



**Utrecht University**

**MSc Youth, Education & Society  
Education for Inclusive Societies  
EFIS**

**Access to higher education for refugees**  
The case of the Netherlands

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# Abstract

The current study examines the barriers that refugees face when accessing higher education in the Netherlands. According to the literature, refugees encounter a lot of obstacles, with the main one being language barriers and unrecognized certificates. The general aim of this research was to address these barriers and provide recommendations. For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The respondents consist of both refugees who access higher education and stakeholders who are engaged in initiatives and institutions that support refugees' education and further access to the labor market. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis. In line with the literature, the results from the interviews indicated that refugees face numerous challenges, among which linguistic and bureaucratic barriers being the most prominent. Also, the findings suggest that a centralized policy needs to be implemented by Dutch universities, apart from the financial support of the initiatives that encourage refugees' access.

**Keywords:** refugees, education, higher education, barriers

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# Abstract

De huidige studie onderzoekt de barrières die vluchtelingen tegenkomen bij de toegang tot het hoger onderwijs in Nederland. Volgens de literatuur komen vluchtelingen veel obstakels tegen, met als belangrijkste taalbarrières en niet-herkende certificaten. Het algemene doel van dit onderzoek was om deze barrières aan te pakken en aanbevelingen te doen. Voor de dataverzameling zijn semigestructureerde interviews afgenomen. De respondenten bestaan uit zowel vluchtelingen die toegang hebben tot hoger onderwijs als belanghebbenden die betrokken zijn bij initiatieven en instellingen die het onderwijs van vluchtelingen en verdere toegang tot de arbeidsmarkt ondersteunen. De gegevens zijn geanalyseerd met behulp van een thematische analyse. In overeenstemming met de literatuur gaven de resultaten van de interviews aan dat vluchtelingen met tal van uitdagingen worden geconfronteerd, waarvan taalkundige en bureaucratische barrières de meest prominente zijn. De bevindingen suggereren ook dat de Nederlandse universiteiten een gecentraliseerd beleid moeten voeren, naast de financiële ondersteuning van de initiatieven die de toegang van vluchtelingen stimuleren.

**Sleutelwoorden:** vluchtelingen, onderwijs, hoger onderwijs, barrières

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# Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right for everyone (United Nations, n.d.). As it is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “*higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit*” (Article 26). On top of that, Eckhardt et. al. (2017), highlight that the current legal basis guarantees the right to education to “*all displaced persons, refugees, asylum seekers or persons in a refugee-like situation*” (p. 2).

However, currently, this is not the case for refugees. According to the study of the UNHCR (n.d.), the percentage of refugees that have access to higher education is quite low (only 3%) and UNHCR aims to increase this percentage to 15% by 2030. This research aims to understand why refugees are facing obstacles when accessing higher education, by taking the case of the Netherlands as an example. The Dutch case is interesting, due to the large number of refugees and the increasing number of applications from refugees and the initiatives that try to integrate them into the Dutch educational system and offer financial support (Avery & Said, 2017).

## Literature review

### Current situation

The immigration movement has been steadily increasing in the last years (Coleman, 2006). Around 79,5 million people were displaced by the end of 2019 (UNHCR, n.d.) and it is estimated that around 35% of them are young people in the age between twelve and twenty-four (Anselme & Hands, 2012). Crea (2015) also states that millions of forced migrants and refugees have to remain for a long period in camps, in their attempt to seek asylum. In the case of Europe, the number of refugees seeking asylum has risen significantly with one million people arriving in Europe by 2015 (Bakker et. al., 2017). Many young refugees who arrive in Europe are looking into the possibilities of following higher education. That is a fact, as since 2015, higher education institutions have faced the challenge of having to respond to the unexpected growing demand for higher education by refugees (Jungblut et. al., 2018). Refugees however face a lot of barriers during their application procedures, albeit of their qualifications, something

that can be very time-consuming (Eckhardt et. al., 2017). This is an important issue that this thesis is trying to research in more depth.

## **Higher education for refugees**

Education is a process of social inclusion through which refugees can become integrated and accepted in a society, promoting their civic rights, and allowing them to adapt into a new culture. (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Moskal & North, 2017; Thomas, 2016). Education can make them feel more confident and efficient, as their lives could be considered more meaningful, but it can also help them to recover to a great extent the losses they experienced (Alpaydin, 2017). Finally, refugees that are accessing education can be seen as models by the next generations (Crea, 2015).

In the case of higher education, refugee communities view universities as institutions that provide not only a path to employment, but also as a means which will allow them to reach a greater level of social status within their host-community. In other words, education is perceived as a way of obtaining a better life (Gray & Irwin, 2013; Zeus, 2011). Also, access to higher education assists refugees in integrating with local communities, growing personally, and supporting their families (Eckhardt et. al., 2017).

