



## Opening the door of opportunities: How higher vocational education contributes to capabilities and valuable employment of refugees



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### 1. Introduction

*I was just lost, lost in the sky. I didn't know didn't know who I was, what I was going to do, I didn't know [...]. I experienced a tough period in which I lost myself and wondered: what will I do? Who am I? Really, who am I? I was an engineer, but here, I am nothing (Mustafa)*

In the above quote, Mustafa (pseudonym), a higher educated refugee who resettled in the Netherlands, describes his feeling when he could not get a permanent job on the level he wished to work. His integration into the Dutch labor market was not what he had envisioned. A dual higher vocation education training (HVET) program helped Mustafa to pursue his career in the Netherlands. This article is about people like Mustafa, who, to rebuild their lives and pursue their careers, follow a dual HVET program.

Participation in society, especially in the form of paid work, is generally viewed as one of the most important facilitators and indicators of integration (Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller, & Pundt, 2017). It is difficult for refugees to find work in host countries: one in four refugees is employed five years after arrival (OECD, 2019). In relation to other European countries, refugees in the Netherlands have a lower employment rate in their first years after obtaining a residence permit (Dagevos, Schans, & Uiters, 2021). In the Netherlands, of all adult refugees who received their permit in 2014, only 11% was employed thirty months later (CBS, 2018). Refugees face several obstacles

in finding suitable employment, such as discrimination, language barriers, a lower valuation of previously acquired qualifications and work experience (Dijk, 2021; Klaver, Mallee, Odé, & Smit, 2015), and a limited network in the host country (Bakker, Dagevos, & Engbersen, 2014; Maliepaard, Witkamp, & Jennissen, 2017).

Labor participation of asylum migrants is much lower than that of other kinds of migrants, like labor- or family migrants (Bakker, Dagevos, & Engbersen, 2017; OECD, 2019). Refugees face similar barriers as other immigrants, but, refugees are often less prepared and did not bring official diploma's (Bakker et al., 2014; Eggenhofer-Rehart, Lutzke, Pernkopf, & Zellhofer, 2018; Martín, 2016; OECD, 2019; UNHCR, 2013). However, recognized qualifications are of great importance in the Dutch labor market (Bakker, 2016; Bakker et al., 2017). Furthermore, opportunities in the labor market are primarily determined by the country where the highest training was followed (Bakker, 2016).

Unlike labor migrants, refugees often experience a reduction in employment status (Baranik, Hurst, & Eby, 2018; Campion, 2018). Employed refugees often work below their occupational level and have vulnerable positions with temporary and flexible contracts (Huijnk, 2018; Klaver et al., 2015a; SER, 2019) with frequent job changes (Dagevos et al., 2021). Of those employed, 73% are in parttime-employment and 84% on temporary contracts (Dagevos et al., 2021). For only 26% of working permit-holders is work the primary source of income: only one third are in employment every month for a year, and

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incomes are often lower than benefit level. In other words, the mere fact of whether a refugee has a paid job provides little insight into the reconstruction of life, integration, social inclusion, and well-being. It says nothing about whether the job matches qualifications, aspirations, and the personal values one attaches to work. This article focuses on whether and how HVET contributes to valuable employment opportunities for refugees. We view valuable employment as engaging in paid work consistent with aspirations and previous qualifications and experience.

### 1.1. Policy background

Municipalities in the Netherlands need to accommodate a number of refugees in proportion to the number of inhabitants. Since introducing the Participation Act in 2015, municipalities have assisted refugees (who receive benefits) into employment. The goal of the Participation Act is to minimize dependence on social assistance benefits by getting as many people as possible into work through 'active integration' (Echtelt et al., 2019): welfare beneficiaries must frequently apply for jobs and accept jobs that are considered "generally accepted employment".

Because municipalities differ in the way they implement 'activation', employment opportunities for refugees are influenced by to which municipality they are assigned to live in. In general, most municipalities focus on rapid employment of benefit recipients (Echtelt et al., 2019): matching skills, work experience, and educational level matter less (Razenberg & Gruijter, 2018; van Heelsum, 2017). However, a skills mismatch often means lower income and a higher risk of unemployment (Muller & Beckers, 2018) and downward vocational mobility (de Lange, Berntsen, Hanoeman, & Haidar, 2021). Some municipalities focus more on sustained labor force participation and invest in training for refugees based on the idea that this promotes more sustainable employment (i.e., no return to benefits). Refugees are then given the opportunity to pursue a career that better matches their ambitions and qualifications (Razenberg & Gruijter, 2018). Only a quarter of the municipalities allow refugees to study with an exemption from the obligation to apply for a job (Razenberg & Gruijter, 2018). Furthermore, language facilities and training opportunities, and the quality thereof, varies between regions or municipalities (Dagevos et al., 2021).

