

# Rebuilding lives: Evacuation, experiences and integration of recently arrived Afghans to the Netherlands



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Cover photo: Afghan family arriving at military airport in Belgium after the evacuation, by  
Johanna Geron (Reuters, 2021a).

## **Abstract**

In the debate on refugee integration, the perspective of the refugees themselves is seldom included although recently arrived refugees are highly dependent on the existing integration policies in the host country. Therefore, this research studies how evacuated Afghan ex-employees of the Dutch embassy in Afghanistan experience their integration in the Netherlands. The purpose of this research is to examine how their experiences of integration are influenced by the opportunity structures that can facilitate or undermine settlement into a society. By utilizing non-participant and participant observation, in-depth interviews, and a reflection of secondary data, the results show that the Afghans' experiences are highly influenced by the broader social structures in which they are placed. The results have been placed in context of the Indicators of Integration Framework, focusing on the interplay between structure and agency and the influence of opportunity structures. The findings of this research confirm that opportunity structures play an important role in the integration of Afghan evacuees. These structures influence how they experience their integration into the Netherlands. Further, the outcomes illustrate that domains of integration, such as housing, employment, social network and language, are reciprocally related to each other, while simultaneously being dependent on the societal context. These domains also influence how the Afghans experience their settlement into Dutch society. The research ultimately provides a few recommendations that can help increase the effectiveness of integration by focusing on the mutual efforts of the government and individual.

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## Table of contents

List of figures and tables .....	VI
List of abbreviations.....	VII
1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 Problem statement.....	2
1.2 Research objectives and knowledge gap.....	3
1.3 Thesis structure .....	4
2. Reflecting on existing literature .....	5
2.1 Refugee integration.....	5
2.2 Host country and housing .....	7
2.3 Integration into the labour market .....	7
2.4 Integration into society .....	8
3. Setting the context.....	10
3.1 The Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan .....	10
3.2 Integration policies in the Netherlands .....	12
3.2.1 Wet Inburgering 2013 and 2021 .....	13
3.2.2 Participatiewet.....	15
3.3 The Netherlands and refugee integration.....	16
4. Theoretical embedding .....	19
4.1 Structure and agency.....	19
4.2 Indicators of Integration Framework .....	20
4.3 Conceptual framework.....	25
5. Methodology .....	27
5.1 Operationalization of concepts .....	27
5.2 Research design and research methods.....	27
5.2.1 Literature review .....	28
5.2.2 Participant and non-participant observation.....	28
5.2.3 Semi-structured in-depth interviews .....	29
5.2.4 Sampling method .....	30
5.2.5 Discourse analysis.....	31
5.3 Methodological considerations .....	31
5.3.1 Challenges and limitations .....	31
5.3.2 Positionality as a researcher .....	32

6. The Afghans’ experiences of integration into Dutch society .....	33
6.1 Housing .....	33
6.1.1 Emergency shelter versus AZC.....	33
6.1.2 Living conditions in the accommodations .....	35
6.1.3 Location of COA accommodations.....	37
6.1.4 COA’s moving policy .....	38
6.2 Language.....	41
6.3 Employment.....	43
6.3.1 Integrating on the job .....	43
6.3.2 Preparing for the Dutch labour market.....	44
6.4 Social life .....	46
6.4.1 Social network and making new connections .....	47
6.4.2 Acceptance towards the Afghans .....	48
7. Discussion .....	51
7.1 Living conditions, location and the impact on integration .....	51
7.2 Integrating into the labour market .....	53
7.3 Settling and social network.....	55
7.4 The value of language.....	56
7.5 Beyond the division between the domains .....	57
8. Conclusions .....	60
8.1 Recommendations.....	63
References .....	65

## List of figures and tables

- Figure 1** The pre-integration process in the AZC
- Figure 2** Overview of routes towards integration
- Figure 3** MIPEX rating of the Netherlands
- Figure 4** The Indicators of Integration Framework
- Figure 5** Opportunity structures of refugee integration
- Figure 6** Conceptual framework
- Figure 7** Room in emergency shelter Heumensoord
- Figure 8** Map of COA locations in the Netherlands
- Figure 9** Housing trajectory of Karim
- Figure 10** Housing trajectory of Yasamin
- Figure 11** Demonstration in Harskamp against the arrival of Afghan refugees
- Figure 12** Indicators of integration framework based on the results of this research

## List of abbreviations

AVIM	Aliens Police
AZC	Asylum Seeker's Centre
CBS	Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics
COA	Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers
GZA	Asylum Seeker Healthcare
IIF	Indicators of Integration Framework
ILO	International Labour Organization
IND	Immigration and Naturalisation Service
MFA	Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MIPEX	Migration Policy Index
MRCO	Migrant and Refugee Community Organizations
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PCD	Perceived cultural distance
PIP	Personal Civic Integration and Participation Plan
PW	Participatiewet (Dutch participation law)
SZW	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	The United States
VWN	Vluchtelingenwerk
WI	Wet Inburgering (Dutch integration law)

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2021, the United States withdrew its military troops from Afghanistan. Soon after the Taliban conquered Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and overthrew the civilian government. President Ashraf Ghani fled from the capital within hours, subjecting the country to the Taliban's rule (Amnesty International, 2021). As a result of this, the situation has deteriorated considerably in Afghanistan over the past year, causing many people to flee the country. Between August 18 and August 26 of 2021, the Netherlands have evacuated almost 2,000 people. These evacuation flights included people with the Dutch nationality, Afghans who work or have worked for Dutch organizations and people with other nationalities (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). One of the former Afghan employees of the Dutch embassy in Kabul tells the Dutch newspaper NRC that *"it is like I escaped from hell. Or prison. Everybody is smiling. During a week of struggles we escaped from hell. It seemed impossible, but the world looks different now."* After a week of uncertainties, struggles and dangerous escape attempts, they were finally evacuated from Afghanistan (Koenis, 2021).

Like any other newcomer, the Afghan ex-employees of the Dutch embassy also have to deal with the Netherlands' integration policy. Integration is a highly contested concept and comes with many requirements for asylum seekers, which differs per host country. This research understands integration as a dynamic, multi-directional and multi-dimensional process which is dependent on time, place and context (Damen et al., 2022). This is a process that does not come without setbacks and difficulties, as people who have to integrate face structural and personal constraints. These can include housing, the set of rules and regulations in a country, discrimination, lack of knowledge about the host country, lack of skills, or lack of social network (De Lange et al., 2019). Especially refugees face more difficulties when they want to integrate into a society, since they are highly dependent on the host country's implemented policies (Damen et al., 2022). A refugee is a person who has had to flee conflict, violence, war or persecution and has crossed borders to find safety in another country (UNHCR, n.d.). The research group of this study consists of the Afghans that were employed at the Dutch embassy in Kabul and evacuated by the Netherlands in August 2021. For the purpose of this research, they will be considered refugees, although some might make a distinction between evacuees and refugees.<sup>1</sup> However, since the former employees of the embassy came to the Netherlands

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<sup>1</sup> Leila, one of the participants, has indicated that she does not consider herself a refugee: *"I'm not even refugee, I'm an evacuee, you know.(...) It's not like I'm here illegally."* She considers refugees to be illegal, while the UNHCR definition includes all people who fled for different reasons and does not specify legality or illegality.

to flee from the Taliban, this group will thus be considered refugees according to the definition provided by the UNHCR.

## **1.1 Problem statement**

For refugees it is more difficult to integrate into a society than other migrants. They often face difficulties regarding legal requirements and restrictions that are in place in the host country. In addition to this, they differ from other immigrant groups in terms of their background and life experiences, such as traumas, which can complicate their integration process. Other factors that may hinder a refugee's integration are a lack of language and professional skills, limited social networks, uncertainty regarding their legal status, discrimination and legal barriers (Battisti et al., 2019; De Lange et al., 2019). Additionally, refugees may experience difficulties as a result of certain systems and structures, i.e. sets of rules and regulations and policies, in a host country. These systems and structures can serve to undermine the importance of inclusion, and instead foster a society in which participation is made difficult for refugees (Strang et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the integration of refugees is often examined from the perspective of integration theory and government policies, in which assimilation and acculturation are core concepts. From this point of view, it is often emphasized that refugees do not integrate well into a society, or rather, as desired by the host country. In this type of analysis the perspective of the refugees themselves is missing (Damen et al., 2022; Van Heelsum, 2017). Keeping this in mind together with the fact that refugees experience many barriers to integration, it is problematic that the refugees' perspectives are not included to bring an insight into the structural constraints that are inherent to integration.

