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Intercultural Communication MA – Thesis

FROM INCLUUSION TO INTEGRATION

Refugee higher education: the benefits of inclusive policies on the integration process

A case-study on the InClUUsion program

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Abstract:

The integration of refugees is a multi-layered process of which the success is determined by both their personal experience, and the conditions and opportunities offered by the hosting community. This study recognises higher education offered to refugees as a possibility for them to develop socio-cultural and structural integration and approaches InclUUsion, a program directed towards refugees affiliated with Utrecht University (NL), as a case -study. The purpose of this research is to understand what policies and strategies designed by local schools can holistically benefit refugees' integration. For a complete overview, this research focuses both on the analysis of InclUUsion practices towards diversity, and the refugee students' feedback and experiences within the program. According to indicators measuring the integration process, students' participation in the InclUUsion program improves their social connections with local members and initiatives, as well as their general and cultural knowledge and confidence in communicating. These findings reveal that policies based on *self-reflectivity, flexibility* and interest in promoting synergy between all the parts involved, can give shape to an *inclusive* educational environment that stimulates refugees to identify as students and step inside the local community.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, due to war, unsafe political conditions and threats of climate change, a consistent number of people from Africa and the Middle East left their countries to reach Europe to seek for a better future. Welcoming and integrating million people from different cultural backgrounds represents a significant challenge politically, socially and culturally. To respond to this so-called “refugees crisis”, European countries have adopted different policies, some opted to close borders and encourage repatriations, others implement measures to foster resettlement and integration within the local community. For instance, in the Netherlands, that has been the destination country of thousands of asylum seekers in the last two years, integration courses are mandatory after refugees receive the residence permit.¹ The aim of these language and culture courses is to get refugees acquainted with the Dutch labour market and thus support the process of economic integration in the country. Despite the benefits and support such an initiative offers to refugees, the participation in these courses does not grant a successful integration.

It is significant to consider that this assisted process of integration begins only once asylum is granted, which can be after months and even years from the arrival in the Netherlands. However, integration cannot be seen as an outcome of a course, it is not a ‘destination point’ but it rather starts upon the arrival in the new country (Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013). The time asylum seekers have to wait before they are legally accepted has great influence on the overall process of inclusion, especially since they are obliged to stay in a reception centre, Asylum seekers’ centres (AZC) until the legal acceptance (Klaver, 2016). This indefinite period of reclusion causes isolation, feelings of exclusion and boredom, which are detrimental for their motivation and attitude towards the hosting country (Bakker, Dagevos, Engersen, 2013; de Vroome, van Tubergen, 2010). This is particularly true for the Netherlands, as most of the centres are situated in rural areas, what significantly undermines the possibility to create contacts with the locals and get to know the culture (Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013).

As it will be discussed throughout this research, integration primarily involves the person’s well-being and sense of belonging, hence it is crucial to identify further approaches able to look at refugees’ integration holistically, considering all the aspects that come into play for refugees and asylum seekers still waiting for their permit. Previous research aimed at similar purposes revealed that participation in schools and other forms of educational programs have been demonstrated to be effective on various aspects of newcomers’ integration (Naidoo, 2015; Berg, 2018; Bacher et al. 2019). For refugees and

¹ “The integration obligation applies to every new resident aged between 18 and 67 years. The integration obligation starts as soon as you get a residence permit. You have complied with this obligation once you have signed the Participation Statement and passed the Civic Integration Examination or State Examination NT2. These examinations consist of the following parts: Dutch language, Knowledge of Dutch Society, and Orientation on the Dutch Labour Market.” How to integrate. (n.d.). Retrieved June 30, 2020, <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/forrefugees/inburgeren?language=en>



asylum seekers to be included in educational activities launched by schools of their hosting countries can represent a life-changing opportunity and stimulate their integration process. However, as former studies suggest, the success of refugees and asylum seekers scholastic experience is determined by several factors, both personal and contextual.

The purpose of this study is to understand what policies and practices implemented by educational institutions are more successful to facilitate refugee background students' integration. Therefore, this research will inquire both the school's policy and refugee background students' opinion and experience. Mixed method of analysis will be applied on a case-study concerning an educational program launched by Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

In the following section, the concept of integration will be explored with the aim of highlighting which indicators are able to facilitate the development of the integration process. Then, the attention will be turned towards the identity of refugees, its implications at the personal and legal level, specifically considering the case of the Netherlands. The research questions and the subject of the case-study, InclUUsion, will be introduced after a review of literature focused on opportunities and implication of higher education for refugees. Consequently, the method of analysis and discussion of the results are reported. The main findings, limitations and suggestions for further research are described in the conclusive section.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. INTEGRATION

1.1 Indicators and approaches

Integration is a complex concept, it is hard to point out stable and objective indicators, which would suggest its development. The definitions offered by dictionaries are rather vague, in the Cambridge Dictionary integration is referred as “the process of successfully joining or mixing with a different group of people”, while Longman Dictionary describes it as “the process of getting people of different races to live and work together instead of separately”. What seems to be highlighted is integration as a form of “assimilation” or “adaptation” that newcomers from different races have to undergo in the hosting country. Although the importance of social-cultural aspects of integration emerges from these definitions, it remains unclear how “working together” and “mixing with a different group” can lead to integration. It is necessary to delve further into the discussion of the concept of integration, in order to achieve a more accurate idea of the facilitators and barriers that influence this process.

Studies in the field of social sciences and anthropology provide insightful tools to approach and measure integration (Knapper, 2018; Ager, 2008; Bacher et al., 2019). The first distinction that is relevant to point out is between structural and socio-cultural integration (Dolman, 2017). The former refers to the full participation of a person in the social institutions of the hosting country: structural integration is achieved by gaining access to services of a social community, such as schools, healthcare, housing market and participating in the labour market. Socio-cultural integration reflects and expands the definition provided by the Cambridge dictionary, since it refers to the degree a person identifies him/herself with the cultural values and norms of the new environment, builds social connections and acquires the language spoken by the local community (Dolman, 2017; Dagevos, 2001). Although social and structural integration seem to be linked to different fields of concern, these two conditions of integration are deeply intertwined. Structural integration does not represent a condition of *successful* integration by itself (Dolman, 2017; Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013). To gain access to social services and start working in the hosting country does not necessarily lead to integration: it certainly represents an important achievement to step into the community, but several other levels can impinge on it and can obstruct inclusion.

Integration is subjective and depends on the personal experience of the individual, therefore to consider the social and human aspects involved is important to understand what makes this process successful. Human capital is meant as competences and skills, while social capital refers to social network and social activities (de Vroome & Van Tubergen; 2010, Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013). De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2010) exploring the employment experience of refugees in the



Netherlands, state that the development of human capital and social capital lead to acquire a better structural position in society.

This approach has been validated by one of the leading studies concerning integration conducted by Ager (2008): seeking “to reflect normative understandings of integration” (p. 2). Ager (2008) designs a conceptual framework to evaluate and measure integration’s facilitators, and the indicators described to be the most relevant for “removing the barrier of integration” are related to social and human capital (p. 12). Specifically, proficiency in the language spoken in the hosting country, social capital, cultural knowledge and sense of belonging can determine the success of integration (Ager, 2008). These features represent “discrete domains which actions could serve to facilitate (or obstacle) local integration” (Ager, 2008, p.182).

1.2 Communication first: language proficiency

Language represents the first potential barrier for integration: a low proficiency will preclude newcomers the possibility to understand and communicate in the hosting society (Ager, 2008; de Vroome & van Tubergen, 2010; Tip et al., 2018; McBrien, 2005). One’s incapacity to communicate adequately using the local language might jeopardize the quality of social contacts and produce a counter effect of self-isolation and feeling of exclusion (McBrien, 2005; Tip, et al. 2018; Naidoo, 2015). This counter effect may hinder the feeling of belonging and motivation to engage more in the resettlement.

Tip et al. (2018) designed research to explore whether refugees’ language proficiency positively correlates with more intergroup contact at a later time point. This longitudinal study, conducted throughout three years on over thousands participants in the UK, confirms that improvement of language proficiency does correspond to an increased number of social connections between refugees and locals, which fosters the overall well-being of the former (Tip, et al. 2018). A study on Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese newcomers in the Netherlands provided the same outcome: proficiency in Dutch language positively correlates with more connections with Dutch people. Since the frequency and quality of intergroup contacts is relevant to determine one’s well-being and consequently, the integration process, it is crucial not to underestimate the role of language in this path (Jasinkaia, 2011; Tip et al., 2018; Brar-Josan, 2015).

Nonetheless, it is also true that for newcomers to gain proficiency in the local language it is not the only way to achieve a successful communication with the members of the hosting community. In today’s globalized world, contact between people from different cultural backgrounds has increased, and ‘the most obvious way in which people cope with linguistic diversity [...] is to use English’ (Backus et al., 2013, p. 11). English has played a central role as the common international language in linking



people who have different mother tongues (Kubota & McKay, 2009, p. 3). Referred to as ELF, English as Lingua Franca represents a different variation from the standard form of English as a native language, it rather results in a mixture between English, the speakers' first language and other languages they know. An increasing number of European countries are promoting services, education and sources of information in English, which would allow newcomers to find their way and efficiently communicate in English until they learn the local language (Backus et al. 2013). However, the diverse linguistic landscape of Europe, and the policies enacted by each state, affects the development of English as Lingua Franca: in some countries it is used as a second or third language, while in others English is not in use (Berns et al., 2011). As the study of Gerritsen et al. (2016) describes, in the Netherlands English is changing from EFL to ESL, English as second Language. Accordingly, this is possible as the Netherlands promote the study of English in its education system: English is the only compulsory foreign language at primary and secondary school (Gerritsen et al., 2016, p. 14). Moreover, 'English is the only language used in news broadcasting, newspapers, scientific higher education, scientific research' and, as Berns et al. (2011)'s study suggests 'English is seen as a useful and attractive language and not a threat to the Dutch language' (Gerritsen et al. 2016, p. 6; Berns et al., 2011, p.39).

