

# Working toward aspirations: How Higher Education Learning-working trajectories for Refugees in the Netherlands support work-related capabilities

Citation

Dijk, D. v. (2021). Working toward aspirations: How Higher Education Learning-working trajectories for Refugees in the Netherlands support work-related capabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-09-2020-0328>

Accepted for publication: 06-Feb-2021

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** Refugees face multiple barriers to employment, such as previous work experience and qualifications not recognized. The Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences offers a Higher VET dual program for highly-skilled refugees, in which education and work is combined. After completion of the two-year program, participants have gained new skills, learned (vocational) language, have work experience in the Netherlands and have a Dutch diploma. These are the factors that are decisive for successful employment integration.

**Methodology** This explorative study aimed to get insights into the participants' views and experiences with the dual program. A qualitative design has, therefore, been chosen. This article is based on 20 in-depth interviews with refugee-students. The transcribed qualitative data was systematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 8 qualitative data analysis software.

**Findings** Overall, refugee-students were positive about the opportunity to study further and to work simultaneously. They valued the close connection with employers, learned new skills, improved their (vocational) language, and it gave them professional prospects that fit their ambitions. Based on the experiences of students, it seems that the dual program enhances work-related capabilities. However, the University should make more use of existing professional knowledge and experiences. Recognition of prior learning is crucial for employment integration but also contributes to a sense of inclusion.

**Originality** Higher VET dual programs for highly-skilled refugees are innovative and can contribute to their integration into the labor market. The associate degree is a recognized diploma between higher education and secondary vocational education.

**Key words:** refugees; Higher VET; dual program; employment integration; Capability approach

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## 1. Introduction

As a result of the war in Syria and violence elsewhere in the world, there has been an influx of refugees into Europe since 2015. The integration of refugees is a significant challenge in Europe because most cannot return and will remain in the host country. Integration into the labor market is viewed as a crucial promoter and indicator of integration and social inclusion (Martín, 2016; Barslund, 2017; Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller, and Pundt, 2017; Klaver, Mallee, Odé, and Smit, 2015; UNHCR, 2013) with positive effects on health and welfare (Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen, and Zacher, 2018). In many European countries, refugees' integration into the labor market is, therefore, a central goal (Scholten, 2018). Refugees face multiple barriers to employment such as discrimination, language barriers, lack of relevant networks, limited knowledge of recruitment methods, mental health problems related to fleeing, and previous work experience and qualifications not being recognized (EEPO, 2016; Campion, 2018; Baranik, Hurst, and Eby, 2018; UNHCR, 2013). It is assumed that better-educated refugees integrate more easily into the labor-market in the host country (Bevelander, 2020). However, it may actually be more difficult for highly-skilled refugees to find suitable work than for lower-skilled refugees. Among the highly-skilled, professional identity is strong; people are afraid that knowledge and expertise will diminish as time goes on and that if they take up a job in a lower position, they lose status (Eggenhofer-Rehart, et al., 2018).

Besides, whether and how work promotes integration and social inclusion of refugees depends on the quality of the job and the professional prospects in the longer term. If refugees are employed, this often consists of part-time work, temporary contracts, and lower occupational levels (Huijnk, 2018; Klaver et al., 2015a; SER, 2019). Refugees are likely to experience downward occupational mobility (Campion 2018), which means lower earnings, lower job satisfaction, and a higher risk of unemployment (Muller and Beckers, 2018). Vocational education and training (VET) programs could help to overcome these issues (OECD and Cedefop 2017; Jeon 2019). Particularly Higher VET, could enable highly-skilled refugees to convert existing expertise to a new context and acquire new knowledge and skills, such as (vocational) language.

In this article, a case study is presented of a two-year Higher VET dual-program targeted at highly-skilled refugees in the Netherlands. This program combines formal classroom learning with a (paid) work placement. The objective is to give insights into this form of higher education, if and how these learning-trajectories support refugees' work-related capabilities, and to identify relevant questions for further research.

## **2. Refugees, education and employment in the Netherlands**

Between 2015 and 2017, more than 100,000 refugees applied for asylum in the Netherlands. Four-and-a-half years after obtaining a residence permit, 51% have a paid job (CBS 2020). Many of the barriers to employment are similar to those in other European countries. In the Dutch labor market, great importance is attached to recognized qualifications (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen, 2017). When refugees have completed their highest education in the Netherlands, the chances of finding a suitable job appear to be just as high as for native Dutch people (Bakker, 2016). Many refugees consequently aspire to study in the Netherlands.

