

# Falling in the unemployment gap

*A qualitative exploration of how high skilled refugee women experience entering the labour market in The Hague and how they reflect on the policies governing their integration in the labour market*

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## **Abstract**

After receiving asylum and being recognised in a host country, refugees are expected to integrate and participate in society. One of the most vital elements of their overall 'integration' is finding employment and becoming financially self-sufficient in their new country. Various factors impact the level of access recognised refugees have to local labour markets, from language skills, to qualifications, experience, discrimination, networks and numerous others. Within the population of recognised refugees, the sub group of high skilled women can face particular challenges when trying to get a foothold in the local Dutch labour market. To guide this process, local municipalities in the Netherlands have policies in place, although little was known about how successful these policies are perceived to be according to their most important target group. This research aims to explore how these high skilled refugee women experience the process of entering the job market in the Hague and how they reflect on the policy governing this process. This has been done by conducting a policy analysis as well as eight in depth semi-structured interviews with said target group. Outcomes show that there is a lot to be improved as the respondents expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment throughout the process, and felt that existing policy designs inadequately met their individual needs as high skilled, qualified individuals. Based on these findings I have made a number of policy recommendations as well as recommendations for further research.

## **Key words**

Labour market incorporation – integration policy – policy outcome gap – experience - underemployment - refugees – high skilled refugees - women

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- Caitlin L Utama

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2016 over hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants have crossed the Mediterranean Sea and made their way to the various member states of the EU (UNHCR, 2019). The Geneva Convention defines ‘refugee’ as *“a person who is, due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”* (1951). Originating primarily from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea, these refugees often are not in a position to return due to ongoing conflicts and danger in their home countries. The implication is that settlement in any of these EU member states will be for the long term. EU member States have placed integration high on the policy and political agenda, and investments have been made into support and programmes aimed at facilitating immigrant integration in the EU. Because of the recent increase in migration into and also within the EU it has become clear that successful evaluation of these EU and local integration policies is essential (UNHCR, A new beginning, 2013). The Netherlands is among the ten EU member states that have received the highest number of asylum applications since 2016 (vluchtelingenwerk, 2019). The relative increase in the number of applications in comparison to the years before has given rise to a reformulation of the Dutch refugee integration policy in order to ‘cope’ with the new situation. The Netherlands has an interesting approach to policy when it comes to dispersing the refugees as it leaves it to each municipality to devise a local strategy and policy for handling the refugee resettlement and integration.

Although all aspects of ‘integration’ can be understood as being challenging, finding employment can be seen as being a particularly complex issue. Data gathered by the CBS has shown that only a minute number of recognised refugees are actually employed three and five years after receiving their refugee status, and many (up to 95%) of these people end up on benefits programs and in low socio economic circumstances. Only 4% were employed, and self-employment and entrepreneurship was not reported (CBS, 2017). Generally these number do rise slowly as the number of years spent in the Netherlands continue to increase, however, relative to the native

Dutch population as well as earlier established family-migrants, their numbers remain low (2017).

As a group, refugees are interesting to study from a migration studies perspective, due to the peculiarities of their migration motives and their history (Feller 2005; Phillimore 2011; in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). These factors set them apart from other groups such as purely economic or labour migrants and can have a substantial impact on how they adapt and integrate into their new host country upon arrival (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). Although the distinction between a ‘refugee’ and a so-called ‘economic migrant’ is not always clear cut or justified to make, the label ‘refugee’ is significant as being assigned refugee status will determine much of the subsequent procedures and processes of integration. This integration into the mainstream society is a challenging and complex process, for refugees in particular (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008; in Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen, Zacher, 2018 ). After applying for asylum, being resettled, and where possible reunited with family, a process of learning the local language and culture begins. Although most recognised refugees, which is the term that shall be used to refer to this group from here onwards, will be financially supported by funding coming from the state during this initial phase of settling into the new host country, seeking and finding employment is encouraged as it is a very important step on their path to integration. Eventually, it is paramount that the recognised refugees participate in the local labour market to become financially independent from government funds and support the financial needs of their families and themselves (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006).

This process can be riddled with complications. All of this takes place within a framework with various restrictions and obligations, from limits to the amount of time one is allowed to take the integration exams (or ‘*inburgeringstoets*’ in Dutch), to pressures to start work and become financially independent of government benefits (or ‘*uitkering*’). In addition to that, the possibly traumatic experiences and coerced nature of the refugees’ flight from their country of origin can impact their mental health and thus their ability to integrate into their new country smoothly (Beiser 2006; Jorden et al. 2009; Laban et al. 2004; Phillimore 2011; Takeda 2000, in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

Labour market participation numbers can vary from one nationality or ethnic group to another and differences can occur between the genders among the overall refugee population. Reasons for such low participation can be related to a number of different factors, relating to language, their qualifications and diplomas being lost or undervalued, not being familiar in the local labour market and more. Research has shown, for example, that the labour market participation among women from particular high-scoring refugee sending countries is low (Dourleijn and Dagevos 2011; Jennissen and Oudhof 2008; in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). Explanations can range from practical reasons such as childcare and household duties to more cultural explanations such as traditional gender roles and values (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

A particularly interesting sub-group within the refugee population is the group of high-skilled refugees. Although there is no fixed consensus as to what the term ‘high skilled’ is supposed to mean, high skilled is most typically meant to refer to those who have completed a form of tertiary education or have gained work experience on a level equivalent to that (Iredale, 1999 in Kou, Wissen, Dijk, Bailey, 2015). For this research the term ‘high-skilled’ refugee will refer to those who have completed tertiary education at University level (Bachelor’s degree) in their country of origin before resettlement in the Netherlands. From the perspective of the European states, a rough distinction can be made between so-called ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ immigration. ‘Wanted’ immigrants are generally those who are seen as strengthening the local economy by bringing a particular set of skills or labour that complements the needs of the local European labour markets. Broadly speaking high-skilled refugees and migrants fall into the category of the desired or wanted migrants (Carling, 2011). Although this can apply to the other end of the spectrum as well, with low-skilled migrants being able to fill in niches of the labour market in important ways, there is an overly simplistic assumption that because a high-skilled refugee brings qualification and skills, that they are therefore more easily absorbed into the local job market and will be able to make a contribution to society.

The reality, however, is much more complex than that. It could even be argued that successful labour market incorporation for high-skilled newcomers is in fact even more complex than it is for those who are low-skilled, due to additional administrative hurdles, such as getting degrees recognised and valued, to the

difference in expectations and outcomes, and the frustrations that can come from this. The results can be grim: the hurdles experienced by these high skilled recognised refugees can exclude them from the labour market entirely or restrict them to accepting jobs in which they will work under their capacity and level of training. This can have negative consequences, as their skills and talents can be seen as ‘going to waste’, and this can create feelings of frustration, demotivation and even depression. Odé and Dagevos specifically mention that those who are employed generally find themselves at the ‘bottom of the employment ladder’; most of those asked indicated that they thought that they were overqualified and underemployed (2017).

These issues have not gone unnoticed and policy makers are aware of the importance of assisting and supporting refugees to find employment effectively. Stable and successful employment amongst refugees demonstrably reduce welfare dependency whilst also enhancing the financial, educational and even health outcomes among refugee families (Khoo, 1994; Pernice & Brook, 1996, in Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen & Zacher, 2018). However, not much is actually known about the ways in which refugees experience and navigate these issues. Only few studies have looked at how refugees look for employment, set up and continue a career, and how they overcome employment-related hurdles and traumas in their new host societies (Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen & Zacher, 2018). Knowledge on how organisations and policy makers can assist and support recognised refugees in this aspect of their integration process is also limited (Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen & Zacher, 2018).

Because of the many variables and unpredictable outcomes of labour market integration policies for the high-skilled, this can be seen as a ‘wicked’ policy problem. Even the most carefully designed policies can still lead to undesired and unexpected outcomes and ultimately fail. In the ‘State of the’ Art I review what is known about the target group and how they interact with policy, and the phenomenon of underemployment. From there I will move on to the main research question and the theoretical framework I will use as a foundation for my empirical research.

The main aim of this study is to paint a clear picture how high skilled recognised refugee women experience the process of entering the labour market in the Hague, as well as to reflect on the local level policies in light of how the target group evaluates it. The accounts and experiences given by the target group will also serve as footholds for policy suggestions.

The theoretical relevance of this research is the knowledge it adds to the current understanding of how recognised refugees experience the process of integrating into a new local labour market, and how they experience the existing policies governing them. The practical and societal relevance of this study is the contribution these insights can make to the creation of policy recommendations. By creating a better understanding of the experiences of the recognised refugees who are on the receiving end of these policies and initiatives to create suggestions for improvement and recommendations, policies might be able to include and help even more recognised refugees who need support from local municipalities. Finally, the importance of this research is the voice I hope to give to the participants who are otherwise left in silence.



## *1.2 State of the Art*

This section will briefly review the available existing literature on the concept of underemployment, which is the context within which this research takes place. After inventorying what is known in the literature I will point out the gaps and the research question that these gaps bring forth.

### *Underemployment*

The many factors that can hamper a smooth transition from the immigrant's situation in their country of origin to the new labour market can result in the phenomenon dubbed here as underemployment. Underemployment refers to the phenomenon of individuals working in occupations that are under their level of skill and knowledge. It is a multidimensional concept referring to problems connected to employment or other inadequacies in employment with respect to economic needs or level of skill or training, including unemployment or employment at less than full-time capacity (Clogg 1979, Sullivan, 1978 in Morrison & Lichter, 1988). The act of migrating or moving across borders commonly can reduce the utility an immigrant can make out of his or her degrees or qualifications (Liversage, 2009). This is often referred to in the literature as the 'immigrant entry effect': due to a particular combination of factors amplified by their migration, the migrants are most likely to start their new careers at lower levels than natives (Reitz, 2007 in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

Various explanations can be given for this, from the immigrants' limited language proficiency, to a discrepancy in how particular skill sets are valued from one country to another, to labour market discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or background (Boyd, 2001; Rätzzel, 1999; Remennick, 2003: in Liversage, 2009). Skills and qualifications that migrants possess are called into question on their arrival in their host country as the local labour market attempts to protect the privileges of their local professionals (Girard and Bauder, 2007, in Liversage 2009). Most of these barriers resemble the factors hampering access to the labour market making the two problems closely linked.

The effects can be long lasting and devastating, from immigrants finding themselves unemployed for long periods of time or being permanently stuck in low-

skilled and low-paid jobs. This phenomenon is known as ‘brain drain’ or ‘brain abuse’ (Bauder, 2003; Brandi, 2001; Salt and Koser, 1997; in Liversage, 2009). A substantial body of research focusses on the labour market participation of migrants. An on-going discussion in the field is how far reaching and long term the effects are of the initial ‘immigrant entry effect’. Some argue that despite initial disadvantages in terms of earnings and occupational status, over time the immigrants will be successful in acquiring all the skills necessary to ‘catch up’ with their native colleagues (Chiswick, Lee & Miller, 2005 in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). Others are less optimistic about the immigrants’ prospects of bridging this gap.

Outcomes of this predicament differ between subgroups of the total immigrant population, with certain minority groups experiencing more difficulties integrating into the labour market than others. A study from Sweden (Le Grand and Szulkin, 2002) and another from Canada (Reitz, 2007) have shown that immigrants from ‘western’ nations experience the transition from their home labour market to the new one as less problematic than migrants with a non-European background. Migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin-America may experience discrimination on the labour market, or face a greater cultural gap to bridge in terms of religion, norms or language. All of these factors can inhibit the migrants’ adjustment to their new environment and set them back too far to catch up within their lifetime (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). According to Kogan (2011), many newcomers may decide not to pursue the long and arduous path towards higher-status jobs if the perceived costs of time and investment into acquiring the qualifications and skills needed for these higher status positions seems too high. This leads them to opt for jobs with more immediate financial returns and can lead to an overrepresentation of newcomers in low-skilled employment. This usually happens when the migrants in question suspect that they might not be in the host country for a very long time, thus rendering the potential returns on investment in human capital lower and less worth pursuing. However, we see this pattern even in refugees with no return-intentions, as they end up in low-status employment after a prolonged period of trying to enter higher echelons of the job market. In the long run, many newcomers remain ‘trapped’ in low-paid and low-skilled secondary labour markets with limited upward mobility (Kogan, 2011)

Little is known, however, about how high-skilled migrants respond to such

obstacles when confronted with them in their new host society (Liversage, 2009). It is also unclear how these recognised refugees can be supported into work and what role external factors such as social capital and their human capital have in helping them access employment (Cheung & Philimore, 2014).

### *Refugees Entry Effect*

A particular subgroup of the total ‘migrant’ population is the group of refugees. This group is a special case when it comes to explaining labour market incorporation and the challenges that come with it. Not much is known about this so-called refugee gap, referring to the gap in employment and wages between refugees and the other migrant groups (Conner, 2010 in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). Refugees are distinctly different to (economic) migrants, as from the outset of their arrival in a host country, they are kept at a distance from the local labour market by lengthy asylum procedures and relative insecurity about their future residency status and location. These continuous stretches of uncertainty about the future impede their personal and professional development and can also negatively affect their mental wellbeing (Bakker et al. 2013; Phillimore 2011 in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

In the Netherlands, refugees have the legal status of ‘asylum seekers’ whilst awaiting the decision for their permit. This status comes with a set of rights and restrictions on employment, education and social security. Asylum seekers in the Netherlands are allowed to work up to a maximum of 12 weeks a year for as long as the procedure to be granted official status lasts (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). All in all, the factors described above from a lack of resources, rights, and securities can create a situation of marginalisation, social isolation, mental health issues and an economic dependence on the state (Da Lomba 2010; Laban et al. 2004 in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). In addition to these challenges, refugees often come from places of conflict and have suffered traumatic experiences. The involuntary nature of their move to a new country also means that they are often less prepared than other migrant groups to have to adapt to a new country and labour market (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). All these factors put refugees at a clear disadvantage on the Dutch labour market when compared to their native and other migrant counterparts. Bakker, Dagevos and Engbersen have found indicators

that the ‘refugee entry effect’ is in fact present as labour market participation of refugees is in fact lower than that of other migrant groups at the beginning of their professional careers (2014).

Although not much is known about how refugees overcome these disadvantages, and how long lasting the effects of their initial setbacks are further along their career, what is known is that even a small initial advantage or disadvantage can set them up for further success or failure. This principle, known as the principle of cumulative advantage, states that once a particular agent has an advantage over other agents, this advantage will over time compound into an increasingly larger advantage (Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008). Similarly, the inverted concept of cumulative disadvantage has been used to explain inequality in education and occupational careers. The effect is exemplified by the phrase ‘the rich get richer and the poor will get poorer’. Merton (1988) originally coined the term to explain advancement in scientific careers amongst scientists, but the principle has been applied in other domains as well. On the labour market previous unemployment can ‘damage’ a worker and put them at risk of future unemployment because their current unemployment is seen to reduce their human capital and makes them generally less attractive to any prospective employers (DiPrete and Eirich 2006 in Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2014). The inequality in employment opportunities that can come as a result of the above-mentioned cumulative disadvantage is thus not necessarily attributable to the personal characteristics of the individual refugees (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

Despite these relative disadvantages, Cole and Singer (1991) argue that refugees are often determined to succeed in their destination country as they mostly do not have the luxury of returning to their home country as other (economic) migrants might have. The hardships and challenges they have faced being forced to leave their homes and on the way to their host countries are also mentioned as factors contributing to the resilience and ability to respond with strength and motivation to initial labour market disadvantages.

### *Research gaps*

Several gaps come forward from an analysis of the available literature. Firstly, the available statistics expressing employment rates among recognised refugees only look

at employment versus unemployment (CBS). There are many statistics that show disparities between employment numbers of recognised refugees compared to the native Dutch population as well as other established minorities. These statistics, however, say nothing about the employment levels, and simply categorises the participants into employed vs. unemployed. This dichotomy can mislead readers into thinking that ‘employment’ is a form of labour market integration success, when it in fact only means that a person is no longer on benefits regardless of the context. Because of the lack of consideration for ‘underemployment’ among these groups, there is also no statistical evidence to demonstrate how big the problem of underemployment actually is.

In addition to this absence of more nuanced data on successful labour market incorporation, there is also not a whole lot known about how the recognised refugee women experience the policies and their outcomes. Apart from one article by Ghorashi and Tilburg from 2006, there are no scientific studies looking specifically at the experiences of this group in the Netherlands. In recent years, due to the ‘migration crisis’ as it has been called in 2016, policies have changed and more pressure has come onto the EU member states to absorb newcomers and help them integrate. The data that exists is mostly quantitative and the available qualitative data is largely anecdotal, autobiographical or unscientific. By looking only to the numbers to measure the ‘success rates’ of policies and ignoring the perceptions and experiences of those it concerns, the picture painted can become skewed and inaccurate. A policy evaluation based on how the target group experiences it could add value for policy improvement.

The question central to the rest of this paper is *“How do high skilled refugee women experience entering the local labour market in The Hague and how do they reflect on the policy governing this process?”*

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To answer the research question stated above effectively it is necessary to define the three central concepts that constitute this research. These concepts are *Experience: entering the labour market and labour market integration*, *Policy* and *Policy-outcome gap*, and they will be defined and expanded on respectively.

### 2.1 *Experience: Entering the labour market and labour market integration*

Employment is considered a crucial indicator for assessing an immigrant's incorporation into society. It is part of a larger framework of 'integration', a laden and contested concept with many different interpretations generally used to denote the multidimensional two-way acceptance and adaptation process between an immigrant and the host society (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014). According to Castles et al. 'There is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration. The concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated' (2001: p. 12). The interpretation of integration as a process has some traction, although it has also been criticized for assuming integration is a unidirectional and monolithic concept (Cheung, Philimore, 2014). Instead of focusing on how migrants supposedly adapt to society, scholars should also question what exactly characterises this 'society' that these migrants are integrating into (Castles et al., 2002). Bhatia and Ram conceptualise it as 'an on-going negotiation between past and present, and country of origin and country of refuge, wherein social networks are developed or maintained and identity is contested and shifting' (in Cheung & Philimore, 2014). Despite the contended nature of this term, for consistency the term 'integration' will be used throughout this paper to denote the relation between the newcomer and the host society.

A variety of definitions of the term '*integration*' exist in the literature and each of these gives a different operationalization of how integration is measured/manifested in practice. In Dutch literature a general distinction is made

between two domains, namely the structural or socio-economic integration on the one hand and the socio-cultural integration on the other (Engbersen, 2003). Within this domain labour market participation is especially viewed as a crucial indicator of successful integration (Snel et al. 2006; Vermeulen and Penninx 2000, in Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

Governments often focus on paid employment as being a pathway to integration; from a policy perspective, employment is one of the single most important factors playing into migrant and refugee integration. It is a key factor of structural integration as employment is linked to the individual newcomer's ability to access and create a social network, practice and improve their language abilities and of course, to gain economic independence from state programs and benefits (Cheung & Philimore, 2014). Refugees themselves also reported feeling that a job was like a gateway to 'fitting in' into the host society and that it was crucial for improving their quality of life (Bloch, 2002).