Undoubtedly, higher education and education in general, can contribute to long-term socio-economic development of countries (Wilkinson, 2002; Avery & Said, 2017). However, it is observed that access to higher (or post-primary) education has been overlooked for the case of refugees. Humanitarian organisations, as well as governmental policies pay attention only to the basic educational needs of the youth and higher education is not at the center of discussion (Anselme & Hands 2012; Baker et. al., 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Moskal & North, 2017;). Apparently, humanitarian solutions have typically minored this topic, by focusing on facilitating access to vital necessities such as housing and medical treatment (Baker et. al., 2019). It should be noted that there are attempts promoting the opportunities for refugees in accessing higher education, through scholarship programs, distance learning and other initiatives (Avery & Said, 2017). However, the literature on how higher education systems respond to the issue of enabling access for refugees is relatively recent and still somewhat limited (Jungblut et. al., 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

## Refugees and higher education in the Netherlands

As in most European countries, also in the Netherlands there is an increasing number of refugees that have arrived in the country in the last 10 years (Macrotrends, 2021). As it can be seen in Figure 1, the number of refugees has been steadily increasing since 2013 but had an important drop in 2019. It is worthwhile to mention here that the number of asylum applications fell by 72 percent in the second half of 2020 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (CBS, 2020) but probably numbers will start increasing again post the pandemic.

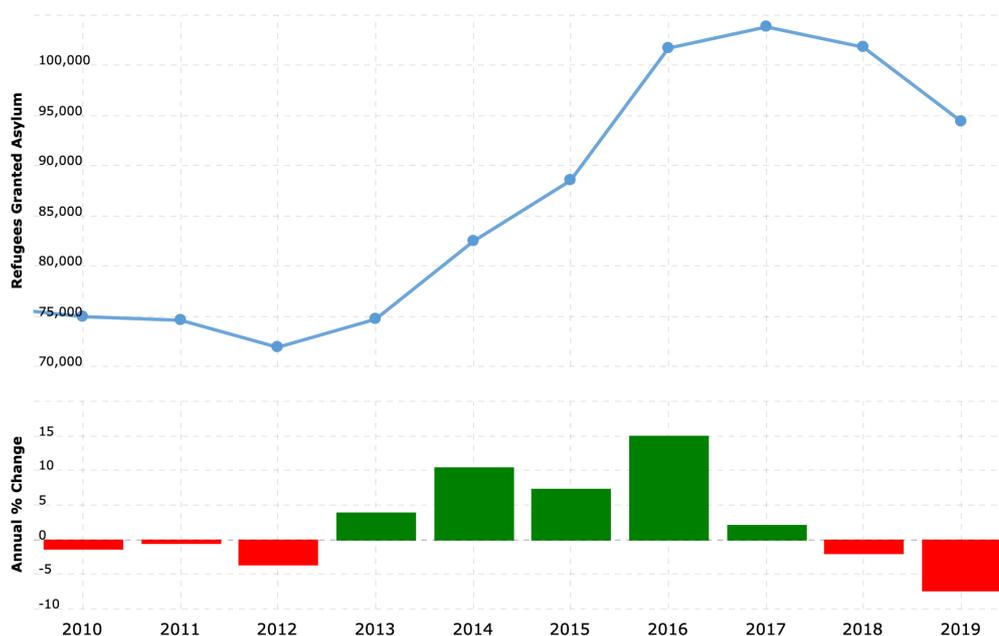


Figure 1: Number of refugees arriving in the Netherlands, (Macrotrends, 2021)

Amongst these refugees, there are a lot of adults who want to gain access to Dutch higher education. The higher education system in the Netherlands consists of three types of schools: universities (universiteiten), universities of applied sciences (hogescholen) and adult education (volwassenenonderwijs) (Crul et. al., 2016). According to a survey conducted by the Council of Europe, in 2014, 665 refugees applied for recognition of their qualifications in the Netherlands. On top of that, in 2015, this number almost doubled which illustrates the big interest of applicants with a refugee background (Eckhardt et. al., 2017). The actual number of refugees entering Dutch higher education cannot be determined, because educational institutions do not keep any information about the refugee status of enrolled students (Teunissen, 2016).

In the Netherlands, only refugees with a residence permit are allowed to enroll to higher education. The process of gaining this status may take more than a whole year, depending on the country of origin. Once they have obtained a permit, they can enjoy the same rights as the Dutch students, which means having the right to student financing, a factor that plays a crucial role in the realization of their studies (Crul et. al., 2016). Refugees must also receive a Dutch language certificate at the academic level (B2) or an IELTS or TOEFL examination for English-language studies, to access higher education (Crul et. al., 2016). It is good to mention that there is an increase in the variety of choice for English-language studies. Given that learning Dutch at an academic level is more consuming, a big percentage of refugees start an English-language study, as being more proficient in English (Teunissen, 2016).

When it comes to academic criteria, refugees should get an evaluation by International Credential Evaluation, in order to check the eligibility of their diploma (Refugees in the Netherlands, 2017; Teunissen, 2016). Refugees between the age of 16 and 18 who arrive in the Netherlands can go through the ISK process. After two years of ISK, they have reached the age of 18 and are no longer entitled to receive financial means (integration budget) to prepare for a higher academic path. Also, due to regulations, refugees usually have to transition to MBO-1 education, even though they are capable of following higher education (Teunissen, 2016).