In the new Civic Integration Act, which will be into effect from 2022, employment is given a central place. Municipalities will be responsible for implementing this new Act. Partly because of this, there is a policy movement to think about more sustainable employment integration of refugees (Dijk, 2021). Vocational education and training (VET) programs are viewed as potentially effective in helping refugees achieve more sustainable labor integration (Jeon, 2019; OECD & Cedefop, 2017) particularly programs that combine training and work (Bakker, Dagevos, & Engbersen, 2017). In the Netherlands, the universities of applied sciences (UAS) offer professionally oriented higher VET programs. Besides bachelor degree programs, since 2011, UAS offer two-year associate degree (Ad) programs (EQF 5).

This article revolves around whether and how a dual HVET AD program strengthens work-related capabilities of refugees, how former students look back on the program and look ahead to employment opportunities. Although it is assumed that further education promotes integration of refugees, not much research has been done on refugees' access and experiences in higher education (Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik, & Jeong, 2019). Refugees are often treated as a homogeneous (target) group, which does not do justice to differences in educational level, work experience, language skills, age, and gender (Dijkers & Bell, 2020). There are refugees who are illiterate, have no further education and those who have completed higher education, and have work experience at a higher level. This article is about the latter group. Highly-skilled refugees are generally seen as a promising group when it comes to connecting to the labor market (Bevelander, 2020). However, based on our research, we will argue that employment that matches qualifications and aspirations is a major challenge precisely for this group. Our arti-

cle provides insights into innovations in HVET that benefit refugees and contributes to a better understanding of valuable employment opportunities of highly skilled refugees.

## 2. Theoretical framework: work related capabilities

To investigate whether and how HVET contributes to valuable work opportunities for refugees, we use the capability approach. The capability approach (CA) was originally developed by Amartya Sen, who challenged the dominant paradigm of neo-classical economics in which well-being is assessed by disposable income or goods consumed (Deneulin, Nebel, & Sagovsky, 2006). This ignores inequality in access to resources and if these resources contribute to the ends. Capabilities refer to the real opportunities individuals have to achieve what they value (Robeyns, 2017). These opportunities, or freedoms, relate to choices, abilities and opportunities of individuals to pursue their aspirations or ends (Frediani, Clark, & Biggeri, 2019). The core of the capability approach is to look not only at what an individual does or achieves (functionings) but also at that outcome in relation to what people want to achieve (valued functionings or aspirations), whether they are able and enabled to do so.

The capabilities for work are the real freedoms to choose the work one has reason to value (Bonvin, 2012). Freedom consists of process freedom of opportunity freedom (Sen, 2002). The latter refers to the ability to achieve things that one considers important and values. Freedom of process refers to the fact that the procedures used to achieve results can have a value independent of the result achieved. This value relates to the ability of individuals to exercise agency to do things in the way they consider good. Process freedom is the freedom to choose, without interference or restriction from others (Alkire, 2005). In addition to observable action, agency also involves the sense of agency (Kabeer, 1999).

An important factor in being able to achieve what one values, lies in the ability to convert material (i.e. housing, income) and non-material (education, work experience, support) resources into functionings. There are different factors that influence this conversion: personal conversion factors (such as physical condition and intelligence), social conversion factors (social norms, and power relations related to class, gender, race) and environmental conversion factors (the environment in which a person lives) (Robeyns, 2017). Conversion factors influence whether people have access to (available) resources and whether and how they can use them. Conversion factors strongly influence the effect of (available) resources on people's capabilities. Structural constraints, in turn, can have a great influence on the conversion factors. These are the institutions, policies, laws, and so forth, that people in different social positions face (Robeyns, 2017).