Integration is a highly contested concept in which different actions are expected from different actors. With the academic and practical focus being primarily on the success of integration by refugees as considered from a governmental perspective, a more comprehensive approach is deemed necessary. This means that the refugees' perspective should be taken into consideration, as well as the context that they find themselves in and the effect it has on their settlement into society. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following research question: *How do recently arrived Afghans experience their integration into Dutch society?* In order to answer this question, this thesis first seeks to identify the barriers and enabling factors that exist for refugees in their integration process. Secondly, it will be examined how career guidance and language classes contribute to their integration process. Finally, it will be analysed

how different enablers and barriers relate to each other and fit within the broader social structures of the Netherlands, which influence the integration process.

## **1.2 Research objectives and knowledge gap**

As established, the refugees' perspective is often ignored in literature. Their aspirations and experiences are often overshadowed by the institutional perspective (Van Heelsum, 2017), which is why it is crucial to include their opinions. This research will contribute to the broader debate on refugee integration, by approaching the issues they encounter from their point of view. Furthermore, this study focuses on the Afghans that recently arrived to the Netherlands, in August of 2021 during the evacuation period in Afghanistan. This group of people is in the middle of their integration process and may have different understandings and expectations towards their integration compared to already settled refugees. However, early experiences serve as a foundation for their development into the host society. Despite the importance of early experiences, recently arrived refugees are generally understudied in scholarly work (Damen et al., 2022). Therefore, this research seeks to fill this knowledge gap by taking the group of Afghans that arrived in August 2021 as the research group. By including their perspectives, a more thorough understanding of the integration process can be achieved. Additionally, this contributes to creating a more tailored approach to integration that can be implemented to support these refugees in their integration into Dutch society. Further, it is important to shed a light on how existing structures, policies and other mechanisms influence how this group experiences its integration process in the Netherlands. Since the arrival of this particular group of Afghans is so recent, there has not yet been extensive research with regards to their integration experiences. With the continuing conflict in Afghanistan and other parts of the world and the large influx of refugees over the past decade, this topic will remain high on the developmental agenda. By identifying main barriers and enabling factors for refugees, an opening will be created to explore the optimization of integration processes.

The objective of this research is to establish how Afghans that arrived in August 2021 experience their integration into Dutch society. This research aims to shed a light on how employment, living situation and social life influence their experiences with integration. This will be done by examining how enhancing their language and professional skills and how supervising them during this process benefits them while guiding them in their pathway to obtain a job. Their housing situation will also be taken into account to examine how this impacts integration, as well as career guidance and social life. Academically, this research aims to

contribute to the broader debate on refugee integration, by focussing on their lived experiences and the structural constraints that they face. Practically, this study's goal is to see how this group's experiences play a role in its integration into the Netherlands. On this basis, the integration process in the Netherlands will be analysed, after which a few recommendations to improve the integration process will be provided.

### **1.3 Thesis structure**

The next chapter provides a reflection on already existing academic literature regarding integration. Afterwards, the research will be contextualized in chapter 3. This chapter will include the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, which led to the evacuation. Furthermore, it takes into account the existing policies and attitudes towards refugees in the Netherlands. In chapter 4, the theoretical embedding of this research will be introduced. This chapter will focus on structure and agency in migration, as well as the Indicators of Integration Framework that was designed by Ager & Strang (2008) and Phillimore's (2020) opportunity structures. This chapter also introduces the conceptual framework of the research. These three chapters will serve as the foundation of the research. Chapter 5 discusses the research methodology and will focus on the operationalization of concepts, as well as the methods used and data analysis. Chapter 6 presents the results of the data analysis, after which a discussion will follow in chapter 7. Chapter 8 serves to conclude the thesis, which will include recommendations for future research, as well as ways to improve the integration process in the Netherlands.

## **2. Reflecting on existing literature**

### **2.1 Refugee integration**

Integration is the process of adapting oneself to a society. According to the EU Common Basic Principles, integration is considered a two-way process of mutual adjustment between the newcomers and all residents of EU member states (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). Integration entails inclusion and participation in a society as well as having equitable access to resources and opportunities compared to the local population (Udayar et al., 2021). Labour is one of the main domains of integration, which entails equal access and participation in the labour market and resources. Other domains of integration include language acquisition, education, housing and social and cultural adaptation (Ager & Strang, 2008). Integration is a highly contested concept and is understood differently by different actors. However, most scholars agree that integration is a dynamic, multi-dimensional and multi-directional process, which is dependent on time, place and context (Ager & Strang, 2008; Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Bakker et al., 2014; Damen et al., 2022; Udayar et al., 2021), meaning that the process differs per host country and per individual. In practice and academics integration and its success are often considered from the perspective of the host country, rather than the perspective of the individual in question. The government's perspective is dominant in integration thinking, which as a consequence often leads to designating refugees a low integration score. Often, this group is compared to the local population and government policies are aimed at bridging the gap between the two groups. There is an emphasis on the responsibilities of the refugee and their outcomes in the integration process, without taking into account the society's context which can hinder or enable them in their process. In this regard, the perspective of the refugee is neglected. They might compare their integration process to their starting point, instead of the end goal as desired by the host country's government (Damen et al., 2022; Phillimore, 2020; Van Heelsum, 2017). Although the two-way effort of both the individual and local residents is emphasized by the EU Basic Principles definition of integration, the emphasis in reality is often directed towards the newcomers' efforts in adjusting. This is emphasized by Van Heelsum (2017), who states that an immigrant's aspirations are often not taken into account and in which their efforts are compared to the host country's dominating wishes.

In the understanding of refugee integration, this kind of perspective may often lead to a misconception of the integration process and outcome. Whereas the host country's policies and measurement of integration dominate the debate, an individual's aspirations and efforts are

disregarded. Furthermore, newcomers, and especially refugees, often also experience structural challenges that hinder their integration process. A refugee is highly dependent on the host country's implemented policies, as well as the institutional structures that provide them with or restrict them from opportunities that contribute to their integration (Bakker et al., 2014; Udayar et al., 2021). A society's context plays a crucial role in shaping refugee integration, which is often not taken into account (Phillimore, 2020). Attitudes towards refugees and acceptance from the local population are crucial in this.

The Netherlands is viewed as a multicultural, welcoming society for newcomers (Albada et al., 2021). However, in recent years, the Dutch approach to welcoming refugees has shifted. With increasing numbers of new asylum seekers over the past decade and growing concern from the population towards the effects of hosting asylum seekers, a stricter asylum policy was implemented. This policy placed more emphasis on reducing asylum numbers and making the Netherlands a less attractive country for asylum seekers. To achieve this, access to housing, employment and benefits has been restricted (Bakker et al., 2016). The asylum procedure also has an effect on the integration process of newcomers. These policies are considered paradoxical dual policies. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on exclusion during the asylum procedure, while on the other hand there is an emphasis on inclusion during the integration process of these people. The integration policy is mainly focussed on providing equal opportunities regarding employment, education and health, as well as social development of an individual. In the meantime, refugees do not have a choice with regards to how they want to integrate into a society. They are restricted by the policies that are implemented by the government (Bakker et al., 2016; Damen et al., 2022). With this paradox, asylum seekers are initially hindered in their integration process. Many governments state that integration can only start once a sort of refugee status has been obtained by the refugee. This is contradicting to what NGOs and literature argue, in which it is emphasized that integration starts upon arrival. Newcomers simply cannot avoid integration, as they get to know a new culture, have to communicate in a new language and interact with locals (Damen et al., 2022). This already demonstrates how refugee integration is hindered by several structural barriers, in which the individual's perspective is neglected. Besides the policies that may hinder refugees, refugees also encounter other problems in their integration process, related to housing, employment and social life.

## **2.2 Host country and housing**

Housing is a crucial factor in the integration of refugees. It is one of the key domains that indicates the success of integration, as argued by Ager & Strang (2008). Asylum seekers already encounter problems with regards to housing. When refugees first arrive to the host country, they are placed in an asylum seekers centre (AZC). This limits them in their freedom to participate in society. First of all, due to living in an AZC, newcomers have limited access to the labour market and have little to no access to education. Secondly, the AZCs are often located in rural areas, which is an obstacle in itself with regards to be able to actively participate in society. Newcomers are allowed to move around freely outside of the AZC but are still required to report to the AZC frequently. Lastly, refugees experience a lack of privacy and autonomy, since most daily activities are performed in larger groups and are controlled tightly (Bakker et al., 2014; Bakker et al., 2016). This seriously impacts an individual's integration, since they are deprived from the resources that contribute to their integration. In the Netherlands, municipalities are required to house a certain number of newcomers, proportional to their population. In the process of integration, refugees are assigned a municipality by the Central Organization for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). However, due to a housing shortage, this process can take a long period of time (Damen et al., 2022; Van Liempt & Staring, 2021). This prevents refugees from settling and starting their integration process. Hence, it is emphasized how the housing situation and location play a crucial role in the integration process of an individual.