However, education, and particularly Higher education is difficult to access for refugees (Gruijter, Razenberg, and Tinnemans, 2019; Onderwijsraad, 2017) because of admission requirements, a lack of information, and financial constraints. Especially older students, who live independently or with a dependent family, face financial obstacles. Students in the Netherlands (under the age of 30) who are enrolled in tertiary education receive 'student finance'. Although this is a loan for a large part, it supports students with paying fees, books, and living costs. Refugees over 30 are not eligible for 'student finance' and often depend on social assistance.

Municipalities are responsible for implementing social assistance, and most do not allow benefit recipients to follow education as they need to be available for a job (Razenberg and Gruiter, 2018). Because municipalities will be responsible for implementing the new Integration Act from 2022 onwards, there is a movement towards thinking about more sustainable labor integration. One way that would lead to more sustainable positions in the labor market would be programs that combine education and work (Bakker et al., 2017; SER, 2019). In several municipalities there are initiatives that already focus on combining education and work. Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS) offers a dual program for refugees. After two years, students have work experience in the Netherlands and a Dutch accredited diploma (Associate degree, EQF 5).

### **2.1 Content and purpose of the dual program**

The dual program is a cooperation between RUAS, the Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF), and several companies. UAF supports refugees in their studies by providing advice, guidance and financial support (for study-related costs). UAF is involved in the selection of students for the dual program. The companies participate based on social involvement and because there is a shortage of personnel in their sectors.

The program consists of a preparatory six-month program and a two-year dual program in Integrated Building Management, Engineering, and Maintenance and Mechanics. To enter a higher education institute, one must have at least a B2-level in Dutch. Therefore, a critical focus in the pre-program is to pass the B2-exam. The pre-program exists of four days of education at RUAS, where they learn Dutch, about the Dutch culture, communication in the workplace, and job application skills. RUAS and UAF provide counseling during these six months, which continues during the dual program. At the end of the pre-program, students are introduced to involved companies to apply for a (paid) traineeship. In the program, refugees are expected to work for three days and follow education for one day a week. Refugee-students follow the lectures together with regular students.

### 3. Capabilities for work

Because highly-skilled refugees often experience downward mobility, we should not measure the success of integration programs solely by transitioning into work. Refugees can compensate for this initial decline in position if they learn how to convert their expertise into a new context and if they acquire new skills and knowledge. In other words, the success of integration programs lies in improving a person's capabilities (Egdell and McQuaid, 2016).

Capabilities are the real possibilities that individuals have to achieve what they value; individuals' choices and opportunities to pursue their ambitions or goals (Frediani, Clark, & Biggeri, 2019). Next to capabilities, functionings is another key-concept in the capability approach. Functionings (achievements) are what people have achieved in terms of beings and doings. Inequalities in these achievements arise because capabilities depend on available (material and immaterial) resources, access to these resources, and the ability to turn these resources into capabilities. Turning resources into capabilities depends on conversion factors which are personal factors (such as skills and intelligence) and social factors (public policy, social norms, discrimination) (Robeyns, 2017). Structural constraints, in turn, can have a significant influence on the conversion factors. These are the institutions, policies, laws, and social norms that influence capabilities. People differ in the structural constraints they face, depending on their social position (Robeyns, 2017; Dijk, 2008).

The capabilities for work are defined as the real freedoms to choose the job or activity people have reason to value (Bonvin, 2012). Capabilities for work and work-related functionings go beyond (the content of) the job and wages. Individuals value work because of income security, meaning, values, recognition (Van der Klink et al., 2016), work-family balance (Bonvin, 2012), and opportunities to develop yourself. Capabilities for work are hence strongly related to other capabilities and functionings (Bonvin, 2012). Also, capabilities (such as learning Dutch) can be essential to achieve other functionings (being able to work in the Netherlands), but can also be viewed as achievements or functionings in itself (Clark and Hodgett, 2019). For analytical purposes, capabilities and functionings are viewed as separate, but in practice, there are many "complex and variable interconnections" between these overlapping categories (ibid.).