In the Netherlands there are quite some things that the refugees can do while waiting for their application procedure. For example, the Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF) offers the possibility of a transition year, implemented through several educational institutions. There, refugees that are eligible to participate, have the chance to improve their Dutch language skills, which improves their integration level into the Dutch educational culture. Also, this transition year helps refugees to find a good fit with the study program's acceptance criteria (Teunissen, 2016; Refugees in the Netherlands, 2017). It's worthwhile to mention here that UAF offers administrative and financial support to refugees, as well as legal assistance and counselling (Bleichrodt, 2007; Avery & Said, 2017).

Besides that, there are also some bottom-up student initiatives that provide courses and help refugees to integrate better while waiting for their application (Teunissen, 2016).

More specifically, initiatives such as InclUUsion by Utrecht University, IncLUision by Leiden University, Aspire at the University of Amsterdam and Grotius Minor at Hanze Hogeschool offer free courses to refugees (but without obtaining ECTS) with the aim to make the Dutch educational system more familiar to them.

As it can be seen, the process to enter higher education as a refugee is quite long and complex and it might require that those individuals need to wait two or three years in order to begin their studies (Crul et. al., 2016). To get a better understanding of the adversities that refugees face, an overview of the barriers when accessing higher education is presented below.

## **Barriers**

### **Unrecognized diplomas**

Many refugees have already studied in their home countries but had to stop due to migration. When coming to the Netherlands and applying to continue with higher education, most of them face the issue of unrecognized diplomas. As a result, in most cases they have to study all over again and usually repeat some entry-level educational years (Bajwa et. al., 2017).

Also, many refugees lose or get damaged their documents that can prove their qualifications or previous learning (UNHCR, n.d.) Mostly, refugees leave their homes without being able to provide proof of their degrees, qualifications, or diplomas. As they have to run from sudden abuse, they don't set a priority to collect all the necessary information (Essomba, 2017). Due to this lack of necessary documents, the host countries usually have to reject the eligibility of documents and consequently their application to enter higher education. On top of that, some refugees experience difficulties, when it comes to accessing their previous educational environment, in order to collect and evaluate their documents (Bajwa et. al., 2017).

### **Linguistic barriers**

A lot of refugees struggle with the Dutch language, which is a barrier for them to apply to a university and find a job afterwards. Therefore, these individuals find it difficult to study in the Netherlands (Refugees in the Netherlands, n.d.). Also, advanced language

skills are required by the academic demands of higher education. Mastering a new language to the degree that academic institutions set as a necessity, requires months or even whole years (Teunissen, 2016).

### **Bureaucratic barriers**

As mentioned earlier, the procedure for refugees to access higher education in the Netherlands usually takes a lot of time and this is due to the complexity of the existing system (Refugees in the Netherlands, n.d.). Also, communication from DUO which is responsible for financial matters is getting difficult for refugees, since the letters sent by DUO are written in Dutch (Crul et. al., 2016).

Furthermore, some universities have enrolment quotas, which means that national students are given priority to be enrolled (Teunissen, 2016). Additional difficulty is that their already existing skills may not be useful in the Netherlands and their educational background differs from Dutch students.

Adult refugee education and training is an important issue to discuss, not just because of the social capital they bring with them but also due to their economic status. Their economic position may affect their family's community and subsequently the educational opportunities for their children (Essomba, 2017).

### **Financial barriers**

To begin with, the costs of higher education either excludes several students or discourages them from applying to an academic program. For instance, asylum seekers who are older than 30 years old are not eligible for student finance (Teunissen, 2016).

Also, young refugees are eligible for a study loan while attending post-secondary vocational training. By the time they graduate from post-secondary vocational training to higher vocational education, after five years, their student loan credit has been exhausted, leaving them with no choice but to pursue their studies using their own funds. In fact, this means that the likelihood of dropping out is increasing since refugees have to work in order to afford studying (Crul et. al., 2016).

## **Psychological barriers**

Refugees face psychological difficulties, which are mainly relevant to their migration movement (Essomba, 2017). Migration experiences for refugees may have included war and situations where they have left their families, and adverse circumstances when living in refugee camps. Therefore, refugees' mental health and cognition may be harmed because of these stressors (Bajwa et. al., 2017). Refugees' mental health has an impact on their ability to access information.

Also due to the time-consuming procedures, some refugees have to start their studies a bit later (UAF reports that the average age of refugees who start their studies is 29 years old), in comparison to the majority of the other students, which is between 18-25. This affects them psychologically, as they feel too old to study and experience a different phase of life compared with their fellow students which grows the gap among them (Teunissen, 2016). In this regard, there has been a dropout rate of 34,4% for refugees during the first academic year that can be associated with this issue (Teunissen, 2016).

# **Research Design and Methodology**

## **Research problem**

The current study focuses on the challenges that refugees face when it comes to accessing higher education in the Netherlands. The number of refugees who are forced to migrate due to different factors is steadily increasing (Refugees in the Netherlands, 2017). Many of them want to and have the right to access higher education but cannot, either due to administrative reasons or due to personal factors. This research seeks to explore all the barriers that refugees face in their attempts to access higher education and provides recommendations to eliminate them.

Taking into account the research problem above the following main research question and some sub-research questions are defined.

**Research question:**

*What are the barriers that refugees face when accessing higher education in the Netherlands and how can these barriers be eliminated according to refugees and key stakeholders?*

**Sub-research questions:**

1. Why is it important for refugees to access higher education?
2. What are the benefits for a host country to provide access to higher education for refugees?