## **2.3 Integration into the labour market**

Employment is another crucial component that indicates whether integration has been successful, according to Ager & Strang (2008). Participation in and entering the labour market among refugees has been studied extensively. Refugees often experience challenges when they want to obtain a job. One of the main barriers that refugees encounter when they want to obtain a job is related to language. Newcomers do not speak the language yet, but for most jobs this is a set requirement. Other personal challenges that they encounter are related to not having enough knowledge about the labour market and the host country's culture. Besides these personal challenges, they also face structural difficulties. These include their work experience and diplomas not being recognized, discrimination, receiving insufficient support and legal requirements and restrictions (Battisti et al., 2019; De Lange et al., 2019; Udayar et al., 2021). These challenges results in a refugee gap in employment, meaning that there exists an

employment and wage gap between refugees and other migrant groups. They hold the worst labour market position compared to other migrant groups and natives. Furthermore, this group holds a lower labour market participation and in addition to this, refugees are more likely to be reliant on social benefits, rather than having paid employment. Besides this, refugees are framed as weak and disadvantaged, who burden the system and are passive receivers of social benefits. Furthermore, refugees are subject to being stereotyped, in which their competencies are often underestimated. This framing makes it more difficult for refugees to show their competencies and productivity, which in turn may discourage them in pursuing a job (Bakker et al., 2017; De Lange et al., 2019; Nasrat, 2020; Van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). Because refugees experience these challenges, career support is introduced in order to improve their chances on the labour market.

Due to the lengthy procedures they have to follow and lack of resources, rights and security, refugees are disadvantaged considerably more in entering the labour market than other groups (Bakker et al., 2017). Therefore, many scholars have emphasized the importance of career counselling or job coaching for refugees. Especially when this is done in combination with obtaining work experience, refugees integrate better into the labour market (Battisti et al., 2019; Klaver et al., 2019; Udayar et al., 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). Job coaching will strengthen a refugee's position in society. It helps them identify the barriers they encounter and strengthen their resources, which will help them set their professional ambitions and seize opportunities. A focus on personal characteristics is important, however, it is also imperative to focus on external factors that may impact a refugee's job searching process. It is further emphasized that cultural differences also play a role in how a newcomer approaches the labour market. Therefore, it is also crucial to educate them on these cultural differences in their career counselling (Udayar et al., 2019).

## **2.4 Integration into society**

When refugees arrive to a new country, it is crucial for them to build social connections to support their integration. Social connections stand at the core of feeling included, both for refugees and non-refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019). However, as indicated, refugees are often placed in remote areas with poor living conditions, which may result in exclusion (Bakker et al., 2014; Strang & Quinn, 2019). This lack of social connections can have a serious impact on the integration of refugees. Ager & Strang (2008) have identified ten domains of integration that are important to employ if a person wants to integrate into a

society. These will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4. According to social capital theory, these domains can be utilized through an individual's social connections. Refugees are often deprived of their social resources, which are essentially their social connections. This causes them to use the social connections they do have to the best that they can. Being isolated from others does not contribute positively to the integration process. Living in remote areas hinders making new social connections, which may result into avoidance of communities, low development of language and cultural knowledge, as well as more mental health problems. Ultimately, this may result in refugees not being able to participate in society well and not finding a job (Strang & Quinn, 2019). Furthermore, Nasrat (2020) emphasizes the importance of having social connections to be able to integrate into the labour market. According to him, labour market integration highly depends on an individual's social network in the Netherlands. Often, jobs are given to acquaintances or through social networks. Having access to a social network will therefore contribute to finding employment. On the other hand, however, being employed also helps refugees build their own social networks.

In order to build a social network, social media has been found to be effective. It supports refugees in maintaining their connections and also build new connections that are key to their integration process. Social media can serve to provide information of all kinds, which can promote social inclusion (Alencar, 2018; Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). While this is beneficial to the refugees, it should be noted that false information can be spread on social media, either purposely or accidental. In addition to this, hate speech and discrimination may also be encouraged on these platforms (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). Additionally, social media can contribute to learning about the host country's culture. Through social media, newcomers can learn the language and about the culture, without having to have access to formal institutions. Although it was found useful, the support that refugees receive from local organizations and other actors are considered to be more valuable (Alencar, 2018). All in all, social media and having social connections contribute to the integration process of refugees. On the one hand, it supports an individual in their integration, while on the other hand, being integrated also contributes to making social connections.

### **3. Setting the context**

#### **3.1 The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has known a turbulent history regarding inter- and intrastate conflicts. Since 1978, the country has been in conflict. After a decade of conflict and a short period of peace, the Taliban came to power in 1996. During their regime, all Afghans were subjected to harsh restrictions, executions and torture. Theoretically speaking, the Taliban was a military group that desired an idealized version of Islamic society. However, in reality, many Taliban recruits were angry, young men. Their first objective was security, with the implementation of Sharia law and very restricted life. Any type of liberal culture was prohibited: television, radio, music, dancing etc. Furthermore, women were mistreated considerably, leaving them with few to no rights at all (Johnson, 2021; Kolenda, 2019; Waqas et al., 2019). After 11 September 2001, however, the Taliban was overthrown by the US. With the Bonn agreement of December 2001, a new interim authority was appointed. However, this agreement failed to bring peace and stability to the country. Afghanistan was left in ruins and political development was placed lowly on the agenda. In the decades that followed, the situation deteriorated even further. In 2006, a mix of Taliban and Al-Qaeda recruits re-emerged and re-collected themselves. They were now focused on governance while relying on coercion and persuasion to gain control and receive public support (Johnson, 2021; Waqas et al., 2019). In the meanwhile, they sought to pressure the US and NATO allies to withdraw from Afghanistan. During negotiations, the Taliban demanded full US withdrawal to end the conflict. However, in 2017 the US decided to sustain funding and support for at least four more years, which was a shock to the Taliban. Afterwards, the Taliban turned against the policy to support education for girls (Johnson, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). Bearing the history of the Taliban and the turmoil it has brought to the country in mind, the Afghans feared a takeover of the Taliban after the US decided to withdraw its troops in 2021.

In February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar. This agreement included withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan starting on 1 May 2021. In exchange for this, the Taliban would prevent terrorist organizations from operating in Afghani territory under their control. Furthermore, the Taliban pledged to participate in a conversation with Ashraf Ghani's government with the objective to establish peace in Afghanistan (Verma, 2022). However, soon after the US' withdrawal of their troops, the Taliban conquered Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and overthrew the civilian government.

Within hours president Ashraf Ghani fled the country, subjecting Afghanistan to the Taliban's rule. While the situation in Afghanistan had progressed somewhat after 2001, specifically regarding human and women's rights, the fear exists that the situation will deteriorate extremely again. Although the Taliban have reassured that their restricting policy regarding women's rights has changed, be it under pressure of journalists, their actions have shown otherwise. In September, the deputy head of the Taliban's cultural commission told an Australian news outlet that women and girls would be prohibited from playing sports (Amnesty International, 2021). Within a month already, the Taliban has gone back to their initial views of women and girls. In the following months, the Taliban's ideology has seeped into Afghan society: the rights that women and girls had fought so hard for in the past two decades have diminished considerably under the Taliban's continuous cruel attitude towards women and girls. The Taliban has repressed women's protests against their new regime, declared that women would be excluded from politics, have restricted and enforced possible denial of the right to education for girls and women, as well as enforce female television anchors to cover their faces (Al Jazeera, 2021; Amnesty International 2021; Koenis, 2021; Verma, 2022). All in all, the new Taliban regime has caused widespread fear among the Afghani population. Especially minorities and those who worked with international organizations or the government face a higher risk of being targeted by the Taliban, causing especially the latter to flee the country (Amnesty International, 2021).

Since August 2021, many Afghans have fled the country. The US and its allies have evacuated as many Afghans as possible before the deadline of August 31. More than 114,000 people were evacuated in the period from August 14 until August 31 (Reuters, 2021b). The Netherlands also played part in this and have evacuated almost 2,000 people from Afghanistan between August 18 and August 26, 2021 (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). The situation around the evacuation flights has been very tumultuous, as a few of the participants in the research group have told. It was very uncertain when or if they could leave Afghanistan, and the situation at the airport and in the city was extremely dangerous. Although the employees of the Dutch embassy in Kabul had been promised that there would be an evacuation flight for them, they were not certain about this until they were actually safely on the plane. When they finally received more information and decided to travel a dangerous journey to the airport, the situation was extremely chaotic, with the Taliban firing guns and the Americans throwing smoke bombs. Ultimately, they returned home, hoping that they would be able to catch another evacuation flight later. After another day of uncertainties, they finally managed to reach the airport safely and board the evacuation flight. On August 22, the group arrived in the Netherlands (Koenis,

2021; personal communications, 2022). After the enormous struggle that they had been through, they safely arrived in the Netherlands. Here, a new life awaits them, in which they will face new challenges. The next section discusses the integration policies in the Netherlands that apply to the refugees.