In this study, the CA is used to assess how the dual program strengthens work-related capabilities of refugee-students, by analyzing valued work-functionings (e.g., what their aspirations are in terms of their career), the reasons to participate, the constraints they experience(d) in finding employment, how the program helps to overcome constraints and what they have learned/achieved as a result of the program. In other words, this research focuses not only on what people achieve (in terms of work or education) but on whether and how this relates to what they want(ed) to achieve (their valued functionings) and if and how they are able and enabled to. The main research question is: In what ways are work-related capabilities of refugees strengthened by the dual program in higher education?

## 4. Methodology

Refugees' views and experiences are essential to make policies concerning labor market integration more inclusive and effective (Ponzoni, Ghorashi, and Badran, 2020). This explorative study aimed to get insights into the participants' views and experiences with the dual program. A qualitative design has, therefore, been chosen.

### Background respondents

This article is based on 20 in-depth interviews with refugee-students, that have settled in the Netherlands since 2015 and are enrolled in the dual program of RUAS. Two researchers and three social sciences students conducted the interviews. The author was the principal investigator, and the students conducted the interviews under her supervision. Three refugee-students in the preliminary program, twelve first-year refugee-students, three second-year refugee-students, and two alumni were interviewed in 2019 and 2020. The academic year in the Netherlands runs from September to July the following year. Respondents were enrolled in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. In 2018-2019, 12 students participated in the pre-program, and ten students started the main program. In 2019-2020, 23 students followed the pre-program, and 8 of those students started the main program in 2020-2021. The number of students who start the main program is lower than the number of students in the pre-program. According to the program manager, students choose to do a different course or feel that combining studying and working is too hard.

### Selection of respondents

Respondents have initially been approached by involved lecturers to ask if they were interested in participating in the research and if the researchers could contact them. The researchers introduced themselves, explained the purpose of the study, and asked permission to record the interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on experiences after resettlement. No questions were asked about the flight or reasons to flee. We did ask questions about their lives before the flight concerning prior education and work experience.

There was no selection based on age or country of origin. Of the respondents, nine were between the age of 30 and 40; seven were under the age of 30, and four respondents were 50 or 51 years old. Most respondents (15) were originally from Syria. The total number of students with a Syrian background at RUAS has risen sharply since 2018. More than half of the registered refugee-students in 2018 have a Syrian background (Dijk and Kooiman, 2019).

### Interviews were conducted online and offline

Of the 20 interviews, nine were conducted digitally due to the Covid-19 lockdown (March-June 2020). Students could not go to the University or work, and all courses were transferred to online teaching. The lockdown is likely to negatively influence refugees' learning-outcomes, as they are less able to practice Dutch, their Dutch may not be good enough to understand online lectures, and they are unable to connect with peers or colleagues. Refugee-students prefer face-to-face learning (Mupenzi, Mude and Baker, 2020). Most respondents were enrolled for at least a year and were able to reflect on face-to-face learning. Furthermore, the lockdown in the Netherlands has been less restrictive than in other European countries. After a couple of weeks, some respondents were able to return to their workplace. Hit hardest were probably the pre-program students, as those students are engaged in an almost full-time (than online) educational program.

### Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim into Dutch. The transcribed qualitative data was systematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 8 qualitative data analysis software. A thematic analysis was chosen, driven by the question if and how the program contributed to work-related capabilities and hence by the CA framework. The themes and codes are based on the concepts in the framework. After this analysis, quotations were translated into English. It was not always possible to literally translate the quote, mostly because respondents were not fluid in Dutch. In the translation of a quote, a "transfer of meaning" (Feldermann Sina and Hiebl Martin, 2019) was strived for by translating the original quote into English as much as possible, taking into account the interpretation of the quote in Dutch.

## 5. Findings

To assess work-related capabilities, this article discusses first what students hope or expect to achieve in terms of their career, followed by the constraints they experience(d) pursuing these aspirations, and their motivations to enroll in the program. Finally, reflections of refugee-students are presented on how the program contributes to their capabilities and aspirations.