## **Research Methodology**

### **Type of research**

This study is qualitative research. It focuses on understanding the views of both refugees and policymakers regarding refugees' access to higher education. For that reason, the qualitative approach is used. As Hogan, Dolan & Donnelly (2009) point, qualitative research is considered the most effective method for studying behavior, culture, and society, since it allows for the interpretation and integration of people's own words, without converting them into numbers. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with refugees who are based in the Netherlands were conducted for the current study. The semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the researcher to follow up on the respondents' responses by asking more questions (Berg, 2001).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were either in the process of entering higher education and refugees who were already in higher education, or alumni. Higher education refers to post-secondary studies. Besides that, interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders from higher education working on programs or initiatives that try to integrate refugees into the Dutch educational system.

All interviews were conducted via online meetings (Microsoft Teams) and did not last longer than 45 minutes. I conducted 12 interviews, eight of them with refugees and four with key stakeholders. This number of interviews was selected mainly due to time

restrictions. Also, more refugees were interviewed than key stakeholders because their experiences are particularly valuable to understand the challenges they faced while entering higher education. Both interviewee groups were above or almost 18 years old. In this case, it was not necessary to obtain consent from parents. Two of the refugees were in the process of accessing higher education, by attending courses offered by student initiatives. Three participants were students at the moment the research was conducted, and three participants were alumni. Regarding the key stakeholders, all of them, except one, were natives of the Netherlands.

### **Measuring instrument**

The qualitative data in this research were collected through interviews with both refugees and stakeholders that are based in the Netherlands. To address the research question, a set of interview questions was formulated. The Interview Protocols for refugees and key stakeholders can be found in Appendices 1 and 2. Similar to Boeije (2010), in this research, data are collected using semi-structured measuring instruments that are customized to the research project. Also, the research sample fits with the research subject. For that reason, the interviewees are both refugees and stakeholders who take part in initiatives that encourage refugees' access to higher education. These interviewees shared their personal stories and knowledge from their perspectives.

Regarding the questions of the interview, the method proposed by Gehlbach & Maureen (2011) is used. More specifically, this approach promotes the idea that questions begin with a general approach of the interviewees' personal experiences, followed by a direct investigation, based on previous findings in the literature.

### **Procedure**

The interviews were held in English. The interviews were audio-recorded in compliance with ethical and privacy regulations. In order to achieve the reliability and validity, several measurements were taken. Before the interview took place, the research participants would need to sign off on the Informed Consent Letter, in which all the details of the purpose of this research were mentioned as well as the conditions that they will have to agree to.

Also, the participants' anonymity was maintained. In addition, respondents' personal information was not listed in the study's result section to maintain anonymity. During the interviews, notes were taken as well.

## **Analysis plan**

The interpretation was informed by the research objective, which was to explore the barriers that refugees face when it comes to accessing higher education and how these barriers can be eliminated, according to refugees and key stakeholders. Therefore, the thesis sought to give recommendations regarding the elimination of these barriers. The data was subjected to thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi & Turunen, 2013). This understanding was guided not only by the existing literature used but also by possible themes that could emerge from the data.

To identify the key patterns that contributed to answering the research questions, a combination of a deductive and inductive approach was used. Thematic codes were created deductively based on literature review but then the researcher added new codes inductively, based on the themes coming out from the research (Seale, 2012). Some examples of deductive codes are: "unrecognized diplomas", "language barriers", "time-consuming barriers", "financial barriers", "psychological barriers", "lack of information". On the other hand, the inductive codes consist of: "educational barriers", "differences in mindset", "no access to information with homeland", "complexity of the system" and "differences in educational systems".

The qualitative analysis software N-Vivo was employed to code the interviews (Richards, 2005). This qualitative analysis software helped the researcher to organise the data and connected them sufficiently with the theoretical background of the thesis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

## **Results**

The analysis of the interviews shows that the most frequent barriers the refugees run into are linguistic, educational, psychological and financial. Each of them presented different challenges for the refugee students trying to find their way into Dutch

universities. Besides that, the educational barriers seem to be quite a big obstacle for the refugees, as the Dutch educational system differs from theirs. Regarding the recommendations of eliminating these barriers, a lot of respondents paid attention to the personal willingness and passion to seek your dreams. Apart from the bureaucratic shift that could improve the situation, personal power seems to play a significant role. The most important quotations are written in *italic style*.

## **Barriers**

In this subcategory, the barriers that refugee students face are presented. Some of them consist of linguistic, financial, and bureaucratic barriers. There has been a consensus among the participants that linguistic barriers form the biggest obstacle for refugees who want to access higher education. 11 of 12 participants clearly stated that “*people don’t know the language. One of the obstacles that we find to go to the university or to even to apply to a university*”. Therefore, not knowing the Dutch language can be considered as an obstacle for the refugees.

At the same time, learning the English language, apart from the Dutch language, is mentioned by the participants as well. “*And then they asked me if I had to do the English test (IELTS).*” One key stakeholder has explained that “*As for English, the level of most of the refugees is not that high so that is why they do not meet the requirements and get rejected. Also, the government says that refugees are obliged to learn Dutch*”.