The possibilities of living one's life as one wishes naturally include more than desires in the area of work. Although aspirations for work are the focus here, this often relates to other valued functionings. Furthermore, employment is not solely valued for income. Individuals value work because of meaning and recognition, a work-family balance (Bonvin, 2012), personal development and social belonging (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2006; Dijk, 2021), and view employment as a valuable part of life (Schirovsky et al., 2020). Clearly, not everyone values paid work equally and individuals may have other priorities. In the first years after arrival in the host country, refugees are generally more focused on safety, housing, family reunification, etcetera. Refugees are also not necessarily encouraged to work right away. Sometimes a municipality urges them first to assimilate and learn the language (Van Heelsum 2017).

## 3. Methodology

This article is based on two rounds of in-depth interviews with 10 (former) students of the program. Furthermore, eight involved professionals were interviewed: five educational professionals (lecturers and

**Table 1**  
background of refugee-student respondents

Pseudonym	Age 1st interview	Follow up interview	Country of origin	Year of arrival in the Netherlands	Educational background	Work experience prior to the flight
Dunia	28	yes	Syria	2015	Bachelor civil engineering	no
Zayed	28	yes	Syria	2015	Master architecture	yes
Mustafa	30	yes	Syria	2015	Master construction	no
N/A	33	no	Syria	2014	Bachelor civil engineering	no
Habib	34	yes	Syria	2015	Bachelor civil engineering	no
N/A	35	no	Syria	2016	Bachelor civil engineering	yes
Nabil	35	yes	Iran	2016	Bachelor civil engineering	no
Amin	50	yes	Syria	2014	Bachelor civil engineering	yes
Majeed	51	yes	Iran	2014	Bachelor civil engineering	yes
Farid	51	yes	Syria	2015	Bachelor civil engineering	yes

supervisors), one supervisor from the foundation, and two involved employers. The interviews were conducted by one researcher and two students (commissioned and supervised by the principal researcher). Some of the interviews from the first round have already been used for a publication (Dijk, 2021). That article focused on access and support in higher education, and included interviews with refugees who participated in preparatory training. The present article focuses only on those respondents who were followed up after their studies.

### 3.1. Selection of respondents

In the academic year 2018-2019 (September- July), ten students started the main program. Five of these first-year students, and five second-year students were interviewed. These students gave permission to be contacted again for the study and were asked for a follow-up interview in 2020. Of these, eight students agreed to a follow-up interview.

Students were initially approached by involved lecturers asking if they would like to participate in the study and if the researchers could contact them. No selection was made based on age or country of origin. Respondents arrived in the Netherlands in 2014-2016. Seven interviewed respondents were men and three women. In general, men are overrepresented in the technical programs of the Ad program studied. Of eight respondents, the country of origin is Syria and of two respondents it is Iran. More than half of all registered refugee-students at the concerned UAS have a Syrian background (Dijk & Kooiman, 2019). Refugee-students, and therefore also interviewed students, are on average a few years older than regular students. Respondents started (1) or finished (9) a study in their home country in the technical/construction sector. Six had work experience in this sector, of which three over 20 years (see table 1). These were the oldest respondents (50 and 51).

### 3.2. Ethical considerations

For each interview, the interviewers explained the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and asked permission to record the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour. The questions focused on experiences after settling in the Netherlands. No questions were asked about the flight or reasons for fleeing. However, we did ask about their lives before the flight concerning prior education and work experience.

Of the 18 interviews with (former) students, seven were conducted via video calling because of the Covid-19 measures—this concerned seven of the eight former students who were interviewed in the months November-December 2020. When interviewing via video calling, it can be more difficult to interpret nonverbal communication or to build trust. On the other hand, respondents may be more open during a digital interview because they can stay in their own familiar environment (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). In the period of the second interview (at least 6 months after the start of the corona crisis), the respondents had at least experienced this way of communicating, as had the researchers. Respondents are referred to by a pseudonym.

### 3.3. Analysis

The interviews with refugee-students and stakeholders were transcribed verbatim into Dutch and thematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9.0 qualitative data analysis software. The analysis of the interviews with refugees focused on aspirations, work related values, the (structural) barriers they experience in finding work, and whether and how the program has supported them in achieving aspirations and work one has reason to value. In analyzing the stakeholder interviews, we focused on the goals of the program, how the program contributed to labor market opportunities for refugees and on working elements in the program.

## 4. Results

In this article, we aim to provide insights into how a dual HVET program can contribute to valuable employment opportunities. We do this by describing how, according to the students, the program contributes to their aspirations, how it connects to work related values, and how it contributes to employability, now and in the future. This section starts by describing how the program is structured, and the aims of the program, according to the stakeholders.