1.3 Social connection: Bridges, Bonds and Links

Achieving a good proficiency in the local language, or in English when possible, represents the stepping stone to ensure a positive integration process as it permits newcomers to improve their social and human capital (Ager, 2008; Tip et al. 2018; Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013). Social capital can be distinguished in three types of connections, social links, social bridges and social bonds, equally relevant to promote integration within the hosting community.

Social links refer to the connection with structures of the state, non-governmental organizations or other initiatives that exist in the hosting community (Ager, 2008, p.16). To get in contact with local services and organizations is crucial as it improves the chances for newcomers to get involved in the society and develop structural integration. (Brar- Josan, 2015).

Building *bridges* with the local community is certainly beneficial to step inside of it. Researching the aspects that influence refugees' integration at the workplace in the Netherlands, de Vroome and van Tubergen (2010) found that more social contact with the Dutch majority positively correlates with refugees' odds of employment and occupational status. Positive interactions are also able to stimulate the development of positive personal opinions, instead of reinforcing the norms and stereotypes previously held by refugees towards the majority group (Jasinkaia, 2011). Accordingly, good contacts between newcomers and locals have an impact on the prejudices usually shaped and assumed by media or peer-contact and can change the attitude towards the hosting community (Jasinkaia, 2011). Tip et al.



(2018) confirm the advantages of intergroup contacts for integration, pointing out that under the right conditions, intergroup contact can reduce anxiety and improve the person's well-being in the new environment.

The importance of maintaining contacts and ties with the co-ethnic, co-national community has also been demonstrated as beneficial for integration, as recent studies show (Ager & Strang 2008 in Brar-Josan, 2015). Defined as *social Bonds*, newcomers' connection with people with similar ethnic and cultural background "can also provide cultural and social activities which offer refugees the chance to maintain their own customs and religion, talk in their own language, celebrate their traditions and exchange news from their home country" (Duke et al. 1999 in Ager, 2008, p.13). Especially in the first period post-displacement, connections with family and people like-ethnic group, with whom refugees can share their experiences, play an important role for their well-being. These contacts highlight the importance of common identity and, as it will be described in the next section, to preserve the link with one's previous culture does not necessarily affect the sense of affiliation to the hosting community (Elliott, Yusuf, 2014).

1.4 Integration as negotiation of identities

The relevance of maintaining *social bonds* suggests that integration does not mean assimilation with habits and culture of the hosting country and annihilation of one's previous cultural background and habits in favour of the one existing in the hosting country. Instead, the process of integration is a negotiation between previous and new meanings and values, and it is established by the experience and perceptions of the subject (Bhabha, 1994; Wagner, 2016; Van Meijl, 2008). Previous constructions, norms, values, and identities are used as "interpretative tools or templates in constructing their individual identity in the new society" (Lenner et al., 2007 in Karin & Bar-Lev, 2014).

This is true as identity is not stable and fixed, but it rather represents an on-going process of negotiation and adaptation to the context (Wagner, 2016; Van Meijl, 2008; Harrijvan & van Slageren, 2017). As the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha suggests, who migrates does not completely identify with his native culture anymore, neither get absorbed in the new one. Instead, a third space is created through a continuous negotiation of the characteristics of one's previous culture with the cultural features perceived in the new environment the person feels more affiliated with (Bhabha, 1994). To integrate into a new environment is a dynamic process of negotiation that involves one's agency in shaping a new hybrid identity, rather than a passive assimilation of new cultural peculiarities (Wagner, 2008). This process of identity construction within the new environment influences newcomers' psychological acculturation thus affecting their sense of belonging towards the community (Trickett,



Birman, 2005; McBrien, 2005). Psychological acculturation refers to the “changes that can occur in one’s sense of identity, values, and beliefs” when in contact with a different culture (McBrien, 2005, p.2).

2. CONDITIONS FOR INTEGRATION

In this first section, we established which factors need to be considered in order to evaluate the development of integration. Specifically, it is emphasized that human and social aspects should not be underestimated since they determine the success of structural integration. According to the literature discussed, a wider network of social connections and ability to communicate with the locals help newcomers to engage in the process of integration and achieve a positive psychological acculturation. However, particularly for what concerns social bridges and links, the mere availability of these connections does not ensure a successful integration. The quality of these interactions rely both on the person, his/her command of the language/s spoken in the local community, and attitude towards the others, but also on the conditions offered by the hosting country (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009; Ager, 2008; Jasinkaja, 2011). These conditions correspond to the indicators of safety and security described by Ager and suggest a further relevant aspect to take into in the study of integration: the role of the hosting community (2008).

Indeed, safety and security need to be provided by the hosting country through policies that can ensure the right conditions and services for integration (Harrijvan & van Slageren, 2017; Bacher et al, 2019). This is significant because it emphasizes that the process of integration does not merely encompass the newcomers’ motivation, but it is a “process of mutual accommodation” between the individual and the larger community (Ager, 2008, p.12). The focus is on the interrelation between the person and the larger community he or she is in:

‘Integration is a long term two-way process of change, that relates both to the *conditions for* and the *actual participation* of newcomers in all aspects of life of the country”
(Ager, 2008, p.12, Knapper, 2018, Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013).

The resources that the hosting country, community or organization provide in terms of language support and social connections are crucial to consider as they represent the conditions for newcomers to develop their integration process. In the light of the literature, it is clear that in order to facilitate a successful integration in the society, these conditions should be directed to implement newcomers’ human and social capital prior their structural integration (Dolman, 2017, Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013).

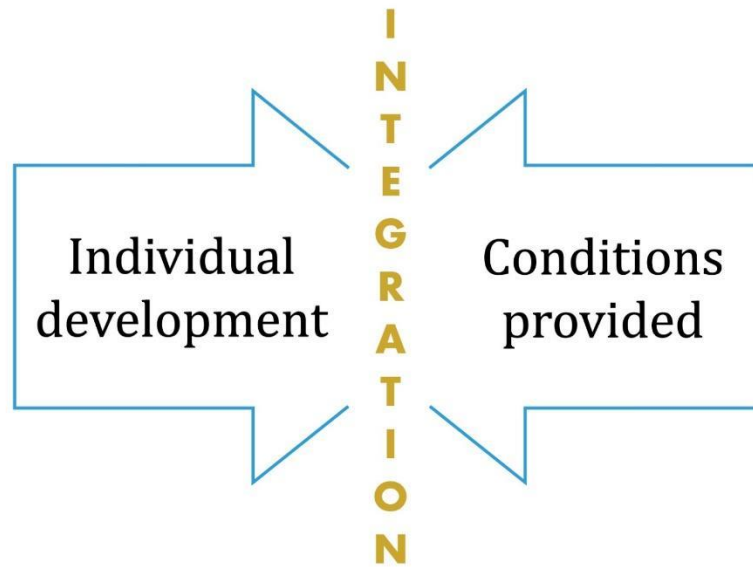


Figure 1

2.1 Three level of integration

Syed and Özbilgin (2009) expand the two-fold approach to integration described above by introducing a further level that enables a more thorough understanding of this process. The authors develop 'a multi-layered conceptualization of integration that considers the micro, meso and macro level, which respectively identify the individual (e.g. individual experiences, opportunities and agency), organizational (e.g. organizational processes and approaches to diversity) and national (e.g. a society's beliefs and values, laws, education) levels of the phenomenon (Knapper, 2018, p. 3). This framework acknowledges that these levels do not operate in isolation but are intertwined: diversity management practices that exist at the macro and meso level will have great influence on the process of integration of the individual (Syed & Özbilgin 2009; Knapper, 2018).

As this study focuses on refugees and asylum seekers' process of integration in the Netherlands, the following sections describe the implication that the status of refugees has on the individual (micro-level), and what is the legislation concerning asylum seekers and refugees at the macro-level of the Netherlands.



2.2 Micro -level, refugee: an assumed identity

In order to understand how to facilitate the integration of refugees in the local community, it is first necessary to look at the rights, limitations and social representation that characterize this group of migrants. The pre-displacement factors that have pushed a person to leave his home country determine the limitations and rights s/he is entitled to in the new society, the psychological well-being and the personal motivation to identify with the culture and create social connections (Wagner, 2008). For instance, who *chooses* to migrate to seek better work opportunities, might have more resources and rights for settling in the new country than asylum seekers, whose decisions might be due to unfortunate circumstances (Wagner, 2008; Berg, 2018).²

A hostile environment stonewalls the motivation to engage in the integration process within the community and create a new life. Hence, a crucial first step is to ensure safety and security in terms of psychological well (Block et al. 2014). In light of this, it is significant to consider that refugee is a legal designation which influences the person as whole, it determines the rights and possibility to build a better future as well as the physical and psychological well-being (Papadopoulous, 2007). According to this latter aspect, it is true that refugee can represent a stigmatized label that links this minority group to socially constructed pre-judgments spread by the media (Begüm, 2018; McBrien, 2005). Negative stereotypes and discrimination have been highlighted as the main barriers for *socio-cultural* integration (Naidoo, 2015; Crea, 2016; Jasinkaia, 2011, Ager, 2008). In a study focused on Syrian refugees, participants report to feel the weight of two dimensions of 'otherness' and diversity: being a foreign student and being a Syrian (Begüm, 2018). To define migrants as *other* immediately labels them as *the problem* and sets an unequal power relation between the majority group *us* and the minority, seen as *the other* (Begüm, 2018).