Another stakeholder highlighted the importance of learning the Dutch language, by saying that “*when you can’t speak the language, you feel like an outsider, and you stay an outsider until you can speak and understand the language of the country where you are living*”. Also, it has been said that “*when you don’t speak the language very well, it’s hard to show your intelligence and your level in other subjects and your pre-education, especially when you don’t have any diplomas*”.

Educational barriers have been mentioned several times by most of the respondents. More specifically, “*the educational system in the Netherlands is very different from their educational things because in other countries everything is called universities*”. Therefore, it is made explicit that the Dutch educational system is different and consequently unfamiliar to refugees. For that reason, “*if refugees don’t understand how*

*things work here, then it's difficult for them to make the right application and be selected for a study program". One Syrian refugee described that "Syria is not really well-rated among other countries in education, they didn't expect that people that come from there will have the sufficient knowledge to be able to participate in the bachelor". Refugees are not aware of the Dutch educational system and how it works.*

Only four participants referred to psychological barriers. A stakeholder said that *"IND procedures create stress"*. Also, the psychological consequences after the experience of a war zone were mentioned. Finally, two refugee students said that they feel intense pressure, due to their age, as they feel that they have to graduate very fast and find a job. Two of the refugees said that they got discouraged by their case managers in terms of proceeding with higher education. A refugee student explains that *"I had that concern. We are told through the media that we are not good enough. So, we assume that higher education in countries like the Netherlands or England might not be for people like us"*.

Quite a few respondents also said that they faced financial barriers. One participant (a refugee alumni) said *"I had to contact other organisations to help me with some financial issues because when you enter the university you will get a loan from the government and sometimes this money is not enough, so I had to ask for support from an organisation called UAF and they helped me with some expansion for books and other purposes"*.

It is worthwhile to mention that one stakeholder referred to the different mindset that refugees have, compared to European students. The respondent highlighted that refugees are not used to searching online for useful information when it comes to studying programs in universities, while European students are more familiar with this practice. Therefore, *"universities are not used to potential students coming to the university to ask for information about the studies we offer"*. Instead, refugees are used to asking for information in person. *"When refugees enter the country, they come to a European society that is completely different from the background they have {...} it's not in their habits to search online on their own and that is a difficult start for them"*.

Lack of information is also seen as a crucial obstacle, as most of the respondents referred to it. The respondents pointed out that when they arrived in the Netherlands, they didn't receive sufficient guidance for educational matters, and they had to *"build their knowledge on their questions to former students"*. In other words, they had to figure out issues on their own, with any roadmap. As a stakeholder remarked, *"there is not a specific office or person or contact center that can clarify things. Some universities have a specific contact person or office for refugee students but many universities and especially universities of applied sciences don't have any. So, students don't know where to get the information they need"*.

Furthermore, the long administration process is perceived as an obstacle by the respondents, according to the literature as well. Refugees who are in the asylum procedure might have to wait around three years until they seek asylum. However, during this period some of them choose to seek their dream to study.

The complexity of the system is a factor that needs to be considered. The fact that the status of refugee students falls between the status of Dutch students and international students might be experienced as confusing. As one of the key stakeholders mentioned: *"They have some similarities with the Dutch students because they have a residence permit in Holland {...} but they also have some similarities with the international students because of the pre-education"*.

Two refugee students supported that argument, as they did experience it. In addition, a refugee student mentioned that DUO doesn't financially support refugee students who are over the age of 30. A stakeholder replied to this that *"our system is not made for this issue {...} A Dutch person finishes high school at the age of 18 and they have plenty of time to start with studies before they are 30"*.

A finding that most of the refugees mentioned is that they were not able to access information that was needed from their homeland. *"Most of us are actually expelled from our homeland and do not have any kind of communication"*. Hence, they are not able to access their diplomas themselves and they need help. Unrecognized certificates are also a barrier according to six respondents. According to one respondent *"when I start applying, they mentioned that my high-school certificate doesn't fulfill the*

*requirements, so I had to do a pre-Bachelor in Amsterdam, where I had to relearn Mathematics, Physics, and English". The respondents underlined that their own diplomas from their home countries are most times underestimated. Also, some disciplines such as medicine and law are quite difficult for a foreigner to study, since "almost no foreigner diploma meets the requirements for medicine studies. They are selecting these schools because in their home country law and medicine is a matter of status {...} it takes almost 15 years for a normal Dutch student to really study medicine, so you can imagine how much more difficult this is for a foreigner {...} the terminology has to be in Dutch".*

At the same time, some refugees mentioned that *"it was not clear what was the equivalent here of what I have studied in Syria"*. Also, for a refugee, the recognition of the diplomas is also a time-consuming process. Most of the respondents acknowledged that at some point they thought of quitting the process of entering higher education, as initially they didn't hear any sufficient and helpful reaction, in order to proceed with their next steps.

### **Success factors**

Nevertheless, there are a number of success factors which helped some refugees in accessing Dutch higher education. External help and refugees' personal power are two of those. When it comes to external help, almost all of them pointed towards either the UAF, which supported them financially and by providing them information, or by Dutch people. *"What was also really helpful was people you meet or talk to, Dutch people in general who are locals. They gave me advice, as they know some things from the educational system. {...} Someone told me that I can try to apply at TU Delft because it's more international"*.