This is bolstered by other research, as it has been shown that refugees who are employed can adjust to their host society more easily than their unemployed peers (Bloch, 2002 in Cheung & Philimore, 2014). The reverse is also true: the inability to find work is the single most significant factor hampering an individual migrant or refugee's successful integration (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006 in Cheung & Philimore, 2014). It is no surprise, then, that entering the workforce is a top priority among recognised refugees upon resettlement, with between 80 to 96 percent of asylum seekers indicating a desire to work once they are legally entitled (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006 in Cheung & Philimore, 2014).

Despite the consensus between government and recognised refugees that it is desirable for this target group to be incorporated swiftly into the local labour markets, numbers reveal that the majority of refugees do not in fact become economically independent and thus remain unemployed. Of those who do find work, most tended to be working low paid, unskilled and temporary jobs with numbers ranging from 60 per cent to 81 per cent (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006 in Cheung & Philimore, 2014). Refugees thus struggle to enter jobs that match their level of skill and education and experience a downward movement in terms of status and earnings compared to their pre-migration situation (Cheung & Philimore, 2014). What this shows is that the issue of labour market integration is layered and complex, and that refugees merely being

‘employed’ might not serve as a good enough standard for policy success. Measuring successful labour market integration is riddled with the difficulties of defining what then should count as ‘integration’ and how this can be labelled successful.

### *Labour market access for high skilled refugees*

The term ‘high-skilled migrant’ too belongs to the family of widely debated concepts. In general, a high skilled migrant is considered to be someone who has enjoyed tertiary education, or has specialised work experience equivalent to that (Iredale, 1999 in Kou, Wissen, Dijk, Bailey, 2015). This already opens up the debate as ‘equivalent experience’ is an ambiguous measure and varies per country and per industry. For this reason scholars favour the use of the distinction between skills-based and qualification-based, i.e. work experience based versus educational attainment. In the Netherlands a highly skilled migrant is defined as *‘labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earn an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance’* (ACVZ 2004, 144, translation; in Kou, Wissen, Dijk, Bailey, 2015). In this paper the term ‘high skilled migrant’ will be used to refer to those who have completed tertiary education at university level before migration.

For high skilled refugees in particular integrating into a new job market can be a tricky issue, as research has shown that they often experience a drop in ‘status’ when they first arrive and resettle. Despite this, it does appear that they experience a bounce-back as time passes and they adjust to the new situation (Chiswick et al., 2005 in Liversage). This study measured labour market incorporation in terms of growth in earnings and looked exclusively at male participants. Despite these numbers, it is generally acknowledged in academia that migration can bring down the value and use that migrants can make of their qualifications and degrees, either because they have no documentation of their qualification as a result of their forced exit from home, or due to the lack of recognition or inadequate conversion of their qualifications, and a lack of local working experience.

### *Factors influencing labour market access: obstacles*



There are many potential reasons for why newcomers are not easily integrated into the local labour market. According to Bloch (2004) these reasons are largely structural rather than personal or individual. Policies that distribute refugees across countries and cities where they have no social networks or social contacts can obstruct them from integrating and accessing information and employment via informal routes. This can leave refugees quite isolated and dependent on formal support systems. Gericke et al. (2018) studied the importance of social capital to refugee labour market integration and found that refugees can often have access to different types of social capital, both ‘horizontal’ (family and friends) as well as ‘vertical’ (organisations and institutions) and that these forms of social capital can have an influence on the way they enter the job market.

A study by Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. (2018) into the labour market integration of asylum seekers into Austria revealed that one of the main factors impeding the refugees from successfully becoming employed was that their cultural capital is often undervalued upon arrival in their host country. What is meant by this is that the skills and knowledge, the habits and soft skills that they bring with them do not match those that are required in their host country and are thus not valued as they would be at home. This, in combination with having to adapt to and find their way in a new and unfamiliar labour market with structural barriers makes it hard for the asylum seekers to find jobs.

In their article Sakamoto et al. dubbed this phenomenon as ‘Canadian experience’ as their study focused on the relative labour market disadvantages high skilled migrants experienced in Canada (2013). From their research, Sakamoto et al. found that employers divided ‘Canadian experience’ up into ‘hard skills’ and ‘soft skills’, with hard skills referring to documented knowledge and skills that could be expressed in certificates or diplomas whereas soft skills consist of unspoken and taken for granted behaviours and cultural affinities gained only by accessing workspaces and learning them by doing. Additionally these ‘soft skills’ are largely intertwined with subconscious conceptions of what it means to be ‘Canadian’. Because of this, the other values, and skills that newcomers bring with them are effectively devalued. Sakamoto et al. found that ‘Canadian experience’ has substantial impact on how

successful migrants and refugees are at getting a job, even though the concept is largely tacit and elusive.

The tacit and unclear nature of this notion of ‘Canadian experience’ makes it opaque and can mask underlying xenophobia. This makes it harder to distinguish which factors blocking newcomers from entering the employment market are grounded or whether they are in fact being discriminated against based on their background and country of origin. Studies have shown that discrimination is present on the labour market between native populations and established ethnic minorities. Refugees, however, fall into an exclusive category as they face more and different structural barriers (such as foreign degrees and languages deficiencies) that are no longer an impediment to established minorities.

In short, the literature has revealed that there are many factors that can contribute to the extent to which a newcomer has access to the labour market. For refugees and high skilled refugees in particular there are many obstacles, but the five most prevalent obstacles mentioned in the literature were a lack of proficiency in the local language; troubles with their qualifications, from having documentary proof of their qualifications and getting them recognised and valued properly; a lack of local work experience; being unfamiliar with the local labour market and lacking a network; and finally, structural discrimination.

### *Enhancing labour market access*

There are ways for refugees to improve their disadvantaged labour market position and stop the downward spiral, or cumulative disadvantage process. One way, according to Brekke and Mastekaasa (2008) is by investing in host country human capital, such as education and language skills, as well as spending time becoming more acquainted with the local working environment through unpaid internships or volunteering. Odé and Dagevos (2017) echo this expectation and indicate that the acquisition of Dutch qualifications and degrees might significantly boost the residence holders’ chances on the labour market. Another important factor that is intricately linked to the acquisition of Dutch diplomas is mastery of the Dutch language, and the possession of a Dutch degree not only circumvents the issues that

arise when valuing foreign qualifications but also serve as a testament to the newcomers' knowledge of the Dutch language. Additionally having a strong social network that includes Dutch natives increases the prospects of integrating harmoniously into the labour market. Doing voluntary work and socialising can thus be seen as a possible gateway to employment through the contacts that can be made through these activities (Odé & Dagevos, 2017). Each of these potential solutions or facilitators complements the obstacles mentioned in the previous section.

### *Gender as a factor in labour market access*

Within the refugee population labour market participation numbers are especially low for women. The employment disadvantage generally affecting refugees was recorded at all levels of qualifications, and is particularly harmful to refugee women. This exclusion from the labour market is partly attributed to the lack of support networks that they have. Consequences can be serious as unemployment can have a significant adverse impact on the psychological well being of refugees, and this effect appears to be particularly strong for women (Cheung & Philimore, 2014).

There are differences in how men and women experience the integration process after migrating. These differences between the genders can intersect with class, ethnicity, age and religion and it is possible for these standard perceptions of gender roles become embedded in how a country shapes its policy. Expressions of such gender specific stereotypes can push male and female workers into particular sectors of the labour market with men taking on the more stereotypically male jobs in construction or as taxi drivers and women working in care and cleaning. 'Feminine' sectors are especially prone to being low-paid and not well-protected and female migrant workers can often find themselves (Brettell, 2016). As was mentioned in the introduction, there are several explanations as to why women refugees fare so poorly in the job market in particular. Some explanations include differences in culture or more traditional values, as mentioned previously, whereas other studies point to the double-burden of being discriminated for being both a migrant as well as a woman (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2014).

### **Theoretical expectation #1**

The empirical study will show that respondents experience un(der)employment, and that their experiences are shaped by the same factors that are mentioned in the literature.

It is expected that the factors obstructing their entrance to the labour market are: language, qualifications, local work experience, lacking a network and unfamiliarity with the local labour market.

It is also expected that the following factors help improve their labour market position: learning the language, getting a local education, doing voluntary work, internships and traineeships and a strong motivation.

Finally, it is expected that a potentially explanatory factor for the expected labour market disadvantage of the target group is gendered, and that the participants are prone to entering low skilled 'feminine' jobs.

## *2.2 Policy*

There are many structural and personal factors shaping the ways in which the internally diverse group 'high skilled female refugees' integrate into the labour market. One major factor shaping this is policy, which can have both direct and indirect influences on the process and be either generic or targeted. There are different types of labour market integration policies with active labour market policies specifically targeting the (potentially) unemployed, and passive labour market policies providing financial support. The common goal of all labour market integration policies is to reduce unemployment and encourage people to financially stand on their own two feet (Verick, 2013). Policy measures used to achieve these goals include assistance and coaching by the local authorities and their partner organisations.

Odé and Dagevos have connected the labour market integration to existing local policies to determine the effects of the latter on the former in the Dutch context. In sum, they found that in the past few years, the failure to cope with the numbers of

newcomers within the bounds of the more generalised and mainstreamed national and local policies, has led municipalities to adopt a more specific and tailor-made approach to the labour market integration of recognised refugees. These measures were introduced out of necessity and appear to be accommodating the recognised refugees better than earlier approaches, although this is still not sufficient overall (Odé & Dagevos, 2017).

Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore also researched the link between the policies surrounding asylum seeker support systems and provisions and their integration (2016). They found that the policy of keeping asylum seekers isolated and physically far away from Dutch cities and Dutch society, and forcing them to remain inactive had negative consequences for their overall ‘integration’. Although not directly related to the labour market incorporation of recognised refugees (which is ‘one step after’ the phase they looked at in their analysis), it is relevant because, as Odé and Dagevos pointed out, a large factor that negatively impacted labour market participation was insufficient Dutch language skills, Dutch connections and knowledge of the Dutch labour market. By slowing down asylum seekers’ integration into Dutch society in the earlier stages, they can still fall behind later on in their integration process (Tubergen & Vroome, 2010).

### *Measuring labour market integration policy outcomes*

Measuring the outcomes and effectiveness of these labour market integration policies can be tricky. There are ways of measuring policy success and how it can best be evaluated, ranging from plan evaluations, to process evaluations to product evaluations (Gonzalez Garibay & De Cuyper, 2013). What is interesting is the fact that in the discussion of policy evaluation in the literature, nothing was mentioned about including the evaluations from relevant target groups for measuring policy effects. The approach seems rather top-down and based on the assumption that policy formation is somehow more significant than policy implementation and that policy goals and instruments determine policy outcomes (Hudson, Hunter & Peckham, 2019). In their comparative study of integration policy evaluations across European countries Garibay and De Cuyper looked at how different integration related policies were assessed per country and they found that by far the most common method was

policy product evaluations, in other words, looking back at the policy and the instruments that have been implemented and evaluating the outcomes. What they also found was that generally this field was a largely incoherent and inconsistent mesh of smaller non-periodical or regulated research projects to evaluate smaller parts of particular policies without any standardised set of measures or evaluation objectives.

According to Goodman (2015) there is a lack of consensus as to whether or not integration policies have an effect. He relates this lack of consensus to the differences between policy design and practice and how success can be measured for these policies. This lack of a universally agreed upon standard or set of policy goals and measures leads to the same problem of apples and oranges that Gonzalez Garibay and De Cuyper (2013) also pointed out, making policy evaluation difficult and inconclusive. What Gonzalez Garibay and De Cuyper did find was that in the Dutch context the effectiveness of integration related policies was expressed exclusively as a description of the policy's *outputs* in terms of how many integration courses were taken, how many passed etcetera, rather than looking past the numbers and at the broader societal *outcomes* of the policies and the behaviours of newcomers. No connection was made between the policies and the actual integration of newcomers into Dutch society. Part of the difficulty with evaluating 'integration' is the fact that most of the studies do not articulate what they mean by 'integration' specifically making it almost impossible to translate this concept into distinct measurable features (Gonzalez Garibay & De Cuyper, 2013). Looking at the way outputs have been measured can help deduce which aspects of integration are prioritised per study, i.e. if a study looks to measure the employment rate amongst newcomers or the outcomes of a language course then that is the aspect of integration central to that study. Most studies appeared to take into consideration the more structural dimensions of integration, such as language proficiency and participation in work and education. The Netherlands also prioritizes these elements for measuring integration successes, although Garibay and De Cuyper also emphasise that the cultural aspect of integration is included in the integration test (or 'inburgeringsexamen').

What was not included as prominently was the cultural aspect to integration and the actual extent to which newcomers become more embedded into the fabric of their host society, nor do we know why certain policies are working or not. A couple of policy evaluation methods are discussed by Garibay and De Cuyper. Garibay and

De Cuyper propose a closer look at policy implementation processes to gain more insights into these causal mechanisms. Additionally they mentioned the need to take into account variations within the variables such as the quality of employment rather than just measuring employment as such as the studies did confirm again that newcomers are overrepresented in the bottom layers of the employment ladder. Analysing this phenomenon can help provide insights to the evaluation of civic integration policies and the link between these policies and the labour market outcomes for the newcomers.

### *How target groups interact with policy: experiencing the labour market integration process*

As has been noted by several scholars mentioned in the literature review, not much has been documented or studied systemically in terms of how newcomers experience the process of resettling and integrating into their host country and its labour market. Not much is known either of how target groups interact with the Dutch labour market integration policies. More generally, however, it is important to understand the importance of target group construction in the creation of policy, and the effect the policy will have on that target group afterwards. Ingram and Schneider (1993) argue that the social construction of target groups influences the approach of the policy towards a particular issue as well as the tools that are selected for solving the problem. The way in which a particular target group is selected and framed is also crucial, as this perception of the target group can determine whether a group is seen as sympathetic or hostile, in need of support or chastisement. ‘Policy’, according to Ingram and Schneider, ‘sends messages about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving and what kind of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society’ (1993, p.334).

Different groups are ascribed different roles in policy making, with positive and negative connotations. They distinguish four positions on a grid, combining positive vs. negative constructions and strong vs. weak power positions. The target group for this study, high skilled refugee women, is an interesting one as it lies on the intersection of multiple boxes: where women are seen positively but often weak,

intellectuals are often seen positively and powerful. Refugees and migrants, however are often perceived more negatively and often with little power. This shows that the position that my target group occupies is unclear and somewhat contradictory.

There is no study that looks at how this specific target group interacts with labour market integration policy in general. However, there is one study by Ghorashi and Van Tilburg (2006) that has delved into the experience of refugee women and their labour market incorporation process. Their research pointed out that although the women they interviewed had done their share of fulfilling all the requirements in terms of learning the language, attending (higher) education in the Netherlands and taking initiatives to find work for which they were actually qualified, it remained a challenge. This demonstrates what they called the paradox of integration: the general assumption that education and learning the local language are key ingredients to a newcomers success in the local labour market and in society. However, having fulfilled their part of the ‘integration bargain’ it is frustrating to see that the payoffs for their efforts are minimal.

Ghorashi and Tilburg (2006) also reflected on what this says about the effectiveness of policies forcing newcomers to learn the Dutch language and encourage them to attend local education, as the apparent effects of these factors to labour market integration are in practise very limited. At the crux of this is their explanation that at the end of the day employers and organisations will still be more likely to hire ‘someone like us’, or in other words a native Dutch person. Negative images painted of refugees and migrants in public discourse as well as in policy only fuel the distrust towards newcomers. The irony of this is that these attitudes block newcomers from effectively integrating and pushes them to the fringes of society. Integration is a complex multidirectional process as has been explained in the passage above, and placing the burden of integration on only one half of those involved will not lead to satisfactory outcomes for anyone.

### **Theoretical expectation #2**

The empirical study will show that the target group experiences shortcomings in the current policies and that the policies do not adequately meet their specific needs in order to successfully enter the local labour market.

It is also expected that target group construction and targeted policy goals and tools are important to perceived policy success by the target group.



### *2.3 Policy-outcome gaps: Linking policy and labour market outcomes*

In the previous section the difficulties in measuring policy effectiveness were discussed, revealing the potential gaps between policy goals and their effects. There can be many factors that play into the existence of the so-called policy-outcome gap, making policy implementation a complex, multifaceted, multilevel issue. The so-called ‘wicked policy problems’ are particular types of policy issues that are so complex and layered, consisting of multiple potential causes and outcomes that they can be quite resistant to change and are very heavily context dependent (Rittel & Webber 1973 in Hudson, Hunter & Peckham 2019). It is crucial to understand this in order to avoid policy failure, and governments have taken increased interest in understanding the policy process to avoid just that. To ensure that intentions actually translate into the intended results it is important to avoid the main drivers of policy failures, such as overly optimistic expectations, dispersed implementation, inadequate collaborative policymaking and finally the whims of the political cycle (Hudson, Hunter & Peckham, 2019). For integration policies it is especially important to take into consideration the specific characteristics of both origin and destination countries, and adapt the policies to the specific immigration populations as well as the local labour markets (Bilgili, Huddleston & Joki, 2015).

Integration policies shape the labour market situation for migrants by regulating their socio-economic rights, anti-discrimination laws and access to secure residence and equal citizenship (Bilgili, Huddleston & Joki, 2015). Equal legal rights and other supporting policies for migrants have an indirect impact on the actual labour market incorporation of migrants. According to MIPEX, labour market mobility policies for a large part shape the chances and opportunities non-EU citizens have in terms of equal labour market access, support, rights and access to programmes specifically tailored to their individual needs. Such policies can enhance access to the labour market for non-EU citizens as well as actively facilitate the recognition and transmission of qualifications and work-related knowledge and skills. However, it is not clear who these measures actually impact and to what extent any effects can be traced back to the specific policies; job placements are not directly regulated and the

sheer number of other mediating factors can frustrate attempts to actually measure outputs (Bilgili, Huddleston & Joki, 2015). In fact, according to Bilgili et al. (2015), eight studies using the MIPLEX score found no conclusive link between integration policies and labour market integration of immigrants. However, several interesting findings were done that hint at a relation between the presence of certain targeted measures or employment policies and the level of over qualification and other ‘ethnic penalties’ for non-EU immigrants.

Although it would be too abrupt to say that policies have no effect or do not matter, it does become clear that for these ‘wicked policy problems’ the policies themselves are insufficient for explaining and understanding why the outcomes differ between the different countries/settings. There are substantial differences between how policies target different immigrants, how they are implemented and what the policy outcomes are between the different countries (Bilgili, Huddleston & Joki, 2015). In sum, a policy-outcome gap occurs when a policy does not produce the intended outcomes, thus creating a disconnect between the goals and intentions of the policy on paper and the realities of the issues that the policy is supposed to address.