As stated above, an essential part of the acculturation process is to feel affiliated to the new community, therefore it is important to identify what are the barriers that might impinge on it and prevent a positive feeling towards the new environment (Trickett & Birman, 2004). Language is a crucial aspect, especially since it is not only a medium of communication, but it is linked to one's identity (Naidoo, 2015). Whereas poor command of the language/s spoken in the hosting community might cause discrimination and make it difficult for one to gain agency and respond to these situations (McBrien, 2005), speaking the new language confidently promotes the development of social *bridges*

² As the 1951 Convention states, a refugee is a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (Weissbrodt, 2008).



and *links*, which leads to an increase of well-being and sense of belonging (Ager, 2008, Jasinkaia, 2011, Tip et al, 2018). As Trickett and Birman's (2004) study on refugees from the Soviet Union in schools in the United States shows, acculturation does not depend on the time spent in the hosting country, but rather on the quality and frequency of contact with American peers (Trickett & Birman, 2004).³ This paragraph describes the psychological consequences and difficulties that holding a refugee status brings about. As highlighted by Syed and Özbilgin (2009) the conditions offered at the meso and macro level have great influences on the individual's integration process. The next section explores the situation of the Netherlands to shed a light on the opportunities and constraints refugees have to face.

2.3 Macro - level: the conditions for hosting in the Netherlands

Diversity policies and overall attitude towards minorities are influenced by the socio-political choices, history and dominant ideology existing at macro-level (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Each national setting has different principles and practices of integration which have to be taken into account in order to understand "the extent to which refugees are provided with the basis for full and equal engagement with society" (Ager, 2008, p.172). It is important to consider the legislation and policies released by the country since macro, meso and micro levels are deeply interwoven (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

Considering the specific case of the Netherlands, the asylum procedure begins six days after the arrival in the country and can take months, even years, to be completed with the acceptance or refusal of the requests.⁴ Refugees spend their waiting time refugees stay in the reception centres (AZC) which are located far from the cities (Klaver, 2016). It could be argued that the waiting period could heal wounds and be employed to develop the socio-cultural side of integration by expanding social connections and getting acquainted with the new culture. However, the study conducted in the Netherlands by Bakker, Dagevos and Engbersen (2013) on "the impact policy-related post-migration stressors on the process of integration" reveals that to remain isolated in the reception centre for a prolonged period of time during the first post-migration period, affects refugees' *personal* resources: it increases insecurity about the future, reduces confidence and motivation (p. 445). The indefinite amount of time spent in the Asylum centres in the Netherlands, and the lack of opportunity to get engaged in any enriching activities has detrimental effects on the first period of re-settlement as it

³ As defined above, acculturation refers to the "changes that can occur in one's sense of identity, values, and beliefs" when in contact with a different culture (McBrien, 2005, p.2).

⁴ The COA (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers) Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers is responsible for the reception and placement of asylum seekers in the reception centres (AZC) (Knapper, 2018, website of COA). During the asylum request procedure, refugees receive up to 232 euros per month from the Government, and they are not allowed to engage in paid work the first six months. Even after this time asylum seekers' right for work is limited under specific circumstances. Until the moment of legal acceptance, refugees are excluded from the social and economic life of the country: the rights and resources to permit a structural integration are missing (Knapper, 2018, Dolman, 2017, Dagevos, 2001, de Vroome, van Tubergen, 2010).



affects the process identity construction of newcomers (Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013, Crea, 2016). As further research demonstrates, “the length of stay in asylum accommodation fosters a passive attitude, making integration a difficult task in the long run” (Ryan et al. 2008 in Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013, p. 6). Until the moment of legal acceptance, refugees are excluded from the social and economic life of the country: the rights and resources to permit a structural integration are missing (Knapper, 2018, Dolman, 2017, Dagevos, 2001, de Vroome & van Tubergen, 2010). It is only after the asylum is granted that the integration in the Netherlands takes place: asylum seekers are obliged to follow an integration course to learn Dutch language and culture and get acquainted with the Dutch labour market. However, the completion of the mandatory integration course does not necessarily lead to a successful socio-cultural integration. Especially since, refugees’ and asylum seekers’ psychological acculturation cannot be achieved through a course (McBrien, 2005).

It is crucial to inquire what conditions offered in the hosting country can foster all the aspect involved in the integration process of refugees. Having discussed the barriers and facilitator existing at the micro-level and macro-level, the attention will now be turned towards resources provided at the meso-level. As reported by Knapper (2018) in her study of inclusion at the workplace ‘the experience of inclusion is a consequence of organizational antecedents, such as diversity management practices.’ (p.3). The current study adopts a similar approach as it analyses policies and practices of organizations refugees are involved in. Nonetheless, the meso-level here considers institutions and programs that offer education to refugees and asylum seekers.

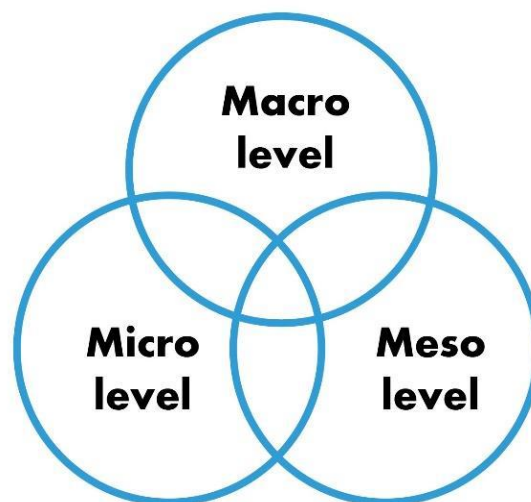


Figure 2



2.4 Meso-level: the key role of education

An increasing number of studies focusing on refugees' access to higher education emphasize how being involved in local schools is beneficial for integration, both at a socio-cultural and at a structural level (Sidhu & Taylor 2012; Berg, 2018; Block, 2014). Indeed, by attending schools refugees are more exposed to the language spoken by the majority group, have more opportunity to establish *social bonds* and *bridges* and to implement their human capital by acquiring new competences and getting to know the culture of the hosting community (Crea, 2016; Trickett, Birman, 2015; Harris & Marlowe, 2011). Furthermore, feelings of empowerment and courage were reported by most of the refugee students interviewed by Crea (2016).

Higher education plays a critical role in the resettlement of refugees even concerning the structural level of integration (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Block, 2014). This is true since a degree gained in the hosting country is more valuable, and enhances more occupational opportunities, than one achieved in the home university, which might have lost its validity (Begüm, 2018). The level of education determines the chances of employment, therefore, once arrived in the hosting country, refugees strive to continue and complete their educational paths (Berg, 2018; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). As integration is a two-way process the success of the educational experience depends on the conditions offered by the educational institutions. Merely exposing refugee to social and cultural resources is not enough to ensure a positive outcome: schools need to beware of the challenges and difficulties that refugee background students can face, especially as the quality of the experience influences feelings and attitude towards the hosting environment and, consequently, it affects the integration process (McBrien, 2005; van Velzen, 2013).

3. DIVERSITY POLICY

First, in the light of the two- ways approach adopted in this study, it is relevant to consider that the way an organization approaches diversity in its policy mirrors its attitude towards the minority groups. Considering Bourdieu's words in a relational perspective, the practices enacted at the meso - level reveal the organizations' *habitus*: 'its socialised predispositions', hence the social attitudes directed towards diverse groups (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009, p. 9). An institution that expects foreign students to assimilate with its culture and habits is more likely to ignore practices that can support refugees' educational path (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Another risk is that diversity is manipulated as an "institutional good" to bring an added value to the school (Urciouli, 2016). Especially nowadays, in the light of neo-liberalist tendency to evaluate things "in terms of their productive deployability", *diversity* is used a form of cultural capital by corporate discourses (Urciouli, 2016, p.38) Some policies might *talk* about diversity and culture as 'goods', without providing actual examples of "how such good can be used" (Urciouli, 2016, p. 38) The



emphasis on minorities' integration might serve as a mere promotion strategy to show on the school's web page, without resulting in any inclusive practices (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Furthermore, in institutions where 'diversity' is over-emphasized, 'refugee student' becomes a label that divides rather than including (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Practices that derive from this approach, such as isolating refugee students from mainstream classes and "medicalising refugees as subjects of trauma" by overwhelming them with psychological support initiatives can have a counteractive effect on their well-being (Taylor & Sidhu, 2013, p. 52).

3.1 Flexible practices

It is crucial to delve into the school's practices in order to understand whether the inclusion policy described is merely superficial or it actually promotes an inclusive environment. The educational strategies and policies reflect the institution's awareness regarding the challenges that refugees encounter due to their limited rights and economical resources and cultural differences. Indeed, schools whose policies encounter specific needs of refugees have been positively evaluated by their students (Naidoo, 2015; Berg, 2018; Begüm, 2019).

Making effective educational choices determines not only academic results, but above all refugees' personal experience and well - being (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). As argued above, the conditions, limitations and resources offered at the macro-level of the hosting country are highly influential (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Therefore, organizations that operate at the meso-level, such as higher education institutions (HEI), need to consider and consequently react according to their external environment (Berg, 2018). This ability, called *self-reflexivity*, benefits refugees' integration in the educational institution according to Berg (2018).

Moreover, Harris and Marlow (2011) highlight the importance of being *flexible* in the management of curricula and services for schools engaged in programs for refugee students. The authors point out the necessity to critically reflect on the institution's practices and "enable effective responses" to the needs and specific situation of students with different cultural backgrounds (p. 7). It is crucial to account that the main difficulties that refugees encounter in their educational path in local schools regard language proficiency and ability to apply it for academic purposes (Begüm, 2018; Naidoo, 2015; Harris, Marlow, 2011; Taylor, Sidhu, 2012). Consequently, additional language classes, easily accessible, tailored for newcomers' educational experience result precious as they help to comply with academic activities (Naidoo, 2015; van Velzen, 2013; Begüm, 2018).

Other studies stress that rather than focusing on emotional needs, to provide the right resources and support for newcomers to deal with academic challenges is more beneficial for their well-being (van Velzen, 2013). Accordingly, more support regarding scholastic activities, such as writing and



comprehending, and study counselling empower refugees and give them more agency to succeed in their scholastic path (Berg, 2018; van Velzen, 2013; Crea, 2016).

