



# **ADRIFT POTENTIAL(S)**

On young highly-educated Syrian refugees and their feelings of belonging to the Dutch citizenry.

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**MA Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship**

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**“Refugees are people like anyone else, like you and me. They led ordinary lives before becoming displaced, and their biggest dream is to be able to live normally again.”**

Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN.org: <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8739>. Last accessed: June 27, 2016.



I want to thank all my participants for sharing their stories with me.

أريد أن أشكر جميع المشاركين لتبادل قصصهم معي .





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# 1. INTRODUCTION

إذا كنت قد ذاق العسل ، فلن ننسى ذلك .

(If you have tasted the honey, you will not forget it – Syrian poetry)

*“If you have tasted the honey, you will not forget it”* said Ali (27) when thinking back of his professional career in Syria. With this phrase of Syrian poetry, he refers to his life as a law-graduate in Syria, working in his own company and earning his own money. Today, a few years later, he lives in a social housing complex in Amsterdam as a Syrian refugee, financially supported by the Dutch social welfare system. He will not forget the career he had in Syria and he will do whatever it takes to continue his career in the Netherlands.

In 2015, the dominant discourse in the media was about the large amount of people who fled their homes. One out of 113 people is forcibly uprooted,<sup>2</sup> according to a report by the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR: “A sad record.”<sup>3</sup> Since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, almost one out of three Syrian citizens fled their homes.<sup>4</sup> Over 4.8 million Syrians have sought for a safer place in a neighbouring country or in Europe.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, 43 percent of the total asylum applications in the Netherlands were from Syrian refugees. Of all the Syrian asylum applications in the Netherlands in 2015, 98 per cent is approved. This means that these people obtained a Dutch residence permit for five years.<sup>6</sup> This residence permit marks the start of their integration process in a new country. They are allocated in houses and start to build their new life. Most of them are

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR.nl, Record aantal vluchtelingen in 2015: <http://www.unhcr.nl/unhcr-in-nederland/nieuws/artikel/144441b3f109ea63e72260aa88034845/recordaantal-vluchtelingen-in-2015.html>. Last accessed: July 22, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Volkskrant.nl, Wereld telde nog nooit zoveel vluchtelingen: <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/-wereld-telde-nog-nooit-zoveel-vluchtelingen~a4323743/>. Last accessed: July 22, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Vluchtelingenwerk.nl: <http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/landen-van-herkomst/syri%C3%AB>. Last accessed: May 30, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR: [http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#\\_ga=1.114028494.87635598.1410375607](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#_ga=1.114028494.87635598.1410375607). Last accessed: July 11, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> In this research, the term ‘refugee’ is used to describe the Syrian people who fled to the Netherlands because of the war in Syria. The main difference between a refugee and a migrant is the forced or voluntary base of their migration. According to the 1951 Convention of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), a refugee is: “A person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/ her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution” (Whittaker 2006, 2).

young Syrian men and women.<sup>7</sup> Many of them obtained high education in Syria. Most of them are ambitious, motivated and eager to start their future without insecurity and war.

Despite the often dominant negative sounds in the Dutch national debate on the integration of refugees that shape perceptions of anxiety and threat on the one hand, optimistic sounds are heard as well. Those who are welcoming refugees often think in opportunities rather than in threats. For example the board chairman of COA, the Dutch reception organization for asylum seekers, who said: “I do not want them to waste their time. We as a society can make their arrival an enrichment to society.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally online news platform De Correspondent stated in an article: “It is like a reverse brain drain: the country that people left already lost its human capital and the host country will do everything to take as little advantage of it as possible.”<sup>9</sup> Although Syrians who are a refugee bring with them traumatic experiences and tragic stories, many of them are also young potentials who bring with them talents, skills, ideas, ambitions and work ethic. The question that arises is: In what sense are they able to ‘enrich’ the Dutch society with their skills and talents? The Syrians in this research obtained education and work experience in their home country, but their professional life was interrupted by the war. In the Netherlands they face many challenges in their structural or socio-economic integration process, which is the successful economic participation in the host society (Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic and De Vroome 2015, 1837-38). Some barriers that may hinder them in this process are inadequate language proficiency in Dutch, foreign diplomas that are not recognised by the Dutch educational system, a lengthy asylum procedure which makes them live in uncertainty, a lacking social network and cultural differences (Kurvers and Spotti 2015; Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2006). Do refugees who are forcibly displaced and whose homes are de-territorialised feel a sense of belonging to their new country, although they experience barriers and a disadvantaged position in this new society? According to Ghorashi and Vieten (2012), home can also become an abstract space wherein satisfaction and freedom of expression can be found (2012, 727).

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<sup>7</sup> COA.nl, cijfers en jaarverslagen: <https://www.coa.nl/nl/over-coa/cijfers-en-jaarverslagen>. Last accessed: August 11, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> NRC.nl: Topman COA: Asielzoekers zijn verrijking voor de samenleving: <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/18/topman-coa-asielzoekers-zijn-verrijking-voor-de-samenleving>. Last accessed: January 13, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> De Correspondent: Gelukzoekers? Gelukbrengers, zul je bedoelen: <https://decorrespondent.nl/3356/Die-iPhone-in-hun-hand-Die-danken-we-aan-een-Syrische-vluchteling/307776296696-b82b2611>. Last accessed: January 29, 2016.

This research focuses on young highly educated Syrian refugees and their feelings of home and belonging to the Dutch society. The influence that education and work as well as refugees' skills, talents and ambitions have on these feelings, and the ability to create these feelings, will be examined. Therefore, refugees' experiences with education and work before and after migrating to the Netherlands will be explored. By collecting data through several research methods, I try to find answers to the following research question: *What influence do both pre- and post-migration experiences of education and work of highly educated Syrian refugees have on their perception of belonging to the Dutch citizenry?* In order to answer this question, this research gains insights into the interrelation of social and human capital of Syrian refugees and the processes of inclusion and exclusion from Dutch education, the Dutch labour market, and the Dutch society at large. In this research, social capital refers to the membership of a refugee in social groups such as family networks, ethnic groups, social workers, but also colleagues or fellow students (Aguilera and Massey in Vroome and van Tubergen 2010, 380). Human capital is about the relevant skills and knowledge acquired by an individual (Nawyn et al. 2012, 257).

Both pre-migration and post-migration social and human capital can have influence on refugees' participation in the Dutch society through education and work, which consequently may influence refugees' feelings of belonging to the Dutch citizenry. Hence, citizenship is an essential part of the integration of refugees in the host society (Steward and Mulvey 2013; Yuval-Davis 2013), as it can generate feelings of belonging to the Dutch society, as well as represent the "equality of rights of all citizens within a political community" (Baubock in Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014, 67). The effect of these concepts will be explored through the lens of young Syrian refugees who are highly educated and aim to continue their professional life in a new society.

As many media, organisations and companies are optimistic about the value highly educated refugees can add to our society, a more nuanced and realistic perspective will be given. This research argues that the devaluation of pre-migration human capital causes feelings of exclusion from Dutch citizenry for highly educated Syrian refugees. The post-migration social capital they obtain in the Netherlands can generate feelings of inclusion and belonging. With these findings, I aim to contribute to the discourse of refugee-integration and to add useful insights for public debate, policy making, refugee initiatives or further research.

With this research, I hope I will be able to give Syrian refugees a 'voice', by enabling them to talk openly about their experiences concerning in- and exclusion in the society and perceptions of

belonging to the Dutch society through education or labour. All eighteen Syrians who participated in this research are in the ages between twenty-two and thirty-five and grew up in Syrian cities across the country. They all obtained a bachelor and/or a master degree at universities in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia. Some of them partially studied in other countries like Egypt, Lebanon or Jemen. Most of the participants' family members also have a university degree. These eighteen young-professionals participated through interviews, informal conversations or participant observation. Almost all participants have a residential permit for five years and live in a rental house or apartment in different cities in the mid-west of the Netherlands. The stories they tell are their personal experiences, opinions and perspectives. Because of these personal stories, the findings of this research are subjective and attempt to paint a broader picture of this group of refugees in the Netherlands. However, I want to emphasise that I do not want to paint a general picture of the situation, as each story, experience and perspective is a different one and worth hearing. As some information that has been told during the interviews is confidential, I use pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. This evidently does not affect this research' findings.

For several reasons, I have only interviewed highly educated refugees from Syria. First, because the refugee population in the Netherlands mostly consists of Syrian people, which means that they are the biggest group to integrate into the Dutch society in the future. However, as the Syrian refugee population is a fairly 'new' refugee group in the Netherlands, little research has been conducted concerning this specific group. It is therefore crucial to gain insights in their integration process and hear their stories in order to contribute to policy making, projects by (non-profit) organisations or refugee initiatives. The second reason to focus only on highly educated refugees from Syria is because the participants share common characteristics: they are all familiar with the Syrian/Arabic culture and educational system and have similar experiences with education and work in Syria. Because of this, a more cohesive conclusion can be found in their individual stories. These reasons made me decide to not interview highly educated refugees from other countries or with another cultural background. Additionally, it is important to realise that although politicians, media and academics often speak about '*the* Syrian refugees', there is no such thing as 'the Syrian refugee'. Therefore, this thesis aims to break this generalisation by focusing on the individual stories behind them. The refugees coming from Syria consist of a variety of people of different ages, religions and lifestyles, coming from different cities and areas. The people who participated in this research are all young adults. They are Muslim, Christian, atheist or agnostic. Some are conservative; others have a more liberal lifestyle. Some are single;

others are married or in a relation and have children. The similarity between them is that they all obtained a university-degree and/or worked in Syria before and try to continue their professional life in the Netherlands. They all have their own talents, skills, ambitions and dreams which help them in achieving their goal in the Netherlands. Therefore, I have deliberately chosen to not call them 'refugees' when writing about my participants, as I feel uncomfortable labelling them as such. Besides that, most of them explained to me they are proud to be a Syrian. Hence, I mention 'the Syrians' when I refer to the Syrians who participated in this research. I doubted about using the term 'newcomers', but this may imply that they want to stay in the Netherlands. As this is not the case for some of them, I chose to just call them by their name, or 'Syrians'. When I talk about (Syrian) refugees in general, I will use the term refugee as it is also referred to in the literature.

As this thesis focuses on the experiences and perceptions of highly educated Syrian refugees, I used qualitative research methodologies which are "oriented towards developing understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of human lives and their social worlds" (Fossey et al. 2002, 730). In the different phases of my fieldwork, I used several qualitative research methods in order to find participants and to gather information. This data triangulation consisted of informal conversation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with a topic list (appendix), discussion group conversations, participant observation and source-material research. In order to find and select relevant information concerning my research questions, I transcribed and coded all interviews. By mainly focussing on the stories of Syrians themselves, a bottom-up research approach is used, with an emic perspective (Voutira and Doná 2007; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) in which the Syrians are the main actors.

In order to meet the main actors of my research, I tried to get in contact with highly educated refugees from Syria in several ways. During a lecture on education and work of refugees in the Netherlands that I attended at *Pakhuis de Zwijger* on December 14, 2015, I came into contact with my first participant Moosa. He was a guest speaker who talked about his experiences with attending Dutch education and about his next steps to find a suitable job. Through Moosa, I came in contact with other Syrians via the 'snowball method' (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 189). Another way in which I found informants was through a co-student, who put me in contact with my second informant that she met during her volunteer work for the Red Cross. Again, I met several other highly educated Syrians by the snowball method, as this informant had a few Syrian friends who also wanted to participate. Another approach I adopted to find research participants

was via online media, for example through the Facebook-community Refugee Start Force, which is an online platform that aims to give refugees and ex-refugees a shortcut into the Dutch society.<sup>10</sup> I became a member of this Facebook-group and posted a message in their different 'expert-groups' where I introduced myself and my research. Five people responded on my message and were willing to share their story with me. Some of them also linked me to other Syrians that were willing to participate.