### 4.1. Content and purpose of the program

The program started as a collaboration between a University of Applied Sciences (UAS), a Foundation for Refugee Students, and several technology companies. The foundation supports refugees in their studies by providing advice, guidance and financial support for study costs. The technology companies participate out of social commitment and because there is a shortage of personnel in their sector, according to the stakeholders.

The program consists of a six-month preliminary program and a two-year dual program in Integrated Building Management, Engineering and Maintenance and Mechanics. Upon completion of the program, students receive an Associate degree (Ad) (EQF 5). According to interviewed stakeholders, the program's main objective is to enable refugees to integrate successfully and sustainably into the Dutch labor market. The collaboration with technical companies is an important element of this integration, as one of the involved lecturers explained.

“The higher goal is ultimately that they have completed an education and obtained a diploma and that they are able to manage themselves in society. We all contribute to that, so the lecturers and companies, that's a very good collaboration. It's actually about the connection to the labor market, that's the highest goal: that they can eventually find a job that suits them and fits them”.

An important component in the pre-program is learning Dutch and passing the B2-exam, because that is an admission requirement for higher education in the Netherlands. The pre-program consists of four days of education focused on the Dutch language and culture, communication in the workplace and job application skills. Students that followed the pre-program indicated that the pre-program helps to decide if the

dual program is right for them. Only eight students started the main program of 23 students that followed the pre-program in 2019-2020. After the pre-program, some students do not continue their studies or change the choice of the study program. The pre-program is also intended as preparation to study in higher education. According to involved lecturers and interviewed students, the education system, what is expected of students, and how they interact with lecturers is often very different from what refugees are used to in their countries of origin.

Both the University and the foundation provide guidance during the pre-program which continues during the main program. At the end of the pre-program, students are introduced to relevant companies where they can apply for a (paid) work placement. This matching of students and companies is vital, because it is difficult for refugees to find work or an internship through regular job applications. During the program, students are expected to work three days and follow education one day a week. There is also the possibility of finding a different workplace during the course of the program, if the workplace turns out to be unsuitable. So, the duration of the program is used to gain experience and to explore which work, or what kind of workplace, suits best.

#### 4.2. Aspirations & work values

An important aspect of rebuilding their lives in the Netherlands is finding employment. As the opening quote reveals, employment can be an important part of refugees' identity. Without work, or the prospect of suitable work, a person may feel lost or useless. This is also evident in the following quote of Amin, who has worked over 20 years in Syria:

"...work is life. Work means...if you work, then you live, then you are human. If you don't work, sorry, if I don't work, then I'm not human. That's the feeling I have. People exist to work [...] Through work you feel that you exist and you live" (Amin).

Another recurring theme was the desire to generate one's own income. This relates to wishing to be independent of benefits, to be able to buy a house and to maintain family members. Generating your own income also gives you more freedom to make your own choices, as the following quotes illustrate.

"work makes me autonomous or independent of people. Because maybe in the Dutch culture, it's normal, but in my culture, women are always dependent." (Dunia)

"my biggest goal was to work, to [take care of] four children [...] Look, if you're on welfare, you're not able to buy a house. But if you have work, you have your own money [...] then you can simply do whatever you want..." (Amin)

As evident in the quote at the beginning of this section, Amin, like other respondents, believes that work is an important part of life. This is also evident when he shares what his wife's volunteer work has brought them:

"my wife worked as a volunteer in the first years at school as an assistant...through that we got to know the whole village. We feel that we are originally from [that village]. When we walk on the street we know almost all the people. And through volunteering, we can give something back to society. We have been given a safe place here by the Netherlands. We want to give something back to the community"

Amin and his wife have gained a sense of belonging through volunteering work: they got to know many people and feel accepted. He also states that by doing (unpaid) work, they give something back to society. Other respondents also refer to this reciprocity: they work hard and (will) pay taxes. However, these statements probably also have to do with contradicting the negative image of refugees in the media or discrimination experienced (Dijk, 2020; Yap et al., 2011).

The two year dual program was not always the first choice of respondents. Because they were receiving welfare benefits, municipalities often wanted them to start working as soon as possible. Respondents recall their discussions with municipalities to get permission to pursue training while receiving (part of) their benefits. These students eventually received permission from the municipality because of the opportunity

for an employment contract or paid internship and/or because the municipality believes that the dual training offers better opportunities for sustainable employment (Dijk, 2021). The freedom of choice for the dual program was hence limited.