The level of acquaintance with the new educational system (van Velzen 2013), and the attitude of teachers towards refugees' background students also have great impact of the success of refugees' higher education (Bacher et al. 2019; Berg, 2018; McBrien, 2005; Harris & Marlow, 2011). Consequently, in designing support services and teaching strategies, it is crucial to understand which approaches are preferred by refugee background students. A recent study suggests that "international students show a preference for active, ongoing assistance throughout their educational experience' and 'African students need more one-on-one time from academic staff" (Harris & Marlow, 2011, p.193).

Social activities within the local community and provision of buddy programs represent valuable policies since they encourage intercultural exchange and stimulate understanding of cultural practices (Berg, 2018; Begüm, 2018). To establish *social bridges* can foster integration, according to some scholars, refugee students should take part in a class with locals and other internationals (Naidoo, 2015; Trickett, Birman, 2011). However, since the quality of these interactions has great influence on refugees' sense of affiliation and well-being, it is crucial to promote initiatives aimed at creating ties between minority groups and locals (Naidoo, 2015; Berg, 2018; Begüm, 2018). Exploring the policies of educational programs aimed at refugees in five German Universities, Berg (2018) reports that the adoption of holistic approach, able to recognize the specific needs of refugees while treating them equally to international students, results in a successful and inclusive experience. Naidoo (2015) researching Australian universities reports similar conclusions pointing to the importance of creating a culture of warmth and understanding', for instance, by informing the staff about their students' culture, values and differences in the academic background.

A need for a clear articulation of the program's goals and possibilities for the future is crucial as well and it influences the motivation to pursue an educational path (Crea, 2016). When activities and further opportunities offered by the educational programs are clear, students' expectations are better managed and the risk of dropouts is lower (Crea, 2016; Laing, Robinson, 2010). In this regard, Crea's (2016) research on refugee students' experiences stresses that integration of the program's activities in the local context is able to better connect refugees to the resources and opportunities of the hosting country, hence support the development of social links (Ager, 2008).

3.2 Inclusive education

All the aspects described above assume further value in the light of Vislie's study on inclusive education (2003). Vislie investigates the shift from *integration* to *inclusion* in the policy of common schools that offer 'special' education to minority groups (2003). These two terms, usually mixed and used as



synonyms, assume a distinct meaning when applied to education. An *inclusive* educational environment takes a step further than mere ‘integration in the classroom’: it merges students who need extra support within the class by adopting initiatives able to level down the differences. Accordingly, what makes it an inclusive education, rather than integrated one, is the ability of the school to: “see differences as opportunities for learning, scrutinize barriers to participation, make use of available resources to support learning, develop a language of practice, create conditions that encourage risk-taking” (Vislie, 2003, p.22).

Considering the situation of asylum seekers in the Netherlands, barriers that could prevent their participation in education are: the impossibility to access any social services, including schools and language courses in Dutch prior to their residence permit, and the transportation cost to reach Universities from the Asylum Centres (Dolman, 2017; Harris & Marlow, 2011; Berg, 2018). Especially since a good command of the spoken language does not necessarily correspond to a good academic use of it, it is challenging for asylum seekers and refugees to learn and use Dutch to access higher education (Taylor, Sidhu, 2012). As highlighted above (1.2,) the affirmation of English as Lingua Franca might represent a good compromise, especially since in an increasing number of academic programs in Netherlands are taught in English (Berns et al. 2011). Schools that offer education to refugees and asylum seekers need to consider the variety of structural and psychological aspects involved to shape an inclusive environment for them.

To sum up, refugees and asylum seekers’ participation in educational environments implements their *human capital*, as it stimulates their general and linguistic competences, their *social capital* since they are in contact with co-ethnic, locals and international students, and their *social links* as schools can provide a connection with other services. Furthermore, a positive scholastic experience benefits refugees’ well-being by motivating and empowering them (Crea, 2016) Certainly, refugee students’ motivation and engagement in educational and social activities is decisive for their integration in the hosting community, but the institution's policy plays a key role in facilitating this process when it recognises the complexity of needs of asylum seekers and refugees and designs an inclusive educational program (Berg, 2018; Taylor Sidhu, 2012; Naidoo, 2015).



4. EVALUATING **Inclusion** A CASE STUDY

The discussion elaborated above emphasizes that socio-cultural aspects of integration, such as language proficiency, *social capital* and *human capital*, are crucial to achieve a successful integration in the hosting country as they have an impact on structural integration as well. This ‘two-way process’ is determined both by conditions provided by the hosting community and by the refugees’ motivation (Ager, 2008). Accordingly, the opportunities and legal rights existent in the hosting country have great influence on refugees’ integration process, especially institutions that offer educational initiatives to refugees. Indeed, by attending academic courses in the hosting country, refugees are exposed to the local language, local and international students and probably a new educational system and learning style. As the literature shows, schools present refugees with many challenges as well as opportunities to develop their integration process. The purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis that offering refugees access to (higher) education may play a boosting role for their successful integration in the hosting community. Therefore, the leading research question is:

RQ: How is the participation in academic programs helping refugees’ integration in the host society?

The empirical basis of this research is the InclUUsion program offered by Utrecht University in the Netherlands, which will serve us as a case study to test our hypothesis. InclUUsion has been created in Spring 2016 as a bottom-up project. It provides asylum seekers with and *without* a residence permit the opportunity to take individual courses free of charge. To access the program, refugees need to have an academic background and prove a good command of English or Dutch, assessed in an interview during an interview with the InclUUsion staff. Once enrolled, refugees can attend one course per academic quarter, called blocks, and after completing it they receive a certificate stating their participation and results. The purpose of the program is not to give refugees a full tertiary education, indeed they do not receive any ECTS, but to “allow refugees to become acquainted with higher education in Utrecht in an easily accessible way” (Valbusa, 2016). InclUUsion is ‘a call to action’ and facilitates newcomers to step into the local community by including them in a stimulating educational environment with local and international students. Furthermore, the program provides refugees with a Buddy student, Dutch or international, who introduces them to the educational system of Utrecht University and to Dutch culture.

As discussed above, the two aspects that mostly determine the success of refugees’ educational experience, and hence their integration process, are proficiency in the local language/s and development of social connections. Accordingly, the two sub-questions, designed to answer the research question, inquire the conditions provided by InclUUsion to implement language proficiency in English



and social connections, and consequently the responses of refugee students. These questions are elaborated as follow.

SQ1: How is the participation of refugee students to InclUUsion improving their language proficiency in English?

SQ2: How is the diversity policy adopted by InclUUsion promoting social connections between refugees and the student/Dutch community, according to the refugee students?

The characteristics of InclUUsion make it a valid example for the study of refugees' integration through participation in academic programs. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of what better facilitates the process of integration, this research adopts a two-fold approach by inquiring both InclUUsion's policy and practices and refugee feedback and experience in the program.



5. METHODOLOGY

The following chapter describes the methodology adopted by this study to investigate the research questions stated above. As this research looks at integration as a two-way process that involves both refugees' experience and the conditions offered by InclUUsion, the development of refugee students' integration is inquired through a two-fold approach. Accordingly, both the policy and practices implemented by the InclUUsion program (meso-level) and the experiences and feedback of its students (micro-level) are the subject of study. This study explores how InclUUsion's policies are able to increase refugee students' language proficiency and social connections. These indicators applied to an adapted version of the relational framework created by Knapper (2018; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), are used in this study to evaluate integration's development both at the micro and meso level.

Given the two-fold approach adopted, this study applied triangulation to gain a more valid outcome from this research. Meant as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon", triangulation permits drawing upon multiple sources of evidence (Bowen, 2009). By examining the information collected through different sources, it is possible to corroborate findings across datasets and reduce the potential biases (Bowen, 2009).

5.1 Material

Firstly, this study looks at the document 'Advies over positionering InclUUsion. Rapportage en blink op de toekomst (2017-2020)' understand which conditions for promoting integration InclUUsion offers to its students. This document was written by the project manager of InclUUsion, Elena Valbusa, and describes the aim, strategy and purpose of the program and it will be referred to as 'the policy document'.⁵

The analysis of the policy document was useful to achieve a better understanding of InclUUsion's services concerning refugees' language proficiency and social connection. In light of this, questions were formulated for interviewing InclUUsion's project manager, Elena Valbusa, and InclUUsion students. The interviews were semi-structured: the format is open-ended questions to encourage the participants to further elaborate their answers (Dorney, 2007, p.137) An interview guide was designed consisting of a few key questions around language proficiency and development of social connections, the topics of the sub-questions of this research (see Appendix 1 and 2 for the interview questions).

⁵ The original version is written in Dutch, but the document has been translated in English using Google Translate



5.2 Participants

Current and previous InclUUsion students represent the sample of the study. The selection of participants was done according to “homogeneous sampling” as “participants are from a particular subgroup who share important experience relevant for the study” (Dorney, 2007, p.127). Four current InclUUsion students and one previous student constituted the sample of participants of this study. They were recruited from different sources: from InclUUsion students already known by the researcher, members of the InclUUsion staff and other fellow students. Since the sampling strategy relies on the availability of participants, the nationality, gender or age were not controlled. The respondents come from different countries: Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran. The participants differ in terms of gender, two are male and four females, and they are all in their late twenties or early twenties. Since the sample of participants is little and very diverse, it is not possible to generalize conclusions from their experiences. The participants’ names were substituted by pseudonym.

Furthermore, the project manager of InclUUsion, Elena Valbusa was interviewed with the purpose of delving into the program’s organization and purposes. All the participants were informed about the aim of the research and about the full anonymity and confidential treatment of the data.

5.3 Procedure and data analysis

First, the InclUUsion’s policy was explored through the document analysis of its policy text, the ‘ADVIES OVER POSITIONERING INCLUUSION. RAPPORTAGE (2016-2017) EN BLIK OP DE TOEKOMST (2017-2020)’, and the interview with the project manager of the program. The document was examined in detail, particularly the choices made in terms of support and services for promoting language proficiency in English and social connections, in order “to identify the agencies that played a role in supporting school improvement programs” (Bowen, 2009, p. 3). Afterwards, Elena Valbusa was interviewed via Skype, due to the Covid-19 restrictions.⁶ The conversation was conducted in English and, after the consent of Elena Valbusa, it was recorded and transcribed using the online program Otter.ai.