### 5.1 Valued work functionings: what students aspire to achieve

When asked what they hope to achieve in terms of their career, respondents discussed various dimensions of work functionings discussed in the literature, such as income security. For some, what they strive for in the Netherlands differs from what they strived for in their country of origin. In the Netherlands, they get acquainted with other views on the value of work. As two respondents explain:

*....in Syria you get more money as a salary, you can easily make big money. Here in the Netherlands it is different: it is not about money [...] here in the Netherlands, people work to enjoy themselves [...] We earned a lot of money in Syria, everything is gone now, my own business is gone, my car is gone, my house is gone, so here I have changed my goals. Here is my goal: enjoy life and enjoy work (m, 50)*

*....just earning enough money to live, to have a good life and a good environment for my family. I'm not looking to get a lot of money, that's not how I am. Actually, I come from a good family. My family had money, houses, cars, but always thinking about money. Not here. Here you are free, you are open, you have time to think about your future. And you can say anything. (m, 32)*

As is clear from the above quotes, losing everything and having to start over in a new country can change what you strive for. Besides that, experiencing another mentality and more freedom in choices in the host country can contribute to altering career goals. Another recurrent theme in the interviews is 'security': striving for a secure income with a permanent contract.

*I hope to get a permanent contract in my new job, I now have a 1-year contract. I hope that I connect with them and then I can stay, because what I have noticed most employees have been working there for years and they are satisfied. (m, 34)*

*So my work will be successful if I get a permanent contract and can develop myself even further through a master's degree (f, 28)*

Being able to develop oneself in a job or within a company, is another dimension of the value of work.

*I actually want to develop myself further. If I have more chance to grow, I will stay [in this job] (f, 28)*

*I see myself in the same company, they are nice colleagues, and I can also develop myself. (m, 30)*

Furthermore, respondents valued work that related to their interests, educational background, and experience. Some stressed their desire to be independent of social assistance. For some, this relates to the obligation to apply for a job and the requirement to justify yourself to the officials. Others stress that they want to be 'good Dutch citizens' that contribute to society. The desire to connect with the Dutch, to be seen and acknowledged, is also reflected in most interviews. This sense of belonging has an important affective dimension: the feeling that you are allowed to be there and that you belong.

### 5.2 Constraints

The researchers asked the respondents about constraints they experience(d) pursuing their aspirations. Respondents mentioned the language and the lack of a Dutch diploma, which are viewed as critical barriers to employment (Bakker, Dagevos, and Enbersen, 2017). After discussing these constraints, financial constraints are discussed, relating to the dependency on social assistance and municipalities'

reluctance to allow beneficiaries to follow education.

### Language

Speaking the Dutch language is important in acquiring a job, according to the respondents. Even in jobs where there is a shortage of staff, employers are expected to speak Dutch fairly well.

*There is also a lot of demand, a lot of vacancies for people in engineering, maintenance, or mechanical engineering, but there is always a problem with my language. I've had several job interviews, but they all said to me: sorry, but your language is not good. (m, 50)*

*... the challenge for me lies with language, because when I go to a company for a job interview, I may not understand some words (m, 51)*

The second respondent added later in the interview that besides his Dutch, his older age might also be a contributing factor to not being able to get a job. Companies prefer younger people over older, according to him, because their salaries are lower.

For students, learning the language is important for specialist terminology but also to be able to connect with Dutch colleagues and fellow students. Connecting with natives goes beyond the ability to understand what is being said, but also, for example, the ability to understand humor:

*... it has been very difficult so far to take part in those conversations with jokes, that is very difficult [...] With jokes, you might take words that everyone knows from their own language or from the past, but I don't know that. That is difficult to learn. [...] I find that very unfortunate, because I want to join in with jokes with colleagues, that's the surprise of life, jokes and laughter and I miss that, I miss that very much ... (m, 30)*

### Not having a Dutch diploma

Most students have a complete, or near-complete, education in their home country. Some of the respondents have a master, which was valued as a bachelor in the Netherlands. On top of higher education, respondents aged 28 years and over also have work experience. Both refugees' diplomas and work experience is valued less, as a man from Syria (34) explains:

*I have applied a lot. They say: we can see in your portfolio that you have experience, but we can see that it is foreign experience. That experience is different from that in the Netherlands (m, 34)*

*I tried many times to find a job, with my civil engineering diploma, but I didn't succeed (f, 28)*

The respondent of the second quote soon realized that both her diploma and work experience are valued less in the Netherlands.