**Theoretical expectation #3**

There is a policy-outcome gap between the goals stated in the policy and how the policy tools and implementation is experienced by the target group (aka the respondents).

### 3. Research Design

In this section I will outline which methods I will use to answer the research question posed in the introduction, *“How do high skilled refugee women experience entering the local labour market in The Hague and how do they reflect on the policy governing this process?”*

First the problem statement and research questions will be defined. After this a statement of the research aim and an operationalization of the variables will be given. This will be followed by an elaboration on the case selection, data collection and analysis, validity, reliability and generalizability considerations, ethical considerations and the plan for implementation of this research.

#### **Problem statement**

The central problem is that even perfectly designed policies can have undesired outcomes. Statistics mentioned earlier in the literature have shown that labour market incorporation of refugees and refugee women in particular remains low in comparison to the native population as well as established ethnic minorities. Misconceptions about the hurdles faced by high skilled refugee women and overly simplistic assumptions that this group will find it easier to find a suitable job due to their high level of skills and education can blur out their reality and struggle. Currently there is a lack of information on how the high skilled recognised refugee women experience the process of finding a suitable job in the Netherlands and specifically in The Hague. It is not clear how this target group is interacting with the current policy, and what real life implications the current local policies have for these high skilled refugee women.

#### **Research Question**

The question that comes forward from the review of the current situation is as follows:

*“How do high skilled refugee women experience entering the local labour market in The Hague and how do they reflect on the policy governing this process?”*

## Sub questions

1. How do the high skilled recognised refugees experience the process of entering the labour market in The Hague?
2. How do these high skilled refugee women reflect on the local policy governing this labour market integration process?
3. To what extent is there a policy-outcome gap, and what solutions are there to close this gap?

## Methods

### Operationalization of variables

The main constructs that have been explored in this research are, on the one hand, the labour market integration policies for refugees in The Hague and on the other hand how high-skilled recognised refugee women experience entering the labour market in The Hague. In order to do an evaluation of how the policy was experienced I have broken these constructs down to the various factors that obstruct access to the labour market according to the theory. These factors were used as axioms by which I have analysed both the policy as well as the respondents' experiences of the policy and that particular aspect of accessing the labour market.

The table below shows the operationalization of the three variables based on the theory:

Variable	Operationalisation
Experience	Obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Language</li><li>- Qualifications</li><li>- Lack of local experience</li><li>- Navigating Dutch labour market</li><li>- Discrimination</li></ul>

	<p>Facilitators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going to school</li> <li>- Voluntary work</li> <li>- Traineeships</li> <li>- Contacts and network</li> <li>- Motivation</li> </ul>
<b>Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policy goals</li> <li>- Policy tools</li> <li>- Policy outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Gap</b>	<p>Solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personalised approach to helping refugees</li> <li>- Help with first job</li> <li>- Monitoring refugee organisations</li> </ul>

Table 1. *Operationalisation table*

The operationalization of the main variable ‘Experience’ has come directly from the factors mentioned in the literature. The operationalization of the Policy variable has been done based on the literature on policy evaluation. This section has been subdivided inductively based on what was stated in the policy document and what the respondents have mentioned during the interviews. The operationalization of the final part, the policy-outcome gap, has been done inductively based on the findings from the research and the solutions that the respondents themselves proposed.

### **Data collection**

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach. These methods consisted of policy document analysis for the labour market integration policy, and a small sample of eight high skilled recognised refugee women who were interviewed in private. During these interviews their personal reflections and experiences were explored on each of the axioms as well as on the support and policies.

### ***Policy Analysis and interviews with the target group***

For this research only one specific policy document was used, namely the ‘*Haagse Aanpak Statushouders Sociaal Domein: snelle integratie en participatie (2016)*’. This is the only main policy document that is published on the municipality website and it

describes the general approach that the municipality of The Hague has towards the integration of recognised refugees. This document has been summarised briefly at the beginning of the analysis section and the relevant aspects of the policy are highlighted and analysed in relation to the accounts given by the respondents.

The second part of this research involved in depth semi-structured interviews with the target group: high skilled recognised refugee women. The interviews were in between 25 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on the speed and talkativeness of the respondents. These individual variations could occur due to personal characteristics such as participants being introverted or extraverted, as well as more structural factors such as a language barrier. Although all respondents could speak Dutch six of the interviews were conducted entirely in Dutch, one interview was mixed with the respondent switching to English about halfway through, and one interview was conducted entirely in English. The interviewer allowed for these variations in language as it was more relevant and appropriate for this research to allow the respondents to freely express what they thought and felt rather than focussing particularly on the language it was said in.

The goals and policy tools are compared to the statements made by the respondents about said policy tools and policy implementation outcomes to establish whether the policies can be seen as successful or whether there is a policy-outcome gap.

### **Participants**

Eight respondents were gathered for the interview section of this policy evaluation research. This number was chosen to optimise the balance between having a large enough sample size to recognise patterns in the data, whilst at the same time being able to go enough in depth and taking the time needed during the interviews to explore the experiences and reflections from the respondents in enough detail. According to Baarda (2013) saturation of data in qualitative research starts to occur after taking 4 to 8 interviews, with around 80% of all results having presented themselves within this sample.

To find them and reach the target group, the researcher has approached the NGOs that are directly responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the policy and ask

them for contact details of potential participants. The NGOs contacted included, but were not limited to vluchtelingenwerk, Taal aan Zee, the UAF, NWO, Hestia, Refugee Start Force and others. These organisations have been approached via email and phone contact details available on their websites. Once contact was established, a short summary detailing the aim of the research and the specific target group was sent to the organisations, which they, at their discretion could circulate in their own periodical newsletters (for example, the UAF). In other cases the contact person from the organisation itself initiated contact with potentially suitable participants. With the approval of the participant, their personal email addresses and phone numbers were passed on to the researcher for further communication and the scheduling of the interviews.

These eight respondents were all approached via organisations such as language schools and other refugee support NGOs in the Hague. The inclusion criteria for this group were as follows.

- All respondents were women
- All respondents had a university degree obtained before seeking asylum in the Netherlands
- All respondents were 50 years old or younger
- All respondents were living in The Hague (thus falling under the policy domain of the municipality of the Hague)

The table below shows an anonymous overview of the respondents with a made up code name that will be used in the analysis to refer to them.

<b>Respondent #</b>	<b>Code name</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1	Nour	Syria	Law (Syria)	No work experience
2	Elena	Syria (originally from the Ukraine)	Economics (Ukraine)	Translator
3	Ghazaleh	Iran	Social Sciences (Iran)	Insurance Advisor
4	Samira	Syria	Law (Syria)	Lawyer
5	Almaz	Eritrea	Geography (Eritrea) and Environmental Management (Netherlands)	Engineer

6	Aisha	Syria	Dentistry (Syria)	Orthodontist
7	Shilan	Syria	Civil Engineering (Syria)	No work experience
8	Sahar	Syria	PhD Mechanical Engineering and Research Methodology (Syria)	Researcher and lecturer

All of the respondents have completed their University degrees in their home countries and all but two of them also have work experience from their home country before arriving in the Netherlands. Almaz, (respondent 5), is an interesting exception because she also did a Masters’ degree in the Netherlands before applying for asylum. This makes her situation slightly unlike the others in terms of qualifications, although in practice she still had to go through the asylum procedure and take the ‘*inburgeringstoets*’ before settling in The Hague, which is why she was still included in the sample nonetheless. To facilitate the storyline in the analysis and to bring the stories of these women more alive, I have provided a short overview of the profiles of the respondents. Nour (Respondent 1) came to the Netherlands from Syria in 2016 by herself before her family joined her a year later. Her husband is a designer and they have one daughter who by now is six years old. She studied law, but has never worked professionally, as her husband had a job and she was taking care of their daughter.

Elena (respondent 2) is originally from the Ukraine but moved to Syria with her Syrian husband more than 25 years ago. Before moving to Syria she studied economics at University in the Ukraine although she did not work in this field afterwards. In Syria she worked for twenty years as a professional translator for a news agency translating between Russian, Ukrainian and Arabic. She came to the Netherlands in 2016.

Ghazaleh (respondent 3) is a young woman from Iran who came to the Netherlands in 2015. After studying Social Sciences at the University of Tehran she worked for an insurance company for a few years before coming to the Netherlands. Ghazaleh is the only one from her family to have come to the Netherlands.

Samira (respondent 4) is from Syria and also studied law, like Nour. Samira, however, worked for years as a lawyer in her husband’s practice before coming to the



Netherlands. In 2015, when Samira was resettled in The Hague she entered a one year traineeship programme especially for refugees at the municipality of The Hague. Samira is one of only two of the respondents to hold a paid job during the time of the interview. She works at the municipality of The Hague as a paralegal for five days a week.

Almaz (respondent 5) is an engineer from Eritrea who originally came to the Netherlands in 2014 to do her Master's degree in Environmental Management in Delft. She had previously done her Bachelor's in Geography back in Eritrea and had worked in this field for five years before coming to do her Master's course. She did not originally plan to stay in the Netherlands when she came for her studies, however, when it became clear that she could no longer return home due to the political situation, she applied for asylum in 2015 and was eventually granted asylum status. Since then she has moved around between various asylum centres in the Netherlands before being resettled in The Hague in 2017. Although currently unemployed and looking for jobs, Almaz did participate in a one-year traineeship especially for refugees at the Municipality in The Hague one year ago.

Aisha (respondent 6) is an orthodontist from Syria with 20 years of experience and additional diplomas and certificates for specialisations such as doing dental implants. In Syria she had her own practice before coming to the Netherlands in 2016.

Shilan (respondent 7) is a fresh graduate who came to the Netherlands in 2017 right after finishing her degree in Civil Engineering at Damascus University. Shilan has no work experience prior to coming to the Netherlands because of this.

The last respondent, Sahar, is a PhD from Syria with over 20 years of teaching experience at the University of Damascus. Her specialisations are mechanical engineering and research methodologies in the Social Sciences. Sahar is currently on a one year contract as a Postdoctoral researcher for the NWO (Nederlandse organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, or Dutch organisation for scientific research) working and researching at the UvA. She has been here for four years, since 2015.

## **Data analysis**

The interviews have been recorded on site and were transcribed afterwards. After this the interviews were analysed by importing the data into the program Atlas.ti to code the data. The interviews were first coded openly to discover what themes were covered by the respondents, and then the data was coded again using the variables and the operationalization as axioms. This allowed me to structure the information and come up with a narrative. The policy documents were subjected to a policy analysis, which was done by coding the relevant parts of the policy document in Atlas.ti. The goal was to understand the policy goals and tools described in the policy documents in order to evaluate them according to the reports from the respondents. These goals are presented next to the findings from the interviews to connect the two and see if the policy goals are being met according to the interviewees or whether policy-outcome gaps exist. The first two sub-questions were answered based purely on the data from the interviews and the policy analysis, and the third sub-question is answered by connecting the two as well as supplementing data from the interviews.

### **Validity, reliability and generalizability**

To ensure that the research-value of this study is as high, measures were taken to ensure the validity, reliability and generalizability of the study. To enhance validity, the researcher made sure to draw on the relevant literature from the theoretical framework and the findings in the policy documents to construct the interview topics and questions. To avoid asking irrelevant questions or missing out on important insights the researcher constantly linked these topics back to the main research question and sub-questions to check on whether they match.

As for reliability, the interviews were conducted one-on-one in a quiet and private place to avoid any discomfort or self-censorship when it came to the answers. Before starting the interviews I took some time to introduce myself as the researcher, explain what exactly I wanted to know and why, and took some general steps to make them feel comfortable and at ease. Before the interviews all of the respondents were given an informed consent form, which they all signed. The respondents were explicitly informed that the results would be made anonymous and that their privacy would be safeguarded. If a question was not clear, I repeated it or phrased it differently, and if there was a language barrier I sometimes switched from Dutch (the

primary language of the interview) to English, or even describing feelings or concepts.

In terms of generalizability, the selection of 8 respondents means that approximately 80% of the findings that are to be found are likely to present themselves throughout the interviews due to saturation of the findings. However, the primary goal of these interviews is to paint an accurate and detailed picture of the range of experiences and reflections that the target group can have on the topic of labour market incorporation in The Hague as a high skilled woman.

### **Ethical considerations**

As the policy documents under analysis are already publicly available online, the first part of the research is not at odds with any ethical standards. For the interviews a few small measures had to be taken to ensure ethical standards were maintained. Because respondents recounted personal experiences and opinions that could be considered as sensitive, all interviewees were made anonymous and will further be referred to by their code name. The interviews were conducted in a quiet, private space that was agreed upon whilst scheduling the interviews. All but two of the interviews were recorded at the request of the interviewees and transcripts were made of the recordings. The researcher has chosen not to do literal word for word transcripts of the interviews due to time constraints as well as the fact that for the aims of this research the literal form of their answer was less important than the content. Instead, the interviewer has made detailed summaries of the interviews and has literally transcribed a handful of relevant direct quotes that came up during the interview.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research design. The main limitation was the number of respondents. Although eight respondents is sufficient to paint a general picture of the range of experiences and reflections held by this population sample, a larger sample would also have increased the number and variety of findings and would have allowed the researcher to explore certain areas even further. To improve this aspect of the research, the researcher could have opted to interview only respondents from one particular country (e.g. Syria) or from one specific age bracket.

This was originally planned, but in practice this was not feasible due to time constraints and the limited access to the target group, which had to be mediated entirely by organisations and newsletters.

A second limitation has been that the policy analysis has been conducted exclusively on paper. Although the researcher did try to access the policy workers from the municipality of The Hague to discuss the policy and access more detailed information about its implementation, consequences and evaluation from the perspective of the municipality, this was not possible due to time restrictions.

The final limitation, and possibly the most significant one, is that it is very difficult to establish a direct correlation between the policy and policy goals and their outcomes, even if the evaluations have been given by the target group. Many of the factors that were brought up during the interviews were only partially attributable to the policies from the municipality of The Hague. In many cases the factors that were mentioned by the respondents were shaped also by national policies and other external factors such as culture and the workings of the free market, which are not (entirely) attributable to the local municipality policies regarding the labour market incorporation of high skilled refugee women. This means that the researcher must take some caution in drawing conclusions or stating that particular situations are the result of the policy.

## 4. Analysis of the Findings

In the following section I present my analysis of the data that I have gathered from the interviews as well as the policy analysis. The central question guiding the structure of the storyline in this section is “*How do high skilled refugee women experience entering the local labour market in The Hague and how do they reflect on the policy governing this process?*”. As has been done in the operationalization, the structure of the analysis has been split into three sections, thus answering the research question in three steps as well as answering the three sub-questions. The sections are respectively *Experience*, *Policy* and *Policy-outcome gap and solutions*. Each section is then divided again into smaller subsections going into the various aspects of each main theme, again, according to the operationalization found in the Methods.

In the first section I will begin by describing and analysing how the respondents reflect on their experiences entering the Dutch labour market in general and how they have felt throughout. This is followed by a more in depth inspection of specific factors shaping their participation in the labour market, beginning with obstacles hampering them from participating (such as language barriers, problems with their qualifications, a lack of local working experience, being unfamiliar in the Dutch labour market, the role of social contacts, and discrimination), and followed by a discussion of the actions they have taken to improve their access to the labour market (learning the Dutch language, studying in the Netherlands, doing voluntary work and internships, traineeships and their personal motivation and attitude towards their situation). This part of the analysis will cover the first half of the research question.

In the second part I will look at their experiences with the relevant policies and how they reflect on these policies. For the most part the respondents indicated having some form of contact and steering or other from the municipality when it came to their labour market integration. Some dealt with the municipality directly through contact persons and others were in contact with satellite organisations. Here, experiences differed substantially with participants reporting differing degrees of satisfaction with the help and support they received from the municipality and her affiliated parties. Where some participants reflected positively or were neutral to the approach that the municipality had towards them, others reported hostility and a lack

of cooperation in their situation. To understand this, I will first provide a brief description of the policy before analysing how the target group has experienced this policy, its goals and its instruments.

Finally, the third section on the policy-outcome gap I will argue that there is indeed a gap between the policy with its goals and instruments as opposed to the outcomes experienced by the respondents. The main gap is the one between the policy goals of helping recognised refugees optimise their employment potential, as stated in the document, and the reality in which PhD holding refugees are forced by their municipality contacts to accept jobs in cleaning and at supermarkets. The respondents have let their frustrations with the system be heard and have given their reasoning for why they experience a lack of support or cooperation in their situation. They have also given ideas for improvement, or solutions to closing the policy-outcome gap. These solutions have been taken as the basis for the policy recommendations I make later on in chapter 7.

#### *4.1 Experience: Entering the labour market in The Hague*

During the interviews, the participants were asked to talk about their experiences entering the labour market in The Hague as a high skilled refugee. Each interviewee has her own story and her own experiences and together their stories create a rich picture of the obstacles they face, the opportunities they take and the frustrations they deal with throughout the process. I will begin this section by discussing how the respondents experienced integrating into the Netherlands in general, followed by their reflections on how it was to enter the labour market, what obstacles they faced and what actions they took to further their careers.

##### ***Welcome to the Netherlands: back to square one and adapting to a new life***

Many of the respondents were dealing with the struggle of accepting that their lives were interrupted and that they are in many ways placed back at ‘square one’ in their life course. Their trip to the Netherlands and the subsequent status as an asylum seeker effectively strips them of many things, such as their freedoms and autonomy,

the life and the status they had built up before, and their social life and networks. Ghazaleh said she struggled with this fact, that at 29 she feels like she has been put back to 0 and must start again building up her life.

*“I had a car, I had a house, I had family, I had a life...”*

At 29 Ghazaleh is still very young and she has been encouraged by the municipality to go back to school to pick up her life. Despite this, she still finds it very hard and struggles to stay motivated. Shilan was similarly encouraged to go back to school, as she too is considered very young at 24. She had just graduated in Civil Engineering in 2017 and after that had immediately fled to the Netherlands with her family. While her young age makes it easier for her to study in the Netherlands than it would have been if she were older and more experienced, it was still not easy to come to terms with the delay that has come into her life because of her flight to the Netherlands.

*“In Syria I could immediately start work, but here I have to wait for a year first: learning the language, the conversion course, Master’s... I find this difficult.”*

*- Shilan*

Being set back and being expected to go back to school and start over rather than immediately move forward and work has been difficult according to the respondents. This struggle was echoed by all of the respondents in many or few words, and especially the more mature respondents expressed some exasperation at having been set back from the positions that they have come from. In their case there is often a loss of a particular status or position that they have spent many years working towards.

*“I am now 47 years old and all 27 years I was just building my qualifications. So if I lose it all now, it means that I have lost half my age, and all my qualifications. And this is really very annoying, very frustrating, very disappointing....”*

*- Sahar*

This loss of years and experience and qualifications expressed by Sahar becomes even more painful when the respondents are made to feel like what they have built up in terms of knowledge, skills and experience is not seen or recognized.