Once clarified the services and opportunities offered by the InclUUsion program, the attention was turned towards the experiences of the InclUUsion students. Five interviews were conducted with four current InclUUsion students and one student who attended the program in the past.⁷ The interviews were semi-structured, however, participants were free to elaborate and share their

⁶ In order to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, during the months of February, March, April 2020 the Netherlands introduced several social restrictions that impede people to meet in person.

⁷ At the beginning of each interview refugee students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary base of their participation and the anonymous treatment of the data. Then permission was asked to record the conversations.



experiences of integration in the Netherlands, which have been an interesting source for further questions during the interview.⁸ Each interview roughly lasted one hour and was transcribed through the online program Otter.ai.

Then, the transcribed content of the interviews and the information collected on InclUUsion's policy were coded through NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) and organized in Nodes in order to better identify significant patterns.⁹ NVivo enables to manage data by creating a template, explore and compare the content of both policy documents and interviews' transcriptions. By applying the same Nodes to the analysis of InclUUsion's policy document and interviews with project manager and students, it is possible to compare conditions and responses and better examine what aspects of the program facilitate refugee's integration. The table below (Table 1) shows how the relational framework created by Knapper (2018; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009) has been adapted and applied in this study. The InclUUsion program and the refugee students represent the two fields of investigation, respectively meant as meso and micro-level, represented on the upper lines of the table. The column on the left reports the indicators examined by this study, language proficiency, social connections and diversity policy, and specify the Nodes used to organize these data. The central columns describe in bullet points what were the focus of investigation for each source.

Both data collection and analysis are qualitative: the flexibility and emergent nature of this approach suits better the purpose and the field of interest of this research (Dorney, 2007). This study aims at measuring the development of integration through students' subjective opinions, feelings and experiences in a specific situation and context.

⁸ The structured questions were designed for delving into refugee students' experiences in class, with the English language and with their fellow students.

⁹ The Nodes used to organize the content are 'Language' which will be divided into 'Spoken English' and 'Academic English'. The second subject of inquiry of this research, 'social connections' represent the second main Node. It is divided according to the contacts promoted by InclUUsion in this regard: 'Buddy program', 'Fellow students', 'InclUUsion students'. In the Node 'Diversity policy' are organized the statements that suggest the organization's awareness about refugee students' challenges and needs, and the consequent approach and initiative design by InclUUsion.



Table 1

	MESO-LEVEL MESO -LEVEL: InclUUsion program		MICRO-LEVEL MICRO-LEVEL: InclUUsion students
	DOCUMENT ANALYSIS Policy Document	INTERVIEW Project Manager	INTERVIEWS InclUUsion students
<p>SQ1:</p> <p>PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE</p> <p>Nodes: <u>Academic English</u> <u>Spoken English</u></p>	<p>Admission requirements</p> <p>Language courses</p> <p>Support services</p>	<p>Admission requirements</p> <p>Strategy behind language choices</p>	<p>Students previous academic experience and knowledge of English</p> <p>Challenges regarding use of academic English</p> <p>Feedback about support services</p>
<p>SQ2:</p> <p>SOCIAL CONNECTIONS</p> <p>Nodes: <u>Social bridges</u> <u>Social bonds</u> <u>Social Links</u></p>	<p>Students in class</p> <p>Buddy program</p> <p>Social activities</p> <p>Students' link to local community</p>	<p>Strategies behind programs' choices</p> <p>Social activities</p> <p>Students' link to local community</p>	<p>Experience in class</p> <p>Experience with the Buddy program</p> <p>Relationship with classmates</p> <p>Relationship with other InclUUsion students</p> <p>Other social activities promoted by InclUUsion</p> <p>Links to the local communities</p>
<p>DIVERSITY POLICY</p>	<p>Description and explanation of the policy designed to promote inclusion</p>	<p>Awareness and purposes behind the policies put into practice</p>	<p>InclUUsion students' experience of the initiatives designed on the diversity policy</p>



6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the coding analysis are reported in two tables (Table 2, Table 3) and then discussed focusing first on SQ1 (Section 6.1) and then on SQ2 (Section 6.2). The tables synthesize the significant outcomes emerged from the evaluation of the policy document and interviews. In Section 6.1 and 6.2 these findings are discussed in light of the literature reviewed, focusing first on the conditions offered by InclUusion (meso-level) and then exploring the experiences of the students interviewed (the micro-level) (Knapper 2018; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). The conclusive section of this research (Section 7) summarizes and discusses the main outcomes in light of the research question leading this study *“How is the participation in academic programs helping refugees’ integration in the host society?”*

6.1 SQ1: HOW IS THE PARTICIPATION TO INCLUUSION IMPROVING REFUGEES’ PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH?

The table below reports the outcomes of the qualitative data analysis conducted to answer the first sub-question. As indicated in the line above, the content of the interviews and of the policy document was organized according to the Nodes “Academic English”, “Spoken English” and “Diversity Policy” (Node’s explanation see Section 5.3). Comparing these Nodes made it possible to understand InclUusion’s policy on language as well as students’ responses to it. The central columns describe in bullet points the core aspects that have emerged from this analysis. These findings are discussed in Section 6.1.1, which focuses on the meso-level, and then considering InclUusion students’ experience, in Section 6.1.2.



<p>Table 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SubQuestion1 Proficiency in English Language Nodes: Academic English, Spoke English</p>	
<p>MESO-LEVEL INCLUUSION PROGRAM Opportunities and initiatives for integration</p>	
<p>Policy document</p>	<p>Interview with project manager</p>
<p>Entry requirements: good command of English or Dutch</p> <p style="text-align: center;">In-take interview in English</p> <p>No language courses included in the program</p> <p>Section of the document 'LESSON LEARNED': students have difficulties with English.</p> <p>Future purpose: continuation and more financial support to EngLUUision (English Academy for Newcomers)</p>	<p>No official assessments of English level: no time, no resources.</p> <p>In-take interview: conversation to have an idea of the person.</p> <p>Beginning accepting: A2/B1 level of English.</p> <p>Now: stricter selection because aware of difficulties. English because most of the courses offered are in English .</p> <p>No additional language courses because no finances available.</p> <p>Partnership with English Academy for Newcomers (previous EngLUUision).</p> <p>Students rejected because low proficiency: redirected to English Academy for Newcomers.</p>
<p>MICRO-LEVEL INCLUUSION STUDENT</p>	
<p>Interviews with InCLUUision students</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Wissam:</p> <p>Studied in English before, but academic system different</p> <p>Difficulties in academic English, hard to complete assignment without supervision/support</p> <p>Importance to practice</p> <p>Improved thanks to reading and academic activities</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Miriam:</p> <p>Studied in English before, but academic system different and everything new</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Difficult writing Essay</p> <p>Very motivated to achieve good grades, refuse extensions offered by professors</p> <p>Improved thanks to reading and academic activities</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Omar:</p> <p>Studied in English before</p> <p>English was not a problem</p> <p>Improved thanks to academic activities</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Zahra:</p> <p>Courses in English very challenging</p> <p>Very motivated and stimulated by teachers and the inclusive environment</p> <p>Improve level of English, built confidence in speaking English thanks to InCLUUision</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Azar:</p> <p>English level good enough to handle academic activities</p> <p>Demanding academic atmosphere, high expectation in the use of English. Challenging</p> <p>Participated in EAN, helpful for IELTS but not for academic activities</p> <p>-Motivated to complete assignments with no support</p>



6.1.1 English: resources and advantages (meso-level)

The following section discusses the findings resulted from the analysis of the first sub-question, which investigates how the InclUUsion program fosters refugees' integration process by offering opportunities to implement their proficiency in English.

To begin, it is relevant to point out that the mere choice of InclUUsion to focus on English represents an inclusive attitude. The impossibility for asylum seekers in the Netherlands to participate to Dutch language courses makes it hard for them to undertake educational programs taught in Dutch (Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013). Even for refugees with a granted residence permit it is challenging to learn and use Dutch academically. As argued by Gerritsen et al. (2016), although Dutch is the local language of the Netherlands, English is the main language used in higher education, and it is increasingly used as a second language by the locals. This aspect is reflected by the numerous courses taught in English offered at the UU.¹⁰ InclUUsion draws upon these advantages offered by the macro-level and chooses to facilitate refugees, with a good proficiency in English, to access the program.¹¹ According to Berg (2018), the InclUUsion program demonstrates great '*self-reflexivity*' as it is able to recognize limitations and characteristics of the external environment and to adapt and react consequently.

This choice also reveals that InclUUsion does not expect nor push newcomers to assimilate with the local culture by imposing the acquisition of the Dutch language (Taylor, Sidhu, 2012). Conversely, by focusing on the linguistic competences that refugees and asylum seekers already hold, InclUUsion positions them at the same level as other international students who are conducting their studies in English at Utrecht University. Using English represents a common ground between all the students and allows refugees to identify with the student community of UU despite the lack of command in Dutch. According to Taylor and Sidhu (2012) and Naidoo (2015) refugees' participation in an international academic environment promotes their integration process as they have more chances to practice the English language, build *social bridges* and improve their sense of belonging (Ager, 2008).

Although English unites InclUUsion students and their peers, refugee background students might be less academically prepared and competent in the English language than students who came to the Netherlands with specific academic purposes. In Harris and Marlow's words, the way InclUUsion deals with this aspect shows its *flexibility*: the program can adapt, rethink its services, and facilitate refugee students in their specific situations and status (2011). Unlike their fellow students, refugees' level of

¹⁰ Utrecht University

¹¹ Macro - level: The Netherlands, according to the relational framework of Syed and Özbilgin (2009)



English is assessed only through an intake interview rather than a strict language test or language certificate. This exception facilitates refugees and asylum seekers' access to the program.