### Financial barriers

Being over the age of eligibility of a study grant means you are dependent of an income from work or social assistance. This is especially challenging for refugees who have dependents:

*... in my situation, I am over 30 years old, I am not allowed to get study finance as a first difficulty. The second difficulty is that I am married and have a family (m, 30)*

In many cases, the municipality does not allow you to study if you have social assistance. Instead, you have to find a job as soon as possible. In some municipalities, any job is suitable. This means that regardless of prior education or work experience, one should be willing to accept any job.

*...the municipality says: you have to go to work, you don't have to study, just go to work. Yes, do you have work for me? Just like what I did in Syria? Yes, maybe a cleaner, maybe a waiter, maybe a parcel deliverer... (m, 34)*

Having to accept a job at a much lower level can be very frustrating as the above quote illustrates. The respondent in question finished a master in his home country and wanted to work as a civil engineer.

### 5.3 Motivations to participate in the program

Respondents were asked how they knew about the program and why they participated. Most students hear about the dual program from UAF. According to the respondents, UAF-counselors provided information about the program and advised them to follow this program because of the relatively short duration in combination with their age:

*...my contact at UAF said: you can do an associate degree, if you like. I say okay, but I intend to take a master's and I have already been admitted. But she said: you are 30 years old, a master's is full-time. If you graduate, you have no work experience and you are about 32 years old. I advise you to follow this program, it is part-time, you will start working right away and gain work experience. (m, 30)*

*Actually, in the beginning I wanted to see what the possibilities are for studying a master's degree. And I went to university to study full-time. Fulltime is 40 hours a week in five days so that's too much and I also considered that in terms of age. It will take almost five years, then I will be 56 and in that period I can't work...they [UAF] called me and said: we have this program, if you want to do that... (m, 51)*

In both quotes, respondents expressed their wish to follow a master. According to them, Their UAF-counselor advised them the dual program instead. The second respondent agrees with his counsellor that working and studying simultaneously is a better option considering his age. That way, he will be able to get a paid job faster. Wanting to gain an income and work experience in the Netherlands is also mentioned as a motivation by other respondents:

*Because [...] it is difficult to find a job, especially without a Dutch education, but I still have to get an income, so that is why I am doing an education. I wanted to study and work at the same time (m, 50)*

*I have been in the Netherlands for three years. Another four years of full-time education is a very long time, that's not really possible. If I don't have a job, then I can't get an education, I can't do anything. What I need is a job, what I want is an education. Now I actually have both. That's why I think it's fine, I think it's beautiful actually (m, 34)*

The choice for the dual program is internally motivated by the possibility to study, gain work experience, and gain an income. The reasons to participate are also externally motivated: social assistance beneficiaries need to be available for (any) job. Although studying is therefore not allowed, some municipalities make an exception for the dual program. This is because some students get a paid job immediately, and thus an income, or because municipalities believe that refugees integrate more sustainably into the labor market thanks to the program. While this could be considered positive, it does limit the freedom of choice, as one respondent explained:

*I just wanted to study civil engineering at the Technical University but they say no. You're 32 now and if you study for five years, you're 37 and then you don't have any work experience. Here on this point, they make my options smaller and smaller and they actually forced me into the program (m, 34)*

Later in the interview he argues that participating in the program is a compromise between his ambitions and the possibilities:

*Sometimes I feel that they are against me and sometimes I think it makes a bit of sense. Your passion, what you want, your ambition....and reality, your age, everything counts (m, 34)*

Other respondents also said to have adapted their initial plans or adapted their ambitions:

*I am now being given another chance. You have to accept what the possibilities are. (m, 33)*

*If I follow the program, I get a diploma, a job and a salary, and I can just live a quieter life. And if I do a master's, I can't find a job until I have completed the master's. I just weighed up the advantages and disadvantages (m, 25)*

Being able to adapt career plans or goals, is often considered a positive treat in response to employment challenges. However, this is not necessarily the case for refugees who are at risk of downward occupational mobility (Campion, 2018). The following section describes the contribution of the program to respondents' goals and aspirations to date.