Before starting the dual program, respondents often had to adjust their initial ideas and aspirations. Working at the former level is not (immediately) possible, a full-time study (such as a master's degree) is usually not an option either. Respondents adjust their ambitions and state that they must be realistic.

"I don't expect a position that I had in my country. I had to forget that" (Majeed)

"I'm kind of realistic: as a first step I just want to finish my education, that's just the closest in terms of future, but it's future. Finish training and a new job and then a permanent contract, if I like my job" (Zayed)

Participation in the program was, for the respondents, often a compromise between ambitions and possibilities. These possibilities relate to the valuation of previously acquired skills, discussed next.

#### 4.3. The low valuation of previous work experience and diploma's

Respondents aspire to work in their own profession and on their occupational level. However, finding a paid job, particularly on their occupational level, proves difficult. Their diploma and work experience is valued less in the Netherlands. In other words: refugees are not able to convert their acquired skills and experiences (or human capital) into a job at their previous level.

A diploma evaluation does not necessarily contribute to the chances of getting a suitable job, as diplomas are often evaluated at a lower level. Even if they are formally valued at a similar level, this does not mean that employers will acknowledge them. Several respondents thought that employers had preconceived notions about foreign diploma's and qualification.

"When I came to Holland, I immediately had my diploma valued. I can work right away with my diploma, but the problem is that I didn't get a chance: I sent my resume, had job interviews, but nobody gave me a chance. That was the big problem, what should I do? Many employers don't have confidence in our degrees. It's valued, but still, they don't have confidence in our degrees" (Habib)

Respondents argued that a Dutch diploma would increase their chances in the Dutch labor market, and acquiring a Dutch diploma was therefore an important motivation to enroll in the dual program.

"If you say I worked in Syria for fifteen years, in Lebanon five years, in Dubai three years, it has no added value, but if I say I worked in the Netherlands for two years, or I did this training, they will take you seriously. That was actually my goal to get a diploma, a degree in the Netherlands" (Farid)

For some, the program's added value lies not so much in what they can learn from the program but that because of this program, Dutch employers are more likely to accept them. This is also clear in the following statement, of Mustafa. On the other hand, he does acknowledge that he is unfamiliar with the Dutch construction industry.

"I may work with my degree, no problem. But who would want to hire me? I come all the way from abroad, I don't know anything about Dutch constructions. I am already an engineer. So what this program adds for me is really just that I can work right away. That's the first goal. The key is this training" (Mustafa)

Mustafa also refers to the direct access to the labor market the program provides, because students immediately begin working for Dutch employers.

#### 4.4. Language & culture as impeding factors

Although students have a B2 degree in Dutch, students indicate that language is still their biggest obstacle during the program. Besides speaking and listening to the Dutch language, reading and writing reports and the technical language is a challenge.

*"I don't speak perfect Dutch, especially in the first period, actually until now, I don't speak perfectly. With an accent, that's why during job interviews, I'm a little scared; he doesn't want to give me a chance. What should I do? What should I do?" (Habib)*

Zayed said that co-workers often did not understand his emails. However, if he spoke to his colleagues directly, over the phone or in person, they would understand him. He was confident that his colleagues would eventually understand and accept him but that it would take "time and patience on both sides"

"From my side and also from the [employers] side. Sometimes they are in a hurry, sometimes they say: why I should wait for that Syrian? I am going for a Dutch person. [...] What I mean is, in my work, many things play a role, among other things the language and background and experience and mentality, the way of thinking.." (Zayed)

According to Zayed, his refugee background puts him in a disadvantaged position compared to native workers. In addition to learning a new language, respondents said they had to adapt to new manners in the educational and work environment. Mustafa recalls how surprised he was at the norms of interaction between women and men, between students and lecturers, and how he slowly got used to them.

"here in the Netherlands, it's easier to say what you think. [...] Gosh, I was very surprised at the beginning. It was completely different. The relationship between students and teachers was completely different, I was very surprised the first year. Started to turn, start, start, then I settled in."