Besides this advantage, the choice of not testing the level of academic English might have counteractive consequences. As highlighted by McBrien (2005) Begüm (2018) Naidoo (2015), it is the academic use of English what usually represents an issue for refugee students, especially since a poor command of the language could cause discrimination and feeling of isolation in class.¹² The absence of additional support service, such as language courses or language assistance, can represent a disadvantage for refugee students, who might be exposed to demanding academic activities and feel discriminated against because of their lower level (Berg, 2018; van Velzen, 2013; Crea, 2016).

InclUUsion is aware of this potential issue and, despite its limited resources, it provides alternatives to meet its students' needs. For instance, the program now imposes stricter selection criteria, as the project manager explained: "I remember accepting people who were, you know, A2/B1 who had a very good academic level, and they're very keen on learning. So now we have decided, since I think two years, we have decided to be more selective and stricter because it is more likely that it goes wrong."¹³ The Buddy program offered by InclUUsion represents a further opportunity for refugees to practice English and ask for feedback and advice regarding school assignments. As van Velzen (2013) describes, this form of peer support is more effective and beneficial for refugee students' well-being. Furthermore, InclUUsion partners with the young NGO 'The English Academy for Newcomers' that offers affordable English language courses to newcomers in the Netherlands.

The opportunities InclUUsion offers to implement the English language draw upon the programs' awareness of both difficulties and resources of refugees and are tailored on their needs. In the light of the literature, the policy and choices of InclUUsion encourage refugees' integration by focusing and stimulating the use of the English language, which includes them in the international students' community and free them from the label of refugee.

¹² InclUUsion is aware of these problems, as described in the policy document, refugees are "They sometimes have difficulty with English during the course [...] there is a need for more English education" (Valbusa, 2016). But, as the project manager clarified, lack of time and resources for the InclUUsion's staff to organize a proper language evaluation for all students are the reasons that prevent the program from organizing official language tests and offering additional language courses.

¹³ Moreover, InclUUsion facilitates its students as they don't have the obligation to complete assignments or exams. The program also supplies its lack of language services by partnering with 'an organization [...] called *English Academy for Newcomers* [...] run by volunteers, who are mainly students, and they offer English courses' as Elena Valbusa explained.



6.1.2 'New and difficult' (micro-level)

Students' experience on the use of the English language confirmed both opportunities and issues that were discussed in the policy document and as well as in the interview with Elena Valbusa. The refugee background students who participated to this study described their proficiency in English as good enough to speak and understand teachers and classmates.

However, as Miriam said "the main difficulty concerns academic activities, I think it's the language, the theme, like everything was really new for me". Although most of the participants in the study declared they have used English for academic purposes before, they pointed out that at Utrecht University the expectations on the academic use of English are higher. The type of assignment, teaching approach and assessment method were indicated as "new and difficult" by most of the participants. As Wissam's experience exemplifies, the difference in the educational system and use of formal vocabulary can jeopardize the learning outcomes. He explained that the exam didn't go well because of "the language of asking questions, I really found out that there is a big word that I don't understand, so I didn't understand the meaning of the questions. And these are the keywords of the question, [...] maybe for the other students, they normally use it for questions. So, in my country we don't use those specific words. [...] So I really understand the question in the opposite meaning, and I answered the opposite way. Yeah, I really understand 90% of the course. But I answered in the wrong way because I didn't understand the question. That was horrible." As described above (6.1.1), these difficulties are acknowledged, and refugees are offered additional courses by the EAN and the possibility to opt out of assignments and exams.¹⁴

Despite these facilitations and support forms, students' responses and attitudes towards the challenge of using academic English were diverse. Some students reported that to prepare for higher education, *additional* language and academic support was needed. As Azar described in regard to the EAN: it was helpful "but not that much [...] if it was one person to one person it could be more effective because you can have your things that you find challenging". One-to-one support can be offered by the Buddy students, about whom InclUUsion students are enthusiastic and express a desire to meet more often. As Berg, (2018) and Begüm (2018) reported, the possibility offered by the Buddy program to combine social bridging with language practice would allow refugees to speak more comfortably or ask for support to peer students.

While these support services and flexibility on assignments has been appreciated by some students, others said they prefer instead to deal with academic challenges and work harder to achieve

¹⁴ English Academy for Newcomers



the same level of their fellow students. Most of the refugee students described the academic activities at Utrecht University as “completely new” and “difficult”, but these very same aspects were also named as a source of their improvement in English. Students experienced reading academic texts and writing essays as a tough and challenging activity because of “the poetic language” and “academic vocabulary”.

However, according to the students interviewed, these challenges were stimuli, instead of barriers, because they were encouraged by the environment of the class where they felt “at the same level of the others”. Thanks to InclUUsion, refugees practice English and make use of the language to undertake academic activities like other international students: this helps them to feel re-empowered, and to build a *third space* in which they are neither refugees nor Dutch, but they belong to the student community (Bhabha, 1994). The positive and supportive atmosphere refugee students perceived in class implement this feeling of inclusion and overcome difficulties, as Zahra described “I wanted to have some participation in the class, I want to express my opinion because, you know, I said to myself, it's not important if you said something wrong in English, it doesn't matter. I'm here because I want to improve my English and also the teacher knows about my situation, the students know, and the teacher was super nice, so I didn't feel any pressure”. In the light of Vislie's words (2003), InclUUsion creates an inclusive environment by creating conditions that encourage risk-taking. Students' words confirmed the programs' ability to balance support services and stimulate their individual development. These characteristics correspond with what Berg (2018) defines as a holistic approach to education.

The improvement in English language is crucial as by using English refugees are negotiating their identity of students, and assuming more confidence, as confirmed by Zahra “I think I improved my academic English a little, and in some aspects I decreased the fear... because I hadn't any confidence or speaking in English but I built this here”. This is important because, as Naidoo (2015) describes, language is not only a medium of communication but is related to identity, therefore InclUUsion students' improvement in English can benefit their overall well-being and positively influence their third space in the hosting country (Bhabha, 1994).



6.2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION SQ2: HOW INCLUSION IMPLEMENTS SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

The above sections clarified that as a result of the inclusive and holistic policy implemented by the InclUUsion refugee students could practice and become more confident in using the English language. This positively influenced their overall well-being in the country and, according to the literature, foster their integration.

The following section focuses on the second integration's indicator considered in this research: newcomers' social connection. Accordingly, the following paragraphs inquire the second sub-question looking into refugee students' social connections with locals, internationals, and other students with similar cultural background. Table 3a and Table 3b reports in bullet point the results of the qualitative analysis conducted using the NVivo program. The main Nodes used to organize and compare the information are "Social bridges", "Social bonds" and "Social Links": the three types of social capital indicated by Ager (2008). The findings are discussed in light of the literature in Section 6.2.1 and 6.2.2, which respectively focused on the policy of the program, and on the experience of InclUUsion students.



<p>Table 3a</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SubQuestion2 Social Connections Nodes: Social bridges, Social bonds, Social links</p>	
<p>MESO-LEVEL INCLUUSION PROGRAM Opportunities and initiatives for integration</p>	
<p>Policy document</p>	<p>Interview with project manager</p>
<p>Open to both refugees and asylum seekers without residence permit</p> <p>Aimed to be a steppingstone to higher education, internship or workplace</p> <p>At InClUUsion the cooperation and interaction of three groups are central: refugee students, their fellow students and teachers.</p> <p>The interaction of the three groups makes inclusive diversity in education possible.</p> <p>InClUUsion is an added value for the entire UU community: students and lecturers, in terms of education, research and social impact</p> <p>Students come into contact with other perspectives and worlds not only through study or participation in education, but also through direct and personal contact with "the other".</p> <p>Provision of Buddy program</p> <p>Social activities with local student associations</p> <p>InClUUsion offers itself as subject of study for researches at the University</p>	<p>During the admission InClUUsion assures that students can cover transportation costs, contact with COA, UAF and municipality</p> <p>Organize social activities, game nights, drinks, cultural activities with other students associations</p> <p>Organization of InClUUsion conference every year: theme and topics chosen by InClUUsion students</p> <p>No guideline to teachers, manage lecture with InClUUsion students independently</p> <p>Buddy and students matched and informed about expectations and activities they can do together</p> <p>InClUUsion helps to raise awareness about refugees and the right for education</p>



<p>Table 3b</p> <p>MICRO-LEVEL</p> <p>INCLUSION STUDENT</p> <p>Experience at the InClUUsion Program</p>		
<p>Interviews with InClUUsion students</p>		
<p>Wissam: "InClUUsion made me better"</p> <p>Age: main difference with classmates</p> <p>Positive experience in class with local, Dutch fellow students and professor</p> <p>Very motivated by the content of the readings and lectures: help to widen perspectives</p> <p>Happy about Buddy student</p> <p>Friend with other InClUUsion classmates</p>	<p>Azar: "Thanks to InClUUsion I feel I can do something meaningful with my life"</p> <p>Age only difference perceived: very international and multidisciplinary environment level down the differences</p> <p>Still in touch with the Buddy although she finished InClUUsion years ago: helped her with the UU system and with English and Dutch language</p> <p>InClUUsion eased the access to the Master: cover letter from professors</p> <p>Participate to organization of InClUUsion conference: helpful to meet other InClUUsion students who share same experiences and challenge</p>	<p>Zahra:</p> <p>Different routines and age: main difference with classmates.</p> <p>Otherwise no difference at all</p> <p>Perceived international environment learnt from other cultures</p> <p>Good relationship with Buddy, build a friendship</p> <p>InClUUsion help her to examine herself, gain confidence</p> <p>Friend with other InClUUsion classmates</p>
<p>Miriam: "InClUUsion opened possibilities to me"</p> <p>Age, routines and priorities: main differences with fellow students</p> <p>Thanks to InClUUsion moved closer to Utrecht</p> <p>Thanks to InClUUsion built a network of connections with professors and initiatives active in Utrecht and found an internship</p> <p>InClUUsion eased the access to the Master</p>	<p>Omar: "InClUUsion was the miracle, the light"</p> <p>Negative experience in class with only Dutch (isolation and exclusion)</p> <p>Very positive experience international class: mutual support, learn from each other</p> <p>No Buddy student,</p> <p>InClUUsion improved his CV: more job opportunities</p>	



6.2.1 Connections as an added value (meso-level)

The analysis of ‘Advies over positionering InclUUsion. Rapportage en blink op de toekomst (2017-2020)’ and the interview with the project manager revealed that connections represent a pillar and a strength of the program. First, and most importantly, InclUUsion represents a connection itself: the aim of the program is to be a “call to action for asylum seeker and refugee to make use of their waiting time” and participate in academic courses at UU (Valbusa, 2016). This is crucial since the prolonged permanence in the AZCs is detrimental for asylum seekers’ psychological well-being as it prevents them from having any contact with the local community and right to engage in it (Bakker, Dagevos and Engbersen, 2013).¹⁵ Thanks to InclUUsion “both groups (refugees and asylum seekers) are given the opportunity to develop and get acquainted with the Dutch education system and culture”. The opportunity that InclUUsion offers them acquires additional values according to what Taylor and Sidhu (2012) and Block (2014) argues: higher education plays a critical role in the resettlement of refugees since a degree gained in the hosting country is more valuable, and enhances the occupational opportunities, than one achieves in the home university.