***Entering the Dutch labour market: applying and applying***

All respondents expressed a clear motivation to enter the job market and become financially independent from government benefits. Despite their high qualifications and the unanimous ambition to find a job, all respondents have reported having difficulties finding work in the Netherlands and most of the respondents are still unemployed and on benefits. Ghazaleh, Samira, Almaz, and Sahar have especially talked about the many applications they have sent in response to job vacancies. Most of these efforts did not yield the desired outcomes and the respondents said that even securing an interview was already difficult. Finding a job, on any level in any occupation was challenging for each of the respondents.

Currently two of the respondents have jobs: Samira works at the municipality in a position somewhat related to her own legal background, and Sahar has secured a Postdoctoral position and is carrying out her own research. Despite having both landed jobs, the situation is still not ideal: Samira, although working in a legal setting, is still working well under her ‘level’ of employment as her position is “MBO, level 5”. Sahar is working at an appropriate level, but has run into the issue that her contract will only be for one year whereas her research project will take longer than that. This leaves her in a position of having to already scout for funding from the university or other organisations if she intends to keep doing her research. Her employment is thus not secure.

The respondents showed their determination to work professionally in their field again. Aisha is determined to work as an orthodontist again in the Netherlands and Elena said that she did not want to settle for just any job:

*“I can cook, I can sew, I can knit, I can do make up or hair, but that does not mean that I want to work in this sector. Yes, I have a high level of education and I want to work on this level, so I must do many things to work at this level in the Netherlands.”*

*– Elena*



Both Elena and Aisha would have to go back to school to get their Dutch qualifications before being able to work in their field again. Almaz also struggled to find employment, despite having the benefit of a Masters degree from the Netherlands which she got before seeking asylum. Sahar explained how she had contacted many organisations and applied hundreds of times for whatever vacancy she came across. Educated to the highest level, fully equipped with years of professional experiences and doing voluntary work in the Netherlands, it still took Sahar over four years to secure her first paid job. Despite ticking all the boxes, of education, experience, and participating in voluntary work to gain access to a professional network as well as Dutch work experience, it seems that entering the labour market as a high skilled refugee in the Netherlands is still challenging.

Samira is the other one of the two respondents who has eventually found a paid job. Although she is happy with the job, and likes the responsibilities and the fact that she is working in a legal field, it is still a position well below what she would have been used to as a lawyer in Syria both in terms of function as well as salary. She still considers herself as one of the lucky ones.

### ***Underemployed and undervalued***

Despite the initial difficulties on arrival in the Netherlands, most of the respondents express an acceptance of the situation and the challenges that come adapting to a new country and having to learn a new language or go back to school. However, the frustrations appear to be aimed mainly at the devaluation of their skills and knowledge:

*“I cannot sit here and throw away all my experience, and pour coffee.”*

*- Aisha*

‘Pouring coffee’ refers to the suggestion that Aisha could work at a care home and pour coffee for the elderly rather than going back to school and working as an orthodontist again. The suggestion offended Aisha as she felt that this blatant disregard for her years of professional experience was dehumanising and ridiculous. She was not the only one to have been told to accept work in a low-skilled field by

her contact person from the municipality, as Almaz, Sahar, Elena and Samira have all been told to do the same despite their level of education and work experience. This aspect of the local municipality policy will be discussed further in section 4.2.

During the interview with Sahar the idea was floated that in fact entering the labour market as an outsider could be even harder on high skilled individuals than on low skilled ones. This sentiment echoes Despite having a PhD and even having had it successfully valued as such, Sahar struggled a lot for the four years since her arrival, even when applying for jobs well under her level.

*“Yes actually you are right because for high qualified, if you want to apply for low market, you will not be accepted because they will say you are high qualified than we need and we couldn’t pay for you and if they apply for high skilled jobs they also don’t have this experience in labour market here, so they are really like....”*

- Sahar

Interestingly Sahar has also been working on conducting research on the labour market incorporation of refugees and during the interviews we discussed some of her findings which confirmed this idea that for high skilled refugees the frustration in finding a job could be worse than for those with fewer qualifications.

*“So, its... and you can also notice that high qualified people, when I did my research for VWN, high qualified people are more frustrated than low qualified. Because they [are] pushed to do this kind of work, and none of them wanted to stay at home, but if you work just for work, you lose double, twice. You lost when you left your country, you didn’t use your qualification and you lose it here.... And this is really very annoying, very frustrating, very disappointing...”*

- Sahar

Samira expressed similar frustrations when discussing the job hunt and application process. She stated that it was difficult to find work in the Netherlands and when further questioning her about her applications and her job, it became clear that although she was ultimately successful in finding a job that she liked, it was still a job well below her level and had cost her a lot of effort to secure.

*“We have studied at university but we apply for jobs at MBO level, not even HBO. I have studied at the University and I was a lawyer in Syria, but here my job level is ‘schaal 5’. It is just an MBO job, and that even was hard.”*

- Samira

The fact that the value of the respondents’ qualifications and experiences was barely reflected in the outcomes of their job searches was difficult for most of the respondents to deal with. The frustration was mentioned by each respondent although not all of them verbalised explicitly how this made them feel. Sahar however summarised the feeling as follows:

*“But this is kind of under qualified, or...underemployed... and also it is, how to say, underestimated, undervalued, devalued.... Devalued, dehumanised, de-everything... hah...”*

- Sahar

As was expected based on the theory, many refugees including this sub group of high skilled refugee women struggled to find paid employment even years after resettlement into their districts. Many of the respondents indicated applying for many jobs even below their level of qualification, often not even getting these. This demonstrates how it is possible that study after study finds that newcomers tend to stay at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, with high rates of unemployment and often working in low-paid low-skilled sectors. Only Sahar managed to eventually secure employment at her level of skill and one other managed to find a job but only one in the lower levels of the legal profession at ‘MBO 4’ level even though she was a professional lawyer.

It is clear from the accounts given by the respondents so far that entering the Dutch labour market is challenging and that they are at risk of remaining unemployed or being limited to low-skilled employment. In the following section I will discuss the specific obstacles that the respondents have faced when applying for jobs, as well as the actions they have taken to improve their labour market positions.

### *Obstacles to labour market access*

The main obstacles mentioned during the interviews were language, qualifications, local work experience, unfamiliarity and competition in the local labour market and discrimination. These factors were all mentioned in the literature as well and I will analyse in what way the reality is reflexive of the theory.

#### ***Language: learning Dutch***

*“Dutch is the key to everything.”*

- Nour

The above was stated by Nour and reflects in a nutshell one of the most echoed sentiments among the group interviewed. In her case, the Dutch language would not only be the key to a job, but more importantly to access to the education she needs first to be able to start finding work at a higher level in the Netherlands. Nour is currently learning Dutch at B1 level, and hopes to continue on to B2 before entering a Dutch HBO or University. The level of Dutch required for the integration exam, or ‘Inburgeringsexamen’ is A2. This level is much lower and only covers the basics of the Dutch language. However, for higher education and to gain entry to most university level courses or job positions a minimum level of B2 is actually required. Many of the respondents indicated that they were not encouraged to continue studying Dutch first to reach this level and that there was some pressure to stop taking Dutch classes and proceed to find work instead. The fact that their language courses are cut short in exchange for entering the labour market (and thus coming off benefits) as quickly as possible means that it is practically impossible for these women to access higher levels of employment, which require a higher minimum level of Dutch.

From the interviews it was very clear that the language barrier is the biggest obstacle blocking the respondents from fully accessing the labour market and participating in Dutch society. Every single respondent repeated the struggle to learn the language and commented in some form or other that they would not be able to work effectively without speaking Dutch at the required level. Four of the respondents have indicated that they are currently enrolled in Dutch classes or are working to

improve their Dutch language skills, whilst at the same time many of the respondents let shine through that learning Dutch would not necessarily solve all their problems finding a job. From their answers it is apparent that they are very aware of the competition with the native Dutch population, especially when it came to jobs at a higher level. It is often not even the technical language skills, but even the lack of fluency or having an accent that can diminish labour market prospects. Language ability can often be conflated with other skills or abilities and can set back the recognized refugees even after they have completed the necessary language courses and demonstrated their ability to perform specific tasks or jobs in Dutch. Ghorashi and Tilburg (2006) have also reflected on this point, which was echoed by the respondents.

*“We have learned Dutch, but we don’t speak Dutch so well..... If an employer has to pay, he can find a person who was born here, speaks Dutch better than us, has studied here, so why would he pay for us? This is the problem I think.”*

- Samira

Even in cases where the respondent applied for jobs where the Dutch language was not necessarily the main requirement, there were obstacles. Sahar initially aimed at finding work in academia and applied for many vacancies for postdoc positions at a number of Dutch Universities. After realizing that it was a challenge to enter the competitive field of Academia in the Netherlands, she branched out her search to include other types of employment at other organisations. One of the vacancies she found was a vacancy at Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, where she was already working as a volunteer doing that same job and communicating in Dutch. Her application was not a success. After having received the rejection she asked for feedback on her application to find out why she had not gotten the position. The answer was that there was another applicant whose Dutch was better.

*“... In Vluchtelingenwerk, when I applied for Vluchtelingenwerk they ask for Dutch even though the vacancy was in Arabic... interesting huh?”*

- Sahar

While entirely plausible, this was still a frustrating outcome for her, in an application for a job that appeared to be feasible.

As the interviews were conducted in Dutch for the most part (Almaz, switched to English half way through, and Sahar spoke mostly in English) it is important for me to note that the respondents were all capable of communicating in Dutch, even though there were noticeable differences between their levels. Elena, Ghazaleh, Samira, and Aisha were well spoken and seemed comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas and feelings in Dutch even though they all still expressed a desire to continue learning. Nour and Shilan were a little quieter which can be ascribed to being a little less confident in Dutch, as well as to a generally quieter disposition.

### *English*

Another interesting finding was the mention of the English language as an additional hurdle to having full access to the labour market and higher education. Apparently learning Dutch alone is not enough as in the Netherlands it is also relevant to have knowledge of English in order to work and study on a higher level. In the Netherlands most undergraduate degrees are taught in Dutch or English, whereas most Graduate level degrees are taught exclusively in English. In addition to this most of the academic literature used in all University and HBO level courses is in English. This means that the women aiming to attend University in the Netherlands must, in addition to learning Dutch at a high level to even gain access to the courses they wish to attend, learn to read and understand English as well.

Shilan had studied civil engineering in Syria before coming to the Netherlands with her parents and two siblings in 2017. After her degree had been valued at HBO level she was given the option to attend a ‘schakeljaar’ or conversion year at the TU Delft. During this year she would be taking Dutch classes, as well as English and even other courses such as Math.

*“I have to learn two languages. Dutch, but also English. The schakeljaar is in Dutch, but my Master’s will be in English. The lecturers speak Dutch but the textbooks are in English. So I must also learn to speak English.”*

- Shilan

Samira also faced this additional hurdle to continuing her studies. Having come from a Law background from Syria, options to continue professionally in the legal profession in the Netherlands are very limited due to the differences inherent in the respective legal systems. After having her degree valued at University level by Erasmus University she was told that her option was to continue on to a Master's degree in International Law for one year. There was a language requirement, however as the course is taught in English, to access the course she would have had to take a TOEFL or IELTS first, in addition to continuing her Dutch studies. This ultimately led Samira to discontinue her attempts to study again and instead focus on finding paid work and traineeships.

This demonstrates that Dutch is not even the only language barrier these refugees face. Most of the respondents have mentioned that they felt as though they would actually have to learn 2 new languages to participate effectively at a high level in the Netherlands. What is interesting about these findings is that most of them voice concern about structural barriers and more policy related issues with regards to language learning, and not so much the difficulty of learning the language itself. Most of the struggles stem from needing a higher level of Dutch to enter the job market or education but being told by their contact person from the municipality that their level of Dutch was now high enough to start looking for (low skilled) work. Additionally, the fact that there is not just 1 language barrier but in fact 2 also shows that learning Dutch is not the simple fix to the complex problem of overcoming the language barrier.

Almost all sources discussing migration and labour market incorporation speak of the importance of learning to speak and communicate in the local language. However, as was revealed in the interviews, it was not as simple as 'just learning a language'. Much like Ghorashi and Van Tilbug (2006) pointed out, the prejudices refugees faced related to their language skills long outlasted their completion of the required language courses and even entire studies at university level. As indicated in the interviews, when it came to applying for jobs, they were ultimately always in competition with native Dutch speaking applicants and therefore always one step behind. What was interesting to see, was that the factor 'language' actually meant a large variety of language-related factors, from struggling to physically learn the

language, to the structural barriers (such as funding and the cooperation from the contact person to continue studying Dutch) surrounding it to the fact that in the Netherlands it is often also necessary to have knowledge of English for a university education. These last two did not explicitly come forward in the literature, and the need to learn English was an especially interesting finding that was not mentioned in the literature.

### *Qualifications*

One of the factors hampering effective labour market participation among migrants and refugees from the theory is the difference in qualifications between the country of origin and the country of settlement (Liversage, 2009). This issue has been echoed by the respondents during the interviews. In the Netherlands there are a couple of organisations that perform the task of valuing foreign degrees, the IDW, DUO and Nuffic and in some cases it is done by the Universities themselves. Respondents ran into various issues, from having their degrees devalued to simply lacking the physical evidence of their qualifications.

Aisha is an orthodontist with a qualification for doing implants, and has been active as an orthodontist since 1995. She had sent her diploma to Nuffic where it was recognised, although she is still required to take an exam and do a follow-up conversion course for a year-and-a-half before she is allowed to work in her field again. Aisha accepted that this is simply part of a procedure to convert to the Dutch labour market, although she did express some disbelief and frustration at the fact that she had to re-do a course for a profession which she has worked in for 20 years. The extent to which degrees can be converted successfully is dependent on the field of study among other factors. Samira is a Lawyer from Syria and she recognised the difficulty in converting her degree to a Dutch equivalent. However she also mentioned that it was not just her law degree that was subjected to being valued downward.

*“The laws are completely different, that is why I have to start over. That is just true for Law, but I also have many friends who have studied English, but it was not valued as the same.”*

*- Samira*



Elena would like to pick up her work as a translator in the Netherlands. Her struggle currently is that she has no documentation or proof of her experience and expertise as a translator, and that she will not be allowed to work as a translator in the Netherlands since she has no degree in Translation.

*“I have found many vacancies for translators. Every vacancy says I should have a diploma and experience. I do not know how this would work during my interview, as I have no evidence or documents from my old work that prove that I have done this. And this is harder.”*

*- Elena*

The lack of physical evidence and documentation to bolster her case and showcase her experience make it very difficult for this respondent to convince potential employers of her knowledge and suitability for jobs in translation. However, even with documentation and proof of qualifications it is still a challenge according to the respondents.

What is interesting to note is that of the above mentioned cases (Aisha, Samira and Elena) two are examples of professionals working in a very practical sector: orthodontistry and translation. Samira herself was the first to acknowledge that she could not simply practice law in the Netherlands due to inherent discrepancies between the content of her degree and the Dutch legal system. For the other two, however, it was somewhat surprising that they still needed to go through so much trouble to gain qualifications for practical and seemingly universal skills that they have spent over two decades practicing.

Sahar was lucky enough to have her PhD valued as Dutch PhD-equivalent. As she explained, even this was no guarantee for success. Within the first month of arriving and settling in The Hague, Sahar had her degree evaluated and approved. After being initially relieved and happy not to have to return to studying, it quickly became clear that having a degree valued at PhD level in the Netherlands created its own niche of hurdles and frustrations. After applying for many jobs in academia and outside of academia without success, she contacted the UAF, an NGO that offers support and funding to high skilled refugees, only to be told that the UAF cannot help

refugees with PhDs, and only specialises in Under-graduate and graduate degrees. She was forwarded to the organisation ‘scholar at risk’ who then referred her on to the Erasmus University, and after having contact back and forward for many months between different Universities and organisations, her application was lost in the system as her contact person changed. Sahar’s case is interesting as it shows that even when degrees have been recognised at almost the highest level, it is still possible to become stuck in the system.

#### *Valuing the degree: differences between local Dutch institutions*

Another interesting finding was that three of the respondents stated that the valuation of their diplomas was not the same across all institutions. Almaz is an interesting case from the bureaucratic point of view because she had initially come to the Netherlands on a student visa to do her Master’s in Delft on Environmental Planning and Management. As part of her application she submitted her Bachelor’s degree in Geography and Regional Planning to the University and was admitted for the Master’s course. She attended the course from 2014 to 2015 and then applied for Asylum once it became apparent that she could no longer return home after her course was done. When Almaz had sent her bachelor’s diploma from Eritrea to the IDW, it was graded as a HBO diploma, and not a Bachelor’s at University level, even though the University in Delft had already valued it as a University level Bachelor’s degree, and invited her to do her Master’s degree in the Netherlands.

Shilan also sent her diploma to the University in Delft and a similar thing occurred. Not knowing exactly where to go to have her diploma evaluated, she first approached the University, where her Civil Engineering degree was valued as a HBO diploma, requiring her to take one extra ‘schakeljaar’ or conversion year before she could start with a Master’s. The level was not the same as what Nuffic had rated it as, as it had been valued lower than the University. Both had given a different answer, and after questioning this, Shilan said that Nuffic eventually adjusted their verdict and stated that her degree was indeed HBO equivalent as the University had stated.

Samira had her Law degree valued by the IDW, as well as two of the Universities, Leiden and Erasmus. Whereas the IDW concluded that her degree was approximately equivalent academically to a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>d</sup> year of a Dutch Law degree, Leiden University advised her to start over and begin at the first year of the Law

Bachelor's course. The Erasmus University advised her to start with a one-year Master's degree in International Law. It could be argued that the case for law is very particular due to the differences inherent in the Dutch versus the Syrian legal system, and that no Law degree from abroad could realistically be equated with a Dutch degree. Yet, it is still interesting to see that the results of the evaluations and the consequent advice can differ so widely between all these institutions.

Though the sample used for this research is perhaps too small to model any conclusions on pertaining to the structural valuations of refugees' degrees and qualifications, it is an interesting finding. All three respondents had their documents reviewed and valued by different institutions and in these particular cases, the Universities ruled more favourably than the NGOs, with the exception, to an extent, of the University of Leiden, which advised to retake the entire Bachelor's programme.

Almaz also expressed her confusion at the apparent inconsistencies between the institutions within the same system.