The narratives of the stakeholders reflect the influence of perceived cultural differences. Employers state that the connection between native workers and refugees sometimes hampers because the latter behaves differently from what colleagues expect. An example mentioned by an employer is that colleagues take lunch breaks simultaneously. Instead of joining lunch, an employee with a refugee background continues to work. His native co-workers do not understand this. Another example is that native colleagues have informal chats. Because an employee with a refugee background does not do this, he was seen as isolating himself. While these may seem like minor issues, they can cause mutual misunderstanding and exclusion.

How employers handle this varies, according to one supervisor. The employers interviewed are aware that cultural differences can cause miscommunication. One of the employers states that they engage with an employee with a refugee background and ask what they are used to and prefer in communication.

"we are used to looking at each other when you talk to each other. It can come across as very intimidating for someone with this background. We learned from that too, so we also ask someone if they prefer to sit across from someone or prefer to sit next to someone."

In addition to cultural differences in the (informal) interaction with colleagues, several stakeholders mentioned that employees expect to present themselves and dare to contradict a manager in the Dutch work culture. The interviewed employers miss this attitude among employees with a refugee background. One supervisor hears this more often from companies and thinks companies should also reflect on themselves:

"I literally said it to an HR advisor: you mainly look at the shortcomings of these people. The language is not good, he does not adapt, he doesn't profile himself, he's not very sociable so he's not going to make it here. Yes, then I think, that's very much how you look at it, like: we do it this way, so they should do it this way too. [...] There is still a long way to go."

The quoted supervisor feels that the inclusion of employees with a refugee background requires employers and fellow employees to open up and adapt to include new workers. Although students indicated that they sometimes felt undervalued by their employer and did not always feel accepted by colleagues, certain aspects of the Dutch work culture were also particularly appreciated. Students particularly appreciated that managers showed interest in them and asked how they were doing. In addition, they greatly appreciated it when they received compliments about their work or progress in development. In the second

interview, respondents shared that they had become accustomed to the Dutch work standards and work culture, in which there is little hierarchy. Besides that, they enjoyed their job content and felt part of the group of colleagues.

#### 4.4. Hard work and perseverance

A recurrent theme in the interviews is the drive and perseverance to succeed, which makes students work very hard. Because most students have a technical diploma in the country of origin, they are familiar with the content of technical subjects and have work experience in that field. Despite this advantage over regular students, the dual program still proves to be very tough in practice, well-illustrated in the following quotes.

"two years [...] is really too busy. Because you work three days and you go to school two days. When do you have time to study? When do you have time for your family? When do you have time for yourself? you hardly have any time" (Farid)

"so what we do, we just have to stay awake until three, four in the morning, study, work, and get up at 6 in the morning" (Nabil)

Dunia, who switched to a part-time master's program, perceived the workload at the Ad higher than at her current master's program. The heaviness of the program and the hard work are reflected in the follow-up interviews with the students. Perseverance is viewed as an explanatory reason that they succeeded with the program. The supervisors also see hard work and grit as essential conditions for success, as illustrated by the following quote.

"you come here with the goal of developing yourself in the coming years and that's what companies want to see. Those who are very goal-oriented and motivated, they make it and work very hard."

Although those involved praise their hard work and enormous motivation, the education professionals interviewed think that refugee students sometimes demand too much of themselves, for example, they want to get high marks, whereas native students are usually satisfied with a pass.

#### 4.5. Valued outcomes

Although the Ad-program was lower than the obtained educational level in the country of origin, students learned new skills and gained context-specific knowledge. Respondents stated that they improved their Dutch language skills and learned specialized vocabulary. Most say they enjoy their work and feel heard by their employer. However, some respondents still experienced some difficulties with their communication. Respondents argued they needed more time and patience from their managers and colleagues.

For several respondents, the increase in self-confidence was noticeable in the second interview. They are much less uncertain about their value in the company where they work. For example, Habib explained that his employer offered him an extension of his temporary contract. By now Habib knew well what his added value to the company was, and demanded a permanent contract.

"when my contract ended, the temporary contract, the employer said to me: I am going to extend your contract for one year. I immediately said, because I can really do much for this company, if I don't get a permanent contract, I will immediately go to another company. Within five minutes he changed his mind and said to HR: give him a permanent contract." (Habib)

In addition to improving language proficiency and experiencing a better connection to colleagues, respondents said to have learned relevant theory and acquired relevant skills for work in their profession. They gained new knowledge during the dual program, especially about Building Information Management (BIM). People with knowledge about BIM are highly demanded in the Netherlands. Moreover, BIM is a technical skill whereby knowing the Dutch language is of less importance. Respondents argued that this knowledge and skill was to their advantage in their jobs.