After I came in contact with my research participants, I had to develop trust and rapport (Huisman 2008; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011) in order to create an open interview setting in which the participants felt comfortable. According to DeWalt and DeWalt, rapport is a state of interaction wherein "the informant and the researcher come to the point when each is committed to help the other achieve his or her goal" (2011, 47). When doing so, the researcher acts in a respectful and thoughtful way that allows the informant to tell his or her story (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 47). Establishing rapport requires appropriate behaviour, being a good and careful listener; and being ready to reciprocate in appropriate ways (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 47). Being able to reciprocate was something I often found difficult during my fieldwork. There were moments where I felt I was only gathering information from my participants, without being able to give anything in return. I tried to reciprocate by being alert for interesting opportunities that may help my participants in finding an internship or a job. Sometimes I send them a link to an interesting job vacancy, other times I invited them to an event or lecture, or linked them with professionals. This worked out for one participant, who got an internship through my contacts.

While approaching my participants, I always made my role as a researcher clear and through informed consent my informants and participants were always aware of their role in my research project. Before interviewing them, I asked whether they agreed if I recorded our conversation, and I told them that if there were any questions they were not comfortable answering, they could tell me. It only happened once that a participant was not comfortable with recording the interview, so I only made notes during this interview.

For the interviews, I used a topic-list (appendix) with the main themes I liked to discuss. However, as I got more and more experience with interviewing, I applied a more unstructured method. This often resulted in a rather more equal interview-setting instead of a 'question-answer'-interview, and a more chronological 'life story' told by the interviewee. First we talked

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<sup>10</sup> Refugee Start Force Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/refugeestartforce/?fref=ts>. Last accessed: July 11, 2016.



about life before the war started in Syria, then we talked about their flight to Europe – some spoke more openly about this than others- and the start of their ‘new life’ in the Netherlands. While having these conversations, I noticed similarities in observations or topics between the different participants which helped me strengthening the argumentation of this thesis. This ‘life story method’ worked out very well as it helped me to understand the process most Syrians have gone through, and the choices they now make in the Netherlands. As ‘belonging’ to a certain place is a process in itself, the life story method can be seen as a suitable method for enabling Syrians to tell their story and to describe their feelings of belonging based on their personal experiences. In this, I see similarities with Ghorashi’s (2007) explanation of the life story method during her study on identity with Iranian women refugees. As she explains: “The life stories in particular have created the necessary space to listen to the often untold stories of refugees. This has enabled the researcher to go beyond the expressed words in order to understand different layers of expression within the narratives” (Ghorashi 2007, 117).

Aside from interviews with the Syrians, I also interviewed people working for different organisations and initiatives that support refugees in their professional life. When gathering data from these institutions, non-profit organisations and initiatives, I used open-ended, unstructured interviews with a topic list or a brief interview guide (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 139). Even though these interviews provided me with a lot of useful information, I did not implement the data of all interviews in this research. During my fieldwork, I realised that I mainly wanted to focus on the stories of the Syrians. Although the ‘expert’- information was useful as background information and understanding of the broader picture, it was not essential toward finding the answer to my research question. Therefore, I chose not to incorporate many of the expert-interview data directly in this thesis. Besides the expert interviews, participant observation at several events like speed-dating with employers and training-programs in entrepreneurship provided extra information on the structural integration process of the participants.

As I met some participants several times, informal conversations with them also contributed to data collection. Often these conversations provided me with a lot of extra information and made me understand the daily life of my participants better. During the fieldwork period, I also communicated with some participants via Whatsapp or Facebook. These messages were sometimes useful to add to my data collection, as they gave me an update about the activities they undertook. Additionally I organised two discussion group meetings with participants that I interviewed before. In these meetings, I mainly focused on the concepts of ‘home’ and

'belonging', as I wanted to gain more insight into my participant's perspectives on these concepts. The first meeting was with a Syrian couple and their Syrian friend, all of which I interviewed separately before. This meeting was rather successful as it turned out that each one had a different opinion or perspective on feeling at home in the Netherlands. This triggered an interesting discussion. Another discussion group was more complex, as there was a language barrier between me and the two participants. Although they both spoke Arabic, one was only able to answer me in English, and the other in Dutch. Reflecting on these discussion meetings, I can conclude that it would have been valuable if I was able to organise more of them as it turned out to be a useful and interesting means of data collection. Unfortunately, I was not able to organise more discussion meetings, as it was very difficult to match the participant's agendas.

In the three chapters that follow the concepts of social and human capital, as well as home and belonging will be explored in order to answer the main research question: *What influence do both pre- and post-migration experiences of education and work of highly educated Syrian refugees have on their perception of belonging to the Dutch citizenry?* The next chapter on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands introduces this refugee population, and describes their process of (structural) integration in the Netherlands. In this chapter, the concepts of integration, citizenship and home and belonging are introduced, supplemented with the applied theories on concepts. The third chapter explains the social capital theory and gains insight into the social life of the participants and the changes in this social life that occurred after migrating to the Netherlands. The importance of a social network and the way in which this social network can help them to (structurally) integrate in the Netherlands and in the Dutch labour market will be explained. Subsequently, chapter four focuses on the human capital theory by describing the participants' professional lives in Syria and their search to re-find this professional life through education and work in the Netherlands. This chapter also describes the activities the participants undertake to gain more work experience and the effect they think this will have on their socio-economic integration and feelings of belonging to the Dutch society. The final and concluding chapter answers the main research question and gives an important insight on how devaluation of human capital can cause feelings of exclusion from Dutch citizenry.

## 2. A HOME AWAY FROM HOME<sup>11</sup>

Syrian refugees and their process of integration and home-making in the Netherlands.

A dark theatre with just one big screen. Images of a group of friends in Syria. Eating together, laughing together. A group of actors playing in theatres with standing ovations afterwards. Then: bombings. Destroyed houses. Crying children, women, men. The war in Syria begins and the talented young men are on the run. [...] Nine men enter the stage. All dressed in black. They take a step forward, one by one, and start a monologue in Arabic. They all tell a refugee story. Not their refugee story, but stories they have collected in the asylum centre in the Netherlands where they live at the moment. Each scene gives an impression of the harsh reality in Syria today. Each scene tells a dramatic story of war, corruption, torture, lost love and broken families. Although no one in the public can understand their Arabic words, they do feel their emotions more than ever. These talented people are on the run. Looking for a place where they can start over again.

*Field note, April 1, 2016.*

Together with 18,000 other Syrian citizens, the nine (amateur) actors from the play 'Talent on the Run'<sup>12</sup> left their country to seek for a safer place in the Netherlands. The two initiators of the theatre group, both an honoured actor and director in Syria, met during their flight to Turkey. After ending up together in an emergency shelter in the Netherlands, they decided to integrate the stories of other refugees into a theatre play in order to positively contribute to the image of refugees. As they state: "We are people with stories and dreams. We just want to be safe. For ourselves and for our families."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Allusion to the open call-competition by COA and Chief Government Architect Floris Alkemade for new, flexible housing solutions to arrange suitable temporary housing for asylum seekers: <http://www.ahomeawayfromhome.nl/en/>. Last accessed: July 25, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Fada Theatre: [http://fadatheatre.com/?page\\_id=2](http://fadatheatre.com/?page_id=2). Last accessed: July 25, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Fada Theatre: <http://fadatheatre.com/>. Last accessed: July 25, 2016.

As Syrians are a relatively 'new' group of refugees, with many of them still in their asylum procedure, little research has been conducted about their position and integration into the Dutch society. Academic- and policy reports can help understand the Syrian refugee population by comparing them to previous refugee-groups in the Netherlands in the nineties. This chapter aims to gain insight into the Syrian refugee population living in the Netherlands and the process of integration they are going through. Therefore, the concepts of structural integration, citizenship and home and belonging are introduced here.

## **2.1 Integration into the Dutch society**

As statistics in this thesis' introduction showed, Syrians consist of the largest group of refugees in the Netherlands today (Sasnal 2015). It is expected that more migration will be generated in the future due to family reunification and family formation (Leerkes and Scholten 2015, 4).

Once an asylum seeker has obtained the refugee status, he or she has a temporary residence permit for five years and is able to start the process of integration in the new society, which amongst others means assignment for housing, learning the Dutch language, studying and/ or finding a job.<sup>14</sup> Refugees who migrate to Europe often have a different cultural background with different values, attitudes, behaviour and language than most citizens of the host society (Van Oudenhoven et al. 2006, 641). The same holds for Syrian refugees that arrive in the Dutch society. This means mutual adaption to both cultures.

Although alternative concepts such as inclusion, participation or incorporation are preferred as well (Castles et al. 2001, 115-9), in academic literature and policy publications on migration in Western societies the concept of integration is used most often (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014; Agar and Strang 2008; Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2008). However, there is no generally accepted definition, theory or model of integration (Castles et al. in Agar and Strang 2008, 167) because perceptions on integration can change over time and depend on the interests, values and perspectives of the people concerned (Castles et al. 2001, 112). As there is no such thing as a 'mainstream majority culture' to integrate in (De Haas and Fokkema 2011, 763), integration has to be assessed as relative and culturally determined, as well as a two-way process (Kuhlman in Castles et al. 2001, 125). From refugees it requires a willingness to adapt to the lifestyle of the

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<sup>14</sup> Rijksoverheid.nl: Inburgering en integratie van nieuwkomers: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/nieuw-in-nederland/inhoud/inburgering-en-integratie-van-nieuwkomers>. Last accessed: January 23, 2016.

host community, and from the host country a willingness to facilitate this adaptation and participation through access to education, jobs and services (Ager and Strang 2008; Castles et. al. 2002; Lomba 2010; Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Phillimore 2011 in Bakker et. al 2014). In this thesis, the term 'integration' will be used to define the process of mutual adaptation of both refugee and host society.

In Dutch academic literature on integration, a recurring distinction is made between different aspects of integration: cultural integration, referring to the adoption of host society values; structural or socio-economic integration, which entails successful economic participation in the host society; and social integration, which means participation in the social life of the host society (Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic and De Vroome 2015, 1837-38). A broader definition of structural or socio-economic integration by Heckmann (2005) is: "the acquisition of rights and status within the core institutions of the receiving society, such as employment, housing, education, political and citizenship rights" (in De Haas and Fokkema 2011, 763). Especially the position of refugees on the labour market is seen as a crucial indicator of integration (Snel et al., Vermeulen and Penninx in Bakker et al. 2014).

## **2.2 Integration through education and work**

Refugees generally have a higher level of education in comparison to other immigrant groups (Muus in Ager and Strang 2010, 170) or in comparison to the general population in the country of origin. As stated in a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

Contrary to public perception, refugees are generally not the poorest of the poor in their country of origin and tend to have higher skill levels than the general population in origin countries. There are however variations across countries of origin and destinations as well as across migration waves (OECD 2015, 8).