*“For me because I have the degree and they devalued it, it is strange it is the same system and the same country but the university says it is a graduate but when I sent it to IDW....”*

- Almaz

The obstacles concerning qualifications were largely acknowledged in the literature by almost all sources that looked at the labour market position of newcomers, from the absence of documentation or physical evidence due to the flight and the tendency of host countries to devalue the qualifications and human capital that the newcomers bring with them. What was perhaps surprising in light of the theoretical expectations was that even those respondents who managed to have their degrees valued as Dutch-University equivalent and Almaz who actually got her Masters' degree in the Netherlands did not experience any noticeable advantage from this. An explanation could be that recognised refugees face a whole host of other

### ***Lack of local work experience***

Apart from the importance of having degrees and qualifications as proof of the knowledge, expertise and academic level, practical working experience is valued very

highly when looking for a job. Although many of the respondents have worked for many years professionally, it could still be a challenge to move from that experience into a new job in the Netherlands. The respondents indicated that this was probably due to the requirement of relevant ‘Dutch’ working experience, or experience working in a Dutch company in a Dutch setting. Elena has expressed concerns about this, in combination with the aforementioned struggle to provide proof of any qualifications and experiences due to a lack of papers. Almaz had both a Master’s degree from a Dutch University as well as several years of working experience prior to coming here. Despite the fact that she had worked in geographical information systems for two years and an additional 5 years of experience with data management systems, she still struggled to secure employment, let alone on this level.

*“I have a lot of work experience from my home country on my CV, but it is not enough.”*

- Almaz

So far Almaz has received invitations to two job interviews, both in the field of geographical information systems and in both cases matching what she had done during her studies. The first interview was with the municipality, where the feedback was that she did not speak Dutch well enough for this position. The second interview was with the ‘Waterschap’ in Middleburg, where they were looking specifically for someone with knowledge of hydrological systems. Despite her expertise in this area, this attempt too was unsuccessful, due to language and the fact that there were competitors with more experience.

Even for a very highly qualified and experienced academic such as Sahar, it was a challenge to find work. Having spent the first 10 years of her academic career teaching at the department of Mechanical engineering and the following 10 years teaching Research Methodology at the University, there is little doubt that she has ample experience in conducting research and working in an academic context.

*“Yes, at the same time, this is the dilemma. Even with, they just, they stay or keep thinking that I have this experience but I don’t have any experience in the Netherlands labour market.”*

This sentiment reflects the labour market access barriers according to the literature, described by Sakamoto et al. as ‘Canadian experience’. However, where Sakamoto et al. described this concept very specifically and the requirement of ‘Canadian experience’ by Canadian employers seemed very explicit and quantifiable, my respondents only hinted at this and indicated that they had suspicions that local employers were mistrusting of their experience because it was not Dutch. There was no indication from the interview that any of the respondents had at any point been literally required to show Dutch experience, however as most of the respondents had many years of professional experience as well as good qualifications, the idea was quickly floated that perhaps Dutch employers would be more comfortable hiring someone who had already worked in the Netherlands. Other factors that were mentioned in the theory such as learning to apply for jobs in a new and unfamiliar labour market and the competition with locals were also echoed during the interviews.

### ***Navigating a new job market and competition from natives***

Respondents have also mentioned that it was difficult to figure out how to properly apply for professional jobs in the Netherlands, as it all works differently from procedures in their home countries. Most respondents have said that the CV for the most part was the same in terms of content as they were used to, and as for the format some of them have received some help or coaching to make it fit the Dutch expectations and standards. Nour said that her husband has taught himself to do all of this by looking around on the Internet for examples and following them, whilst respondents Samira and Almaz, who entered a work-experience programme at the Municipality last year received some guidance and help from job coaches during the training. More will be said about the work experience programme in 4.2.

Elena explained how the Dutch system differed from the system in Syria, and how in Syria people could often find work because they would be given a chance to work for a short period to prove their skills to their employer. In Syria, she said she would have been able to show her skills in translating first, whereas in the Netherlands it is required to have the necessary diploma as proof of skill. This

struggle to learn about the application procedures and the ins and outs of the new job market in general was mentioned in the literature too.

One of the major factors barricading high skilled refugee women from finding work, is the competition they face on the Dutch job market, especially from the native Dutch population. Shilan, who is going to start her conversion course at the TU Delft said that the biggest barrier was the fact that Dutch employers were unfamiliar with her university and degree, and were thus less likely to hire her for particular positions if there were locals with qualifications that they did know and recognise. In Syria, she could have started working immediately with her current degree, but due to the devaluation of her degree she must learn Dutch first and do a conversion course before entering a Dutch University to do her Masters. This totals a delay of three years, after which the challenge will remain, as there will be other native candidates for the jobs she is looking for. Samira voiced this same difficulty.

*“If the employer wants to pay, he can also find someone else who was born here, speaks Dutch better than us, has studied here and has a Dutch diploma; why would he pay for us? This, I think, is the problem.”*

*- Samira*

### ***Discrimination***

When asked whether they had been discriminated, answers were mixed, often heavily depending on the individual persons experiences with particular contact persons and employers. Samira said that she at no point experienced any form of discrimination working for the municipality, as it was a very diverse and large employer. Aisha indicated that she has felt discriminated by the treatment she received, not by an employer but by her contact person from the municipality. She also reflected on the fact that not all contact persons dealt with their refugee contacts in the same way and that this felt unfair to her. Others were careful to use the term ‘discrimination’ but did acknowledge an awareness that their being an ‘outsider’ put them at a disadvantage from the outset in comparison to the Dutch natives that they would be competing against for jobs.

Sahar also expressed having felt that certain people or institutions treated her unfairly or in a way that made her feel frustrated. She gave an example of an

experience she had when being sent to Gothenburg for a training programme for refugee academics, funded by the EU.

*“We were like, 15 high educated refugees all with PhDs, and do you now how they made the training? How to make a CV, and how to do an interview. And even if you do this training, when you give this kind of training with high-educated people, what does that mean? I felt like.... You consider us as very small... why?”*

- Sahar

This was only one of a number of examples that she had brought up during the interview in which she reflected with some level of disbelief and indignation on how she and others as high skilled refugees were treated by the host countries. Almost all cases involved a contact person or organisation underestimating her and treating her as if she were less capable or in need of instruction or advice. The type of discrimination experienced and described by Sahar and Aisha is not an obvious form of discrimination where they have been directly denied a job or help based on their recognised refugee status; it was more part of the communication towards them that revealed a low esteem for these women despite their high credentials and years of experience. Perhaps this is why the respondents have been quite careful to refer to this as discrimination, as it is hidden and difficult to prove or point at.

Despite the struggles and obstacles that the respondents have described, the respondents all were working on improving their labour market prospects in some way or other. Initiatives ranged from going back to school to doing volunteering to sharpening their Dutch skills. In the following section I will look more closely at these initiatives and discuss how the respondents reflect on this process.

### *Enhancing labour market access*

The main initiatives mentioned by the respondents concerned obtaining a Dutch qualification by going back to school, doing voluntary work, entering traineeships, having contacts and a social network and finally I will discuss how their motivation is also an important element to their success. These topics were all put forward in the theory and although the respondents all discussed them, it became clear that simply

taking these steps was not enough to actually improve their position on the labour market. Even taking these steps was more complicated than the theory might suggest.

One crucial factor for enhancing labour market position as a newcomer, which was mentioned in the theory, was the language, which I have left out of this part as it has already been discussed profusely in the previous chapter. All respondents acknowledged the importance of language and over half of them were actively studying the Dutch language, which is why I did not feel the need to repeat this factor again here.

### ***Back to school***

Almost all respondents indicated that they would begin studying in the Netherlands in order to climb up and onto the job market. Despite the frustration of having to take the time and effort to go back to school, most of the respondents seem to accept the necessity of doing studies or courses again.

*“Yes, I find it annoying. But it is just, the law is just different. The law in my country is different. I just have to learn it in the Netherlands.”*

- Nour

Aisha is currently doing her 1,5 yearlong conversion course for dentistry and is expected to graduate from this in June 2020. Shilan is in the process of enrolling into a conversion year at the University of Delft, as her lack of work experience and the differences between her degree and the Dutch degree made it the most suitable option for her. Samira had enrolled into an MBO course for law, but quit in September 2018 to focus on her work experience position at the municipality. The difference in level and the focus on basic skills bored and frustrated her, as can be seen in the passage below:

*“... for me it is boring to study for 3 years to get an MBO diploma; I have studied at University and I was a lawyer. At Mondriaan we have not only law but also Maths, this is boring, I have learned this at school. And also Dutch and English; it is boring and it takes a lot of energy... it is tough.”*

- Samira



Luckily, by this time she had secured a work-experience position at the Municipality, similar to a traineeship but created specifically to help high skilled refugees get a foothold in the municipality. She is currently working as a legal advisor in public law enforcement, where she has the freedom and responsibilities to make decisions about how to deal with complaints and requests from citizens regarding garbage and recycling. For now, she is content with her job and is happy to be able to apply herself and her legal skills in her work.

Elena has shown readiness and motivation to start her course in translation, which, being a HBO bachelor, would take 4 years.

*“The environment of a University or Hogeschool is very important. But for me it is not a problem, I will sit with the youngsters and listen with them to the professor.”*

*- Elena*

All in all the respondents showed a willingness to study despite having already gotten their qualifications years before, and did not see the studying itself as the biggest obstacle. This is evidenced by the fact that almost all of them are studying or in the process of preparing to apply for a study. However, it is difficult to say whether going back to school to get Dutch qualifications has actually enhanced the labour market potential of the respondents, as most of them still do not have jobs and are still preparing to start their education or are still in the middle of their course. Almaz, who already has a Dutch qualification, has still experienced struggles looking for work in her field of expertise, which also reveals that having a Dutch education does not spell the end of difficulties upon entering the job market.

### ***Volunteering and unpaid work***

Almost all respondents have mentioned doing or wanting to do some type of voluntary or unpaid work. Some have managed to secure volunteering positions relevant to their profession or field of study, whilst others have mainly used the volunteering as an activity to help them practice and learn Dutch and make contacts. According to the literature voluntary and other unpaid work can be a useful shortcut to a paid job, as it expands networks and contacts, adds to local working experiences

on a CV and allows refugees to demonstrate their skills and capacities to a potential employer. Respondents evaluation of the usefulness of voluntary work in finding a job was mixed, with some respondents reportedly finding work through volunteering contacts, and others simply doing the volunteering as an opportunity to improve their Dutch.

Nour volunteers as a sort of teaching assistant in a local community centre where she helps the teacher in her activities with the children, such as playing and handicrafts. She has said that she enjoys it and that communicating with the children helps her language. Samira did three volunteering jobs whilst she was learning Dutch. Two of her jobs were as support staff at a language school and one was in an organization in Amsterdam. Sahar also did many different volunteering activities.

Ghazaleh has tried, without success, to secure an unpaid internship at the Gemeente for 6 months in an attempt to climb up and move from there to a paid job. This tactic has been echoed by other respondents as well, and this strategic use of starting voluntary work in order to enhance their opportunities to get to work is understandable, as the experience gained during volunteering can familiarize the respondents with the work and systems as well as give them valuable contacts.

However, in some sectors it is not only necessary to have volunteering experience but the experience has to be relevant and within a particular field. Aisha hoped to find an internship or voluntary work in the medical field as this she hoped to match her volunteering work with her skills and expertise as an orthodontist. She was not supported in this request. This was also the case for Shilan, who, as a civil engineer without previous work experience needed to get into an internship where she could learn the tricks of the trade.

*“I want to do an internship within my specialism, not an internship in other things. They want to give me an internship in something else, but I don’t want it, it is difficult for me. It is not a good solution for me to just do another internship, I want to work in civil engineering but that experience does not match.”*

- Shilan

In other cases volunteering experience made no differences in the respondent’s job perspectives. This was the case for Elena who explained that the main obstacle was

not having the right documents and qualifications, not a lack of relevant experience. However, she did mention that other refugees she knew were working at the municipality or organisations as vluchtelingenwerk as voluntary translators. However, when asked whether any of them had had the possibility to move up into a paid position from there, the answer was no.

Although most of the reflections on the voluntary work were positive, the understanding was always that voluntary work was a good way to improve their Dutch, gain some local experiences, build up a few contacts and stay active. At the end of the day, however, voluntary work was never an end, but merely a means through which the respondents would hopefully come a few steps closer to an actual paid job. Sahar also revealed another side of doing volunteering work, which was not all positive and uplifting.

*“ So I do this kind of even research in vluchtelingenwerk for one year doing research; I just want to gain this experience in the Netherlands, but it is very painful when you work very hard to gain these qualifications and then you work for free at the end, I felt that I sell my experience for free and this is not fair. It is unfair, just to do this research for 1 year for nothing. Of course I gain experience, but I would love to be independent and work on my experience and gain more... so this is the case.”*

– Sahar

Sahar was doing three types of voluntary work at the same time in the hopes of using it as a channel to find a job, not necessarily to bolster her experience. What she did mention was that because her experience was exclusively gained when she was in Syria she had a disadvantage because she lacked ‘Dutch experience’, and thus started doing research as a volunteer. In her case, eventually doing all the different voluntary jobs paid off, as she secured her current postdoctoral position through a connection that had resulted from her volunteering work as a research assistant for a PhD candidate at the UvA.

### ***Traineeships***

An important step towards a job is securing a traineeship or paid work-experience placement. Two of the respondents, Samira and Almaz, managed to get into such a position at the municipality by joining the municipality traineeship for refugees. These specific traineeships at the municipality are only currently running in The Hague and Amsterdam, and were designed in the image of the regular municipality traineeship, which is open to young Dutch natives. Both trainees reflected positively on the experience and said that it helped them familiarise themselves with the municipality as an employer, with the systems, it gave them access to coaching and professional help with other job applications, as well as boosting their CVs with this extra, local, experience.

Almaz joined the DSO department for urban development, a good fit for her qualifications and previous experience. She enjoyed the traineeship where she worked on making different kinds of maps for the area. However, Almaz wished that she had done this traineeship later on, when her Dutch was already a little bit better. Because she found the traineeship very early on after resettling in The Hague, her Dutch was still basic and most communication happened in English or a mix of Dutch and English. This was acceptable for while it lasted but the result was that there were no longer-term opportunities to work coming out of this experience, as her Dutch was still below the required standard. Despite having already gotten a good head start over her fellow highly educated respondents, Almaz is not yet out of the woods when it comes to looking for and finding a suitable job in the Netherlands.

Samira also stressed that the training programme was a good first step, but it was no more than that: after the programme jobs were still not a guarantee and that even the work experience she did get was only relevant to municipalities. In her group of friends and family and among her co-workers at the municipality she has still been able to get that rare and hard to attain job. She explained that of the 50 refugees that had started the special traineeship at the municipality, only 10 of them had managed to secure proper paid employment the year after it ended. All of them found the jobs inside the municipality and not one has managed to find work outside or in the private sector.

These traineeships provide a small step in the right direction for the respondents, but the road after the traineeships is still hard and it is not clear whether the traineeships can create a lasting change. These types of programmes were not

mentioned specifically in the literature, however they can be considered similar to a job or other work-experience programme. Although there are high hopes that such programmes can help refugees, the reality shows that they do not solve the systemic problem of general underemployment within the high skilled refugee population, or make their problems on the labour market disappear.

### ***Contacts and Network***

In the structure I chose to place the category ‘contacts and networks’ in the section on ‘Enhancing labour market access’, even though the theory mentioned that a lack of contacts and networks is usually an obstacle. Most of the respondents acknowledged how difficult it was to get by with limited connections, but what came forward even more strongly from their responses was the empowerment they could get through the networks and friends that they do have. Many reported having help or getting ideas from friends, or that incidental meetings with strangers could lead to an application for a traineeship or post-doc position. For this reason the choice was made to emphasise the empowerment gotten from these networks rather than the disadvantages of not having a network.

Most of the respondents mentioned in some form or other the importance of having a network and social contacts. In some cases these contacts were useful for sharing information about vacancies or job opportunities, in other cases these contacts helped perform tasks and helped to do the job applications. Almaz said that she had heard about the work experience programme in the municipality through a friend she met at a barbeque. She asked him many questions about doing internships and getting to know the systems in the Netherlands. He knew a man who was the manager of urban planning to whom he passed on her CV, which got the ball rolling.

*“Yes it was accidental; its not really a kind of friend, i just met at a neighbourhood barbecue, and we talk about my life in DH what i want to do, and from this speaking something comes from it...”*

*- Almaz*

Shilan too had received vital assistance from friends in finding language schools and registering for study programmes. She did not have a contact person from the

municipality and said she had to do most of the searching and navigating the system on her own. Sahar stressed the importance of networking. By doing so much volunteering and attending workshops and sessions she built up a network through which she could find opportunities to do work and research. This was not always easy, as Samira also agrees: as these women are still in the process of learning the Dutch language it can be difficult for them to make contact and reach out. She and others were aware of the risk of falling into a downward spiral, as the lack of skills will not improve without a network to practice it in and without a network to practice with it will be difficult to improve.

Almost all of the respondents explicitly stated that they have either received help from contacts or friends, or that they have benefitted in some way from networking and seeking informal channels for advice and help. All respondents also expressed having to fend for themselves without having ‘official’ help or support from the municipality at some point during the process. In some cases, respondents even described their experiences with their contact persons as being more of a barrier than help. Social contacts and having a network are important to the job search and other aspects of life, and that the contact and support from the municipality or other formal contact persons is still only mixed to negative from the perspective of the respondents. What also was mentioned during the interviews was how the individualistic and independent mentality that is assumed in the Netherlands was a surprise to many respondents, who were not used to or comfortable with that way of working and being pushy to get what they need. When asked, some of the respondents, such as Samira and Nour agreed that this ‘Dutch directness’ was unfamiliar to them and might have hampered them initially in getting the information and support that they needed. This could be a cultural reason for why refugees struggle to make contact and access the labour market effectively.

### ***Motivation and Psychological challenges***

From the interviews it has become clear that the participants are, generally speaking, proactive and motivated to do what is necessary to find work and contribute their skills and capacity to the Dutch society. This attitude can be seen as an asset to the specific migrant subsection of refugees, as Cole and Singer (1991) have shown that

refugees in particular are extra motivated to overcome obstacles and make their new lives into success stories. Reflections on discrimination and the frustrations of being underemployed and no longer being able to work and live in the socio economic position that they had acquired in their home country also resonate with prior expectations based on the literature. Cole and Singer (1991) stated that refugees as a group were often very determined and motivated to make the best of their new lives in their host countries and were prepared to work hard to succeed. This resilience was reflected in the comments made by most of the respondents who seemed to look forward towards all the possibilities that they had beyond the obstacles and the barriers.

However, this strong motivation and eagerness to build up a new life can give rise to frustrations and disappointments when their integration into their new home and job market does not work out as easily as expected. Setbacks can make some, such as Aisha, even more determined whereas others can eventually feel hopeless and lose their initial motivation to go back to school or find a high-level job. The respondents generally showed high spirits and most of those interviewed acknowledged the struggle while not seeming defeated by it.