### 3.2 Integration policies in the Netherlands

Upon arrival in the Netherlands, refugees are placed in an AZC by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and receive the asylum status. Figure 1 displays the journey that an asylum seeker follows upon arrival in the Netherlands. Before they can officially start their integration, they will have to request asylum through the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). The Aliens Police (AVIM) will then identify and register the individual, after which a medical intake will be done by the Asylum Seeker Healthcare (GZA). The IND will then proceed with the registration interviews to determine their mental and physical fitness and their aspirations. During this period, the Dutch Council for Refugees (VWN) is available to provide the refugees with information and counselling. In the meantime, they will continue to live in a COA accommodation. After the conversations with IND have finished, the IND will determine whether the asylum seeker is allowed to stay for a certain period of time. If this is the case, the refugee is granted a residence permit which is valid for five years and will then be considered a ‘status holder’. When they have completed these first phases of the process, they will be going through a screening with COA to determine past work experience and future aspirations (COA, n.d.-a). The status holders will then be connected to a municipality in which they will be going to live in the Netherlands. When this has happened, a broad intake will be done by the municipality.

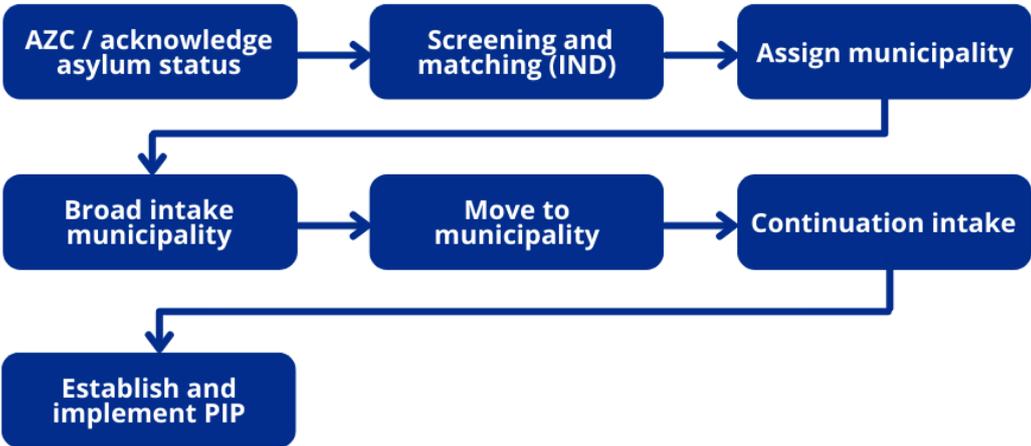


Figure 1: Pre-integration process in the AZC (Source: Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2018).

Due to a housing shortage, the municipality often does not have a house available immediately for the status holder. During this waiting period to get assigned a house, the status holder will continue living in an AZC (COA, n.d.-b). In the meantime, a status holder can already start with their unofficial integration into the Netherlands. As soon as they are assigned a house, the official integration process will start. The municipality will establish a personal civic integration and participation plan (PIP) in which it is determined which of the three routes the newcomer will follow to integrate. These routes are the regular B1-route, the education route or the Z-route, which is aimed at people who do not fit within the first two routes. The following section will discuss these routes and the integration law they are part of.

### **3.2.1 Wet Inburgering 2013 and 2021**

Recently, the integration law (Wet Inburgering, hereafter WI) that was implemented in 2013 has been changed. Instead of this law, a new integration law was introduced, called the Wet Inburgering 2021. This section will discuss the WI2013, the new law, and the important changes in the Dutch integration policy.

The WI2013, as the name mentions, stems from 2013. Under this law, a person who is obligated to integrate is responsible for their own integration process. They will have to find their own pathway in the Dutch integration system. The law assumes natural market forces in which there is a commercial market for language providers that provides a fair price/quality ratio. If a person does not pass their integration exam, there are consequences, such as having to pay back their loan (De Lange et al., 2021; Razenberg & de Gruijter, 2019). In the WI2013, it is stated that a person is required to integrate when they obtain a legal residence permit for a certain period of time, in which there are some exceptions, such as a person younger than 16 years (WI2013 article 3; WI2013 article 5; Aliens Act 2000 article 8.a & 8.c). Someone with the obligation to integrate has to pass the integration exam within three years after their arrival. This entails acquiring oral and written knowledge of the Dutch language on at least A2-level of the European Framework of Reference for Languages (WI 2013 article 7). The integration exam also includes orientation towards the Dutch labour market, which is also an individual's own responsibility. In order to pass the exam, newcomers can take up a loan up to €10,000,- from the government to finance their courses and examinations. Given that newcomers have to find their own pathway in the integration system, this also entails that finding courses to prepare themselves for the integration exam are their own responsibility (De Lange et al., 2021). Under this law, these people receive little guidance from governmental institutions and the municipality they live in. The law has been found ineffective, unsuccessful and too complicated.

As a consequence, the integration process is too slow and people under this law remain dependent on social benefits for too long (Razenberg & de Gruijter, 2019). Therefore, a new integration law has been implemented on 1 January 2022.

The WI2021 differs mostly from the WI2013 with regards to the guidance that people who are required to integrate receive. Whereas they did not receive any guidance from governmental institutions under WI2013, they are now guided in their integration process by the municipality they are assigned to. They will receive information from the municipality, as well as support with arranging basic needs. Furthermore, the nature of the civic integration obligation has changed considerably. As mentioned in the previous section, a status holder has to follow one of the three routes in order to integrate. An overview of these routes is shown in Figure 2. The municipality will determine which route the newcomer has to follow, according to the PIP they constructed. The PIP is established together with the refugee, based on the broad intake and a learnability test (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.). The regular route is the B1-route and entails an integration examination including a section of mastering the Dutch language on a B1-level both orally and written, as well as a component that tests the knowledge on Dutch society (WI2021 article 7). The education route is for those who indicated that they want to pursue further education in the Netherlands. They will follow a special language trajectory, after which there is a bigger chance that they will be able to receive their diploma in their desired education field (WI2021 article 8). The last route is the Z-route, which was designed for those who cannot participate in the first two routes, as judged by the government. In the Z-route, the Z stands for self-sufficiency. Individuals will follow an intensive trajectory tailored to their capacities, aimed at learning the Dutch language, self-sufficiency and participation in Dutch society (WI2021 article 9). So, with these routes, the WI2021 provides a more tailored approach to the integration process of newcomers. They receive more guidance from the municipality they are assigned to, in a programme that fits their needs. The element that remains from the WI2013 is the period within which status holders have to complete their integration process, which is three years. Additionally, the status holders still have access to the loan.

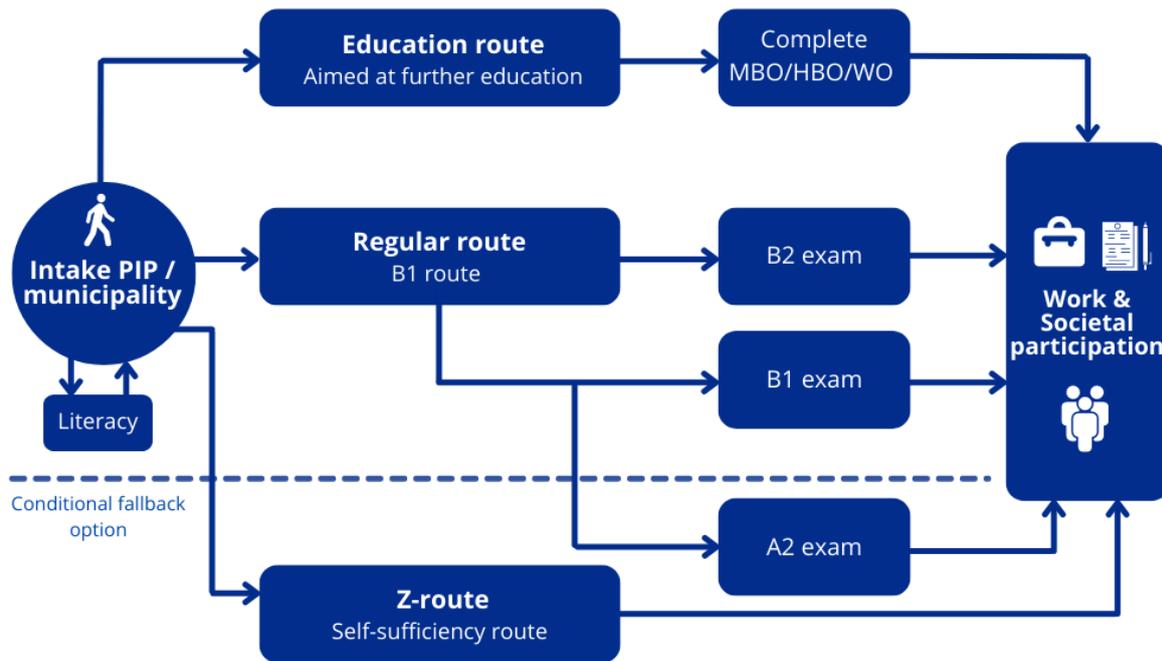


Figure 2: Overview of routes towards integration (Source: Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2018).