Unlike economic migrants, most refugees did not initially flee because of their poor economic situation in their home country. They fled because of political and/or safety reasons. According to the Syrians I spoke, most Syrians from rural areas with a lower level of income fled to neighbouring countries like Jordan or Lebanon. People who entered Northern Europe and the

Netherlands are mostly people holding a higher socioeconomic position in Syria (Leerkes and Scholten 2015; Sasnal 2015) and have more financial resources for this journey. The 28-year-old Amena, who lives in the Netherlands since one year, explains why many Syrians are fleeing to Lebanon: “It is the closest country to us. That is why. People who are not capable to go, some of them they do not have the finance [financial means] to go out in planes.”<sup>15</sup>

A programme manager of education at a Dutch asylum centre also sees a difference between the less wealthy and the wealthy Syrian population. He notices that the newly arrived Syrian refugees are less educated. In general, the group of refugees that arrived more than one year ago consists of mostly highly educated people. According to the programme manager, this might be the case because they have more to lose - like a job, an income, a career -, so they look for a place where they have a greater chance of regaining their previous professional life. Other reasons why they made it to Europe might be their wide social network and their financial resources to pay for the journey.<sup>16</sup>

The COA estimates that thirty per cent of Syrian refugees is highly educated. Another thirty per cent enjoyed intermediate vocational education.<sup>17</sup> However, these percentages are estimates. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) has no systematic recording of the educational level and qualifications of refugees. Furthermore, the Syrian educational system is not similar to the Dutch educational system as there are differences in the level of education as well as in the way of teaching. Although Syria is a low-income country, it has a modern educational system and the government invested a lot to improve the educational system, especially the education at universities (Bacci 2009).

According to the OECD, it is important for refugees to become language-proficient, to get their educational and professional credentials recognised and to complement their skills with additional training. Although they may be less highly educated than the general population in the host society, these are critical factors for successful (structural) integration (OECD 2015, 8). As little is known about the integration (and labour market) participation of Syrian refugees in the Dutch society, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) compares these refugees with the Iraqi refugees who came to the Netherlands in the nineties, because the socioeconomic position and human development of their population is quite similar (Leerkes and

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Amena, March 14, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with COA-employee, April 1, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> NRC.nl: Topman COA: Asielzoekers zijn verrijking voor de samenleving: <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/18/topman-coa-asielzoekers-zijn-verrijking-voor-de-samenleving>. Last accessed: January 13, 2016.

Scholten 2015, 7 and WRR 2015, 8) Research among refugee-groups from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia – with a considerable amount of highly educated people - shows that even after fifteen years of residence in the Netherlands, less than half of the refugees participate in the Dutch labour market. This is, in comparison to seventy per cent of the native Dutch labour force population (Dourleijn and Dagevos 2011, 112). As the percentage of highly educated Iraqi refugees was comparable with the highly educated Dutch population (Dourleijn and Dagevos 2011), this example shows that high education is not always a guarantee for successful labour market- and economic participation, or in other words, structural integration. Various studies mention lack of qualifications and visible discrimination as an explanation for this challenge of employment and self-sufficiency (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg 2006). However, according to Ghorashi and Van Tilburg, these barriers are paradoxical; it is rather the negative representation -for example in the media- of refugees related to the dominant discursive processes in society which resulted in their exclusion from the labour market, and thereby possibly also their exclusion from society and citizenry (Ghorahi and van Tilburg 2006, 66).

### **2.3 Citizenship**

Citizenship is an essential part of the integration of refugees, whether it is structural, social or cultural integration (Steward and Mulvey 2013; Yuval-Davis 2013). It is important to question whether citizenship is experienced as an abstract acquisition that generates feelings of belonging to the Dutch society, or a civic notion that entails equal rights and duties as any other Dutch citizen. Baubock (in Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014, 67) describes citizenship as “the equality of rights of all citizens within a political community, as well as a corresponding set of institutions guaranteeing these rights”. The importance of equal treatment is also shown in a study on refugee integration by Ager and Strang (2010, 594), wherein refugees themselves see equal rights as fundamental to being considered as equals by established citizens. Bloemraad (2006, 5) refers to *participatory* or *substantive* citizenship, also known as naturalisation and engagement in the political system of the host country. Like the diversity of the concept of integration, the concept of citizenship cannot be defined in one specific way.

The variety of the participant’s perspectives on citizenship also shows this diversity of the concept. Where some already feel they are becoming ‘Dutch’, as they speak the language and get used to the culture, values and norms of the new country, others will only consider

themselves Dutch when they obtain the Dutch nationality. Another difference in perspective on Dutch citizenship is that some think they have to 'earn' the Dutch passport. While discussing 'citizenship' with the two Syrian friends Anas and Sami, they appeared to have different opinions about what citizenship exactly entails. Anas explains: "For me, I do not think I have to take something that is not for me [...] I don't feel safe to earn it. They will give us back, I trust that".<sup>18</sup> With this, Anas means to say that he is convinced that, when he has his Dutch passport, the government will take it back after the Syrian war is over. On the contrary, his friend Sami thinks he has proved himself to the Dutch society: "Because from day one I am working. I already saw people who did nothing with their life here. And they are always complaining. From day one I helped people, I work, I am going to study."<sup>19</sup> By participating in the Dutch community, Sami strives for equal treatment just as any other Dutch citizen.

Citizenship, education and employment can influence refugees' sense of belonging to the Dutch society. As interviewed refugees in a study on citizenship policies and refugees in the United Kingdom described it: "only citizenship will mark the end of the asylum and refugee journey" (Steward and Mulvey 2014, 1028). Not having a status or having a temporary five-year status gave them a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability (Bakker et al. 2014; Steward and Mulvey 2014). For example, refugees experienced high job insecurity because few employers would hire people with a temporary residence status. A temporary status (and with this, temporary protection of refugees by the government) can limit choices, decisions and future plans of refugees (Steward and Mulvey 2014). Ryan et al. (2008) assume that citizenship is a prerequisite to successful integration of refugees into society.

According to Yuval-Davis (2013, 53) "There have always been people and communities who do not belong to the hegemonic national community who live within the boundaries of most, if not all states, and there have always been members of the national collectivity who have been living outside the 'homeland.'" Nation-states struggle with the inclusion of all its members and the universality of citizenship rights. Castles and Davidson (2000, 12) call this the 'paradox of citizenship'; even though its claim to be 'universal' and capable of transcending cultural differences, citizenship only exists in the context of a nation-state, which is based on a specific culture. In this light, it can be interesting to relate citizenship to issues of home and belonging, as

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<sup>18</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.



‘home’ – although it is as multi-layered as citizenship is – is also often related to something which is settled between the borders of the nation-state.

## **2.4 Home and belonging**

As millions of Syrians are uprooted from their natural environment where they grew up, issues of belonging and non-belonging arise. After arriving in the so-called ‘host-country’, refugees often face cultural differences and the unfortunate position of being a refugee. They try to regain their previous ‘normal’ life, and try to adapt to the host country. It is remarkable that the dominant discourse on refugees focuses primarily on “‘the national order of things’ in which ‘rootedness’ in a culture or a geographic territory is considered as a natural and normal feature of belonging” (Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 727). According to Gellner (in Malkki 1992, 26), this national order of things is often seen as equivalent to the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ order of things. Home is often related to a physical space within the borders of a nation state. When home is de-territorialised, it can also become an abstract space in which one is able to find satisfaction, or in which one can express freely (Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 727). This meaning of home becomes a sense of belonging where different places or spaces can overlap (Hall, Malkki and Appadurai in Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 727). Equivalent to the concept of citizenship, the definition of home becomes as well a multi-layered concept, wherein the distinction can be made between ‘feeling at home’ and declaring a place as home (Brah 1996, 197).

When asking Ali what home means to him, a long silence follows. Then, he mentions a Syrian proverb that expresses his feelings. He cites: “The real mother is not pregnant, but the real mother cares for her children”. For him, as long as the Syrian regime is in power and the government does not take care of the Syrian citizens, he cannot think about Syria as his home anymore, although he is born in the country. For him, the Netherlands has become his home, because this country welcomed him and takes care of him.<sup>20</sup>

*Field note, March 21, 2016*

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ali, March 21, 2016.

### 2.4.1 *Being the 'other'*

During the interviews and conversations, the Syrian refugees often mentioned that they do not like the term 'refugee', as they feel marginalised and labelled. According to O'Neill and Spybey (2003), the term 'refugee' itself marks a lack of homeland, and these people try to feel at home in a new land. Belonging to a certain place is linked to the idea to 'fit in' (Tomlinson 2010, 282), but how do people experience 'belonging' when they are forced to fit in, because they are displaced as the consequence of a war at home?

Numerous studies on migrants and refugees in the Netherlands show that despite having – civic- citizenship, “many feel excluded and do not consider themselves as belonging to the imagined construction of the Dutch Nation (Essed, Triekenes and Vasta in Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 728). According to Tomlinson (2010), belonging is activated when there is a sense of exclusion, because the experience of 'sameness' to someone is associated with the estrangement from another (Anthias; Yuval-Davis in Tomlinson 2010, 280). Belonging to someone or something also implies active agency on the part of the subject. Belonging is in contrast to the experience of being cast as 'other' (Özbilgin and Woodward in Tomlinson 2010, 280). Syrian refugees often face this experience of being the 'other' or 'the refugee'. The label or stereotype of a refugee is, according to Zetter (1991) one of the most powerful labels within the repertoire of humanitarian concern. Bauman argued that “refugees are the 'wasted lives' of globalization, stripped of all identities but one – that of being stateless, status less and functionless” (in Morrice 2011, 1). This labelling of a refugee conjures notions of loss, suffering and passive victimhoods (Morrice 2011, 1). Sami explains the reaction when people he meets hear he is a refugee from Syria:

Sometimes you meet people, just random people. You talk to them. And then they will ask you: where are you from? And then I say I am from Syria. And then I look to their faces. Some people act like this...like they feel sorry. But I do not want them to feel sorry.<sup>21</sup>

When talking about his life in Syria with Dutch people, Sami experiences marginalisation of refugees, as he was labelled as a poor and uneducated refugee: “A thing that really surprised me

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<sup>21</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

is that all Dutch people think we live in a tent or something and that we are really poor and everything. Most of us are really educated people, most of us studied at universities.”<sup>22</sup> His friend Anas encountered stereotyping too and he felt like he had to prove or explain his Syrian life and identity:

They think all Syrian people are the same. Because in our tradition or in our community in Syria, there is a difference between people who come from the city or who come from villages. My family is from Aleppo. [...] The Aleppo people are business men. And they are rich. And now most of them they open our works out of Syria. [they open companies in other countries] And we had a more relaxed and comfortable life then here. But now everything is gone.<sup>23</sup>

In another interview Khalil, who came to the Netherlands with his wife and baby, explains that the fact that he does not speak the Dutch language well contributes to this feeling of ‘being the other’:

The situation now, because still we do not speak Dutch, I feel that we are still a foreigner here. So after speaking Dutch well, I do not know if that feeling will change or not. I hope that it will change.<sup>24</sup>

Most Syrian refugees did not experience situations where they were discriminated by the fact that they were a refugee, or a foreigner. However, they sometimes feel that people become suspicious or detached when they approach them. The young student Firas joins Khalil’s argument that not speaking the Dutch language can contribute to this behaviour of people:

I am always considered as a refugee, and not like just Firas. I do not know if that can be changed. Language also plays a really important role in this. Look. If you hear a foreign accent than people think: Ok, he has a foreign accent... They are not afraid, but a little suspicious. They start to think: what kind of people are they? [...] The

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Sami, February 21, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Anas, March 9, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016.

more Dutch accent you have, the less you are discriminated. That is why I really want to talk Dutch very well, without an accent. [...] I feel as a refugee because people see and treat me as a refugee. Even if you have the Dutch nationality, they will consider you a refugee.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the fact that some people give some refugees the feeling that they do not belong to the Dutch society, others just bring about the opposite effect. Social contact with Dutch people can contribute to a feeling of social inclusion. When social spaces are created that allow people to prosper in social contacts - but also in work, education, political engagement and so on - new places can become home (Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 726). Anthias (in Ghorashi and Vieten 2012, 726) sees a close connection between belonging and social inclusion: "Through practices and experiences of social inclusion, acceptance in a society is created and maintained".