One of the refugee participants (an alumnus) mentioned that he started working as a volunteer in order to expand his Dutch network. This way, he got to know a Dutch guy who helped him to contact the university. *"Because at the beginning sending a formal email wasn't an easy part and once an employee from the administration office sees that you can't write properly in Dutch, because when you applied for the bachelor you write in Dutch, that kind will ignore your email and not going to reply as fast as other applicants, so he helped me writing the emails"*. Likewise, a refugee student

highlighted that a mentor in the refugee camp helped her to reach out the front desk of the university.

Initiatives that encourage refugees to study such as TU/Enable have been mentioned as quite useful and helpful: *“They gave me the confidence {...} Such initiatives really help students”*. Also, a student who is now in the process of entering higher education emphasizes that as long as he was waiting the residence permission, he decided to improve his English-speaking skills and to get more familiarized with the Dutch educational system.

Personal power plays a significant role, as it includes resilience, motivation, persistence, socialisation, and ambition. In some cases, refugees themselves got more motivated to search by themselves for university programs. Also, some of them tried to build a network with locals, by practicing Dutch.

*“I applied for the first time, and I got rejected and applied for the second time after one year and I got accepted. In the meantime, I understood more what they needed from me and tried to work on this. I did a mathematical exam, national exam in math. I tried to fulfil the requirements more and not rely on my formal education from the past. I saw what it’s needed now, how I can accomplish that ”.* (Current student)

Overall, according to the data from the refugee students, it is quite important to start building a network after arriving in the Netherlands and learning the Dutch language. In a lot of cases, local Dutch people supported and contributed to refugees’ efforts to access higher education. At the same time, organisations, such as UAF played an important role, especially when it comes to the financial aspect. Besides that, student initiatives, such as IncLUision at Leiden University or TU/enable contribute to decrease some barriers and increase the possibilities of accessing Dutch higher education.

However, even though they received support from external institutions, it’s up to the individuals not to get disappointed to the extent that they will quit the process. All the refugees indicated that given their previous educational background and their willingness to continue their studies, in order (among others) to improve their life conditions, they decided to overcome all the upcoming obstacles.

## **Level of integration with Dutch society**

Almost all the respondents recognize that they are engaged in Dutch society, albeit the cultural differences. They pay attention to the fact that it is good to speak Dutch, so it's easier for them to establish relationships with locals. Some of them even applied for a Dutch nationality and became Dutch citizens. *“Even though there are people who are against the idea of refugees, there are so many people who believe in refugees’ abilities. It doesn’t mean that a refugee is not poor or not well educated”*. Another respondent said, *“if you understand how the people behave and how you should get a job, you are engaged”*. Nevertheless, two of the respondents don't consider that they are engaged, since they didn't overcome the cultural differences. *“I think that Dutch community has a different lifestyle that is kind of different than mine”*.

Also, it has been said that if you don't speak proper Dutch, it becomes difficult to make friends. A participant noticed that it takes time to get adjusted to the new reality. *“I think academia is a scary place for me in the beginning because you have to appreciate aspects of my educational culture. The distance between my teacher and me here is less {...} I came from a non-democratic country to a very open, democratic country and society”*.

## **Benefits for Dutch society**

Certainly, any society profits from hosting highly educated citizens. Both refugee students and stakeholders recognize that Dutch society could also benefit from the easier access of refugees to higher education, given that a lot of these individuals are skilled in their professions and can contribute to the Dutch labour market.

*“Refugees, in general, have a lot of hidden talents that they don't know themselves because they didn't get the chance in their own countries to express them”* mentioned an alumni student. The refugee students say that the Netherlands gave them the chance to rebuild their life, so they want to do their best for the country. Also, *“you work and pay taxes”*, said an alumni student, pointing to the financial contribution of refugee workers after they graduate to the Dutch state. Moreover, it is highlighted that diversity in the labour market is promoted, as refugees from different cultural backgrounds contribute with their knowledge. The participation of the refugees in the labour market contributes to a diversity of knowledge and skills. Overall, all the respondents agree

that highly educated refugees can cover places in a variety of fields and *“they become active and productive people in the society”*.

### **Benefits for refugees**

Both refugee students and stakeholders pay attention to the benefits for the refugees themselves when it comes to easier refugees' access to higher education. The respondents mostly mentioned that through easier access to higher education they are able not only to get more integrated into the Dutch society but also to gain new skills, by engaging with different communities. For their integration, a student who is in the process of entering higher education mentioned that *education is the first step if you want to become part of the Dutch society*.

All the participants indicated the significance of accessing education. It can make them change their perceptions about the world, as they become more open-minded and more tolerant to new cultures. A refugee student presented an additional view on the importance of accessing higher education: *“If I want to be respected in this country and if I want to be taken seriously, and not as a burden in the country, I need to study and find a job. I need to be an active citizen. Otherwise, a lot of people will see us as people who take benefits from the government, but they are not really productive. So, I think education for us is the main way to start feeling equal as others here and productive”*.