Secondly, InclUUsion’s connections with agencies and organizations involved in asylum seekers’ support, (UAF¹⁶, COA¹⁷ and the municipality of Utrecht) represent a strength as they are directed to facilitate refugees’ access to the program and represent a valuable *social link* (Ager, 2008). By means of these links InclUUsion can reach refugees and asylum seekers at the AZCs and establish a dialogue with organizations able to cover transportation costs for asylum seekers. InclUUsion demonstrates self-reflexivity: the program is aware of the structural barriers and limitations for refugees in the country and it makes use of its connections to contribute in overcoming them (Berg, 2018).¹⁸

Furthermore, every year InclUUsion involves its students in the organization of a conference based on theme and topics decided and developed by the InclUUsion students themselves. The opportunity of coming together with other refugee background students stimulates *social bonds*, which are crucial for their well-being and negotiation of identity in the new environment (Karin, Bar-Lev, 2014, Ager, 2008). This dynamic network of opportunities and activities reveals InclUUsion’s interest in providing conditions to develop social connections. As highlighted by Tip et al. (2018), by providing

¹⁵ Asylum Centers in the Netherlands

¹⁶ The UAF provides support to refugee students and professionals in their studies and in finding suitable employment on the Dutch labour market.

¹⁷ Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers. COA accommodates them in reception centres, offers basic services and guides them to their future in the Netherlands or abroad.

¹⁸ Furthermore, InclUUsion joins initiatives and collaborated with organization existent in the local community of Utrecht that can advantage refugee students in terms of educational opportunities and social activities.¹⁸ As Vislie (2003) argues, attention in making use of available resources to support learning creates an inclusive environment for refugees. Concerning social activities, Elena Valbusa explained “we (as InclUUsion) also collaborate with, well, historically, I would say with ESN,¹⁸ and the Buddy goes Dutch, that is another student organization. So usually we partner with the Student Associations to organize other activities. It’s mostly social activities.”



opportunities to develop positive social contacts, integration is implemented: positive interactions reduce anxiety and promote well-being.

The option offered to refugees to partner with a Buddy student also represents InclUUsion's attention in providing opportunities for social connections. As argued by Begüm (2018) the Buddy program is particularly successful since it stimulates intercultural exchange and *social bridges* (Ager, 2008). The Buddy program was already offered to international students at Utrecht University, and InclUUsion applied and tailored it to refugees' students. Buddy students are not expected to provide "psychological or legal support" for refugees, which according to Taylor and Sidhu (2012) could have emphasised refugees as a subject of trauma and stress their diversity. Conversely, the Buddy program suggests InclUUsion's belief of the importance of treating refugee students equally to international students, while providing a tool to get acquainted with the culture of Utrecht University.¹⁹ The Buddies can help refugees to become familiar with the educational system, which is crucial to ensure a positive experience according to Van Velzen (2013).

A further opportunity to build *social bridges* is stated in its policy document where the relationship between InclUUsion students, fellow students and teachers is described as a triangle of intercultural exchange. InclUUsion students are included in mainstream class with other international and Dutch students. According to Trickett and Birman (2011), increasing the frequency of contact with the local can implement refugees' psychological acculturation. As stated in the policy document, it also allows teachers and fellow students to be "socially involved", "come into contact with important issues such as migration", "to reflect on their lives as Westerners from a different perspective" and "not only study the other, but study with the other" (Valbusa, 2016). Apparently, these statements seem to overemphasize diversity in terms of 'otherness'. According to Urciouli, the fact of pointing out how the westerners would benefit from diversity may appear as a strategic way to promote the institution rather than refugees (Urciouli, 2016). However, the actual connections and practices promoted by InclUUsion to facilitate its students' clearly show that this is not the case.

On the contrary, by pointing at the advantages of all the parties involved, InclUUsion seeks to shape a more holistic and inclusive project, as described by the policy document "it is the synergy and collaboration between all the parts that create the added value". In the light of these considerations, the opportunity for fellow students and teachers to get in contact and get enriched by cultural differences suggests that the conditions that InclUUsion provides for integration are two-folds. Creating these

¹⁹, Elena Valbusa explained that Buddy and InclUUsion students are matched according to their field of study, language, age and gender, and then informed about expectations and type of activities they can do together. These conditions according to Jasinkaia (2011) can secure positive social interactions which can influence refugee students' opinion and attitude towards the hosting community and environment.



opportunities for social contact benefits refugee students and shape a more diverse and inclusive environment at Utrecht University and in the local community. As observed by Elena Valbusa: “I think that the main achievements have been for the university and the community as a whole. InclUUsion raised awareness about refugees, the right of education for refugees inside Utrecht University. It is making us aware that there was nothing to facilitate that before, about the issues that they may encounter when studying and how we can overcome them”. Aiming at fostering multiculturalism in university, InclUUsion facilitates the promotion of a space where refugees do not stand out as such and are rather included as students. According to Naidoo (2015) Berg, (2018) and Vislie (2003) this approach determines inclusive education and help asylum seekers and refugees to feel more affiliated.

Thanks to InclUUsion’s strategies concerning language and social connections students can create *social bridges* by participating in mainstream class and meeting with Buddies. Furthermore, thanks to the organization of the annual conference and other social events directed to refugee background students, *social bonds* are stimulated as well (Ager, 2008). In the light of the literature, InclUUsion stimulates refugees’ socio-cultural integration as it offers opportunities to get to know the hosting community, the student culture and system, and to identify as a UU student while maintaining the bond with students who hold similar background. Furthermore, InclUUsion represents a step towards structural integration as well since it provides services and educational courses that enrich refugees’ competences and links to future opportunities.

6.2.2 A network of connections as a door to integration (micro-level)

Once again students’ words validated the success of InclUUsion’s policy and practices in facilitating their integration process. The main consequences reported by InclUUsion students who participated in this study are: a strong sense of re-empowerment and vibrant willingness to take control of their life. Wissam said that InclUUsion was “a purpose to get out of bed”, that, as rephrased by Azar, means “to take predictability back to my life”.

As argued by the literature, the mere presence of refugees in mainstream classes is not sufficient criteria for their integration, the success of this rather depends on the policies and approach on diversity enacted by educational institutions (As Tip et al., 2018). Students confirm that InclUUsion’s ability to balance support and attention to individual situations with stimulating challenges have helped them to identify as *students* and feel included as such. The program draws upon academic knowledge, resources and motivation that refugees do have, but have been for long suffocated by boredom and psychological



distress caused by their reclusion in the 'jail', as AZCs were described by almost all of them. Focusing on refugees' resources rather than lacks, InclUUsion triggers them to be "active again", "to do something meaningful with life" (Omar, Azar). These words confirmed Crea's findings (2016): educational programs directed to refugees can implement their feeling of empowerment and courage.

Thanks to this feeling of re-empowerment promoted by InclUUsion's policy and choices, refugee students are encouraged to take advantage of the connections that the program offers in terms of social *bridges* and *links* (Ager, 2008). Talking about her new internship and access to a Master program, Miriam explained that "InclUUsion didn't do that for me, but it was really the gate. Like, I don't think that I would have been that far. If the InclUUsion wasn't there". Similarly, Azar affirmed that InclUUsion facilitated her access to the Master she is currently enrolled: through the program she got acquainted with the system and expectations of the university and she was supported by teachers to continue her education. These aspects are particularly beneficial for the success of refugees' future in HE²⁰ and structural integration (van Velzen, 2013; Bacher et al., 2019). InclUUsion's success in representing a "steppingstone to future opportunities" is confirmed also by Omar's satisfaction about the academic courses: "Now my CV is really huge, it really has a lot of impact".

The results of this study demonstrate that InclUUsion's choice to include its students in mainstream classes together with local and international students helps promoting social *bridges* and sense of belonging in the students' community. However, as stated by Trickett, Briman (2004), it is the *quality* of social connections that influences refugees' feeling of inclusion in the academic environment and their overall well-being. Interestingly, InclUUsion students' feedback in this regard were different and sometimes contrastive yet determined by the same factor: fellow students' and teachers' approach to diversity. In contrast to what De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2010) described regarding the positive effects of contact with the 'majority', the experience of one student placed in a class with only Dutch students was rather negative. He reported feelings of discomfort and rejection, and perceived Dutch people as very individualized: "they don't want to talk to me [...] they already have their own group and they don't want anybody to get inside this group or they don't want to expand the group".