Contact with neighbours can contribute to this feeling of social inclusion. Syrian refugees who live in small cities or villages explain they have more experiences with neighbourhood encounters than refugees who live in cities. According to them, people in cities are more individualistic and highly value their privacy. Additionally, co-students or colleagues can also play an important role in refugees' feelings of social inclusion. The next chapter on social space will elaborate on situations wherein refugees feel socially included.

#### *2.4.2. Perspectives on home and belonging*

When talking with the Syrian participants about their feelings of home and belonging, different perspectives on these concepts are given. Some position their sense of home back in Syria, where they have (or had) their family and where they grew up. Ranim for example, thinks her perspective on 'home' did not change after migrating to the Netherlands. Although she has lived and worked in many countries, she still believes her soul is in Syria.<sup>26</sup> However, she does want to stay in the Netherlands, even if the war in Syria is over, because her child is growing up in the Netherlands and will have the Dutch nationality. Other Syrians describe different notions of home. Khalil, who travelled a lot and lived and worked in several countries, thinks home is linked to 'good memories': "Actually all the places I have visited are my home. Because in Syria I have

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Firas (Translated from Dutch), March 22, 2016

<sup>26</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

good memories, but also in Jordan and in Turkey and now here. It is also related to the good things that happened to you and the bad things.”<sup>27</sup> As well as Khalil, Khan, who has several years of work experience in the Gulf States, sees home in a more abstract way. For him, home is not a place on the map, not a house, a country or a city, but home is where his loved ones are.<sup>28</sup> Sami, on the contrary, links his home-feelings to a concrete place, his own apartment. For him, the Netherlands has become his home, as he said: “It is where you come from, you will never forget. But the Netherlands is becoming my home”<sup>29</sup>. These home-feelings are fuelled by the fact that for the first time in his life he has his ‘own’ house. Before, in Syria and Turkey, he lived with his family or with other students during his study. Besides that he has his own place, the fact that he meets new people and works at his internship reinforces his home-feelings, because: “Everything now is here.”<sup>30</sup> As some of his family members live in another European country, Sami feels really ‘Dutch’ when he visits them. During these visits, he also misses his home in the Netherlands, and is always happy to be back. These differences show that home is interpreted in different ways, some see home as a concrete, physical place, some see home as a more abstract, emotional feeling, or an atmosphere where people are satisfied and happy.

#### *2.4.3 Thoughts of return*

As the regime in Syria is far from stable today, it remains to be seen what the situation will be in a few years and what effect this will have on the gained residence permit of Syrian refugees. This uncertainty and the temporary nature of their permit is something many Syrians worry about. It can influence their feelings of home and belonging, as they are aware of the temporality of their stay in the Netherlands. Moosa, who has been living in the Netherlands for two-and-a-half years, does not know what will happen when his residence permit expires:

I live here now two-and-a-half years so I still have two years and a half. And according to my information, when you have these years passed, I think I have to go again and ask for extension or a new permission. I am not sure. Yeah, I am not aware of what is going to happen later. Maybe the integration ministry says you should go

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Khan, March 23, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

back to your country, maybe they say you can stay longer here. It depends. [...] I think I won't go back because of the situation in Syria. Because after five years and if I am working here and I am settled down, I have a family here. So it is quite difficult to go back. And it also depends on the situation. Because I am sure that, even after five years if the war stops, it cannot be a safe situation, it will never be. Also when I have seen what is happened [sic] in Iraq and what is still happening right now. So, let's see.<sup>31</sup>

When I explain Moosa's concerns to Sami, he nods in agreement. He is also insecure about his future in the Netherlands:

I have the same worry. Now I am preparing for work. I start working, things getting better in Syria, they suddenly say that you have to leave. But then you have to quit everything, you are working and you started a life here. And then you have to start over again. Again, from zero. And then you have wasted your time. That is the worry I have. That is why I am worried about this permit. After you are finished [sic] you get your permit one, then you are allowed to stay here without question. This you will feel secure [sic].<sup>32</sup>

When asking more people if they are thinking about going back to Syria, similar answers were given. Most people think that it is very difficult to go back and they would rather focus on their lives in the Netherlands. They also think that life in Syria would never be the same again, so the country that most of them saw as their homeland, may not feel like home anymore. Some think there is a difference between elderly and youngsters when thinking about going back. Young people are putting much effort in starting their lives in the Netherlands. They might study, they might have a job, they might have children who grow up here and have never been in Syria before. Most people who would rather stay in the Netherlands say they do not want to lose their experiences with education and work which they have obtained in the Netherlands. They do not want to start over once again.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, there is also a general feeling of responsibility

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Moosa, February 14, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Information from multiple interviews in February until May 2016.

towards the Syrian country and its citizens. Many Syrians talk about rebuilding Syria after the war, as their attachment to the Syrian country and society does not usually disappear. This may result in a 'transnational consciousness', 'divided loyalties' or even the fact that refugees become citizens of two different nations (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2015, 66). Despite the fact that these refugees obtain a residential permit, they often still feel a strong sense of belonging to their country of origin. After all, they were forcibly displaced. This can be called 'transnational citizenship' which, according to Castles, de Haas and Miller, is a model where "identities of the members of transnational communities transcend national boundaries, leading to multiple and differentiated forms of belonging" (2015, 68). Although Sami hopes he can built his future in the Netherlands, he muses about going back to Syria to rebuild the nation:

Even if I want to go back, I want to go back strong. So I want to go back that I actually built something. That I made something of myself. I already have experience. I worked, I have enough money. So I can rebuild. I will not go back weak. So now, no way. Later, perhaps. When, I do not know. Even if I want to go back it will be for visit. So I will go back for help. But here is for living. Probably it becomes my home. It is different for every person.<sup>34</sup>

Even within families, there are different opinions about going back to Syria. Ranim's husband Anas for example, would rather go back to Syria when it is possible. Every day he talks with his family on Whatsapp and Skype for hours. He refers to his attachment with Syria:

For me I always feel Syrian, I do not change. For me maybe in Syria there is a different community. For me I do not feel very different than from Syria. So I do what I used to do in Syria. And it is the same for the Netherlands [...] Maybe if my family comes to here, I can feel that [home-feeling], maybe."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

As highly educated Syrian refugees in the Netherlands cannot be seen as a group, but as individuals with all different backgrounds, experiences, thoughts and opinions, it is not surprising that different perspectives on home and belonging arise while living in the Netherlands. Overall, speaking the Dutch language is seen as something that can contribute to feelings of inclusion and belonging to the Dutch society. As some people explain, not speaking the Dutch language makes them feel like a foreigner and 'the other'. A lack of language proficiency can also contribute to their marginalisation as a refugee and exclusion from the Dutch labour market.

For some, working – volunteer work, an internship or a paid job – can help in feeling at home in the Netherlands, as some refugees see this as a way of participating and 'proving themselves'. Structural integration through education and work can thus contribute to refugees' feelings of home and belonging to the society. However, some refugees have other opinions, as they feel uncertain with their temporary status. They do not believe that after five years, they will gain 'legal' Dutch citizenship by a Dutch passport and the Dutch nationality. For them, it is hard to feel a sense of belonging to the Dutch society as feelings of return are still very strong.



### 3. SOCIAL LIFE

#### Rebuilding a social network.

*"Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social ties are cut off."*

Hannah Arendt - *We Refugees* (1943)<sup>36</sup>

When leaving their house and their city behind in Syria, refugees also leave their community, their family members and their friends. Unlike philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt - who fled Germany because of the second world war - Syrian refugees today can more easily communicate with their family and friends through social media like Facetime, Facebook, Whatsapp or Skype. Although they have access to these media, they do not have much social connections in their direct surroundings. Most Syrian refugees came to the Netherlands on their own, leaving their often wide social network of family-members, friends, co-students colleagues and neighbours behind. After migrating to the Netherlands, this network decreased significantly. Based on Bourdieus social capital theory (in Szeman and Kaposy 2011), this chapter describes how social contacts influence refugees' integration through education and work, and in which way this affects refugees' feelings of belonging to the new country they have arrived in.

When building a new social network in the Netherlands, Syrian refugees often face the difficulty of cultural differences. Social life in Syria is not the same as social life in the Netherlands, and people have different standards and norms towards approaching one another. In Syria, the family served as a base of their social network. In the Netherlands, some Syrians are in the process of family reunification so that they can live with their family again.

Social life in Syria largely took place outside on the streets. Almost every night after study or work, people would go out to walk, go for a drink or have dinner together. This aspect of Syrian life is much emphasised in interviews, and a lot of Syrians miss this lifestyle. When Adnan tells about his social life in Syria, he says: "In Syria, few people stay at home at night. People meet each other to see a movie or talk. *Kletsen* [chat], is how you call it? In Syria, everyone knows each other. If you walk on the streets all people say 'hi', 'hello!'."

In the Netherlands, Syrians experience a different lifestyle, where people are more on their

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<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt. 1943. *We Refugees*. *Memorah Journal* 110-119.

own and rather stay at home at night. They often miss the Syrian way of life and are not sure how to approach Dutch people. Though, it differs per person if someone is able to easily make new contacts, as some participants are more self-assertive than others.

### **3.1 Social capital theory**

When living in a new society, many refugees hold a(n) (economic) disadvantaged position relative to the majority population in this host society. According to Lamba (2003) and others<sup>37</sup>, this disadvantaged position can be linked to the Bourdieusian concept of social capital (Bourdieu in Szeman and Kaposy 2011). The degree of capital can have its effect on chances and opportunities regarding education or employment, as social contacts can facilitate in providing information and creating a professional network (Vroome and van Tubergen 2010).

Bourdieu's social capital-theory explains the potential to build up a durable social network of more or less institutionalised, lasting useful relationships with mutual acquaintance and recognition. The social capital of one person refers to the membership of this person to a group. The volume of the social capital depends on the size of the network or connections he or she can mobilise (Szeman and Kaposy 2011, 88). Thus, social capital is not about *all* the social contacts one has, but the social networks that have the potential of providing refugees either material or nonmaterial resources, allowing them to feel integrated into a certain community and feel valued by members of this community (Nawyn et al. 2012, 257). The previous chapter introduced the theory that social contact with Dutch people can contribute to feelings of social inclusion. Additionally, new social spaces and experiences of social inclusion and acceptance can create home-feelings (Ghorashi and Vieten 2012).

When it comes to structural integration, the Syrians use their social capital to find resources that can provide them with useful information about education, internships and jobs. According to Lamba (2003), important social networks for refugees can be family networks, ethnic-group members, service providers, social workers and so on. These networks may be the first sources for refugees to help them find education or employment (Lamba 2003, 46).

Pre-migration social capital often enabled the Syrians to easily find employment. According to Moosa, most job opportunities are facilitated by people you 'know', or 'via-via'.

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<sup>37</sup> Vroome and van Tubergen (2010), Erel (2010) and Nawyn et al. (2012)

As he explains: “If you know people you can work in any place, but if you do not know anyone you will be ignored. While here, although you have connections, you have to be qualified to get the job.”<sup>38</sup> For example, if someone wants to work for the government in Syria, this person needs to have connections at the government, otherwise he or she will not make any chance to get the job. Participants see this phenomenon as a sort of corruption or nepotism. In Syria this is called ‘Oasda’, or, as Moosa tells ‘vitamin-O’. This term is used often by various participants during the interviews.

After leaving Syria, the difficulty of a decreased or scattered social network is often experienced by the participants. In a new society, their accumulated social capital might not be recognised as legitimate and may no longer have exchange value (Morrice 2007, 7). Subsequently, Cheong et al. (2007, 25) argue that the concept of social capital is dynamic, value-based and socially constructed. Levels of good or bad social capital change over time and are dependent on the prevailing ideological climate (Cheong et. al 2007, 25). While living in a new society, Syrian refugees may experience ineffectuality of their previously obtained social capital, and the different ways in which they can create new value to their new social network.