The refugee respondents emphasized the importance of higher education for being an active citizen, being respected and feeling equal. At some point of their lives had to quit education and they recognize the deeper values and meanings of higher education. In addition, through higher education, refugees get the chance to feel active members in the society, where their voices can be heard and their choices matter. Attending higher education provides them the chance to prove their value and foster their citizenship.

### **Recommendations**

These are several recommendations for improving refugees' access to higher education that were identified based on the analyses of the interviews. More clarity on the prerequisite to enter Dutch educational system, a centralized policy run by universities, guidance through refugees' first steps and more attention to the problem could be some of the solutions.

Firstly, attention was drawn that there should be more clarity about how a refugee can enter higher education in the Netherlands. For that reason, a step-by-step plan is proposed, which would give more insight to refugees who are interested in studying in the Netherlands. Secondly, there should be a more centralized direction, under which universities could take steps and implement their policies. As a result, universities need to have more communication in order to implement a standard policy.

So far, how it is being done, is that only some Dutch universities run some initiatives that support refugees, but this is not the case for all universities. A participant mentioned that *“Supporting initiatives like TU/enable and InclUUsion would be also useful if they include more courses and if they can enroll more students”*. In addition to that, another recommendation that was highlighted by a number of respondents pointed the need for more institutional support programs and efforts for inclusion by Dutch universities. A key stakeholder, working as a student coordinator of an initiative, mentioned that *“Dutch universities can certainly acknowledge more that refugee students are there and do exist”*.

Furthermore, universities should have either a contact person or an office which is responsible to provide refugee students with the necessary piece of information. *“When we come to the Netherlands, we should be introduced to what should we do and how a study is and what kind of requirements. So, from the beginning you need to know what you should focus on, not wasting time.”*

However, some of the refugee students indicated that also refugees from their side need to take initiatives to get access to higher education. In other words, students should feel more confident and *“talk even if you think you are not talking properly Dutch. It doesn't matter. Start talking, use the vocabulary you have {...} The person who is standing in front of you has to appreciate who you are, regardless of where you are from or what your bachelor is”*. Building a network among Dutch people may contribute to refugees' easier access to higher education, since getting to know a lot of people can give your insights on how to contact universities. In line with this, some refugee students believe that newcomers should start learning Dutch.

Finally, a stakeholder mentioned that organisations such as UAF should receive more financial support. *“It’s not a governmental institution. {..}They spend money which they only get from sponsors. It would be really nice if the government would be one of the main sponsors, that would help a lot”.*

## **Discussion**

The general aim of this study was to address the main barriers that refugees face when it comes to their access to higher education in the Netherlands and to provide some recommendations to eliminate these barriers. Based upon the findings, it was clear that refugees who intend to study in the Netherlands face several challenges. Those obstacles differed per participant, but barriers, such as the linguistic one, were mentioned from both the refugees and the key stakeholders. As Teunissen (2016) points, speaking the language of a country can give someone access not only in terms of education but also regarding job market. For that reason, refugees should start learning the language, as soon as it is assured that they will stay in the Netherlands.

In addition, literature shows that the obstacle of unrecognized certificates could be a challenge that refugees came across (Essomba, 2017). This obstacle came upfront also through the interviews, with the refugees mentioning that the Dutch educational institutions most of the times cannot accept their certificates.

Moving towards the bureaucratic barriers, it can be seen that the procedure to access higher education takes a long time (Refugees in the Netherlands, n.d.). The interviews also showed that for most of the refugees it took more than two years, in order to enter higher education. Even though it is a time-consuming process, which still can become more efficient, it is worth the wait, as refugees have access to financial support once they are accepted (Avery & Said, 2017).

An unexpected finding that hinders the process of accessing higher education was the different mindset that refugees might have, according to a key stakeholder. Since refugees mostly come from non-European countries, they may find the current system inaccessible as it lacks possibilities for personal information and guidance. Yet, this is not the case for all of them. On the one hand, maybe they are not so familiarized with

those practices, but on the other hand, one should wonder whether they have the are able to search online, given the difficult process they have to go through. Therefore, a lot of refugee students face challenges regarding lack of information about the education systems and more specifically about the application process and the requirements of enrolling, which is not so much enlightened in the literature. They are not aware whether they are entitled to access Dutch higher education and how they can take next steps (Eckhardt et. al., 2017). Clear information should be provided to this group, even from the point they remain in the refugee camps and any institutional organisations should pay attention on resolving this unclarity, which seems to be one of the biggest challenges.

As expected, participants in this study expressed the argument that accessing higher education can contribute to the improvement of the quality of their lives. By accessing higher education, their lives are becoming more meaningful, and these individuals feel part of a society (Crea, 2015).

Refugee students and key stakeholders highlighted that more guidance on searching for information can contribute to refugees' easier access. Also, an interesting finding is that a more centralized policy by Dutch universities should be promoted. However, one should consider that Dutch higher educational institutions should pay more attention to refugees' topic, given the significant participation of refugee students in Dutch universities (Teunissen, 2016).