Among the research group, most of the participants fall within the WI2013. This means that officially, the municipality that they are assigned to, do not have to guide them as they would under WI2021. However, practice shows that many municipalities actually provide more guidance to these people as well. Although these newcomers follow the integration process according to the old law, the municipality guides them in providing language classes and social benefits, whereas they would have had to do that themselves under the old law. This may create a grey area, in which it is unclear what people under the old law can expect from the municipality. However, the reason that municipalities do this, is because integration and participation in the society are too separate from each other. By claiming supervision over the integration process, municipalities can bring more coherence to these two processes, especially when municipalities are responsible for a status holder's participation in society. Not only is this done to bring coherence to these two domains, but also to benefit the status holder. Combining the integration and participation process allows municipalities to create combined programmes that provide newcomers with trajectories that combine language and participation. This provides a status holder with a better chance to enter the labour market and participate in society (Klaver et al., 2019; Razenberg & de Gruijter, 2019).

### 3.2.2 Participatiewet

Another important law for status holders in the Netherlands, is the participation law (Participatiewet, hereafter PW), which is closely related to the WI for status holders. This law

applies to everyone who is able to work, but who cannot enter or stay in the labour market without support. The law provides municipalities with the means to support people obtain and keep a job. This only concerns people with a disability or those who are not familiar with or close to the labour market, including status holders. Municipalities provide those people with different re-integration and participation facilities that are aimed at participation, learning (new) skills, or obtaining work experience. Besides this, municipalities can opt to deploy structural labour costs subsidies, job coaches and protected work as a re-integration facility (SZW, 2021). The PIP is an important component that is shaped by the PW. It is established together with the newcomer tailored to their needs, abilities and ambitions. Therefore, the PIP allows for a tailored guidance by the municipality. It includes agreements about the route that the newcomer will follow, the number of lessons one will follow, as well as performance agreements including working/volunteering hours. The PIP is closely related to the PW and has to take into account the rules and regulation of the PW (Razenberg & de Gruijter, 2019; Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.).

### **3.3 The Netherlands and refugee integration**

The Netherlands is known to be a tolerant and welcoming country for minorities historically speaking, as well as for its multicultural migration policies and focus on specific cultural communities. However, the Netherlands has seen an increase in the influx of refugees and migrants since 2015, which led the population to voice their concerns regarding the government's migration policies. Although many Dutch people believe that refugees should be granted asylum, a majority of this group is worried about the consequences of this process. This resulted in a reversal regarding the Dutch open multicultural migration policy with a shift towards prioritizing assimilation (Albada et al., 2020). The attitude towards refugees has significantly changed for the worse in the period between 2017 and 2019. Kuppens et al. (2020) have conducted a study that shows how the attitudes towards asylum seekers has changed during that period. They found that Dutch people are rather negative than positive towards asylum seekers. During their study, they even adopted a more negative stance. Although this shift is small with an increase in negative attitudes from 38% in 2017 to 43% in 2019, it has been consistent among the different measuring moments. Overall, Dutch people view asylum seekers more as a threat than an enrichment, are less likely to support them, are less positive towards the fact that the Netherlands hosts asylum seekers, and also show less support for the Dutch asylum and integration policies.

The research by Albada et al. (2020) supports this as well. According to them, Dutch society appears to show signs of polarization with regards to attitudes towards refugees and migrants. They have identified two main groups at both ends of the spectrum who oppose each other in being anti and pro, as well as two groups in the middle. These middle groups are two separate groups, in which one is more lenient towards positive attitudes, and the other group takes a critical stance. This can be ascribed to differences in education level, political orientation and perceived cultural distance (PCD). People with lower education levels, a more right-wing political orientation, larger PCD and greater discontent with society are more likely to have a negative attitude towards refugees. The PCD is of main importance when the refugee is Muslim. Islamophobia has increased over the past years in Europe, which is also apparent in the Netherlands. Studies show that the majority of the Dutch population is opposed to Muslim practices (Albada et al., 2020). This may impact how the group of Afghans is perceived and influence their integration process in the Netherlands.

Political orientation plays an important role in the polarizing attitudes towards refugees. According to Knappert et al. (2021), politicians fulfil a key role in framing and maintaining such attitudes due to their influence in policymaking and their key stance in public debate. Often, stereotypes are used in politics that frame attitudes towards refugees. Findings of their study suggest that attitudes towards refugees are shaped by political beliefs and personal contact with asylum seekers (Knappert et al., 2021). Personal contact can reduce negative attitudes towards refugees, as has also been emphasized by Albada et al. (2020). Furthermore, Kuppens et al. (2020) also highlight that people who live close to AZCs hold fewer negative attitudes towards refugees than people who live further away. This can relate to the fact that these people may be in more contact with them.

The way in which the Netherlands views refugees and has adopted its policies towards a focus on assimilation is also visible in the Migration Policy Index (MIPEX). The MIPEX measures integration and asylum policies to analyse how governments promote the integration of refugees and evaluate migrants' opportunities regarding their participation in the host society (MIPEX, 2020a). As discussed, the Netherlands used to be a tolerant and welcoming country for refugees and employed a commendable integration policy but dropped significantly in the MIPEX ranking in 2014 (Albada et al., 2020; Knappert et al., 2021). MIPEX classifies the Netherlands a halfway favourable, meaning that the countries in this category provide immigrants with basic rights and opportunities, but do not ensure a secure future. Policies emphasize to view immigrants as their equals, yet also as strangers rather than potential citizens

(MIPEX, 2020b). Figure 6 displays the rating of the Netherlands by MIPEX and shows all the scores of different factors that are deemed important by MIPEX to measure the integration policies of countries. The Netherlands obtained an average score of 57/100 in 2019. The approach the Netherlands has is therefore classified as temporary integration and is considered halfway favourable. This influences how the population and the immigrants interact with each other, impacting the willingness of people to accept asylum seekers as well as how immigrants participate in society and experience their sense of belonging (MIPEX, 2020c). All in all, the negative attitudes towards refugees, especially Muslims, have risen and the Netherlands decreased in ranking on the MIPEX. This suggests that there is room for improvement regarding integration policies and attitudes in the Netherlands.

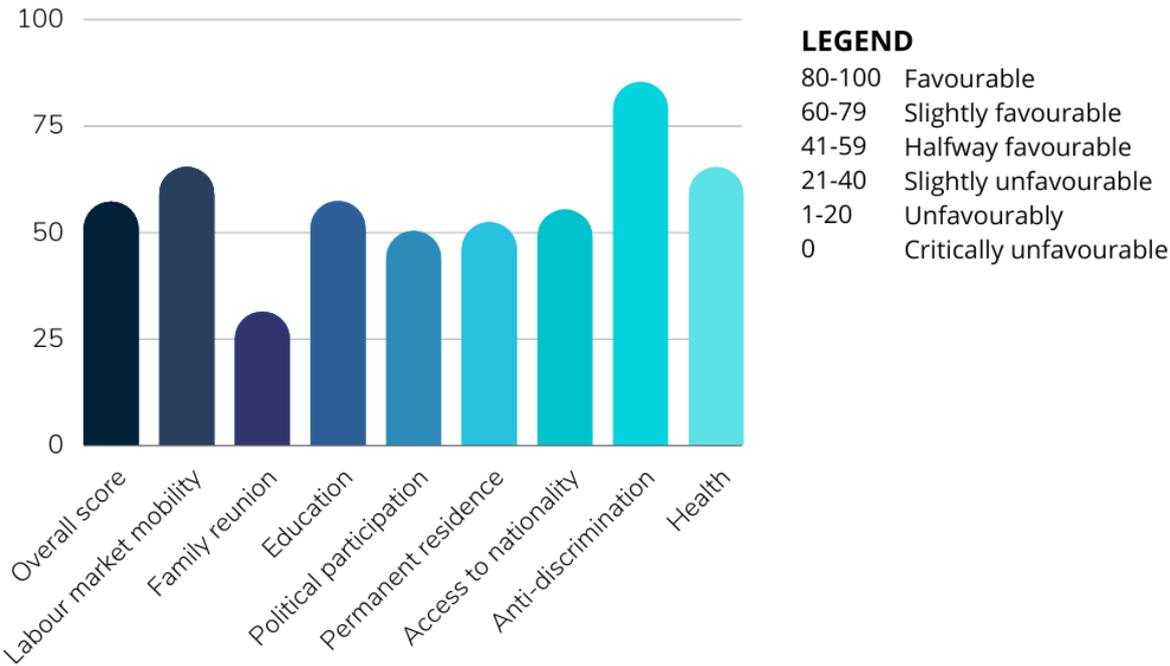


Figure 3: MIPEX rating of the Netherlands (Source: MIPEX, 2020c).