### **3.2 Bonding social capital**

Social capital gained through family and ethnic groups is called ‘bonding social capital’ by sociologist Putnam (in Cheong et al. 2007; Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010). This exclusive form of social capital is built around homogeneity and focuses on immigrants contacts within the ethnic group or community (Cheong et al. 2007; Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010). In these networks, family contacts and ethnic associations are of major importance. However, mere bonding social capital may cause social isolation of ethnic minority groups, which can hinder social- as well as structural integration.

In contrast to the statement by Lamba (2003) that family networks are important in the search for education and employment, most participants do not think their family network can help them with finding the right information and resources. Their families are mostly split up after migration, and their family members living in the Netherlands usually do not have more access to information or resources than they do themselves. Some Syrians explained that for parents or

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Moosa, February 14, 2016.

other older family members it is even harder to build a network and gain resources, because it costs them more effort to learn the Dutch language and understand the system.

Refugees may predominantly rely on their co-ethnic contacts, though Kanas and Van Tubergen (2009) think these contacts cannot help refugees in education or employment. They are often less familiar with the host country's educational system and labour market than the native population (Kanas and Van Tubergen 2009, 895). However, during fieldwork it turned out that co-ethnic members are able to play an effective role in providing other refugees with relevant information. For Example Khalil, who is orientating on a master degree. He has a lot of contact with Moosa, whom he knows via family members. They call each other to talk about Moosa's experiences with the Dutch educational system, since Moosa has graduated from a Dutch university. During their phone calls, Moosa gives Khalil advice about the options he has. Khalil:

Since I want to do a master, my master is in English. And the UAF<sup>39</sup> they have a strict rule that says before you go to your master you have to finish B1 [level of Dutch]. So, also my friend Moosa told me: try to do the opposite. Go do the master and after that do the Dutch. Cause you will forget a lot of Dutch, because it is new. And that is like wasting your time.<sup>40</sup>

Besides advising Khalil, Moosa is thinking about structurally helping other Syrian refugees who just entered the Netherlands. This can also be seen as a way of bonding social capital:

I want this contact to help Syrians to get into the system, the culture and to get integrated, regarding my experience for 2,5 years. Which is short, but... I am looking for a way to do that. I want to work with educated people. Also my knowledge will help, because I know about the procedures, how to apply for university, what to expect.<sup>41</sup>

More examples of the use of bonding social capital came up during the interviews. A great deal of contact with other Syrians is made during the refugees' stay in the asylum centres. After

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<sup>39</sup> UAF (Universitair Asiel Fonds): Foundation for Refugee Students in the Netherlands

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Moosa, February 14, 2016.

replacement in houses in different municipalities, they still help each other out if someone has questions about for example the Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk), a student loan, or if they need help with translations. They make use of each other's experiences with the procedures and in this way they will function as a useful resource. Some communicate only via telephone, Whatsapp or Facebook; others meet in real life to exchange information. However, it can be questioned if this form of social capital will be a sustainable contribution to refugees' integration into the Dutch society and the Dutch labour market or if it is merely a way of 'surviving' the struggles concerning asylum procedures and dealing with the lack of information they obtain. Putnam argues that bonding social capital among minority groups is less desirable, as it might bond ethnic groups too much within their communities at the expense of integration into the host society (Cheong et. al 2007, 29).

### **3.3 Bridging social capital**

Where bonding social capital is exclusive, bridging social capital can be seen as the inclusion of migrants or refugees, as it refers to horizontal ties based on common interests that transcend heterogeneous differences like religion, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Putnam in Cheong et al. 2007, 29). The Syrians come in contact with Dutch citizens in different ways. The next paragraphs will describe these different ways of bridging social capital and evaluate how these social relations helps them in feeling a sense of belonging to the Dutch citizenry. The described situations often occurred during study or work, but also in other places such as the neighbourhood.

#### *3.3.1 Bridging social capital through education*

Refugees who enrol in school or continue their studies in the host country can benefit from such educational experience as they are more likely to develop contacts with the native population in schools and universities (Kanas and Van Tubergen 2009). Consequently, these contacts can help them increase their economic opportunities (Kanas and van Tubergen 2009, 896). Most Syrians who enrolled in a study met Dutch students. However, some contacts are more superficial than others. Although Hanan, who is pursuing a master degree, regularly meets co-students before and after class, she did not make real friends at the university. On the contrary, her husband Moosa explains that he made some Dutch friends while working with a group of students on a

project: “We continued working with this group the whole master. Two of them are Dutch, two of them are ‘integrated Dutch’ [people with an immigrant background] and the fifth am I. We are friends now, we go together to parties, we go out once in a while.”<sup>42</sup> Also Sami met a Dutch friend when he was following Dutch courses at the university. Now his friend joins him when he visits information events of different universities to help him with orientating on a master study.

Although these Dutch contacts will help refugees in building a social network and feeling ‘inclusive’ in the Dutch society, Moosa experiences differences between Syrian friendships and Dutch friendships:

In Syria we used to work or be with our friends every day. If you do not go with your friends or not work then you go with your neighbours, or the people who are living around you. So there is always someone to talk to and to be with. Here it is more independent. It is the weekend. Ok, in the weekend we can do something. If you meet with a Dutch person, he will say: *Even wachten, ik kijk naar mijn agenda* [wait, I first have to check my agenda]. If there is a moment to make an appointment to go. Yeah, it was more easier in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

When talking with Khalil about friendships, he agrees with Moosa, as he also notices a difference in approaching people and building a friendship. He sees a difference in ‘the nature of the people’, as he thinks many Dutch people are very busy and strict. In Syria, he felt like people had more free time, or found it more important to spend time together.

### 3.3.2 Bridging social capital through work

Some participants have found an internship or work in the Netherlands. Anas found an IT (Information Technology)-internship through my own contacts, and Sami found a job at the municipality through his contact person at the Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland). The colleagues at their internship can be seen as a form of bridging social capital, as these relationships are obtained through common profession and interests. During the discussion

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Hanan and Moosa, May 22, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Moosa, February 14, 2016.

group-meeting with Sami, Anas and Ranim, we talked about their colleagues and their work, and how they help them in feeling appreciated:

Anas: “Yes, the internship is good also. For me, during my internship I feel comfortable. Cause also I feel myself like I am ‘heavy’ [important] in this place. Like I feel like my colleagues they...”

Sami: “They appreciate you more”

Anas: “Yes, and they make you feel at home, because they respect you”

Sami: “They [colleagues] are enjoying their time with me. And they appreciate the work. And if you do something for them, they really appreciate it and respect it. So when I help people they appreciate it. That is the difference. So in Syria if you do something, you will not be appreciated”<sup>44</sup>

Moosa experiences the contact with his colleagues as something that makes him feel at ease and appreciated as well. As his employer offers him free language courses, he is able to easily communicate in Dutch with his colleagues. This helps him in feeling as one of them, instead of feeling like ‘the other’. These examples show the importance of contacts with colleagues and a good work atmosphere for refugees in order to feel comfortable and appreciated. This way, work relations can contribute to feelings of belonging.

### *3.3.3. Bridging social capital in the neighbourhood*

Besides contacts at universities and at work, neighbourhood encounters can also create bridging social capital (Ager and Strang 2008). These contacts can contribute to home-feelings. Sami experienced this form of bridging social capital. Contrasting to his city-life in Damascus, he nowadays lives in a small, quiet Dutch village where “the last bus arrives at five o’clock p.m.” and where there are not many activities to do. However, he is happy to live there: “I am happy to live in a village, because they welcomed me. My neighbours invited me in their house.”<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, his friend Anas lives in a busy, multicultural city. He would prefer to live in a quiet village like Sami: “I like to live with Dutch people, like my friends who live in a village. Every weekend we

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<sup>44</sup>Discussion group-meeting, May 16, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Sami, February 21, 2016.

go to them, because I feel comfortable there. Because their neighbours pass by and we will have a barbecue.”<sup>46</sup> According to Khalil, in Arabic society it is common that people have more contact and help each other out: “Actually for us as Arabic people, I know people they have the same feeling also more than what I have, that you have to be active in the society by helping other people. So maybe I can do some work for the neighbours or whatever.”<sup>47</sup>

These examples of social inclusion, or refugees’ desire to have more social contact with Dutch people, illustrate that social contacts can contribute to feelings of acceptance, belonging and home. Social relations, as Ghorashi and Vieten (2012) argue, are not merely confined to the countries’ borders: “A new place can become home as long as social spaces are available that allow individuals to thrive with respect to personal development, e.g. work, political engagement, friendship and intimate relationships” (2012, 726). However, it is important to keep in mind that it depends on the type of neighbourhood where one is living in. Some participants do not have a lot of contact with their neighbours, as they do not feel ‘invited’ to talk to them. Others – who for example live in a smaller village – do have pleasant encounters with neighbours as they feel that their neighbours are ‘curious’ about their culture and are glad to meet them.

### 3.3.4. *Online community*

For many refugees, social media are means to keep in touch with friends and family who nowadays live in different countries or who are still in Syria. Through Facebook, Facetime, Whatsapp and Skype they communicate almost every day with their family-members. Social media also served as a communication tool during their trip to Europe. For example, many refugees got in contact with a smuggler via social media, or were informed by other refugees which routes to take in Europe, etcetera. While in the Netherlands, social media still helps them in gathering information or making contacts. Contrary to Bauman’s claim that having access to cyberspace can result in less autonomy in local communities and transmissions of information and relations on the Internet may contribute to a devaluation of place (in Barenholdt and Granas 2008,111), the use of social media can help Syrian refugees in building up (bridging) social capital.

An example of the use of social media by Syrian refugees is the Facebook community ‘Refugee Start Force’.<sup>48</sup> This online platform aims to give refugees and status holders a shortcut into the

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<sup>46</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Refugee Start Force: <http://www.refugeestartforce.nl/>. Last accessed: July 11, 2016.



Dutch society. By creating an online community<sup>49</sup> on a platform that many refugees are already familiar with, Refugee Start Force tries to match refugees with professionals, organisations and companies based on profession, skills and expertise. This can be online through Facebook-chat, or offline through special (matchmaking) events or an informal cup of coffee. With this, Refugee Start Force aims to equip refugees with the contacts and knowledge needed to realize their professional ambitions. In the different 'expert-groups', based on professions or sectors (Hospitality, Medical, Business, Finance, etc.) people can connect with each other. Additionally, offline events organised in collaboration with partners of Refugee Start Force will give refugees the opportunity to meet experts and professionals.

This platform is an example of the way in which bridging social capital is built between refugee and professional or expert. Almost every participant of this research is a member of Refugee Start Force and uses the platform to be informed about special events (for example information events at universities, trainings, labour orientation events or matchmaking events) or to get in contact with professionals. Furthermore, refugee-members of the platform can inform each other about specific topics, based on their own experiences. Besides functioning as bridging social capital, Refugee Start Force can also be seen as a form of bonding social capital.

### **3.4 Linking social capital**

In addition to Putnam's bridging and bonding theory of social capital, a third form of 'linking' social capital is proposed which refers to 'state-society relations' (Woolcock 1998), power and authority (Elliott and Yusuf 2014) or vertical relations (Cheong et al. 2007). This form of social capital helps individuals gain access to resources from formal institutions for improvement of social and economic positions. With regard to refugees, this linking social capital "implies the need for government intervention to implement policies to grant new immigrants citizenship and help them to gain access to formal resources (Woolcock in Cheong et al.2007, 29-30). For refugees, both bridging and linking social capital are of great importance in order to gain access to education and the labour market in the host society.