Comparing this statement with the stories of other students, whose impression towards their Dutch classmates were rather positive, it stands out that cultural differences are not an issue per se. As Elena Valbusa stated, InclUUsion students "bring diversity in class, and sometimes we recognize we don't know how to deal with it". Miriam's experience exemplifies how difficult it can be for both sides to handle the vulnerability of students' situations: "I'm being excluded from a lot of activities, not because they don't want me to be included. Because they know what I have. [...] I feel it, I feel, you know, the vibes

²⁰ Higher Education



that they really didn't want to bother me. Yes, but unfortunately, sometimes I really need to be bothered". Talking about her lecture, another student said that during teamwork she was grouped with other InclUUsion students, since the 'Group InclUUsion' could benefit from teachers' extensions and this might affect the teamwork of their fellow classmates. The good intentions behind these choices, aimed at facilitating or 'not bothering' refugees, reveal that dealing with diversity is challenging for all the parts involved and that it is hard to define 'right' guidelines.

Aside these difficulties, students' experience in classes with most international students confirmed that a multicultural environment is more successful in promoting integration through social contacts. Expats, internationals and refugee background students are all 'newcomers' in the Netherlands and InclUUsion choice to place refugees in international classes increases their sense of identification with the international student community. By sharing the same situation students' differences give space to dialogue: "everyone wants to explore, to be open to everyone, to share" confirmed Omar. Other students as well welcomed cultural differences with curiosity, as something new to "learn more from each other" (Azar). Zahra expressed that "It was interesting in this program to see other cultures, because you communicate with a lot of people, not just European people but many people around the world".

Similar outcomes emerged from refugees' description of their experience with the Buddy students: a bonding with the Buddy student does not rely on cultural differences, but on one's personality and on the common interests. All InclUUsion students were enthusiastic about their experience with the Buddies, who were described as helpful in getting to know the "rhythm of students' life" according to Azar and Zahra, and to understand better the Dutch culture. The positive outcomes of these social bridges stimulated refugees to give shape to a new identity of 'students' and feel re-empowered by the opportunities and education offered by the university.

Besides these new stimuli and multicultural interactions, the contacts with other refugee students promoted by InclUUsion was described as a strength as well. As discussed by Bhabha (1994) Wagner (2016) Van Meijl (2008), successful integration does not require the annihilation of one' previous cultural background, but it rather depends on the negotiation of previous and new meanings and values. Accordingly, it is important to maintain co-ethnic *social bonds*, who share similar experiences as it can benefit refugees' well-being (Ager, 2008). More than one refugee students reported to have established friendships with other InclUUsion students. As Azar said, InclUUsion represented a chance "to meet other people that they have the same challenges. They have the same understanding and it's it helps a lot because you realize that you are not alone".

In the light of Vislie's words (2003) InclUUsion gives shape to an *inclusive* educational experience, as it creates opportunities for *social bridges, bonds and links* (Ager, 2008), and the right conditions to shift



the focus of diversity from differences into similarities. Azar, Omar and Zahra confirmed this strength by saying that “it is not about being an outsider or insider” at the end “we are all the same”, “we are all guests in the Netherlands”. InclUUsion contributes to create an open and diverse environment that allows to look beyond cultural differences and help refugees to become familiar with the local community. As Omar described, the *bridges* with the local students he created through InclUUsion helped “to manage my expectations[...] I had this culture shock when I came here with how direct Dutch people are, they are direct. The first few times I was feeling really offended because of my culture, I shouldn't say things straight forward [...] but now I manage to understand, okay this is their culture”. From these results it is possible to conclude that the conditions provided by InclUUsion do promote successful social connection which implement refugees’ socio-cultural integration.

7. CONCLUSION

The discussion delineated above aims at delving into the research question leading this study: “how programs that offer higher education to refugees and asylum seekers can promote their integration process in the hosting country?” The literature revised in this study suggests that refugees’ participation in local schools can benefit their socio-cultural and structural integration as it stimulates social connections and proficiency in the local language/s. This positively affects their well-being, acquaintance with the new environment and better prepare them to find a job in the hosting county.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the actual success of schools when facilitating integration depends on what kind of approach towards diversity leads their educational policies and strategies. In order to empirically assess what choices and initiatives more efficiently influence refugees’ integration, this research designs a specific case-study, the InclUUsion program offered at Utrecht University (NL). Both the policy documents and the practices promoted by InclUUsion were compared with the refugee students’ feedback. This two-folded approach enables a holistic and deeper understanding of the effects of the program.

The findings of this research highlight three specific aspects that make InclUUsion particularly successful in designing an inclusive educational experience able to facilitate refugees’ overall integration. The outcomes of this study highlight how conditions and initiatives designed at the meso-level can promote the integration of an individual, micro-level, in the hosting country, macro-level (Knapper 2018; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009).



Firstly, InclUUsion adapts its services on the basis of refugees' limitations and advantages recognized at the macro-national level of the Netherlands. Indeed, the program's choices draw upon the bilingualism and multiculturalism that characterize the social and educational environment of the country. In response to this policy, refugee students reported more confidence when communicating in English, and an increased frequency and quality of their connections with peer locals and co-ethnics, which benefit socio-cultural integration (Ager, 2008, Dolman, 2017, Dagevos, 2001). InclUUsion's choice to allow asylum seekers without residence permit to access education also reflect the program's awareness about the detrimental consequences of refugees' indefinite staying in the AZC, and its willingness to offer newcomers an alternative choice (Bakker, Dagevos, Engbersen, 2013).

Furthermore, InclUUsion balances services tailored to support refugees' educational experience along with academic challenges and opportunities equal to their peers. InclUUsion students' reveal that this approach to diversity allows them to detach from the label of refugee and step inside the local community as students. This provides them with motivation, competences, and information useful to implement structural integration by getting involved in local initiatives, agencies and further educational opportunities (Ager, 2008, Dolman, 2017, Dagevos, 2001).

Thirdly, the policy and initiatives of the program reflect its purpose to shape a more *inclusive* environment within the university by promoting unbiased intercultural dialogue between refugees, their peer international and local students, and teachers (Vislie, 2003).

The combination of these choices and strategies shows that educational programs can facilitate integration not by teaching or guiding towards it, but by offering refugees resources that stimulate and empower them to develop their integration autonomously. Initiatives directed to implement human capital, *social bonds, bridges and links* (Ager, 2008) are certainly beneficial, but what determines a positive influence at all levels of integration is the promotion of an inclusive and multicultural environment.



Limitations and further research:

The first limitation regards the initial methodology adopted by this research which consisted of a questionnaire. The collection of quantitative data would have allowed to draw correlations between the initiatives offered and students' evaluation. Unfortunately, an insufficient number of respondents made the results unreliable. As a solution, the analysis on the empirical data collected was based on a number of interviews with refugee students. As this research took place during the Covid19 period in the Netherlands that imposed the use of video-chat apps instead of face-to-face conversations. The small sample of participants and the qualitative evaluation of the data do not allow us to generalize the findings, but they provide a first clear picture of the effects of a holistic approach to inclusion of migrants.

Future research could collect more interviews with students enrolled at InclUUsion as well as students who dropped out of the program in order to achieve a thorough picture of refugees' experience. Furthermore, in light of these preliminary findings, it would be interesting to examine the teaching strategies of teachers engaged in the program as well as on the experience of Buddy students involved in InclUUsion. The investigation of these aspects is crucial as they affect the inclusivity of the learning environment, therefore the well-being of refugee students.



GLOSSARY

Considering the linguistic controversies concerning the labels ‘refugees’, ‘migrant’ and ‘asylum seekers’ ‘newcomers’, especially for what concerns the legal consequences that each identity carries, it is important to clarify how these terms have been used in this study. The terms *refugees* and *newcomers* have been used indiscriminately to refer to a specific group of migrants who left their home country to seek asylum in a new one. However, the application to the InClUUsion program is open to both the refugees with residence permit and to those without. Therefore, in this research we will specifically refer to refugees still waiting for their request to be confirmed as ‘asylum seeker’. When *refugee student* or *refugee background students* will be used interchangeably to talk about the students, who are enrolled in the InClUUsion program.



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APPENDIX

Appendix 1

QUESTIONS – INTERVIEW WITH ELENA VALBUSA, INCLUUSION'S PROJECT MANAGER

- How is the intake interview with the students structured? How is the student proficiency in English evaluated?
- How often does it happen that students get refused during the intake interview because of their proficiency in English?
- Are there also language support courses or some kind of services aimed just at the supporting students in the most challenging academic activities?
- How does this cultural exchange come into practice during the the lectures? Does InclUUsion provide some sort of guidelines and preparatory meetings with the teacher involved in the program or does the organization of these activities rely on the teachers only initiatives?
- What kind of further activities does InclUUsion organize with the students? Does it attempt to create a connection within the wider community through other services and initiatives in Utrecht or maybe more like widespread in the Netherlands?
- How inclusion deals with students' transportation issue? Has there been some sort of agreement with the municipalities and what are the main difficulties in organizing like in making such a deal such an agreement to facilitate the transportation and the moving?
- In your opinion, what are the main goals that are inclusion to see to achieve in these four years? And what are the main one? I'm going to say he aims at achieving in the in the future.

Appendix 2



QUESTIONS INTERVIEWS WITH INCLUSION STUDENTS

The following questions are just a guideline. Not all the students have been asked the same questions. Since the interviews were semi-structured most of the insights and outcomes have emerged from a spontaneous conversation triggered by one previous question.

- What were you doing before coming to move to the Netherlands in terms of academic studies?
- Is the educational system at Utrecht University similar from the one you were used to? Have you used English academically before?
- Would you say that your level of English has improved? What has been more useful during your experience at Inclusion in improving your level of English?
- how many courses you attend at Inclusion? What are studying at Inclusion?
- How did you discover about Inclusion?
- How was your experience in class?
- How was your experience with your teachers and classmates?
- Do you have a Buddy student? How is your experience with the Buddy?
- How often do you meet with the Buddy? What kind of activities do you do together?
- How is your relationship with other Inclusion students?
- Do you hang out with your classmates after class?
- Did you participate in any social activities promoted by Inclusion? How did you experience it?
- Did Inclusion provide you with any contacts with organizations or activities outside the university?
- How did your kind of opinions and attitudes towards the Netherlands have changed through Inclusion?
- What was your idea before and how it changed now?