## **4. Theoretical embedding**

### **4.1 Structure and agency**

In order to place the Afghans' experiences within a broader social and theoretical context and analyse these appropriately, a few theories are introduced to substantiate the analysis. First of all, it is important to focus on the structural challenges that Afghans encounter regarding their integration in the Netherlands. Here, it is important to focus on structure and agency. This study draws upon the reflection on structure and agency in migration by Bakewell (2010). Based on this, in this research (social) structure will be understood as 'any recurring pattern of social behaviour' (Scott and Marshall, 2009 as cited in Bakewell, 2010, p. 1694-5) or the systematic interrelationships between different components of a social system or a society. Agency is defined as the ability of social actors to reflect on their position, create strategies, and undertake action to achieve their wishes (Bakewell, 2010). This is closely related to Giddens' structuration theory, in which structure and agency are seen as interdependent of each other. According to Giddens, structure has a dual nature and serves as the means and the outcome of social practices that structures constantly organize. So, not only does structure shape social practice, but it is also reproduced by social practice and may even be transformed by it as well. Further, social structures can be considered to both enable and constrain individuals' actions. Even though the actions of individuals may be limited by these structures, Giddens argues that individuals' agency ensures that they always have some freedom to move (Bakewell, 2010). In order to exercise their agency, individuals must know a considerable amount about the society that they are participating in. Their actions then serve to reproduce the social structures that they are exercised within. Although their actions are bounded by structural patterns, they can cause social transformation as agents have control to some extent over the social relations they find themselves in (Sewell, 1992). So, Giddens' structuration theory presents the importance of the interplay between structure and agency and emphasizes that it is a continuous process rather than a static given.

Although Giddens' structuration theory has provided an appealing, dual understanding of structure and agency, it fails to explain how a balance between structure and agency in a certain social context is achieved (Bakewell, 2010). Further, the notion of structure can be found problematic due to the fact that the concept does not have one clear definition. Even though Giddens discusses the concept of structure in his work, he does not specify an elaborate definition of the concept. Despite this, structure does explain an important element about social

relations. It explains the tendency to reproduce patterns, even if involved actors may not be aware of these patterns or do not want the reproduction of them (Sewell, 1992). Archer's approach serves as a solution to this problem with Giddens' structuration theory. She opposed morphogenesis with structuration (Archer, 1982). The morphogenetic approach has its roots in general systems theory and seeks to unite structure and agency, like Giddens' structuration theory. Similar to structuration theory, the morphogenetic approach believes that structure and agency are closely interrelated (Bakewell, 2010; Archer, 1982). Structural patterns are grounded in actions, whereas these actions are simultaneously shaped and limited by the structures they find themselves in. Where structuration is considered a process by Giddens, this is also the case with morphogenesis. It is a process that produces change within structures, but different from Giddens' ideas, this process has an end product: structural elaboration, or structural interaction. The morphogenetic approach is not only dualistic, but sequential too, as it manages endless cycles of social interaction which uncovers the interplay between structure and agency. By contrast, structuration considers the connections between structure and agency as permanent (Archer, 1982). So, although the core ideas of the interplay between structure and agency as introduced by Giddens serve as a starting point for this research, the morphogenetic approach takes it a step further. A focus on endless cycles that transform structures is preferred over the idea that the interactions in Giddens' structuration theory is permanent. This idea will serve as an overarching approach to the study, in which the notions of structure and agency stand at the core. To link this to refugee integration, the Indicators of Integration Framework by Ager & Strang (2008) will be applied, in which the interplay between structure and agency is also discussed.

## **4.2 Indicators of Integration Framework**

To substantiate the research, the Indicators of Integration Framework (IIF) by Ager & Strang (2008) will be applied, including the refinement of Phillimore (2020). In this framework, the interplay between structure and agency also becomes apparent. It is crucial to place the Afghans' situation and experiences within an integration framework in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of refugee integration. Combined with structure and agency and Archer's morphogenesis theory, this will bear more insight into the experiences of Afghans with regards to their integration process, since it allows to explore how experiences are situated within the broader societal context. Ager & Strang (2008) have defined several indicators of integration that indicate or determine whether integration has been successful. These indicators

have been categorized into four categories: 1) markers and means; 2) social connection; 3) facilitators, and; 4) foundation. Figure 4 displays all indicators.

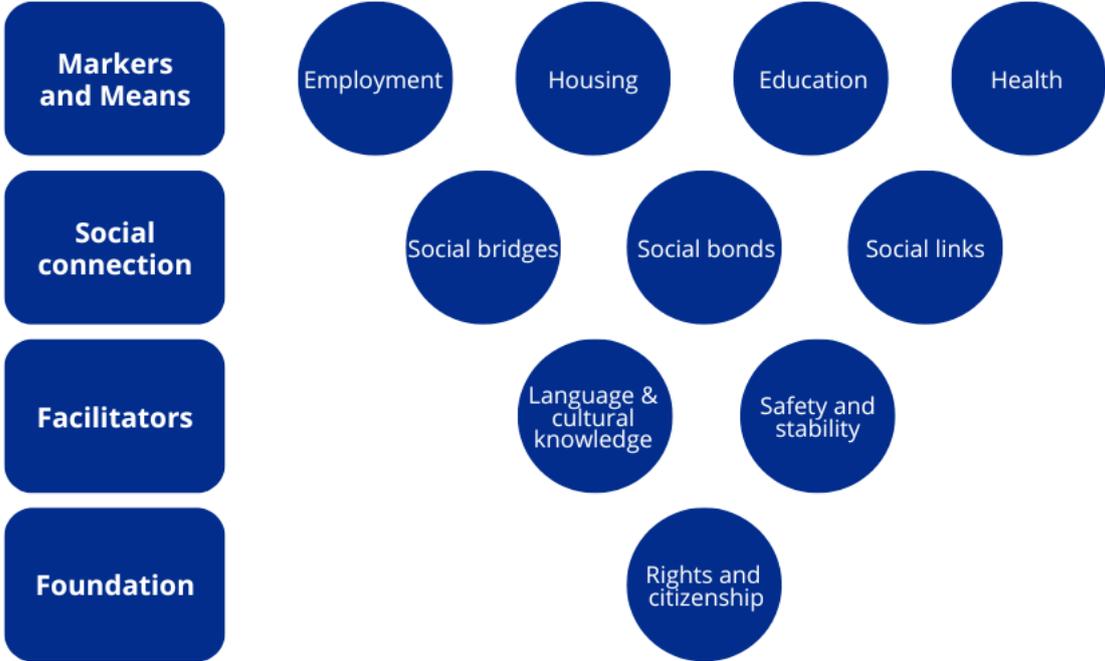


Figure 4: Indicators of Integration Framework (Source: Ager & Strang, 2008).

Among markers and means are employment, housing, education and health. They can serve as a marker to indicate whether integration has been successful, but also as a mean towards achieving integration. Employment ensures economic independence and also helps with making new connections, getting to know society and learning the language. Housing influences the settlement of refugees and impacts feelings of safety and security, influencing the wellbeing of a person. Education provides individuals with new skills which benefits their employment opportunities and increases social connections as well. Health is another domain which is seen as an important resource to actively engage in a society. Good health as well as good access to health services supports the integration of refugees, since it allows for active participation (Ager & Strang, 2008). In many studies, these factors also come forward when integration is discussed.