The initiative Refugee Start Force can also be seen as a way of linking social capital as many institutes and companies are active in the community. Moreover, Refugee Start Force serves as a recruiter for certain initiatives who would like to work with refugees.

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<sup>49</sup> Refugee Start Force Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/refugeestartforce/?fref=ts>. Last accessed: July 11, 2016.

Another organisation that – amongst others - serves as linking social capital is the Dutch Foundation for Refugee Students UAF (Universitair Asiel Fonds)<sup>50</sup>. This institute helps refugee students in their search for an educational programme and during their studies. They advise refugees about their choice of study and provide them with correct information about the procedures of application. While studying, UAF counsels students in order to orientate for a job after graduation. Most participants applied for student support at UAF. Besides the UAF, different municipalities and educational institutes offer special programs for refugees who want to start their study in the Netherlands. The municipality of Amsterdam for example is developing different programmes with educational institutes like the University of Applied Science of Amsterdam (Hogeschool of Amsterdam ) and the Free University ( Vrije Universiteit)<sup>51</sup>. These programmes offer language courses, study-trainings, cultural activities, and preparatory-years to prepare for the universities matriculations.

These initiatives by municipalities, institutes or individuals, promote the linking social capital of refugees. Besides that, individuals who work for these institutes and organisations also play an important role. In interviews, many participants showed their appreciation for their contact person at the Dutch Council for Refugees, their lawyer, their language coach and so on.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

While starting their new life in the Netherlands, Syrian refugees often face the difficulty of a decreasing or scattered social network. The accumulated social capital in Syria has no (or less) value anymore, as their social network dispersed. Newly obtained valuable social capital can develop refugees' feelings of acceptance and belonging to the Dutch society. Social capital through education and work can contribute to these feelings. Neighbourhood encounters and refugee-initiatives like Refugee Start Force are of great importance too.

The three different forms of social capital will each help Syrian refugees to feel included and part of the society. In most situations, the new social capital is obtained through education, work, or in the asylum centres. Bonding social capital will help them in setting their first 'steps' in the Dutch system and starting their integration process through the

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<sup>50</sup> UAF: [www.uaf.nl](http://www.uaf.nl). Last accessed: June 29, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Information gathered during conference at Pakhuis de Zwijger about education and work. Attended December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

community of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Bridging social capital helps them in rebuilding their social network as they participate in the social life in the Netherlands. At school, they make friends; at work, they feel appreciated and valued, and in the neighbourhood they (sometimes) have pleasant and meaningful encounters. The third form, linking social capital, helps them in a more sustainable way by supporting them in the structural integration process of study and work. As most of the Syrians believe that an education in the Netherlands will increase their job opportunities, the linking social capital might be of great importance for them.

These examples of the different forms of social capital, and the way in which Syrian refugees try to gain more social capital show that, according to Putnam “voluntary associations between people will lead them to transcend difference and ‘come together’ as a cohesive citizenry” (Cheong et al. 2007). Where Ryan et al. (2008) assume that citizenship is a prerequisite to successful integration of refugees into society, examples of this research show that it can also work the other way around. Studying or working with Dutch people can also contribute to refugees’ feelings of belonging and a more abstract form of citizenship, namely “the full membership of the individual in the collective, which is the ‘community’” (Marshall in Yuval-Davis 2013, 59).



## 4. LOST CAPITAL

The devaluation of education and work experiences.

In the upper room of the Humanity House in The Hague, twenty employers in business suits and forty young status holders gather as part of the Big Improvement Day.<sup>52</sup> The employers stand in front of the crowd, with their business cards in their hands. The status holders sit down with their curriculum printed and their notebooks and pens in front of them. In a short thirty-second pitch, the employers and companies introduce themselves and their work. Amena, a twenty-eight year old Syrian refugee, is listening concentrated to their stories. She writes down essential information, and makes a top-list of people she would like to speak to. Then, the first 'speed dating and matchmaking' round is announced. In a short time of eight minutes, the young refugees are able to meet and network with employers and companies, in order to increase their network and explore their opportunities concerning an internship or a job. Immediately, Amena hurries to the first person she would like to talk to, and introduces herself. Others do the same and soon every employer has three or four people standing next to him or her, who are eager to meet them and tell their story. Amena talks about her experiences as a client relation manager and advertising professional in Syria and in other countries. She is proud to announce that she has over a 1,000 contacts on LinkedIn. Then, the second round begins and Amena searches for other interesting people to talk to. This repeats for five or six times, until she thinks she spoke to all persons present who could help her in gaining work experience in the Netherlands. Some people she talks to have some concrete offers like an internship in marketing and communication. After the speeddates, Amena goes home with renewed positive energy and a lot of business cards in her bag.

*Field note, March 15, 2016*

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<sup>52</sup> Big Improvement Day: <http://www.bigimprovementday.org/>. Last accessed: June 22, 2016.

The vignette above describes how a Syrian refugee aims to build a professional social network of people who can help her in her economic integration in the Netherlands through an internship, work experience position or a paid job. While social contacts can be beneficial for labour market integration, specific skills and talents are crucial in order to increase opportunities on the labour market. Syrian refugees in the Netherlands can use and apply their skills; competences and experiences to (re)build their professional life in the Netherlands. Consequently, as mentioned by Anas, Sami and Moosa, colleagues make them feel appreciated which subsequently results in feelings of home and belonging.

#### **4.1 Human capital theory**

In order to explain how different individual resources may influence labour market success in the new country, the human capital theory by Bordieu (in Szeman and Kaposy 2011) is used. In this case, human capital entails the skills, competences and knowledge acquired by an individual (Nawyn et al. 2012, 257). These resources can be acquired through education and work, but also through other life experiences like their flight and settlement in a new country. Therefore, a distinction is made between pre-migration and post-migration human capital. The Bourdieusian approach towards human capital describes how migrants or refugees engage in ‘bargaining activities’ with professional bodies, such as universities, companies, professionals, employers and managers, about the value of their human capital ‘treasures’ (Kelly and Lusi 2006, 836). According to Kelly and Lusi (2006), these treasures are often undervalued. Anas explains that, when he meets Dutch people in a professional setting for the first time, he feels like he has to ‘prove’ himself professionally, and that he has to mention his ‘treasures’:

With the first meeting with any other Dutch people, I introduce myself like; I am Anas, I am a computer engineer, I have a *stage* [internship], I study Dutch. Just to prove myself. I said the positive things to make him respect me. Because if I said Hi I am Anas, I am from Syria, maybe he will not feel positive.<sup>53</sup>

This way of introducing was also seen when Amena introduced herself in the speed-date event, as she was strongly aware of her disadvantaged position as a refugee on the labour market, and the

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<sup>53</sup> Discussion group, May 25, 2016.

devaluation of her human capital.

Pre- and post-migration human capital cannot be seen as a homogeneous factor. Numerous refugees possess a combination of foreign and domestic human capital (Friedberg 2000, 222). This is also the case with Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, as some finished their study and gained work experience in Syria and other countries, while others have no work experience and have to continue their education in the Netherlands.

It is to assume that the amount of human capital obtained in Syria has its impact on the refugee's education and economic outcomes in the Netherlands. Both pre-migration and post-migration education and work experience can foster structural integration. However, differences in quality and ratings of education and work and the non-recognition of certain diplomas by the Dutch educational system can have its impact on the durability and the time needed for successful structural integration (Vroome and Van Tubergen 2012, 378-379). This shows that pre-migration human capital is not always transferable across borders. Refugees can experience this as a setback when (re)building their professional life in their new country.

According to Mincer (1982, 18), the greater the economic and cultural differences between the origin and host country, the greater the 'depreciation' of human capital. In some situations, diploma's, certificates or work experiences no longer have value and people have to start from scratch. Ali experienced this devaluation of his human capital.<sup>54</sup> In Aleppo, he was a law graduate, had several years of work experience and had started his own business. Since the Dutch law system is completely different than the Syrian law system, Ali's law-diploma is valued as equivalent to the second year of the bachelor law-study in the Netherlands. Consequently, he has to start his law study all over again, as he cannot enrol in the second year. Through his language coach, Ali is in contact with a law firm where he can start an internship to gain some work experience. Other refugees have similar experiences with their diploma validation. The next paragraph on education will elaborate on this.

Refugees may experience a greater loss of human capital in comparison to economic migrants (Mincer 1982, 18) as the disruption of their occupation is compulsory. With the duration of absence from work, they will lose general capital, and due to separation from a specific

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Ali, March 21, 2016.

occupational position, they will lose specific capital (Mincer 1982, 17). This may leave them in a disadvantaged position in comparison to their previous lives and in comparison to the majority population of the host country. On the contrary, economically motivated migrants are more adaptable as they are not reliant on specific occupational skills in order to find a suitable job (Mincer 1982, 18). Although some companies, organisations or employers see the potential of highly educated refugees in the Netherlands, they may be too optimistic when stating these refugees are able to fulfil open vacancies.<sup>55</sup> In practice, Syrian refugees often do not benefit from their previously obtained diplomas. Some Syrians try to adapt to the Dutch labour market by widening their search. They choose a study or a job in a sector with a high job-guarantee in the future, rather than pursue their previous study or work.

## **4.2 Living on social welfare and thoughts of return**

As many refugees generally experience the devaluation of their human capital in the Netherlands, a low share of them gains income from work, and a high share depend on social services (Vluchtelingenwerk 2014). Leerkes and Scholten (2015) and Vluchtelingenwerk (2014) state that refugees have a low level of participation on the labour market in the first years of their residence in the host country. Labour market participation is the highest among naturalised refugees. It is expected that the high unemployment rate among highly educated refugees will remain and many refugees will work under their level of education (Leerkes and Scholten 2015, 12). Recent statistics show that in 2014, over sixty per cent of the Syrian refugees living in the Netherlands received social welfare (WRR 2015, 9). Although this seems to be a high amount, these statistics automatically show that forty per cent of the Syrian refugees did *not* rely on social welfare in 2014. As it has been just a couple of years since Syrian refugees sought asylum in the Netherlands, this forty per cent is optimistic, even when it is compared to asylum seekers in the Netherlands in general. According to the WRR report, after a residence of two years in the Netherlands, a quarter of all the asylum migrants have a paid job of more than eight hours a week (WRR 2015, 11).

The issue that a large number of (Syrian) refugees still receive social welfare after several years can be explained by the fact that most Syrians still focus on Dutch courses, a study or an

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<sup>55</sup> NOS: werkgevers willen vluchtelingen aan werk helpen. <http://nos.nl/artikel/2056955-werkgevers-willen-vluchtelingen-aan-werk-helpen.html>. Last accessed: June 24, 2016.



internship, which takes time. This means that they are not yet able to be financially independent through a paid job. From the conducted interviews the conclusion can be drawn that most Syrians think it is very important to find a job soon. They experience it as uncomfortable to live on social welfare. They express that they are really thankful for the government to support them financially, but they want to earn their own money as soon as possible. They also think the social welfare system in the Netherlands is a good thing, as it gives them time and freedom to plan and prepare their future career in the Netherlands. As Khalil explains:

Yes we have *uitkering* [social welfare], and this is really a good thing that we have. Because we can manage our life better and we can plan to do better later. [...] For me, I want to be programmer, and also want to benefit from the eleven or twelve years of experience that I have. But if I am forced to work now, I would probably work as a chef [cook] or something.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, some feel uncomfortable receiving social welfare. While the couple Ali and Zeinah are very thankful for the Dutch government for supporting them financially, for them it feels “like a neck yoke.”<sup>57</sup> In Syria there is no such thing as social welfare, and they do not trust the government with their money. As a result, they rather “work for a hundred euros then receive two-hundred euros from the government.”<sup>58</sup> When talking with Amena about social welfare, it turns out that she has other reasons why she does not want to stay on social welfare too long: “I just want to be independent as I have always been. Because I am Syrian, I am called a refugee; I do not want to be stereotyped.”<sup>59</sup> This quote expresses her wish to lose her status as ‘the other’ and ‘the refugee’, and be equal as any other Dutch citizen. Similar to Amena, Anas also wants to be independent as soon as possible. However, contrary to his wife Ranim, he prefers to return to Syria if it is possible. While discussing their different perspectives, he says:

No, I don't feel it like my home, homeland. Always I dream to go back. I dream to go back to Syria, to Aleppo. And my wife knows that. I don't feel like safety here. Not safety for like some problems, but safety from inside me. I don't feel like it is a safety

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Ali and Zeinah, March 21, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Ali and Zeinah, March 21, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Amena, March 14, 2016.

place to my children to grow up [sic]. Cause for me I don't like the type of money I take. Because I think that money is not for me, and I take it.<sup>60</sup>

The feelings that Anas describes here, can be linked to the depreciation of his human capital. As he has no work and income, he is dependent on the Dutch government, a situation where he feels uncomfortable in. He relates this to his feelings of home and belonging, as he explains that home for him is a place where he can support himself and his family, and where he can prosper in work.