*“It is a challenge. And I like challenges, I am a motivated woman and I am a strong woman. I have cried a lot, but it also gives me the energy to keep going.”*

*- Aisha*

During the interview Aisha talked about her children as one of her main motivators to keep working hard and to stay motivated. She recounted a situation in which she had felt that her daughter had been discriminated by the school, when they advised her to pursue an MBO level education after secondary school. Believing strongly that her daughter was capable of entering University, Aisha and her husband worked hard to circumvent this advice and help her to apply for and enter a fast track to University instead.

*“I have two daughters, one who is 19 and one who is 15. The first one was 16 when she came here, and her school gave her advised her to do MBO. After that she could work up to HBO and University but it would take at least 5 years. My husband is an engineer. For three weeks he helped her with math, physics and chemistry to prepare*

*for five exams in two days to do a schakeljaar (conversion year) at the VU. There were 200 applications, and only 10 were invited. Now my daughter is doing the VU Schakeljaar, doing VWO 4, 5 and 6 in one year.”*

- Aisha

It is unclear why exactly the school did not advise or even offer the option to do this, but it is yet another instance of an institution apparently being less than encouraging towards refugees and their ambitions. Aisha indicated feeling discriminated by this, but did not let this deter her and instead worked hard with her family to ‘beat’ the system. Although it is somewhat hopeful that this strategy has worked for Aisha and her family eventually, it is important to notice that the system in itself is not very supportive of the refugees who find themselves in this situation and that it is important to look critically at this system.

This is especially true for those who do not have the persistence and support to keep being motivated despite setbacks and obstacles. For some, like Ghazaleh, it was difficult to stay motivated after all the hardships and failed attempts to start an education and find a job. When she had arrived in the Netherlands she was initially very motivated to start a University level education. After all, she had already been to University in Iran and felt that it was a logical starting point to settling in and creating a life in the Netherlands. However, this initial motivation disappeared after years of struggle to get into University courses and learning the Dutch language. Her expectations began to drop, and her ambitions soon shifted to pursuing an MBO education and later on to just finding a job instead. When this also did not happen Ghazaleh experienced trouble staying motivated to do anything at all and her mental well being suffered. The feeling of aimlessness she described has caused depression and other psychological troubles for Ghazaleh; she struggles with stress and anxiety and that her moods can swing wildly from day to day. She is receiving therapy for these issues, although it is still an on-going struggle.

Ghazaleh was the only respondent who had expressed such severe difficulties coping with her situation. An important factor that could help explain why she has apparently struggled with her situation more than others is the fact that she is alone in the Netherlands with no relatives to support her. Unlike in Aisha’s case, there was no direct family to support or be supported by and this can make a recognised refugee’s



situation even more difficult. It is unfortunate that the situation has been so difficult to cope with that it has brought on psychological problems for Ghazaleh. It should be seen as something of a red flag that the situation for a high skilled young woman with high employment potential such as her should be so challenging that it over time eliminates her from the employment pool altogether.

### *Link to theoretical expectations*

The respondents mentioned all the obstacles that were found in the literature and reportedly experienced all of the struggles and frustrations that I expected to find based on the theory. As for the factors that supposedly enhance labour market access according to the theory, results were more vague. The theory states that interventions such as investing in a local education, doing voluntary work and trainings as factors that can improve refugees' job search as these elements can chip away at the disadvantages they face initially. However, the resulting success from these strategies are inconclusive and mixed at best; some respondents who already had local qualifications or who had their degrees valued did not necessarily experience any benefit from this in terms of finding a job, and some still struggling to find a real paid job even after doing a traineeship or voluntary work. Where Ghorashi and Tilburg (2006) linked participating in unpaid internships or other opportunities for refugees to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to positive labour market effects, this link was not conclusively found in this study. All respondents indicated having difficulties applying for jobs and being largely unsuccessful, even those who participated in volunteering activities, internships, training programmes and who had connections within an organisation. In this respect, the theoretical expectations based on the literature were somewhat reflected by the interviews: to a great extent most respondents identified with the obstacles mentioned in the literature, whereas the factors that supposedly enabled them to participate on the job market were less conclusive.

What has not been reported at all was any specific mention of gender as a factor shaping the labour market integration of my respondents. None of the respondents indicated that her gender was in any way of itself restricting her from

accessing the labour market, or that traditional role patterns prevented her from working or finding a suitable job. Most of the women had worked before arriving in the Netherlands and did not expect anything else than to work here again.

While these ideas might help improve refugees' labour market position in theory, in practice the respondents often did not have the liberty to experiment and invest in themselves so freely. Policy borne restrictions on funding for studies and benefits, and pressure to accept work even below their level of qualification over a certain age or despite doing many voluntary activities show that in practice these women were not as free to maximise their labour market capital as theory might suggest. I will look at these factors in the next section, 4.2, and make clear how the respondents reflected on the role of the local level government policy on their experience of entering the Dutch workforce.

#### *4.2 Policy: Reflections on the policies that govern labour market integration*

In the first section of this analysis I have discussed how the respondents reportedly experienced the process of integrating into the Dutch labour market. In this second part I will analyse how they reportedly experienced and reflected on the policy from the The Hague municipality regarding their labour market integration. The Hague has a policy document, the *Haagse Aanpak Statushouders Sociaal Domein*, which outlines the policy goals and policy tools for the municipality of The Hague and her collaborative partners.

I will discuss the following section in three steps; Policy goals, policy tools and policy outcomes. However, as the tools and outcomes are directly linked I will discuss both of these in one section and weave the two elements into one narrative. I will also point to gaps between the stated policy objectives and tools and their perceived outcomes according to the respondents. This will be the setup for the final chapter of the analysis in which I will propose solutions to these identified policy-outcome gaps.

##### *Policy Goals*

In the Appendix I have given a brief summary of this policy, and in the following section I have analysed how the respondents have experienced this policy in action and how they reflect on it. The policy outlines the most important themes for refugee integration according to the local government (resettlement, learning the language, work or daily occupation and financial) and the approach that the municipality of The Hague has to this process (i.e. pairing up refugees with a contact person from the municipality, focussing primarily on young refugees and delegating operational tasks to external organisations). The policy document clearly states that its goal is to optimise the employment potential of each recognised refugee and that they strive for a personal and fitting approach to their individual integration. There is no specific clause or policy targeted at high skilled recognised refugees, however, and this lack of target group specification has consequences for the respondents, as their stories make clear. Ingram and Schneider argued for the importance of delineating a clear target

group when constructing policy (1993). This has not been done specifically for the sub-group of ‘high skilled’ recognised refugees, as they are grouped together in the broader category of ‘refugees’ in general.

### *Policy Tools and Outcomes*

#### ***Contact persons and coaches***

The municipality pairs up each refugee with a so-called contact person from the central municipality who will stay in contact with and monitor the recognised refugee’s integration process and who are also there to provide support and help them realise their plans for entering school and finding work. As this contact person is organised by the municipality, the recognised refugees generally do not have to do anything about it and are contacted by their contact person who will then inform them about the following procedures. This system of having a contact person is a sort of policy tool for the municipality to facilitate the recognised refugees’ integration and achieve their policy goals of enabling as many refugees as possible to find work and assume a role in the Dutch society.

The responses to the contact persons who were in touch with the respondents upon settling into The Hague are at best mixed, and at worst negative. Nour was positive about her contact person and said that she asked her everything she needed to know, and had so far gotten all the information she needs. Aisha and Sahar on the other hand have had negative experiences with their contact persons ranging from being pushed to accepting (low skilled) work that they did not want, to discouraging and blocking them from continuing their studies in Dutch or professionally, and to feeling frustrated at the type of communication and treatment they received from their contact persons. Both respondents were also aware of the differences in treatment and support between the contact persons, as they noticed how other friends or family were being treated differently, and Sahar even noticed the difference when she contacted a different contact person once. It is therefore not clear whether this tactic of pressurising particular refugees is an actual policy tool that is employed on purpose or whether it is the individual contact person’s own personality or take on their job. This

apparent randomness and the differences in how supportive or obstructive the contact persons were only exacerbated the feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Sahar also said that the way the municipality deals with the refugees was a sort of a standard and impersonal approach, where all refugees were seen and treated as a homogenous group. The approach she referred to was the intense pushing and putting pressure on refugees to accept work even though circumstances differ widely between cases and not everyone benefits from this blanket pushing tactic. Having been very actively applying and working three voluntary jobs, Sahar was annoyed that she was still pressured into doing paid work and being told that all her volunteering activities and job applications were not enough. The following passage details an encounter Sahar had with the municipality.

*“By the gemeente, you know that the gemeente they do a kind of scan for all your qualifications, what did you do what did you study, online, I did this about 2,5 hours. Scanning for answering all these kind of questions. And when I finished they invited me to talk about the results. Do you know what happened? They said, first what surprised me, the highest level of qualification was master degree, so I told them I have a PhD. But when they invited me to find a job, they said if you don’t find a job, we will find you a job. So I said yes! I want a job now! What kind of a job you were looking for? And they said. Any job. Cleaning, or Albert Heijn.... What? Why I did 2,5 hours scanning my qualifications, why? And I went home crying, crying crying....”*

- Sahar

The empowering and positive tone expressed in the policy document is at stark contrast with the bitter and frustrating experiences recounted by these respondents. Although it is important to stress that there were good stories and that these experiences in no way are representative for the entire municipality work force, it is clearly a problem that the implementation of the policy by said contact persons can be in such sharp opposition to the goals stated in the policy document. This problem can be ascribed to the relative vagueness of the guidelines in the policy document, as there are no specifics attached to the guideline ‘encourage newcomers to find employment’. The lack of a specific approach for the sub-target group of high skilled recognised

refugees can also be seen as explanatory for this. No exceptions are made and no regard seems to be paid to their level of experience or education, leading to a waste of talents if they do indeed settle for the jobs offered to them.

Two respondents said they did not have a contact person at all (Almaz and Shilan). This is interesting as it is part of standard procedure to allocate contact persons to the recognised refugees, although it is not clear why these particular respondents did not have any. Ghazaleh did not speak of a contact person but described a type of job coach from vluchtelingenwerk. Almaz said that she did instead have a type of job coach from the ‘werknemers servicepunt’ or WSP, one of the partner organisations that the municipality works, but she did not experience this as very helpful or very useful. This coach or contact person from the WSP was pressurising her to do cleaning work, but did not notify her about other opportunities to do more meaningful traineeships or work experience programs more befitting her level of education and experience.

*“He [a friend] contacted the manager from the urban planning department and when I got the email I showed her; I am busy with this kind of internship, so next week I will contact the manager and she asked; how do you get this one. She was supposed to inform me but she was surprised, rather than informing me I told her.”*

- Almaz

Once she started her work-experience position in the municipality she received support from a career coach. This coach was very helpful and helped with things such as looking for jobs, passing on information about positions but also formatting CVs and other more technical things. The difficulty with this contact person, however, is that he would only be assigned to the participants once they have already managed to enter the traineeship positions.

### ***Pressure to take on any job***

A number of the respondents have indicated feeling pressurised to begin searching for work at the instruction of the municipality. It is an important part of the local policy goals for the municipality to help get as many of the recognised refugees as possible

off the benefits and become financially independent. In concrete terms this means making sure that they find work as soon as possible. However, this does not necessarily take into account the type of work or the specific target groups within the total recognised refugee population. The municipality has statistics showing the numbers of recognised refugees on benefits and those who are employed, however these numbers do not make a distinction between the level of education that these people have and the jobs they are being placed into. According to the metrics of the statistics, a person with a degree working in a supermarket would technically still be classed as a ‘success’ due to the fact that they are no longer unemployed. This approach has been cause for frustration, indignation and pain on the part of the recognised refugees interviewed for this research.

According to the data from the interviews most of the respondents have experienced pressure from the municipality to start work and to accept the jobs that are given to them. The municipality offers to assist in finding a job but does not necessarily have to put effort into making the job a good ‘fit’ with the person’s skills or education. This construction can lead to tensions and disagreements between the recognised refugees and the contact people who are responsible for putting them to work. Samira was also put under pressure to accept a low-skilled job; however she managed to enter the trainee programme at the municipality. Almaz, who also managed to enter this programme said that before she found it she faced similar experiences where her contact from the WSP was forcing her to start a job. There was no regard for what job or her level of skills, and the interaction led her feeling like this experience was part of a set procedure not necessarily designed to help them.

*“And the contact said just do any job, like cleaning or something. I think the job that they gave in workservice is only they want people out of uitkering but they don’t care about helping the people. Its just work.”*

- Almaz

The following quote from Aisha reflects a very similar encounter where she too was told to accept a low-skilled job without any regard for her degrees or years of experience as an orthodontist.

“I have asked for voluntary work or something medical, but she said to me: just go serve coffee [in a care home] or work with the elderly or children...”

- Aisha

Elena has also shared her experience of being pushed to start a job in a different sector, such as in restaurants or in healthcare, because there is a need for these people and at the same time they try to match the recognised refugees to a job. In these cases it becomes clear that it is not necessarily the refugees’ best interests that are being met by putting pressure on them to work. The municipality strives to assist recognised refugees as well as other target groups who are alienated from the labour market find employment and thus become independent of benefits. Although it is understandable what the motive is, it is still cause for frustration on behalf of the recognised refugees.

Sahar vocalised her irritation at being pushed by her contact person. During the interview she explained that not only did it feel offensive because the contact people did not seem to care about her level of education or experience, but also because it felt like she had to be pushed hard to work or was otherwise unwilling or even lazy. This was not the case for almost all of the respondents who have expressed a willingness to find paid work, but also to do internships and voluntary work instead, for the time being. However, having worked at a high occupation level, or having studied before means that these women are less inclined to accept ‘just any job’ as they have worked long and hard to achieve what they have achieved.

*“Exactly. Just pushing. And if they give stats for refugees working, they never mentioned what jobs they offered. ‘We offered these jobs for refugees.’ what kind of job; they never mentioned. They just stop uitkering and this is the big issue for gemeente.”*

- Sahar

Sahar was also outspoken about her displeasure at the municipality contact persons’ approach to dealing with refugees and treating all as ‘the same problem’. She explained that in her experience they had no regard for her as an individual, her achievements but also her efforts to find work and to do so many different types of volunteering. All of this appeared not to count for anything in their approach to her,



which was to push her hard as if she had been reluctant or inactive in trying to find a job. This approach gave her the feeling like she and all other refugees were being ‘painted with the same brush’. She was also critical of the lack of regard for the types of jobs that were being offered to refugees and the overly simplistic ‘quota’ like approach to getting people off benefits and pushing them.

*“No. It doesn’t matter how educated you are, they just pushing me to stop uitkering. This is their problem, stop uitkering, you should work. You should have paid work. So it doesn’t matter if it is in cleaning or in Albert Hein, supermarket, doesn’t matter they just want me to stop uitkering. I want that very much, but not in cleaning.”*

*- Sahar*

In some cases the pressure to find a job quickly also interferes directly with the refugees’ studies of Dutch. In order to work at such a high level again in the Netherlands thus requires that they spend longer on studying the Dutch language as a higher skilled job is often more wordy and requires an even higher ability of the Dutch language than what is required for the basic ‘inburgering’. This has proven to be a difficult point for a number of the interviewees, especially among the ones above the age of 30 as they were pressured earlier on to start work and were discouraged from studying or spending more time on Dutch courses. Aisha says that even though she has only been in the Netherlands for about 2 years, which is relatively short, she is already being discouraged from improving her Dutch in favour of low-skilled employment instead. In terms of the policy it would seem contradictory that the recognised refugees would experience pressure to stop learning Dutch and start working, however in the policy document learning Dutch is very much presented as a tool to enable integration and employment. Since it is not stipulated to what extent learning Dutch is encouraged and what kind of employment it refers to it appears that in practice it is not always self evident that the recognised refugees should continue studying Dutch if they have already reached a level sufficiently high to be working someplace or other.

She described how her contact person had written up an action plan for the coming three months stating that she would spend only three more months trying to find a job by herself, after which she would be forced to agree with and accept any

job the municipality could find for her. Her contact person had also threatened to stop her benefits if she did not comply with the proposal. Aisha was told to sign this document but she declined, as it went against her own plan to perfect her Dutch before doing the year-and-a-half conversion course for dentistry that she is currently doing. These and other encounters have had a draining and demoralising effect on the respondents as became clear from the interviews and their examples.

The amount of interference and pressure a local authority puts on its constituents to find and accept work differs per country and per region, and in this particular case it is clear that the municipality plays an important role in the labour market incorporation of these recognised refugees. However, according to the experiences from the respondents this role was often more obstructive than helpful and not particularly tailored to helping the niche of high skilled and experienced refugees. This friction is caused by the contradiction inherent in the statement of policy goals which aim to both empower the recognised refugees and help them make the most of their skills and potential, whilst at the same time pressurising them to find a job as fast as possible. Due to financial considerations, it is often the case that speed takes priority over taking the time to find the refugees a solution that can help them maximise their situation.

### ***Investing in the Youth***

In the policy document it explicitly links youth to high employability and states as a goal to prioritise helping young refugees find work, and there is a special focus on helping the age group between 18-27 find work, and under 35s. There is no mention of more mature candidates and there was already no provision for high skilled refugees to begin with, leaving this sub section of an already elite group in between a rock and a hard place. The municipality discourages ‘older’ recognized refugees, i.e. above the age of 35, from studying and maintains a policy of trying to encourage this particular group to work as quickly as possible. The logic guiding this policy is that younger people will yield higher returns on ‘investment’ as they will have more productive working years that pay back for and justify the cost and duration of the study. Two of the respondents mentioned their age as being a factor potentially hampering them in finding a suitable job or being allowed to return to studying in the

build up towards a professional career in the Netherlands. Elena, at 50, is unwilling to give up on a prospect of improving her career chances in the Netherlands and settling for another profession than what she had done for over 20 years before. She saw the time spent on improving Dutch and going back to school as a relatively small investment compared to the many years that she would still have left to work.

*“But I think, I still have much time left before my pension. According to this new law [the retirement age is] 68 years, and I am only 50. If I study now for 4 years I can still work for many years and pay off my loans to DUO and the UAF...” (resp. 2)*

Sahar, who is 47, similarly voiced concerns about her age but more in light of the preference employers seem to have for younger job candidates. According to her, there was nothing inherently surprising or strange about the fact that employers often seek to hire younger people, but this focus on the younger generation means that there are very few chances left for people who are highly educated but also older and more experienced. Because of the difficulties in transferring experience between the country of origin of many of the refugee population and the Netherlands, having a lot of experience no longer gives these women a particular edge over their competition. In fact, this ‘over-experience’ or ‘over-qualification’ can even be a disadvantage in as much as it places these women in between a rock and a hard place so to speak. Because of their situation, language, and other structural barriers they are not quite competing with their similarly experienced native population peers for the high-end jobs, whilst at the same time being too experienced and therefore not interesting or affordable enough for more junior positions.