#### **5.4 How the program contributes to aspirations**

Most respondents were still in the program, and reflected on how the program contributed to various skills, such as the language:

*... when I started learning Dutch, everything became easier. Now I can read the letters from the municipality, now I can work for many organizations. I think that changes a lot of things. Now I can really integrate into Dutch society, because I now speak a little Dutch (m, 28)*

*I really needed the language, because the Dutch language is a very difficult language. But we had a really intensive course. And I am really grateful for that, for giving me the opportunity to raise my language level to a higher level (m, 34)*

Respondents mention that they have developed further in work-related skills, such as specific drawing programs, presenting, report writing, and how to apply for jobs. Respondents reflected on how the program supported the connection with the Dutch labor market, but also how this supported their integration into Dutch society:

*And actually what I think is really important is the combination of work and study. [...] I think it's the best way to integrate into society, work and study. [...] This combination is very important, or the most important way to integrate. [...] this way I can build my future well. (m, 28)*

*...people also want to have confidence as far as your background is concerned, so I'm glad I'm doing the job, it's a stepping stone to more opportunities in the future. (f, 28)*

*That's also what I like about the company, that they will also take care of us. They're also going to teach us something else. Practice, more than theory. So, we're going to apply the theoretical things to work... (m, 25)*

Thanks to the program, they find a (paid) internship or workplace. These are companies that have already joined the program or companies through the network of UAF supervisors or RUAS supervisors. One former student (m, 30) now has a permanent contract with the same company he worked for during the program. He is delighted with what the program has brought him and argued he learned a lot from it. He was able to get a contract with the company he worked for during the program and moved to a better position since. The temporary contract of another former student (m, 34) was extended for the second time. He had expected and hoped that he would get a permanent contract: "I am really not happy. If I want to get married, I need a permanent contract, and also for a house." Although it is not yet clear how the program contributes to ambitions in the longer term, respondents expect to develop into their aspired positions through the program and their work.

## Counseling and guidance

A recurrent theme was the counseling provided during the program. At RUAS, some teachers are also study-counselors who monitor the student's progress. Besides that, students have someone who supervises or provides guidance at the workplace. Both the counselors and the supervisors at work play an essential role in the progress of students:

*I have a very good work supervisor. He always helps me, quickly, if you say you need time to study, he says no problem (m, 30)*

*[she] is also a flexible teacher. I get advice from her. She says: let's see... how much have you worked, and how far have you come with networking. And she keeps personal contact with students. I don't know whether that's her job or her own strength. [...] I can talk to her as a friend (m, 33)*

Respondents feel that teachers and counselors are easy to approach when they have study-related problems or problems related to their internship or work. There is also a supervisor at work; someone students can ask for help or advice.

*My supervisor [at work] helps me a lot...and when I ask him how does this work, how do you do this, how is this construction going to be made or so, he sits with me and he draws a lot and gives me a lot of information about construction, so at work I get a lot of help (f, 28)*

*The supervision of the work is very good, I feel welcome and acknowledged, I can, as I said, operate quite well on my own, but I can ask questions where necessary. I do not feel hindered (f, 28)*

Some respondents say that they feel encouraged by teachers, colleagues, or managers at work. This feeling of encouragement is vital because, for many students, the program is very demanding. Besides three days of work, students need to follow one day of education, do homework, and improve their Dutch. Although not discussed in the interviews, it is estimated that 13 to 25% of refugees have post-traumatic stress disorder or depression (Huijnk and Miltenburg, 2018). Previous research among RUAS refugee-students (Dijk and Kooiman, 2019) has shown that it is crucial to pay attention to the student's psychological well-being. Good contact between supervisors and students is a prerequisite for this, and this seems to be the case in the program.

## 6. Discussion

By analyzing what refugee-students have achieved thanks to the program from a capability perspective, the interaction between resources, contextual factors, and personal factors in employment opportunities becomes clear. This interaction is evident in the conversion of professional capital to the Dutch labor market. Qualifications and experience gained earlier in the home country are valued less (or not) in the Netherlands. As a result, refugees cannot use previously acquired competencies for what they want to achieve. Respondents needed to adapt their initial plans or aspirations and argued that the program and the work they executed was below their professional level.