Respondents said to have developed work-related skills, such as report writing, professional language, and how to apply for jobs. In addition, the program helps them to find a (paid) internship or workplace at companies affiliated with the program or through the network of teachers. The program thus supports the development of work-related capabilities.

Six of the eight respondents that were followed up after graduation, finished the program successfully, and have a job in the technical sector. One respondent was finishing some final tasks for his internship and was searching for a new job, and another respondent switched halfway the dual program to a technical master program. The employed respondents said to feel satisfied about their current employment situation.

Students indicated that the program allowed them to gain a network of Dutch construction companies and has been an essential step in rebuilding their professional life:

“this training opens up opportunities for me in the future; with a diploma and an education in the Netherlands, I may find a better job” (Farid)

“... it was a helpful study, I must say. [...] At least, you know, the program is a key of a door, but you don't get everything in the program: you get the key to open the door or discover a different path” (Zayed)

“I am a civil engineer in Syria. I am already familiar with all these subjects [in the program], that is not new. And it was lower than my level, [but] I looked at this program as a key to work in the Netherlands” (Amin)

Respondents argued that the program expands opportunities and refer to the program as a ‘key’ or a ‘door’ to opportunities. They obtained a Dutch diploma, grew more confident about their career prospects because of the gained work experience in the Netherlands, and acquired a professional network. Former students aspired to develop themselves further and get higher positions. They were confident of getting a new job quickly should they not be able to stay in the current job. Some have already received messages from recruiters through LinkedIn.

Mustafa, from the opening quote, who felt lost when he realized he could not simply continue his career as an engineer here, shares how he was able to reshape his career thanks to the program. The dual program helped him to find his way and to rebuild his life.

“...but really in the end I am very happy that I found my way. It's very important for my character and feeling. For my soul. [...] working, gaining experiences, getting friends, your language becomes stronger, you can make jokes, people also start respecting you, start liking you. The chief engineer came to me and says Mustafa I am proud of you. A statement like that will stay in my head for a number of years, perhaps even longer. Because I feel, I have now done something I dreamed of, so to speak.” (Mustafa).

## 5. Discussion

This article focuses on the question of whether and how a dual program in HVET contributes to valuable employment opportunities of refugees. By using a capability lens, individual factors, contextual factors, and the interaction between them that influence employment opportunities become clear. All respondents had completed higher education in their country of origin and some had work experience. However, foreign diploma's and work experience gained abroad are not considered equivalent to certificates and work experience gained in the Netherlands (Beckers & Muller-Dugic, 2018). We regard not valuing or undervaluing these previously acquired competencies as an impeding social conversion factor: it hinders refugees from converting their professional capital into a job that matches previously acquired skills. In Europe, but particularly in the Netherlands, diplomas are of great relevance as a signal to employers (Bakker, 2016; Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2011). Respondents therefore follow the program partly in order to obtain a Dutch diploma.

Because respondents already have a relevant bachelor, they do not experience the program as difficult. However, they do experience the workload as (too) high. They also state that they (had to) work very

hard to complete the training. Involved parties also often mention the drive and grit of this group of students. A great deal of perseverance certainly seems essential for achieving the program, but it should not be a condition for following such programs. The downside of this hard work is the risk of health complaints, which are more common among refugees than native Dutch people (Huijnk & Miltenburg, 2018). In addition, social activities are usually neglected while these are essential to get a (supportive) network.

Also of importance with regard to personal conversion factors is the ability to learn a new language. Good quality language training appears to be very important to adapt to social and cultural norms (Ibesh et al., 2021). Mastering the Dutch language is often seen as very important for many goals related to integration: to get a social network, find work, and connect with colleagues. The question is, however, when is their Dutch considered ‘good enough’? (Eijberts and Ghorashi, 2017). Our respondents all mastered Dutch at the B2 level, which is generally considered sufficient for higher education. Nevertheless, respondents felt insecure about their language skills and thought that they could not connect with fellow students or colleagues because of lack of language skills. The difficulty connecting with colleagues was confirmed by employers. Although interviewed employers were understanding of different cultural norms and behavior, they generally expect refugees to adapt to the work culture according to those involved. These observations are consistent with previous research (Eijberts and Ghorashi, 2017; Saal & Volkert, 2019).