*“But I can realise and understand if they choose young people, but at the same time there should be more chances for high educated people who are also old. Otherwise I feel like I am forced to early retirement. I am still 47 and I shouldn’t work in my field, which is early retired, which kills me actually.”*

- Sahar

Before landing the postdoctoral position, respondent had tried many times without success to find a job in academia in the past 4 years. She explained that the years

going by only made her chances of getting into academia slimmer and slimmer, and that she decided that if the application for the postdoc did not work out, she would definitively choose another path. It is easy for the recognised refugees to land on a downward spiral where it becomes harder and harder to enter the job market the more years go by. As the gap in their CV widens and they grow older the existing obstacles only seem to grow bigger. This obstacle was not mentioned explicitly in the literature as being a barrier for high skilled refugee women in particular, but it is a known that age can be a complicating factor for job seekers in general.

For the respondents however the added complication was that the policy is mainly geared towards helping those with so-called ‘high employment potential’. Although it can be argued that this is an example of targeting a specific group through policy, it leaves out a large part of the total recognised refugee population, and seemingly ‘writes them off’. What is ironic, however, is that according to the policy document most of the younger high skilled recognised refugees are advised to start a Dutch education because their qualifications are not recognised. This means that effectively, they will not be ready to work professionally for at least four more years. It appears then that for the target group of high-skilled recognised refugees this policy tool is missing its goal and not effective.

### ***Financial***

For almost all the respondents, money was an issue and became some sort of obstacle getting in the way of their integration process. Almost all respondents, with the exception of Samira and Sahar are dependent on the government benefits or ‘uitkering’. However, according to the policy, only refugees under a certain age are entitled to keep receiving these benefits if they start their education. For most, however, this is a trade off, and as soon as they start studying their benefits will be replaced with a much smaller loan from DUO. This switch can cause real problems for refugees, especially those with families who are dependent on these benefits to live on. Nour experienced this dilemma:

*“I have valued my diploma and I would like to do a course in legal administration, but it is difficult because if I start this course my benefits will stop. DUO will lend me*

*money, but this money is much less than the benefits. My husband is looking for work, if he finds a job then I can do this course.”*

Ghazaleh faced the same issue and had, by the time of the interview, already a huge debt above her head due to the many language courses she had taken, without much success. She explained that she had attended a number of language schools for her ‘inburgering’ but that these schools did not offer a very good standard of Dutch whilst still taking her money. The policy surrounding the ‘inburgering’ is such that each refugee is entitled to take out a loan from DUO of up to a certain amount to spend on Dutch language courses and their inburgering. If they complete the inburgerings test within 3 years of starting it this loan becomes ‘gift’ and they will not have to pay it back. Ghazaleh wanted to go back to school, as was the advice from the municipality, however due to her financial troubles and the additional hardship of having even less money if her benefits were cut off, she was very hesitant and distrustful about going back to school.

“My time is gone, my money is gone... What am I supposed to do now?”

- Ghazaleh

For more mature respondents the situation was slightly different, as they were not offered as generous settlements for studying and are pressured structurally to find work instead of study. Elena explained in detail what her predicament was, as she is 50 years old and needs to study to get certified as a translator. She had found a course in Utrecht, but if she wants to attend this course she would have to first pass her ‘staatsexamen’ with Dutch at level B2. She is currently enrolled and taking classes but when she starts studying she will have to pay 3000,- euros a year in school fees and she will lose her right to benefits. She has two options for funding, one being a loan from DUO, only she will have to pay interest because of her age, and her other option is to become one of the UAF clients. The many different ways of receiving funding and the rules and loopholes governing it can make the system like a maze for the recognised refugees trying to navigate it. Elena indicated that she wanted to discuss her options with her contact person, but other respondents have noted tensions with their contact persons concerning this issue. Because contact persons have

instructions to help the recognised refugees find work and become financially independent they do not always inform and encourage the recognised refugees about other options, and in some cases even apply pressures such as threatening to stop benefits if the person in question does not accept a job they have found for them or wants to continue studying Dutch. This tactic was recounted during the interviews by a number of the respondents (Aisha, and Samira).

The clash between stated policy objectives and actual implementation of the policy becomes clear here. The policy document, though vague, states clearly that it prioritises swift labour market incorporation for recognised refugees and places the responsibility for carrying out this plan with the contact persons who meet and counsel these clients, or refugees. It also states that it is essential that the newcomers are encouraged to make the most of their potential in terms of skills and qualifications to blossom in The Hague society. In this case speed and accuracy come into conflict, as trying to get someone to work as quickly as possible is opposite to taking the time and investing in these people getting the *right* job. However, the fact that there are no targeted provisions for high skilled refugees, and that there is a general approach that does not encourage or facilitate local human capital investments financially makes this option more of an illusion for the respondents.

This obstacle that came forward from the interviews was the financial limitation of being dependent on government benefits whilst also needing to study to get ahead. The trade off that the respondents often faced was that going back to school meant being cut off their benefits which could harm themselves and their families. This is a very local policy-dependent factor and was not mentioned in the broader literature. The only source that also reports this issue is the article by Ghorashi and Tilburg, and this can be explained by the fact that they looked at the same country and target group, meaning that most locality-specific factors are similar giving rise to the same problems/obstacles as found in this study. Even though the nitty-gritty of the finances has changed since 2006 (the date of their study) in broad strokes policy concerning finances and study funding has remained similar.

### **Organisations**

A Sahar mentioned something very interesting about organisations that are supposed to support refugees in the Netherlands. There are many NGOs and organisations out there helping refugees in some way or other, by offering workshops and empowerment and giving the refugees prospects and hope for a brighter future. However, Sahar was very critical of the idea that these organisations are doing anything substantial to ‘help’ these refugees. There is a lot of promotion for helping refugees, or even fetishisation of refugees as victims needing help, but at the end of the day a lot of the help offered is superficial, ineffective and motivated by self-promotion and subsidies. Respondent seemed to be talking specifically about some organisation but she did not say the name.

*“And they really like, use those refugees to show on social media; we did this! We did that! No. If you see the website or Facebook page and you don’t know the real situation, they did lots of things. But actually nothing.. Not even nothings, sometimes they steal money.... If they offer something, some small jobs, they take part of the salary of them. It is really very annoying, and I will not say the names but I knew these practices...”*

- Sahar

She also mentioned that these comments apply equally to faulty ‘inburgerings-‘ or language schools, which resonates with the sentiment showcased by Ghazaleh. She reported feeling cheated and misled by the poor language education she received and the powerlessness at having felt like they had taken her money and left her standing out in the cold with no Dutch skills to show for it. Sahar affirmed that this was a problem and that various organisations could become predatory, because of the high demand for refugee support, the good opportunities it brought for self-promotion as well as the unregulated climate in which they could sprout up.

Ghazaleh voiced her dissatisfaction with how she had been treated by the different institutions, as she was sent from one language school to another, spending her money but not feeling like she had been taken seriously or that she could trust the organisations to actually help her. Ghorashi and Van Tilburg mention a similar trend amongst language schools as reports were that the levels of education differed widely

between the courses from recognised organisations such as the UAF, and other private language schools. This shows how a lack of regulation and clear vision can create a muddled playing field among organisations that are supposed to support refugees. Instead, it creates confusion and the target group are left to their own devices.

#### *4.3 Policy-Outcome Gaps: shortcomings and solutions*

Throughout the interviews, the respondents have given many suggestions and potential solutions to the problems they faced, both directly and indirectly. There are roughly three categories into which I have divided these suggestions. They are ‘Don’t treat all refugees the same’, ‘create a fairer and more consistent policy for supporting refugees’ and ‘check and regulate refugee organisations’. All of the suggestions are directed at the local municipality.

##### ***Don’t treat all refugees as one***

*“Don’t deal with all as if they all need the same push. Take care of some people who are traumatised, wait for them to get better or, healing.... Just take into consideration each one’s requirement.”*

- Sahar

This general theme can be taken to apply to a number of cases that have been discussed by the respondents. Aisha emphasised her frustration at being pushed hard to accept ‘just any job’ whereas she was very motivated to gain her qualifications and pick up her profession as orthodontist. She expressed her resentment of being pushed on the one hand to accept work, but being blocked and even having been threatened for wanting to continue studying rather than starting a low-skilled job immediately. As Sahar also said, not everyone needs the same push. Those who are motivated and proactive might not need pushing but rather some more advice and guidance to help them get where they want to be. At the same time it is true that others might need more support or help.

Sahar also said, a solution to her problem could be for there to be more programmes to support and help high skilled refugees and also more opportunities



specifically for more mature refugees with high qualifications. She was critical of the support and trainings given, because during these sessions all refugees from different backgrounds and levels of education were placed together to receive the same generic training, which ultimately didn't really help any of them.

*“If they do any training for example for refugees, they do not also distinguish between one that didn't work with computers at all and one who is high qualified. They put the people at the same training and give them the same information, the high qualified doesn't get any value and the low qualified doesn't understand it. They didn't distinguish between people, they only look for all refugees as one.”*

- Sahar

More tailor made solutions seem to be a step forward in helping all the different groups within the recognized refugee populations, as more help and more opportunities to gain work experience can help the young people (Shilan).

In a similar vein Aisha and Sahar have also expressed a strong desire for a fairer and more consistent policy in terms of how the contact persons work and advise the refugees. Experiences with these contact persons have differed very widely and it became clear that the type of treatment that the respondents received depended largely on the individual contact person they were dealing with per time.

### ***First Job opportunity***

As has been elaborated on extensively, it is a challenge for those interviewed to enter the labour market in the Netherlands due to their lack of language skills, difficulties with converting their qualifications and having their foreign work experiences appreciated accordingly. Because of this many have stated that a 'leg up' or a little help with getting a first professional and secure job would be advisable. As one explained, the logic behind this kick-start is that once the person in question has gained a small foothold in the Dutch labour market, it will be easier to proceed onwards to a next job. It is the initial step that has to be taken, to add a "Dutch experience" to the CV, and to ease the doubts of potential employers.

*“The first job is very important in the Netherlands. Maybe after that we can find for ourselves. But the first job is very important.”*

- Samira

Samira and 5 both agreed explicitly that they thought the Gemeente has an important role in creating these first job opportunities for recognised refugees. It is important to note that both Samira and 5 have participated in a work-experience traineeship at the gemeente in The Hague for a year. During this time they were familiarised with the gemeente as an institution, the systems they use, the people that work there, practicing Dutch daily and receiving support and assistance as well as training programmes. Having experienced this, both respondents emphasise how valuable this initial experience was and stress how practically impossible it would have been for them to find work without this experience.

Both also emphasise that it is still incredibly difficult to find work outside the gemeente. Their experiences have taught them about the systems used in the municipalities and how the organisation works, which makes them more attractive to hire for other positions within the gemeente. It does not necessarily help make it easier to enter the private sector, and even among their peers who started the internship together with them the initial work experience position was no guarantee for smooth sailing towards paid work afterwards. According to Samira only 10 of the 50 initial participants managed to find paid jobs after their traineeship and all of them were in the Gemeente.

*“Yeah I mentioned that I want to give people the opportunity, it is difficult and takes time, when you are communicating and practicing you learn the language. So give opportunities to people who have already studied. Give opportunity to work even not the same level as they can do, just a junior level can really help.”*

- Almaz

### ***Regulation of organisations***

The final suggestion is an interesting one mentioned only specifically by one respondent (Sahar) and hinted at by Ghazaleh. During the interview Ghazaleh

expressed her exasperation at having spent so much of her time and money trying to learn Dutch at different schools without seeing the results. Having tried out different schools she soon came to realize that her initial language school was of a lower standard and that she had essentially wasted a good chunk of her time and money there. Now, she is enrolled in language classes again for grammar and reading because she is relatively behind on these aspects of the Dutch language. She felt frustrated that it had to take her this long and with so many detours to learn Dutch well, and feels that this has hampered her from ‘integrating’ more swiftly. The fact that there were so many different language schools to choose from and almost no clear indication or guidance as to which one to pick gave Ghazaleh the feeling that she had been cheated and was wasting her time.

Sahar took this point a bit further, suggesting that the municipalities should monitor and regulate all organisations that claim to help or empower refugees more closely. Currently, she says, there are many organisations and initiatives to help refugees and when viewed on paper it looks like there is plenty support. However, she questioned how effective they actually are and whether they actually help refugees to find their place in society, or whether they are in fact targeting a relatively vulnerable group and exploiting them.

*“... these kinds of organisations don’t help refugees or work for refugees they work with refugees. Do you know what is the difference between work with and work for? Work for refugees means they will help them to find a job, but work with refugees, they will use refugees to find a way to get money. To do something. They give the refugees high ambitions; high expectations but they didn’t do anything. They just maybe took money from the gemeente, support, subsidies, or like this, but they didn’t really help refugees find a job... so this I think, if there is a policy at the gemeente they should check these kind of organisations...”*

- Sahar

Respondents are asking for very concrete and local solutions and asked the municipality to play an active role in creating first job opportunities for them as well as fine tuning the policy tools that are currently in place to better fit the needs and wants of a target group of high skilled refugee women. The literature is divided on

whether or not such specifically targeted policies are desirable, although Bilgili, Huddleston & Joki (2015) do state that the nature of the process of labour market incorporation is so delicate and context specific that any policy would have to be extremely fine tuned to the specificities of the local context in order to be successful. As for these solutions, only time can tell whether they are the answer to closing the policy gap.

## *5. Discussion and Conclusion*

This study was borne out of an interest in the experiences and stories behind the numbers often brought up when talking about labour market incorporation of refugees into their host society. What has become clear from the conversations I had with the respondents is that there is not one single variable that can explain why they face such difficulties to enter the labour market as high skilled refugee women, and that there will not be one simple solution to magically fix this. But this has never been the goal of this research, and to look for a simple answer would be missing the point, which is to uncover the complex realities that these women live with daily and to paint a detailed picture of how policy and other factors come together and shape their experiences as they try to rebuild their new lives in the Netherlands. In a time when anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric is becoming increasingly widespread and the term ‘integration’ is wielded as a tool against refugees rather than as a crutch to support them, I believe it is important to hear their voices and listen to their experiences in order to gain a better understanding and to create empathy for their situation. The numbers in the reports and in the policy document that underpin the discussion surrounding how to shape integration in The Hague from a policy perspective do not reveal the human side adequately.

The findings from this research show that my sample of high skilled recognised refugee women experience a number of challenges upon entering the Dutch labour market, most of which are already well documented in the literature. However, it has also shown how these individuals have faced these challenges. This research adds to existing knowledge by providing concrete insights into the frustrations and experiences the target group has specifically pertaining to the policy governing their integration into the labour market: it reveals that their situation is more complex and that their problems are shaped by more factors to simply fix by getting a local degree or learning the local language.

Oversimplifying the problem can be detrimental to solving it as oversimplified solutions can miss the point and be harmful to the people they were supposed to help. In the case of this target group, it became clear that the ‘one size fits all’ approach to helping the recognised refugees find a job pushed motivated and capable individuals into a box that they did not identify with. The lack of understanding and involving the

target group in the creation of the policy lead respondents to feeling alienated and undervalued. It also created a rift between policy-success on paper (higher employment numbers) and policy-success from the perspective of the target group of high skilled recognised refugees (PhDs being told to clean for a living).

It is too simplistic to simply blame policy for the many difficulties that the target group face when entering the local labour market upon resettlement. What this research has hoped to make clear is that this is a complex and highly personal process that cannot be put into a mould or understood in terms of numbers alone. It was never the goal to look only to policy to solve the ‘problem’, however, it has been part of the aim to give the respondents a voice and allow for their ideas and insights to make recommendations towards the policies that govern them.

### *Discussion*

There is a paradox in the frustrations surrounding the policies regarding the contact persons: on the one hand respondents reported feeling as if they were all being treated the same way as if they were all a faceless group, whilst at the same time reporting that there appeared to be no consistency across the way they were being treated from individual contact person to another, resulting in feelings of the system allowing for discrimination and random obstruction between contact persons and refugees. This phenomenon can have many causes, from micro-level explanations such as individual coaching style and prejudice on the part of the municipality contact persons, to more structural explanations that reveal how the municipality as an institution views recognised refugees and how seriously they take their integration process.

The reflections and experiences the respondents shared throughout the interviews also demonstrated how important the human factor is in evaluating policy, and added depth and dimension to the numbers and statistics otherwise used to measure the policy outcomes. Although this research focused solely on high skilled refugee women, the role of gender appeared to fall into the background as almost no allusions to gender or gender based (dis)advantages were mentioned by any of the respondents. Because there was no comparison with a similar group of recognised refugee men, it is difficult to make any statements about gender that does not immediately invoke a comparison with a male group. According to the literature women from sending-

countries are often disadvantaged extra on the labour market, but are also less likely to be active on the labour market because of their more traditional values and cultural differences. These factors did not present themselves in this study, and this can be explained by the fact that the target group is ‘university educated women’, which already sets them apart from the average population. This might make their values and lifestyles more liberal, and their ideas of working less traditional than the literature has pointed out. However, this was not explicitly stated by the participants themselves and thus it would not be appropriate to make these statements based on this research.

In my sample all respondents were willing and proactively trying to get a job or lay the foundation to successfully find work at a later time. Most of the respondents had worked before coming to the Netherlands and thus saw no reason not to do so in The Hague. Half of the respondents had children, but none of them mentioned this as a factor limiting their willingness or ability to find work. Nour was the only respondent with a young child (6 years old) and the other respondents’ children were already in secondary school or even older. Although Nour did not explicitly say that having a small child was part of the reason that she did not have a job, it is worth noting that she was the only participant who did not previously work before coming to the Netherlands (apart from Shilan, who only just graduated).

It is also possible that the issue of gender did not come up because most of the women were not yet employed and thus did not experience more visible discrimination on the work floor. Even then, it would be difficult to isolate gender specific discrimination as this target group is on the intersection of gender and ethnicity/nationality. There were no stories about experiences in the Netherlands of discrimination on the work floor or reports on feeling like the respondents were being treated differently because of either their background or their gender. The instances that the topic of discrimination did come up in this research the discrimination was aimed at their perceived ‘outsider’ status, not their gender.

## *7. Limitations and Recommendations*

In this final section of the thesis I will discuss the limitations of this research and put forward a number of recommendations for future research as well as for policy that have come forward based on the outcomes of my research. Based on the interviews and the respondents' own input as to potential solutions to the problems they experienced I will make three suggestions for the local level of governance.

### *Limitations*

All researchers encounter challenges throughout their research that can pose limitations for their study, as does this study. This study provides a contribution to the literature by revealing what the stories and experiences are behind the numbers published by the CBS and cited in papers. By holding in depth interviews with this specific target group a whole range of new insights were gained about what it can be like to experience the system of resettlement and integration into the Hague first hand. From the interviews it has become clear that this process is one that is riddled with struggle, challenges and obstacles but that it is also one of optimism and determination to make it in the Netherlands. Respondents shared their very personal stories and feelings and revealed that there are mismatches between what is laid out in the policy documents, and how they have experienced the outcomes of the policy on their end. However, for a more structural indication of how large scale this issue is, a quantitative study would be necessary: conducting eight in depth interviews has undoubtedly shed light on many issues but it is ultimately a finite sample of respondents who do not necessarily give an indication of the larger scale of the problem.