The foundation of the integration process concerns rights and citizenship. This concerns what is understood as citizenship and the rights and responsibilities that are associated with this. Citizenship is understood differently in different countries. In some, citizenship depends on blood ties whereas in other countries it is related to where someone is born. It is posed as the foundation of integration, since the entire integration process of an individual is dependent on

how citizenship is understood in the host country, as well as which responsibilities belong to being a citizen and gaining citizenship (Ager & Strang, 2008). So, similar to integration, citizenship is a contested concept. Therefore, the integration process differs per societal context.

Social connection is another category that plays an important role in the integration of refugees. Social connection is considered to drive the integration process at a local level. Among this category fall social bridges, social bonds and social links. Social bonds concern connections with family, co-ethnic, co-religious or co-national groups. Connections like these can contribute to feeling home in a new country, by sharing common cultural practices. It benefits integration, given that it provides refugees with a voice. Social bridges concern connections with other communities. Although this has sparked debates on inclusion and exclusion, it is considered beneficial to integration. Friendliness plays a role in feeling welcome, and it can bring longer-term social and economic benefits to them. Social links concern connections with the structure of the state, such as government services. Connecting refugees to government services relevant to them is an important element in their integration process. In doing so, there exist structural barriers, such as not knowing the language or culture and lack of safety and stability (Ager & Strang, 2008). Here, the focus lies predominantly on the refugee's efforts in making social connections.

The last category is facilitators, which contribute to the integration process of an individual. Facilitators are understood as elements that remove the barriers to integration. According to Ager & Strang, the main barriers exist in knowledge about language and culture and safety and security. The ability to speak the host country's language is seen as a main component in the integration process. Language can also serve as a barrier for the receiving country, given that in some domains it might be better to translate information to the refugees' languages to ensure a better understanding. Furthermore, cultural knowledge of the host country is crucial, as it can help manage refugees' expectations regarding the integration process. Besides this, safety and stability are considered factors that contribute to the integration process. A feeling of safety contributes to feeling at home and feeling integrated. This also applies for stability, especially related to housing. Being moved around frequently or after a short period of time hinders the integration process of a person (Ager & Strang, 2008). Ager & Strang relate these facilitators to an individual, but do not take into account the underlying structures that cause these facilitators to be facilitators or underminers. Instead, the governmental efforts should be incorporated as well.

Although Ager & Strang have briefly addressed the problem of structural barriers in their framework, the emphasis on the individual’s efforts dominates. Therefore, Phillimore (2020) has refined the framework. She emphasize that the framework only includes a normative understanding of integration outcomes, arguing that it is very directed towards the outcomes on an individual or group level. According to her, Ager & Strang (2008) take less account of the social, political or economic context in which an individual’s integration process takes place. She argues that the framework should not be unidimensional, but rather multidimensional, which includes the host country’s efforts as well. Phillimore adds five opportunity structures to the framework, which influence refugee integration. These structures include locality, relations, structures, initiatives and support, and discourse, which are displayed in Figure 5. These can possibly undermine or facilitate the integration process. It is important to understand these structures as such, and should be seen as sets of resources, arrangements and routes that can support or hinder integration through mechanisms such as racism, xenophobia, implemented policies etcetera.

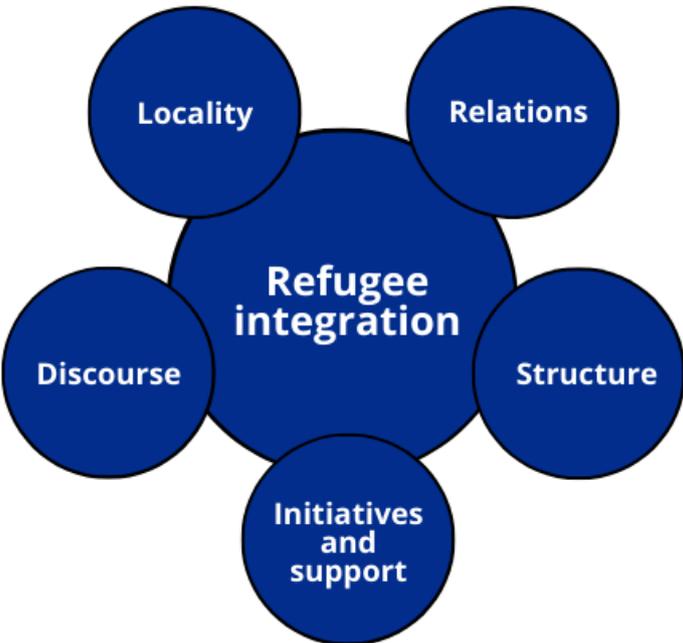


Figure 5: Opportunity structures of refugee integration (Source: Phillimore, 2020).

Locality is one of the notions that plays an important role in shaping the outcomes of integration. First of all, integration policies differ per country and are thus dependent on location. Furthermore, many countries employ a dispersal policy with regards to refugees, meaning that refugees are spread over the country. This is to spread the burden of refugee

assistance in different areas, decrease costs by low-cost accommodations, or repopulate shrinking areas (Phillimore, 2020). The role of locality in the Dutch integration system is also emphasized by Bakker et al. (2016). As discussed by them, refugees are placed in AZCs that are very often located in rural areas, separating them from society. Policies that favour this kind of treatment have been criticized for their isolating nature, since the placement of refugees in rural areas leads to a higher chance of racism and marginalization of refugees (Phillimore, 2020). This locality is imposed by the government and can therefore be seen as a structural factor that can either facilitate or undermine refugee integration.

Another element that can facilitate or undermine integration are relations. These are social relations that can shape integration. Relations like these include relations with local and national communities, such as the relationships between the host country or community and the refugees. These relations are related to whether a society is open and welcoming or hostile to refugees. A rather open society that wants to build a relationship with newcomers can have more positive impact on integration outcomes than an unwelcoming society. Although Phillimore states that these relations function as an opportunity structure, more research has to be done in how these relations can impact the outcomes of integration (Phillimore, 2020). This concept can also be related to locality, given that approaches to refugees may differ per area. It is something which is not fixed and can change over time due to external factors.

Initiatives and support can support refugee integration as well. This can include social networking, specific integration programmes or career guidance. Phillimore makes a distinction between state-led programmes and programmes through migrant and refugee community organizations (MRCOs), which are non-governmental organizations. She emphasizes that MRCOs often operate within the rules and regulations that have been set by the government and are expected to let refugees adapt to this, rather than advocating for change to fit refugees' needs. State-led integration programmes can be implemented on different levels and often include language learning, career guidance and cultural orientation. Often, it is required to pass an integration exam after the programme, as is the case in the Netherlands. The effects of such programmes, both state-led and non-governmental, have not been researched extensively yet. However, they are considered helpful as it may enhance people's skills as well as cultural knowledge. On the other hand, the programmes are thought to focus on control and coercion rather than taking into account refugees' needs for integration (Phillimore, 2020). Given that non-governmental programmes and, naturally, state-led programmes operate within existing

structural rules and regulations, these initiatives and support may facilitate integration, but can also undermine the process due to not meeting individual needs.

The fourth element that can hinder or facilitate integration is discourse. This refers to a dominant course of thinking in politics and society with regards to refugees and integration. Discourse has a considerable influence on the public opinion and thus how refugees are perceived. On the one hand, a discourse may create stigma and fear, while on the other hand it could also create a welcoming space for refugees. However, often refugees are considered problematic as a consequence of the framing of the media. Media and politics play a large role in how the population perceives newcomers, which may also differ on different societal levels. So, discourse influences integration policies and how refugees are perceived and can therefore serve as a facilitating or undermining factor for integration (Phillimore, 2020).

Finally, structure is another opportunity structure introduced by Phillimore. This concept entails all structural factors related to the asylum and integration policy that may hinder or facilitate integration. A main structural factor is the asylum procedure and the length it takes for the institutions to decide on whether a refugee is allowed to stay. Lengthy procedures, while living in a rural AZC with few facilities impacts a newcomer's integration process (Phillimore, 2020). This notion seems a rather overarching concept, which also influences the other four opportunity structures. Locality, relations, initiatives and support and discourse are all shaped by the integration and asylum policies that are in place. As emphasized by Bakker et al. (2016), the Dutch asylum and integration policies are paradoxical: on the one hand they are exclusive, but once a person is admitted, inclusion is highly encouraged. This is reflected by the locations of AZCs, in which refugees live temporarily. Once they are granted a residence permit, they are highly encouraged to participate in society by learning the language and obtaining a job.