Although all participants speak negatively about the Syrian government and see the Syrian government as a corrupt system, they believe the only positive thing of this system is that it enforces them to start working. In their opinion, Syrian people are hard workers with a good work-energy. They do not want them to be seen as 'lazy' people who do not work and receive financial support from the government. In Syria, they did not have a system of social welfare. The family and community were there to support them. After the government has helped them financially, participants think their way to help the government and to be active in the society is by paying income taxes. By paying taxes, they feel like a 'full citizen' again. In order to do this, it is very important for them to find a job. Castles, De Haas and Miller (2014) see citizenship as a rather contested concept and ask to what extent citizenship needs to be seen as the relationship between an individual and the state (2014, 20). Participants who mention 'paying taxes' as their way of contributing to the society and helping the government, may see citizenship as their relationship with the state. Having a job facilitates this relationship.

### **4.3 Back to School**

In the Netherlands, refugees with a legal residence permit are allowed to study at a Dutch educational institute and are able to apply for a student loan. To receive this loan, refugees have to meet the same requirements as other Dutch students. Additionally, the Dutch Foundation for Refugee Students UAF can support refugee students in travel costs and costs for study books and so on. Besides this, refugee students receive a regular social welfare benefit in order to support themselves. All participants of this research have a residence permit, are following Dutch courses,

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<sup>60</sup> Discussion group, May 16, 2016.

or have just finished their state exam. Some of them graduated at a Dutch university, some of them are still studying, others applied for student support at UAF or are still orientating on a study. A few hope to find a job on the basis of their pre-migration education and work experiences, but the general thought is that a Dutch bachelor or master study is of greater value to get access to the Dutch labour market.

Refugee students who apply at UAF will be linked to a student counsellor who becomes his or her contact person during the study. Before starting a study, the student is advised to follow a preparatory program, which takes a maximum of two years in which the student has to follow language courses and pass the state exam NT2 (Dutch language level two). The student counsellor will support the student in finding the right language institute, helping to choose a study, negotiate with municipalities and the COA, and finance the study.<sup>61</sup> According to a student supporter at UAF, refugees have quite some opportunities to enrol in a study in the Netherlands. Even people who do not have a residence permit yet - and are thus still in their asylum procedure – can subscribe at a university or a university of applied science with a special W-document (identity document for asylum seekers).<sup>62</sup> However, each institute can have its own admission requirements. Next to diploma-requirements of previous schools, academic institutes can ask for an English test. For refugees, it is often difficult to learn both the Dutch language and improve their English language skills at the same time, as they explain either their Dutch or English proficiency is decreasing when they have to focus on two languages. The previously mentioned programs at the University of Applied Science (Hogeschool van Amsterdam) and the Free University Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) also support refugees in their study and integration in the Netherlands.

Some Syrian refugees experience difficulties when orientating on a study or while studying in the Netherlands. When they choose to start a new study in the Netherlands because of diploma devaluation, they choose a study or sector in which they have the best chance to succeed and with high job opportunities. This means some need a retraining. Khalil studied Information and Communication Technology in Syria, and has a few years of work experience in Syria as well as in neighbouring countries. In the Netherlands, he wants to start a master but still doubts about his choice of study. Moosa, an acquaintance of his family, gives him advice on the base of his own

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<sup>61</sup> Information from interview with student counselor at UAF, April 4, 2016

<sup>62</sup> Kdw.ind.nl: [https://kdw.ind.nl/KnowledgeRoot.aspx?restart=true&knowledge\\_id=MWOW\\_EnW2\\_Document&jse=1](https://kdw.ind.nl/KnowledgeRoot.aspx?restart=true&knowledge_id=MWOW_EnW2_Document&jse=1)

experience. As Khalil explains:

I have three options. The one that Moosa did: business information, then software engineering and network engineering. I have experience with networking. But I have the feeling that there is a future for the software. This is why I am preparing myself now with the Hack your Future<sup>63</sup> course. [...] Because software it becomes like every six months they have new stuff, and you have to learn it. So I have to recover and learn more to be ready for a job or also for the master.<sup>64</sup>

Also a lack of information can be a problem when deciding which study to choose. Although Khalil visits information events at universities, talks to professors and students and searches for information on the Internet, he still is not quite sure if he makes the right choice.

Actually it is also hard for me to decide which... Because I do not know the market here. And what is the requirement. What is required more than others. Because they are all OK in IT [Information Management], but there is a big difference between each of them. Also I ask a lot of people, also on the open day [information event] in the university. So the professor told me: you have to choose by your own. You have to decide what you like more. But I am not asking you about what I like, but I am asking you about the Dutch market.<sup>65</sup>

In general, education is held to be a key variable for the economic success of the individual (Hartog and Aslan 2009, 220). Most Syrians think a study in the Netherlands will increase their opportunities on the Dutch labour market. However, there seems to be an 'educational gap' as study results of immigrants and refugees are usually lower than those of the native population (Hartog and Aslan 2009:220). During the interviews, several reasons for this gap were given. First, Syrians explained that the way of teaching in Syria is much different than the way of teaching in the Netherlands. Academic studies in Syria are very theoretical, and less attention is paid to discussion and interaction with co-students

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<sup>63</sup> Hack Your Future, a six-month web development program for refugees: <http://www.hackyourfuture.net/#/>. Last accessed: June 19, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Khalil, April 20, 2016

and professors. According to Amena, who just registered for a master, the Syrian way of teaching is “a very old style of teaching [...] I thought it was boring, the theoretical style of studying there, without discussions, without assignments...”.<sup>66</sup> Adnan confirms this and states that they call it ‘kijk-studie’ (watch study) in Syria, with a lack of practical skills.<sup>67</sup> When comparing Syrian students with Dutch students, Hanan, who is doing a master in politics, says: “I think here students practice more analytical and critical thinking than the students in Syria. They have the questioning more. In Syria it is ‘this way’. You only want to pass the class”.<sup>68</sup>

Another difference, according to the participants, is the integrity and the qualifications of the professors working at the universities. During his law study in Syria, Ali experienced corrupt professors who ask students to pay them in order to pass their exams.<sup>69</sup> According to a report by Bacci (2009, 5) Syria does not have an independent body to examine universities and to assess the quality of their teaching. This report confirms this form of corruption as told by the Syrians, and blames this corruption to the low salaries of the universities’ professors (Bacci 2009, 6).

A third difference refugee students face in the Netherlands is the level of education, as there is no such thing as ‘applied science’ (Hoger Beroeps Onderwijs) in Syria. As a consequence of this, most refugee students only want to apply for university studies in the Netherlands, even if their Syrian university degree is equivalent to a study of applied science in the Netherlands. The student supporter at UAF notices that many Syrians have the expectation that they can apply for a university bachelor or master: “Many universities in Syria are comparable with HBO [applied science] studies in the Netherlands. But because they do not know this, they only want to go to universities.”<sup>70</sup> Sami, who studied library information at Damascus University in Syria, explains that his Syrian diploma is evaluated as Information Management on HBO-level in the Netherlands. With this diploma, he is able to work in the Netherlands, but he prefers to do a master as – according to him – it will increase his chances on the Dutch labour market.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Amena, March 14, 2016

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Adnan, March 17, 2016

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Hanan, May 22, 2016

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Ali, March 21, 2016

<sup>70</sup> Interview with student supporter of UAF, April 4, 2016

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Sami, February 21, 2016

These differences in education show that refugees' human capital obtained in the home country is not always of equal value in the host country. A study on the influence of homeland education on the economic position of refugees in the Netherlands shows that for refugees, higher education obtained in the home country generally does not pay off during the first five years of participation in the Dutch labour market (Hartog and Aslan 2009, 243). Hartog and Aslan's (2009) findings show a difference in high education and low education of refugees as refugees with higher education did not earn more than refugees with lower education during the first five years in the host country. This can be seen as problematic for highly educated refugees, who do not seem to benefit from their acquired diplomas and work experience. Besides differences in qualification, Hartog and Aslan (2009, 234) think language proficiency is another important variable:

It may very well be that for many of the occupations associated with higher education, understanding the Dutch language is vital, much more so than for lower levels of education. One can do cleaning work, construction work and much manufacturing work without good fluency in Dutch. One cannot be a physician without a high level of competence in Dutch.

Some Syrian refugees try to work around this problem of language proficiency by applying for an English master or a job at an international company. Moosa, for example, did the English master Business Administration and got a job at an international company, where English is the main language. Via his work, he can follow additional Dutch language courses to pass his state exam. He advises other Syrian refugees to follow the same path, as it seems much more efficient for him.<sup>72</sup> Although UAF is not a supporter of English studies, as it does not promote refugees' Dutch language skills and thus integration, the organisation notices that many students want to follow English education. According to a student supporter at UAF, some refugee students are too rushed and want to start immediately with a study, as they do not want to waste their time on Dutch courses because there are a lot of English studies and international companies in the Netherlands.<sup>73</sup> The time invested in language courses and other educational courses to match the Dutch educational requirements may postpone the chance to pursue any career advancement

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Moosa, February 14, 2016

<sup>73</sup> Interview with student supporter at UAF, April 4, 2016.

opportunities (Lamba 2003, 60). Refugees, as well as professionals and refugee initiatives<sup>74</sup> emphasise this problem of the lengthy process of economic integration of refugees.<sup>75</sup> Other time-related factors may also play a role in this, namely the expressed desire to return to Syria after the war is over, and the expressed doubt about the extension of the residence permit after the five-year permit is expired. As the length of the refugees' stay in the Netherlands cannot be predicted, they want to make the best of it.

Thus, human capital obtained through education is not always transferable across countries and refugees often have to add skills or education in the Netherlands to regain their pre-migration human capital. Refugee students may not feel equally treated as any other Dutch students, which may lead to feelings of exclusion. Some think their diploma-devaluation is understandable, others think it is injustice.

#### **4.4 At Work**

In the Dutch discourse on integration, three aspects for successful integration are often mentioned: language proficiency, participation in the society and paid employment. Glastra (in Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2006, 52) states that participation in the regular labour and educational process is "the critical bridge to Dutch society". A similar statement is made in a report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on labour market integration of resettled refugees: "Labour market integration is an important indicator of short- and long-term refugee integration and of a successful, durable solution to the limbo and protection needs stemming from forcible displacement" (UNHCR 2013, 3). Employment and self-sufficiency have been called the 'greatest challenges' for resettled refugees in other countries (UNHCR 2013, 3). This is also experienced by Syrian refugees who face many barriers while trying to find paid employment, although their residence permit enables them to participate on the Dutch labour market as any other Dutch citizen.<sup>76</sup>

One barrier they face while looking for a job or internship is the language barrier. Just as language proficiency is important for refugees' education; it is also an important requirement for refugees' employment. However, since mastering the Dutch language is one of the most

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<sup>74</sup> Delite Labs, Hack Your Future and COA.