Last but not least, the refugee students who joined student initiatives that offer courses to prospective students, emphasized the importance of these initiatives (Teunissen, 2016). This was also confirmed through the interviews, where these bottom-up student initiatives helped the refugees to feel more engaged with the Dutch educational system. Nonetheless, this doesn't guarantee refugees full admission either in bachelor or master programs. Student initiatives make it possible for refugees who are not yet able to register as students to follow courses at the universities. The findings point, indeed, that a lot of organisations encourage wider participation of refugees in higher education.

# Conclusion

The guiding question in this study was: *What are the barriers that refugees face when accessing higher education in the Netherlands and how can these barriers be eliminated according to refugees and key stakeholders?* The main findings of this study indicate that refugees encounter several barriers when it comes to accessing to higher education. The reasons to invest in refugees' higher education are viewed as very significant by refugees and stakeholders. This implies that there is a need to raise more awareness on this issue. The benefits for both refugees and the rest of the Dutch society are certainly noteworthy. Consequently, recommendations and policies that can contribute to eliminating the upcoming obstacles can play an important role. Avoiding miscommunication and defining a central policy, followed by the Dutch higher institutions are suggested as key tools.

# Strengths and Limitations

This current study presented a few limitations, which need to be taken into consideration when reading the findings. One was the inability to recruit policymakers who implement policies regarding the refugee inclusion and access in higher education. Due to the characteristics of this target population and the limitation of time, the recruitment was challenging. Hence, the results have been mainly drawn upon the perspectives of refugees and key stakeholders. On the other hand, the stakeholders were individuals who work together with refugees, so their insights were derived from the practice within the investigated field. This can be seen as a strength of the study, as people who are engaged in the situation, provided their opinions.

Another possible limitation was the language barrier. A few of the refugee students spoke limited English, which made it difficult for them to express themselves. Also, the case of the Netherlands is investigated in this study. However, the researcher is not Dutch, so there were some limitations, regarding accessing Dutch literature, the overall Dutch migrant policies, and the educational system. Yet, the researcher tried to compensate for this by asking help for accessing resources in Dutch from Dutch colleagues whenever possible. Lastly, it could be an asset to conduct interviews with

people who work in the refugee camps as they provide all the information for the possibilities that a refugee has in the Netherlands.

While reaching out to refugees, one stakeholder warned the researcher that it may be hard to recruit refugees, as they don't show willingness to speak about their future. However, this study investigates only the barriers while accessing higher education and not the reasons that led them to move to the Netherlands. Therefore, it is worthwhile to mention that more than enough refugees showed interest to participate in this research. This illustrates that the barriers they encounter are a big challenge for them, and that they want to share their experience to eliminate this problem. In fact, all refugees thanked the researcher for investigating this topic.

## **Implications**

Previous knowledge of refugees should be taken into consideration and evaluated accordingly. Apparently, the Dutch educational system has some specific requirements in order for students to enroll and refugees do not align with those. However, given the diversity that should be promoted as well, the previous educational background could be perceived as important and not underestimated.

## **Recommendations**

Future research could investigate in depth the opinions of policy makers that are responsible for drafting the policies that affect refugees' education. Also, a key stakeholder proposed that future research could consider the views of case managers that work in the camps and are in touch with refugees. Last but not least, international comparison between educational systems in different countries and how they provide access to refugees can provide valuable insights and best practice assessments.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview Protocol for refugees

Important note: Before the interview takes place, the research participant would need to sign off on both the Information Letter and the Informed Consent Letter that has been provided prior to this interview.

The overarching theme of this interview is:

*Understand the barriers that refugees face when trying to access higher education in the Netherlands.*

### Introduction

1. Can you tell me some things about yourself?
2. What was your educational background in your home country?  
More details about demographic characteristics: age, nationality, gender, educational level, occupational status.

### Access to education

3. What kind of barriers did you experience when trying to access Dutch higher education?
4. How do you think these barriers can be removed?
5. What helped you reach your goal of accessing higher education?
6. During the asylum process, did you think that you would not be able to access higher education?
7. Did you ever feel like quitting the process?
8. Do you feel engaged with the Dutch culture/society?
9. Do you feel that education can contribute to your integration into Dutch society and why?
10. What are the benefits for the Dutch society if refugees are able to access higher education in the Netherlands more easily?

### Wrapping up

11. Short conclusion and gratitude for the research participants' participation.

# Appendix 2

## Interview Protocol for stakeholders

Important note: Before the interview takes place, the research participant would need to sign off on both the Information Letter and the Informed Consent Letter that has been provided prior to this interview.

The overarching theme of this interview is:

*Understand the barriers that refugees face when trying to access higher education in the Netherlands and how these can be eliminated.*

### Introduction

1. Can you tell me some things about yourself?
2. What is your educational background? More details about demographic characteristics: age, nationality, gender, years of professional experience)

### Refugee inclusion and access to higher education

3. How do you consider the current Dutch policy regarding refugee inclusion?
4. What do you think are the biggest barriers refugees currently facing to study in the Netherlands?
5. What are the costs for the Dutch government and universities to make that possible?
6. What are your recommendations to overcome the barriers that refugees face?
7. What are the benefits for the Dutch society if refugees are able to access higher education in the Netherlands more easily?
8. Do you think that education can contribute to refugee's integration into Dutch society and why?

### Wrapping up

9. Short conclusion and gratitude for the research participants' participation.