Access to VET and apprenticeships can be difficult for refugees (Jørgensen, Hautz, & Li, 2021). The HVET dual program had several employers closely involved. Thanks to the short preparatory program, HVET is more accessible to refugees. By cooperating with employers, the obstacles of applying for a job are alleviated somewhat. Employers can hence contribute to refugee integration (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020). However, as this study shows, more attention is needed in making refugees feel welcome in the workplace. The working environment should be more prepared for the arrival of new employees with a refugee background (OECD/UNHCR, 2018), with more mutual effort for inclusion and acceptance in general (see: Damen, van der Linden, Dagevos, & Huijnk, 2022).

Although they generally reflected positively on the choice for the dual program, this choice was limited by several constraints. Structural constraints greatly hinder refugees in organizing their lives as they see fit. Refugees are assigned to municipalities: they have no choice or influence to live in a city where, for example, they want to study, where there are job opportunities, or where family members or acquaintances already live (Gerritsen et al., 2018). Dependent on social benefits, they experienced little autonomy in their choices of work or education. The municipality demanded that they find work as soon as possible, but potential employers did not acknowledge their previously acquired qualifications. The freedom of process was hence highly restricted. Through the program, learning the (professional) language, and gaining work experience in the Netherlands, self-confidence and (sense of) agency grew: they dare to stand up for themselves more, aspire for further development opportunities, and consider other employers. In other words, both opportunity freedom and process freedom are enhanced.

This research only concerns students of a specific dual program. Therefore, broader research among refugee students of other programs in higher vocational education is desirable. A further limitation of this study is that no participants were interviewed who dropped out or quit early. Although this group is difficult to reach, interviews with them would have provided more insight into efficacy and constraints in the program.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on our findings, we conclude that higher vocational education in which employers are closely involved may be the key to opening doors to refugees' valuable employment opportunities. Respondents said their (professional) language skills had improved, they had learned

new theories and skills, and they felt more integrated into the Dutch work culture. Learning and gaining work experience in the Netherlands simultaneously and obtaining a Dutch diploma were seen as the program's main benefits by the former students. Through engaging in the program, respondents strengthened their work-related capabilities. Of the eight respondents who were followed up, six had a diploma, and one almost had. They work in the sector they had a diploma and work experience in, in which they wanted to work, and important work values are reflected in it. Besides income and security, valuable employment potentially contributes to the feeling of belonging and acceptance and a general sense of well-being.

According to the contribution of the program to work-related capabilities, the positions of former students and their new aspirations and development opportunities, we conclude that the program contributes to valuable employment opportunities. Respondents were confident that they would be able to find another job, if required. On the other hand, the level of an associate degree is too low for some. After all, they already have at least a bachelor's degree. More variation in the levels and pace offered would therefore be of added value. The valuation of previously acquired competencies can contribute to sustainable employment of refugees, and also contributes to a sense of acceptance and inclusion in the new work environment (Andersson, 2020). Despite the impeding conversion factors, the former students interviewed managed to successfully complete the program, and maintain a job that matched desires and aspirations. The program not only improves skills and language; it also attributes to the capability to aspire. We view the new aspirations of former students to develop themselves further and get higher positions as capabilities. To help refugees to rebuild their lives, (higher) education can act as "an opportunity-making context to rethink and expand aspirations" (Walker, 2021).

## 7. Recommendations for future research

In this research, former students have been followed up to evaluate how the program contributed to their career, ambitions, and valuable employment. They were asked to reflect on the added value of the dual program. Because former students were interviewed not long after they finished their studies, they should be followed up after a few years to evaluate how sustainable their employment is. Students who were not admitted to the program (because they did not meet the admission requirements) and students who stopped prematurely were not interviewed. It is precisely from these experiences that much can be learned to improve refugee programs. However, although research into this group is recommended, it is challenging to reach this group. Furthermore, more research is required into the perspective and experiences of the employers involved.

## 8. Declarations

### Availability of data and materials

'Not applicable'. The data generated during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality reasons. They are available from the author on reasonable request.

### Authors' contributions

Melissa Kotiso conducted the first round of interviews with students and Janne ten Have conducted the second round of interviews with students. Diana van Dijk analyzed the interviews with Atlas.ti. Kotiso and Ten Have both contributed to the process of analyzing the interviews and in writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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