<sup>75</sup> Conclusion of a panel discussion at lecture Work and Network of Pakhuis de Zwijger, attended April 28, 2016: <https://dezwijger.nl/programma/work-and-network>.

<sup>76</sup> Werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl: [www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl/werken/wetten-regels.aspx](http://www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl/werken/wetten-regels.aspx). Last accessed: June 18, 2016.

important features towards inclusion in the Dutch society and access to Dutch citizenship, it is used as the main reason for exclusion from participation in the labour market. A study by Ghorashi and van Tilburg on refugee women's' experiences with Dutch labour organisations (2006, 67) and the stories of Firas and Khalil as described in paragraph 2.4.1 (page 25) show that imperfection in language proficiency increases the fear of cultural difference. It seems to symbolise negative representations and marginalisation of refugees. Employers who hire refugees regardless of their level of Dutch may actually contribute to the language skills of their employees. Moosa, Anas and Sami all work as an employee or intern and perceive that their language proficiency improves significantly at work, because of communication with Dutch colleagues.

A second barrier for refugees who enter the Dutch labour market is the often lengthy integration procedure. Before they can focus on education or work, they first have to receive a permit, get allocated to a house and follow integration and Dutch courses. The longer refugees are unemployed, the bigger the gap to the labour market.<sup>77</sup> In the meantime, refugees may lose their skills and competences, and hence parts of their human capital. A more efficient method can be possible, where refugees learn the Dutch language, follow education and/or work at the same time.<sup>78</sup> In Utrecht, the municipality is developing a plan to give refugees access to education, language courses and activities like trainings in entrepreneurship from the first day of their residence in the city.<sup>79</sup>

Some of the Syrian refugees (although not living in Utrecht) are already trying to participate from day one, through an internship, training program or volunteer work while following Dutch courses and waiting for their approval of student support at UAF, or to gain work experience in order to find a suitable job. For example Ranim, who studied dentistry in Syria and is now doing an internship at a dentist in the Netherlands. With this internship, she can both practice her dentist-skills and improve her Dutch.

Another way in which refugees work on professional development and try to prepare for work and the Dutch labour market is to participate in special training programs. Two programs that

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<sup>77</sup> NRC Next: Dé opgave voor 2016: werk voor vluchtelingen. <http://www.nrc.nl/next/2015/12/19/de-opgave-van-2016-werk-voor-vluchtelingen-1567729>. Last accessed June 18, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Volkskrant: Statushouder komt moeilijk aan werk. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/economie/statushouder-komt-moeilijk-aan-werk~a4326500/>. Last accessed: June 24, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Volkskrant: Primeur: Utrecht gaat vluchtelingen al op dag een aan de stad binden. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/primeur-utrecht-gaat-vluchteling-al-op-dag-een-aan-de-stad-binden~a4290148/>. Last accessed: June 24, 2016.



some people are joining are Hack Your Future and Delite Labs. Hack your future<sup>80</sup> is a six month program for refugees to become a web-developer. Besides training in coding, Hack Your Future trains its students in project management, becoming independent coding-professionals and the 'Dutch work culture'. Also, the organisation aims to give its students access to a professional network of companies. Delite Labs<sup>81</sup> is a Dutch foundation and a start-up school that offers training-programs in entrepreneurship for refugees. The goal of this foundation is to support aspiring entrepreneurs in developing and realizing professional ideas and activating entrepreneurial spirit.

These initiatives help refugees to obtain new skills like coding, programming and concept-thinking which may help them in developing post-migration human capital. It also supports them in their professional development and orientation on the Dutch labour market. Besides that, these initiatives can contribute to increase refugees' professional social network, as they involve various organisations and companies. These examples show how social capital can increase human capital and the other way around.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

While living in a new society after being disrupted from Syria, Syrians often face many challenges while trying to structurally integrate in a successful way. Although many young Syrians obtained university degrees and gained work experience in Syria, their skills, competences and experiences are often of less value in the Netherlands. Besides losing their home, they also lost (part of) their human capital. When trying to participate in Dutch education and labour, they often face many barriers. The often lengthy procedure makes them feel they 'lose their time' and they also face challenges such as acquiring Dutch language proficiency, meeting university-admission requirements, building a professional network and finding paid employment. In order to regain their human capital, or to gather new skills, the Syrians follow preparatory study years, training programs, language courses and internships. As the Dutch government, educational institutes and companies decide which diplomas, work experiences or skills are valuable for participation in Dutch society through work, it can be stated that it is difficult for refugees to feel a sense of belonging to the Dutch society when they are excluded from education or work because of devaluated university-degrees or work experiences. The notion of equal rights therefore consists

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<sup>80</sup> Hack your Future: [www.hackyourfuture.net](http://www.hackyourfuture.net). Last accessed: June 18, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Delite Labs: [www.delitelabs.com](http://www.delitelabs.com). Last accessed: June 18, 2016.

of a number of conditions that refugees have to meet. When it comes to work, Syrian refugees stress the importance of work as it allows them to be economically independent and to contribute to the society as any other Dutch citizen by paying taxes. Since Castles, De Haas and Miller (2014) ask to what extent citizenship needs to be seen as the relationship between an individual and the state (2014, 20), for most Syrian refugees that are interviewed, paying taxes is part of their relationship with the state. Having a job facilitates this relationship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In a world where a large number of people is on the move because of war, anthropology aims to explore the changing perceptions of home and belonging. While writing this thesis, the war in Syria is still going on and an end of this civil war is not in sight. Millions of Syrians are uprooted from their homes and every day, many others have to leave the place where they grew up and belonged to; a place they called home. How do these people experience 'belonging' in a country they have fled to and where they are forced to fit in? In this age of migration, it is crucial to examine the integration process of different populations. As a large part of the Syrian refugee population in the Netherlands consists of young, highly educated people who are at the start of their professional life, I aim to understand their path towards structural integration. As much is talked *about* refugees instead of *with* them, I listened to their stories to show their perspectives.

In order to shape a picture of the process of Syrian's structural integration in the Netherlands, I examined the influence of both their pre- and post-migration education and work and their perception of belonging to the Dutch citizenry. Their stories provided insight into the interrelation of their social and human capital and the process of inclusion or exclusion from Dutch education and work, and the Dutch society at large. These insights were explanatory for their feelings of belonging or not belonging to the Dutch society.

In the discourse on refugees in the Netherlands, many think that young Syrians who obtained a university degree in Syria are able to enrich Dutch society with their skills and talents. The experiences by the Syrians themselves showed this is not as easy as it sounds. In practice, they face multiple obstacles that can make their structural integration in education and labour take many years. One barrier concerning education is that many Syrian university degrees are not recognised by the Dutch educational system. Besides that, Dutch language proficiency is often a prerequisite when applying for education in the Netherlands. Therefore, refugees often have to follow a preparatory year to meet this admission.

On the Dutch labour market, Syrians often face comparable challenges; they have to master the Dutch language, their diploma has to be recognised and their skills and competences have to be perceived as valuable. As many Syrians are not able to work because they cannot meet these requirements yet, they receive social welfare. While this helps them financially, most participants felt uncomfortable with receiving money from the government. For them, work is important to

be economically independent and to contribute to society. Many Syrians emphasised that by paying income taxes, they feel that they 'pay back' their social welfare. Aside from the fact that work enables them to be economically independent, it also facilitates their relationship with the state.

In general, refugees' first concern is how to achieve 'substantial' citizenship such as equal chances of participation in education and work (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014, Castles and Davidson 2000). Until they meet certain requirements such as a residence permit, language proficiency, diploma equivalence and work experience, they are excluded from this form of citizenship because of the devaluation of their human capital. Ghorashi and Vieten (2012) state that as long as refugees can prosper in education and work, new places can induce a sense of belonging. The Syrians that participated in this research explained that in many situations, they are not able to prosper in education and work due to the previously mentioned difficulties.

Where the devaluation of human capital can cause feelings of exclusion from Dutch citizenry and impede a relationship with the state, refugees' social capital on the contrary, can contribute to generate feelings of inclusion and belonging. As a consequence of their flight, refugees often first experience a devaluation of their social capital, due to a decrease or scattering of their social network. In the Netherlands, neighbourhood encounters, refugee-initiatives, volunteers, but also co-students or colleagues can help in obtaining new valuable social capital. These forms of bridging and linking social capital are of great importance for them. For example: communicating with volunteers, social workers, neighbours and later on students and colleagues can stimulate their language proficiency. Linking with others on the basis of shared (professional) interests may help refugees in gaining access to professional networks with job opportunities. While language proficiency and valuable human capital are important conditions to structurally integrate into the Dutch labour market, findings of this research show that it can also work the other way around. Social capital obtained in educational and work settings can have the potential to stimulate language proficiency and create new human capital. Furthermore, Syrians emphasise that these contacts can generate feelings of acceptance and appreciation. These contacts make them experience citizenship in a more abstract form, namely as individual being part of a community.

Time and distance proved to be recurring themes in this research. First, the Syrians experience the lengthy procedure of their asylum application, which leaves them in an uncertain position

where they cannot partake in (language) courses, education or work. The longer they have to wait, the more distance created to their previous professional life and to the Dutch labour market. After they obtain a residence permit for five years, again uncertainty occurs as to whether their permit will be extended. Some Syrians fear they will be sent back to Syria, some think of returning voluntarily when the war is over. Others want to stay in the Netherlands as they have invested in a new life here. They do not want to abandon what they have worked for. As the length of their stay in the Netherlands is uncertain, they want to make the best out of it in the meantime and they do not want to waste their time. The longer they stay in the Netherlands, the greater the distance with Syria seems to become.

Other time-related issues that the Syrians experience is the time invested in language courses or other educational courses to match the Dutch educational requirements. According to Lamba (2003, 60), this postpones the chance to pursue any career advancement opportunities. The longer refugees are unemployed, receive social welfare and are not able to start education, the bigger the gap to the labour market will be. As integration is an interaction between different factors, and considering the before mentioned findings, a more efficient integration process would be desirable. This would allow refugees to learn the Dutch language, find housing, built a social network and follow education or work at the same time. Additionally, study programs or work where they are able to communicate in English while they learn Dutch at the same time are preferable.

Through social capital, human capital can be created and vice versa, and feelings of belonging might occur. Uncertainty about whether their future will be in the Netherlands or somewhere else will only postpone the ability to feel at home in, and contribute to, the Netherlands.



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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview topic-list:**

#### **Integration**

- Integration policy
- Structural integration
- Asylum procedure

#### **Citizenship**

- Citizenship policy
- Common citizenship
- Transnational citizenship/ Transnational consciousness
- National community
- Collectivity

#### **Belonging**

- Social inclusion
- Social exclusion

#### **Social capital**

- Bridging social capital
- Bonding social capital
- Linking social capital
- Pre-migration social capital
- Post-migration social capital
- Ethnic membership
- Interethnic contact

## **Human capital**

- Individual skills
- Knowledge
- Education
- Work experience
- Pre-migration human capital
- Post-migration human capital

## **Education**

- Validation
- Certification
- Language proficiency
- Pre-migration education
- Post-migration education

## **Work**

- Professional life
- Socio-economic position/background
- Pre-migration work experiences
- Post-migration work experiences
- Qualifications