What also has to be acknowledged is the fact that the subjective nature of the research, makes it easy for respondents to have different interpretations or ways of expressing certain thoughts, feelings, ideas and experiences. This means that there are always an infinite number of alternative interpretations and answers to each of the questions and comments made during the interview that can change depending on the



respondents. The question of how this target group has experienced the process of entering the labour market in the Netherlands is thus limitless and can be researched continuously. The role of the interviewer in this type of research is also very important and it is possible to say that each interviewer could get (slightly) different results depending on the interaction, the connection and the communication with the respondents.

As has been mentioned in the discussion, the fact that this research was not a comparative study means that not much can be said about the role of gender in this research in relation to men and how they experience the process of labour market integration. What this study can generalise with regards to gender is thus limited.

Another limitation is the absence of a voice from the municipality (a policy maker, a contact person) to add more depth to the understanding of the policy itself and how it is supposedly implemented. The policy document was concise and vague; it did not stipulate how the mentioned goals were to be achieved or even how they were to be measured. An interview with the municipality could have added a more detailed description to the policy and speaking to the municipality in person could have added an extra and interesting dimension to the research, by questioning them on the policy success rates and asking them how they would reflect on the policies themselves.

### *Recommendations for future research*

There are several interesting avenues for further research related to the findings from this study.

### ***Differences between how institutions value qualifications***

An interesting finding regarding the qualifications of the respondents and how they were valued was hearing that there were discrepancies between how the universities valued them and how the governmental institutions such as DUO, IDW and Nuffic valued them. All three respondents that indicated having their degrees valued by both institutions stated that the universities gave more favourable verdicts and options versus the verdicts from the other organisations. The sample is too small to say

anything conclusive and it is possible that other external factors played into the discrepancies between the taxations of their diplomas, however this finding did open up the idea that it might be worth further investigating whether this is part of a structural difference in how diplomas are valued and to question the value and accuracy of these taxations. A systemic look on a large and perhaps quantitative scale could be a suitable way to investigate this.

### ***Review of what refugee organisations do to help refugees***

Based primarily on the interview with Sahar, another relevant avenue for future research is to conduct a large scale review of what sort of support and help NGOs claiming to help refugees are in fact giving, possibly by asking both the organisations as well as their clients, the refugees to review these services. This question stems from the clear dissatisfaction experienced by Sahar and her scepticism towards these refugee-related initiatives. A similar research could be conducted across the breadth of all language and integration schools to find out what these organisations contribute to the integration process of the refugees precisely and to be able to hold them accountable if standards are not met.

### *Policy recommendations*

The three solutions offered by the respondents are making the counselling the refugees receive more personalised and tailored to their individual qualities and needs, offering more opportunities and first jobs specifically for high skilled refugees, and finally tightening regulation of the organisations offering help and support for refugees.

The first recommendation requires the municipality to reassess the support and counselling that is currently given to this group of high skilled refugees. The current approach is experienced as being too generic and standard, with little regard to the peculiarities and opportunities specific to this target group. An option would be to train a number of contact people to focus on high skilled recognised refugees and inform them fully about the options that this subgroup have in terms of valuing their degrees, learning the language, following education, internships, traineeships and jobs. The more tailored approach would also require more flexibility and more

patience to allow this group to learn the language to a higher level before looking for jobs and providing financial aid in the event that they choose to return to school in the Netherlands. As for the pressures to work as quickly as possible, this new approach will aim to take into account the skills and aspirations of the individual client (the recognised refugee) and requires the contact person to be mindful of these factors when recommending jobs and thus avoid painful encounters and frustrating the clients. The same could be said with regards to the extra curricular activities and demonstrable efforts the clients are making with regards to their job search: a general ‘pushing policy’ towards getting refugees on benefits to work should not be applied blanket style, and those who are showing their best efforts to find work should be helped appropriately.

The second recommendation involves very concrete measures for the municipality to create more first jobs for refugees within the municipality itself or in collaboration with external business partners or organisations. The respondents have indicated the difficulty of entering the labour market on their own strength without any local experience, and this first leg-up could facilitate each subsequent attempt at finding work. These opportunities should be advertised and communicated with the target group adequately so that they are made aware of their options and where to look. This communication crosses over with the previous recommendation to have specialised counsellors for high skilled refugees who will be made aware of these options and can keep their clients up to date and informed actively.

The third and final policy recommendation based on the research is to install more regulatory measures and checks on the refugee support organisations, as currently the lack of such supervision has created what can be described as a predatory environment victimising the refugees. This could be done by periodical auditing or inspections of the standard and type of help that organisations claim to be giving to the refugees. For language schools there is already a standard, the ‘*blik op werk*’ hallmark that is awarded to schools that fulfil the requirements set on a national level. However, as was evidenced by the interviews this was not yet a guarantee that there were differences between the quality of education and help offered by the different organisations. A step forward could be to re-evaluate this label and create a list or hallmark for other organisations to fulfil before awarding them subsidies or funding.



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## *9. Appendix*

1. Informed Consent form
2. interview topic list
3. Policy Summary

## 1. Informed Consent Form

<p><b>Naam van het onderzoeksproject</b></p>	<p><i>The Unemployment gap: how high skilled refugee women experience making their way onto the Dutch labour market</i></p>
<p><b>Doel van het onderzoek</b></p>	<p>Dit onderzoek wordt geleid door Caitlin Utama. U bent van harte uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om de ervaringen van jonge, hoogopgeleide vrouwelijke statushouders te documenteren met betrekking tot het zoeken van werk in Nederland.</p>
<p><b>Gang van zaken tijdens het onderzoek</b></p>	<p>1. U neemt deel aan een interview waarin aan u vragen zullen worden gesteld over uw ervaring met het vinden van een baan in Nederland. Een voorbeeld van een typische vraag die u zal worden gesteld: “Kunt u mij vertellen over uw opleiding en werk voordat u naar Nederland bent gekomen?”.</p> <p>U dient een vrouwelijke statushouder van tussen de 20-50 te zijn die aan de universiteit heeft gestudeerd om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek.</p> <p>Tijdens het interview zal, aan de hand van een vragen lijst, dieper worden ingegaan op uw ervaringen. Van het interview zal een audio-opname worden gemaakt, zodat het gesprek later kan worden uitgewerkt. Dit transcript wordt vervolgens gebruikt in het onderzoek.</p>
<p><b>Potentiële risico's en ongemakken</b></p>	<p>- Er zijn geen fysieke, juridische of economische risico's verbonden aan uw deelname aan deze studie. U hoeft geen vragen te beantwoorden die u niet wilt beantwoorden. Uw deelname is vrijwillig en u kunt uw deelname op elk gewenst moment stoppen. Al uw antwoorden zullen anoniem gemaakt worden en uw identiteit zal niet worden gedeeld in het onderzoeksrapport.</p> <p>- Er is enig ongemak verbonden aan uw deelname aan deze studie, vanwege de gevoelige aard van het onderwerp. U hoeft geen vragen te beantwoorden die u niet wilt beantwoorden. Uw deelname is vrijwillig en u kunt uw deelname op elk gewenst moment stoppen.</p>
<p><b>Vergoeding</b></p>	<p>U ontvangt voor deelname aan dit onderzoek geen vergoeding .</p>

<p>Vertrouwelijkheid van gegevens</p>	<p>Uw privacy is en blijft maximaal beschermd. Er wordt op geen enkele wijze vertrouwelijke informatie of persoonsgegevens van of over u naar buiten gebracht, waardoor iemand u zal kunnen herkennen.</p> <p>Voordat onze onderzoeksgegevens naar buiten gebracht worden, worden uw gegevens <b>anoniem</b> gemaakt: geanonimiseerd. Enkele eenvoudige voorbeelden hiervan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- uw naam wordt vervangen door anonieme, op zichzelf betekenisloze combinatie van getallen.</li><li>- uw leeftijd zelf wordt niet verwerkt, maar in een categorie geplaatst. Bijvoorbeeld: leeftijd: tussen 18-25 jaar / tussen 25-35 jaar etc.</li><li>- uw woonplaats wordt niet gebruikt, maar de gemeente waarin u woont.</li></ul> <p>Bij de start van ons onderzoek krijgt uw naam direct een <b>pseudoniem</b>; uw naam wordt gepseudonimiseerd ofwel 'versleuteld', zo zult u bijvoorbeeld vermeld worden als, 'Nour'. Op deze manier kan wel worden onderzocht wat u in het gesprek aangeeft, maar weten de getrainde onderzoekers niet dat u het bent. De onderzoeksleider is zelf verantwoordelijk voor dit pseudoniem en de sleutel en zal uw gegevens niet delen met anderen. Als u bijvoorbeeld het onderzoek heeft afgerond zal de onderzoeksleider daarvan op de hoogte moeten kunnen zijn, om u de afgesproken vergoeding te geven.</p> <p>In een publicatie zullen of anonieme gegevens of pseudoniemen worden gebruikt. De audio-opnamen, formulieren en andere documenten die in het kader van deze studie worden gemaakt of verzameld, worden opgeslagen op een beveiligde locatie bij de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam en op de beveiligde (versleutelde) computers van de onderzoekers.</p> <p>De onderzoeksgegevens worden indien nodig (bijvoorbeeld voor een controle op wetenschappelijke integriteit) en alleen in anonieme vorm ter beschikking gesteld aan personen buiten de onderzoeksgroep; in dit geval aan een onderzoekscommissie van de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam die hiertoe bevoegdheden heeft.</p>
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<b>Vrijwilligheid</b>	<p>Deelname aan dit onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig. U kunt als deelnemer uw medewerking aan het onderzoek te allen tijde stoppen, of weigeren dat uw gegevens voor het onderzoek mogen worden gebruikt, zonder opgaaf van redenen.</p> <p>Dit betekent dat als u voorafgaand aan het onderzoek besluit om af te zien van deelname aan dit onderzoek, dit op geen enkele wijze gevolgen voor u zal hebben. Tevens kunt u tot 5 werkdagen (bedenktijd) na het interview alsnog de toestemming intrekken die je hebt gegeven om gebruik te maken van uw gegevens.</p> <p>In deze gevallen zullen uw gegevens uit onze bestanden worden verwijderd en vernietigd. Het stopzetten van deelname heeft geen nadelige gevolgen voor u of de eventueel reeds ontvangen vergoeding.</p> <p>Als u tijdens het onderzoek, na de bedenktijd van 5 werkdagen, besluit om uw medewerking te staken, zal dat eveneens op geen enkele wijze gevolgen voor u hebben. Echter: de gegevens die u hebt verstrekt tot aan het moment waarop uw deelname stopt, zal in het onderzoek gebruikt worden, inclusief de bescherming van uw privacy zoals hierboven beschreven. Er worden uiteraard geen nieuwe gegevens verzameld of gebruikt.</p> <p>Als u besluit om te stoppen met deelname aan het onderzoek, of als u vragen of klachten heeft, of uw bezorgdheid kenbaar wilt maken, of een vorm van schade of ongemak vanwege het onderzoek, neemt u dan aub contact op met de onderzoeksleider:</p> <p>Caitlin Utama <a href="mailto:Caitlin.l.utama@gmail.com">Caitlin.l.utama@gmail.com</a> 0618928108</p>
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<b>Toestemmings-verklaring</b>	<p>Met uw ondertekening van dit document geeft aan dat u minstens 18 jaar oud bent; dat u goed bent geïnformeerd over het onderzoek, de manier waarop de onderzoeksgegevens worden verzameld, gebruikt en behandeld en welke eventuele risico's u zou kunnen lopen door te participeren in dit onderzoek</p> <p>Indien u vragen had, geeft u bij ondertekening aan dat u deze vragen heeft kunnen stellen en dat deze vragen helder en duidelijk zijn beantwoord. U geeft aan dat u vrijwillig akkoord gaat met uw deelname aan dit onderzoek. U ontvangt een kopie van dit ondertekende toestemmingsformulier.</p> <p>Ik ga akkoord met deelname aan een onderzoeksproject geleid door Caitlin Utama. Het doel van dit document is om de voorwaarden van mijn deelname aan het project vast te leggen.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Ik kreeg voldoende informatie over dit onderzoeksproject. Het doel van mijn deelname als een geïnterviewde in dit project is voor mij helder uitgelegd en ik weet wat dit voor mij betekent.</li><li>2. Mijn deelname als geïnterviewde in dit project is vrijwillig. Er is geen expliciete of impliciete dwang voor mij om aan dit onderzoek deel te nemen.</li><li>3. Mijn deelname houdt in dat ik word geïnterviewd door Caitlin Utama. Het interview zal ongeveer 30 minuten duren. Ik geef de onderzoeker toestemming om tijdens het interview opnames (geluid) te maken en schriftelijke notities te nemen. Het is mij duidelijk dat, als ik toch bezwaar heb met een of meer punten zoals hierboven benoemd, ik op elk moment mijn deelname, zonder opgaaf van redenen, kan stoppen.</li></ol>
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	<p>4. Ik heb het recht om vragen niet te beantwoorden. Als ik me tijdens het interview ongemakkelijk voel, heb ik het recht om mijn deelname aan het interview te stoppen.</p> <p>5. Ik heb van de onderzoeksleider de uitdrukkelijke garantie gekregen dat de onderzoeksleider er zorg voor draagt dat ik niet ben te identificeren in door het onderzoek naar buiten gebrachte gegevens, rapporten of artikelen. Mijn privacy is gewaarborgd als deelnemer aan dit onderzoek.</p> <p>6. Ik heb de garantie gekregen dat dit onderzoeksproject is beoordeeld en goedgekeurd door de docent 'Designing Migration Policy Research' van de EUR. Voor bezwaren met betrekking tot de opzet en of uitvoering van het onderzoek kan ik me wenden tot de Caitlin Utama.</p> <p>7. Ik heb dit formulier gelezen en begrepen. Al mijn vragen zijn naar mijn tevredenheid beantwoord en ik ben vrijwillig akkoord met deelname aan dit onderzoek.</p> <p>8. Ik heb een kopie ontvangen van dit toestemmingsformulier dat ook ondertekend is door de interviewer.</p>	
<b>Handtekening en datum</b>	<b>Naam Deelnemer</b>	<b>Naam Onderzoeksleider</b>
	<b>Handtekening</b>	<b>Handtekening</b>
	<b>Datum</b>	<b>Datum</b>

## 2. Interview Topic list and questions

Naam: \_\_\_\_\_

Datum: \_\_\_\_\_

Gemeente: \_\_\_\_\_

Doel: De doelstelling van dit gesprek is om

- Te horen wat voor werk en opleiding u al had gedaan
- Te horen wat uw ervaringen waren toen in Nederland werk te zoeken, en wat er moeilijk of makkelijk ging
- Te horen hoe u de begeleiding heeft ervaren

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2. Kunt u mij vertellen over uw opleiding en werk voordat u naar Nederland bent gekomen?
  - a. Wat voor baan had u?
  - b. Welke opleiding heeft u gedaan?
  - c. Hoe werkt het in uw land van herkomst om een baan te zoeken?
  - d. Is het heel anders dan in Nederland?
3. Heeft u nu werk gevonden?
  - a. Wat voor werk is het?
  - b. Hoe heeft u dit werk gevonden?
  - c. Bent u blij met deze baan?
  - d. Kunt u mij hier meer over vertellen?
4. Hoe was het om een baan te vinden die overeenkwam met de baan die u thuis had?
  - a. Wist u waar u moest beginnen en hoe het in Nederland werkt?
  - b. Is het gelukt om uw diploma te waarderen bij Nuffic?
  - c. Heeft u hulp gehad met uw CV en brief?
  - d. Was het moeilijk? Kunt u mij hier meer over vertellen?
  - e. Wat was het moeilijkst of het meest frustrerend?
  - f. Moest u weer een opleiding volgen, of andere stappen nemen om in Nederland te werken?
5. Zou u mij meer kunnen vertellen over de begeleiding die u heeft gekregen van de gemeente en van andere organisaties?

- a. Was het makkelijk om uw weg te vinden in Nederland, en kon u de informatie vinden die u nodig had?
  - b. Kon u met uw vragen bij iemand terecht en wist u wie u moest vragen voor hulp?
  - c. Wat vindt u van deze begeleiding?
  - d. Was dit het soort hulp dat u nodig had en zou willen?
  - e. Heeft u persoonlijke hulp en advise gekregen, of was de aanpak standaard?
6. Bent u nu blij en tevreden met uw situatie en werk? Of wilt u misschien dat er iets verandert?



### *3. Policy Summary*

There is no specific policy targeting the sub group ‘high skilled refugee women’ in the Hague. These women fall under the broader general category of recognised refugees and the policies that govern how they are incorporated into the labour force are roughly the same as those covering the more general group ‘refugees’. All refugees fall under the ‘Haagse Aanpak Statushouders Sociaal Domein: snelle integratie en participatie’, which is the primary policy document published from the municipality of The Hague from 2016 onwards. The document describes a general approach with policy goals and tools for the entire refugee population in The Hague without specific attention for the subgroup of high skilled refugees or women. The municipality has an overarching role but many of the operational tasks are delegated to organisations such as ‘vluchtelingenwerk’ (refugeework), the ‘werkgeversservicepunt’ or the WSP (the employers service point).

The main goals and targets described in the policy document emphasise the importance of integration and becoming part of Dutch society. Time is a recurring theme with the municipality emphasising the importance of finding a job and finding one fast. Starting an education, learning Dutch and integrating are also high on the list of priorities. Improving their level of Dutch is mentioned as one of the top ways to improve their labour market position and increase participation in the Dutch society. This will start immediately upon resettlement. The brief acknowledges that it is important to give recognised refugees the chance to contribute their knowledge, skills and talents to society and thus prevent social problems further down the road. The brief also emphasises the hands-off approach guiding how the municipality deals with the recognised refugees; they will rely as much as possible on the recognised refugees own initiative and self-efficacy.

There is no specific mention of high skilled refugees, although there is mention of recognised refugees with a ‘high employment potential’, meaning that they have the potential to find work and become economically independently swiftly. Young refugees (18-27 years) will be given extra support and attention concerning language courses and their integration into the labour market. The service ‘Direct aan het Werk’ (instantly to work) focuses on those who will be in a position to start a job within 3 months and those who will be ready to enter a job within 18 months are

given a contact person from the Werkgeversservicepunt (WSP), which is a body that trains and prepares the recognised refugees for the job market and the skills they will need, as well as connecting them to work-experience stations. There is also a section on education, but this is focused primarily on minors and children rather than adults and highly educated refugees.

All in all it is clear that the municipality of The Hague aims to streamline the refugees into employment as efficiently as possible by offering several measures of support and services, whilst at the same time relying heavily on the individual recognised refugee's independence and initiative. No distinction is made for high skilled refugees although they are implicitly clustered in with the 'high employment potential' group.