Some that argued that the study was below their level aspired to finish the program in a shorter time. They experienced the program as relatively easy since they already worked and/or had a (higher) education in that specific field. This advocates for more flexibility in the content and duration of the program. On the other hand, alumni and second-year students stated that they gained much knowledge and experience during the program required in their current jobs. Having to deal with a new professional context, and the fact that refugees need to build a whole new life may require a more tempered program. Regardless, the University and involved companies should acknowledge and use existing professional knowledge and experiences. Recognition of prior learning is not only crucial for employment integration; it also contributes to a sense of acceptance and inclusion in a new context (Andersson, 2020).

In addition to learning about the content of the profession, refugee-students improved their Dutch in general and learned specialized vocabulary, crucial to both learning and working (OECD & Cedefop, 2017). Mastery of the Dutch language is seen as an important, and often the most important means of participating in Dutch society. It can be seen as a 'fertile functioning' (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2013), meaning that mastering Dutch is likely to have benefits in many areas. It helps refugees to find a job, to connect with fellow students and colleagues, and to integrate into society. The importance of mastering the language is endorsed by respondents: they identified the language as a stumbling block in the search for affiliation with their fellow students or colleagues. However, all spoke at a sufficient level to be able to study in higher education. The level of proficiency in the Dutch language alone is therefore an incomplete explanation for the exclusion experienced by some.

Something that the dual program was not anticipating but can have a significant impact on guiding students towards a sustainable position in the labor market, is the impact of measures around Covid-19. The measures lead to major risks for people with a vulnerable position in the labor market, such as refugees. Uncertainties and financial setbacks mean that employers are less able to offer refugees an internship or apprenticeship. Besides, the measures relating to Covid-19 result in many lessons being offered digitally rather than physically. Especially for students who are not fluid in Dutch, this is a significant challenge. In addition, because of Covid-19, (refugee-) students have lost their jobs or are unsure about their job's stability. The uncertainty about having an income and a work experience placement most likely negatively influences their study (Mupenzi et al. 2020). On the other hand, blended learning (a combination of online and face-to-face learning) could offer more flexibility for refugee-students who often struggle with the combination of study, work, and caring responsibilities (Al-Husban and Shorman, 2020). Designing online or blended learning for this target group does require careful thinking about the specific challenges and needs of refugee-students, such as the language.

### Conclusion

Although it is hard to start over in the Netherlands, respondents were extremely driven to rebuild their lives here and take advantage of the opportunities provided. Overall, students were positive about the opportunity to study and to work simultaneously. That way, they were able to get a Dutch diploma and work experience in the Netherlands. In general, students identified the potential career perspectives they had thanks to the program. The opportunity to learn and work in a sector related to their field of expertise, and receiving a Dutch accredited diploma, provided professional prospects in the longer term that matched their aspirations.

Based on this, it seems that a higher VET dual program enhances work-related capabilities. The program's added value seems to lie in the close cooperation with employers (OECD and Cedefop 2017; Muller and Beckers, 2018), the guidance provided, and the combination of work-based learning and

studying at RUAS. Another advantage is obtaining a Dutch diploma, which significantly increases employment opportunities (Bakker, 2016; Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen, 2017). A higher VET program supports highly-skilled refugees in acquiring new knowledge and skills and social capital and potentially also in converting existing expertise to the host country's context.

Nevertheless, a sustainable position in the labor market can only be achieved if refugees are also adequately supported in other areas of life - such as health, finance, and housing (SER, 2019). Although other organizations are involved in those areas of life, from what students have shared the teachers and supervisors in the program can attribute to a sense of belonging and often provide much-needed moral support.

### **Recommendations for future research**

In this exploratory research, not many alumni have been interviewed. Yet, following up on former students to evaluate if and how they have developed further in their career, how it relates to what they wanted to accomplish in the longer term, and if they feel secure in their jobs is vital to assess the added value of such programs. According to Wolff and de-Shalit (2013), what is important for the most disadvantaged people is that they are able to sustain a certain level of functioning over time (secure functionings). Furthermore, in this article, only the experiences of students have been considered. Further research should also aim to analyze how connecting with native students and colleagues could be enhanced from the perspective of Higher Education and employers.

### **Acknowledgements:**

Thanks to the interviews conducted by: Anne Kooiman (researcher), Melissa Kotiso (master student), Pepijn Burger (bachelor student), Diede Vlemmix (bachelor student)

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