### **4.3 Conceptual framework**

A conceptual framework was designed based on the theoretical framework, which is displayed in Figure 6. This framework serves to explain the connections between the theoretical framework and the research questions, which were elaborated upon in the previous chapters. To recapitulate shortly, the main research question is: *How do recently arrived Afghans experience their integration into the Netherlands?* This question will be answered with the help of three sub-questions: 1) What barriers and enabling factors exist for refugees in their integration into the Netherlands?; 2) How do career guidance and language classes contribute to the integration of the Afghans?, and; 3) How do the different enablers and barriers relate to

each other and fit within the broader societal context of the Netherlands? In the third sub-question, the broader societal context includes structures such as rules and regulations that impact integration and the experiences people have with integration.

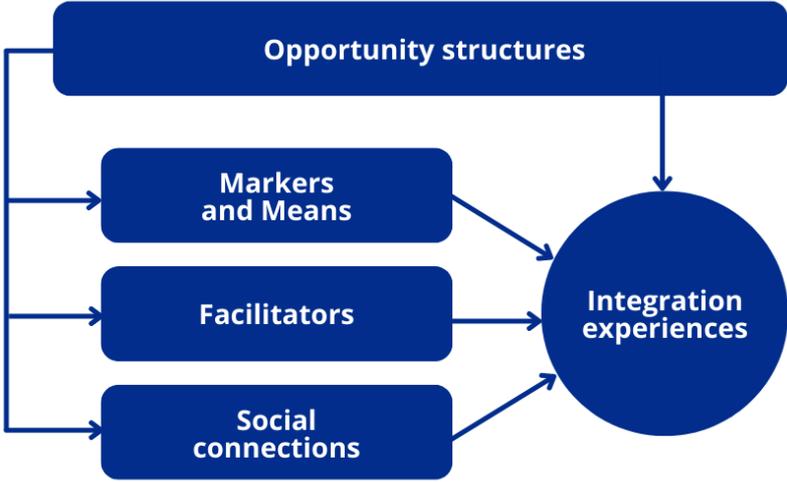


Figure 6: Conceptual framework.

Opportunity structures are illustrated as an overarching concept in the framework. Derived from the theoretical embedding, especially by Phillimore’s refinement of the IIF, and the literature review, it can be established that opportunity structures set the context for how the Afghans experience their integration. Furthermore, these existing structures influence the markers and means of integration, facilitators and social connections. Markers and means include housing, education, employment and health and facilitators serve to enable or ease the integration process (Ager & Strang, 2008). These three concepts are influenced by the opportunity structures, but in turn influence how the Afghans experience their integration process. The first sub-question can be directly related to all three concepts that are influenced by opportunity structures and influence the integration experiences of the Afghans. The second question mainly concerns initiatives and support, which can be gathered under the opportunity structures, but could serve as a facilitator as well. The third sub-question resembles the model. The alleged relation between all concepts has not been displayed, but instead it aims to show how these different concepts fit within the broader social (opportunity) structure in the Netherlands, which also includes the expected outcomes of this research. The main question and outcomes are summarized in the circle, to which all arrows are pointed. The next chapter will further elaborate on the operationalization of the concepts and the methodological approach of the research.

## **5. Methodology**

This section presents the research methods and design of the study. First, the operationalization of the concepts in the conceptual framework will be elaborated upon, after which the research design and methods will be discussed. This includes the research methods that have been applied in this study, as well as the sampling method and type of analysis that has been applied to the study. Lastly, this chapter includes the methodological considerations, by discussing the limitations of the research as well as the positionality of the researcher.

### **5.1 Operationalization of concepts**

The main concepts of the research have been introduced in the previous chapter. These concepts are operationalized based on most common definitions or on the existing literature and research context. First of all, integration experiences as a concept is used to explain how the Afghans feel about their settlement into Dutch society. To analyse their experiences, it is crucial to identify the core concepts that influence how they feel about their settlement into society. Markers and means of integration is an important notion that includes housing, education, employment and health, as defined by Ager & Strang (2008). In this research, housing refers to the place, accommodation and living conditions that the Afghans find themselves in after their arrival to the Netherlands. The notion of employment includes having a job, as well as the process towards finding one, which includes job coaching and skills training. The facilitators of integration include language and cultural knowledge, as well as safety and security. These factors can contribute both positively and negatively to how integration is experienced. Lastly, social connections in this research refers to the Afghans' ability to make new social connections, the value they attach to it, as well as how they are perceived by the local population. Among this notion fall the categories of social bridges, social bonds and social links, based on Putnam's social capital theory.

### **5.2 Research design and research methods**

The research has been conducted in the Netherlands from February 2022 until June 2022 during an eighteen-week fieldwork period. During this period, SPARK organization provided the working environment within which the fieldwork could be conducted. SPARK is a non-governmental organization based in Amsterdam that aims to support young people, particularly women and refugees, in fragile communities. They do this by implementing programmes that are aimed at empowering these people to rebuild their futures, with a focus on study and

employment. They closely collaborate with local organizations and are active in Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (SPARK, n.d.). This sub-chapter further focuses on the research methods, the research group and the data analysis of the thesis.

### **5.2.1 Literature review**

In the initial stages of the research, a literature review was conducted. This served to help identify the core concepts of the research and to gain a broad, relevant overview of the debate on refugee integration. It helped gain a thorough understanding of the concept of integration, and all the factors that play a role in this process. It allowed to outline the thematic, contextual and theoretical framework of the research and understand the large debate on refugee integration. A wide collection of literature was gathered, which was continuously reviewed to apply to the research findings. This collection included peer-reviewed academic articles, newspaper articles, and reports by governmental and non-governmental organizations. The literature review served to lay the foundation for this research, by identifying the core concepts in the larger debate on refugee integration.

### **5.2.2 Participant and non-participant observation**

In the beginning of the fieldwork research period, non-participant observation was adopted as a research method. Hennink et al. (2020, p. 185) define non-participant observation as ‘conducting an observation without participating in the activities that you are observing’. In non-participant observation, people, activities or events are often observed from a distance, in which the researcher is not part of the observed situation. This process allows one to withdraw from the situation in order to gain a broader view of the situation that is being observed. This method allowed to gain an understanding of the research group and the kind of activities, rules and regulations they encountered in their daily lives. The non-participant observation was conducted by being involved in the organization that the research group is supported by, SPARK. We had weekly meetings with two colleagues to discuss the progress and difficulties that the participants encountered. This mainly included hearing and discussing the stories that the participants had shared including structural constraints they faced, for which we aimed to find solutions. It also brought another perspective to the table, from the host organization itself. This perspective mainly focused on the difficulties that the host organization encountered due to being restrained by structural elements. This included learning how little influence an individual has on the institutions that seek to help the refugees, such as COA. These meetings have shown the positive sides, but also mainly the difficulties that were caused as a result of imposed rules and regulations. I gathered fieldnotes to structure the different perspectives and

stories that were found during this method. These were used to substantiate the outcomes of this research. Further, this method has allowed to become more acquainted with the research group, as well as with the broader structural context that they find themselves in.

In the meantime, participant observation was another important method that has helped gain a larger understanding of the research group and the difficulties that they face. This method was applied when I became more acquainted with the research group. Participant observation is defined as ‘the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting’ (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 180). This process contributed to gaining a deeper understanding of the difficulties that the Afghans have faced since arriving to the Netherlands in August 2021. During this process, I was in regular contact with most of the research participants. This mainly concerned covering travel costs for language classes and support for the driving license, but they also came to me with their questions. Furthermore, together with my colleagues, we travelled through part of the Netherlands to meet a few of the participants of the project to check in with them on their progress and wellbeing. Besides this, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also hosted a meeting in the Hague, together with SPARK, COA and the job coaches. The purpose of this meeting was for the Afghans to be able to voice their concerns or ask the questions that they had. Instead, however, the main focus was on the MFA and COA’s rules and regulations, rather than the Afghans’ opinions. Although the main emphasis was not on their experiences, this has allowed me to approach the integration process from different perspectives. Other than this meeting, I have joined two group job coach meetings, in which I was able to speak to the Afghans and listen to their stories, experiences and ambitions. During all these meetings I collected fieldnotes, which have helped in structuring all the information that was gathered. All in all, I have spent the past few months from February until halfway June observing the research group, providing them with support through my internship and getting to know them personally.

### **5.2.3 Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

Within qualitative research a widely used method to gather data is conducting semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews serve to obtain a detailed insight into the topic of the research of the study participants themselves. This kind of interview is typically used when one looks for information on individual, personal experiences about a certain topic (Hennink et al., 2020). This type of interview, following a semi-structured interview guide, was used to get an insight into the Afghans’ experiences of adapting to life in the Netherlands. Most of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewee and lasted approximately 50 to 90

minutes. In total, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Afghan refugees and two job coaches. Appendix 1 contains a list of the research participants, including their gender, education level, age and their housing status. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the research participants and the job coaches. As a result of a lack of willingness to participate and a high non-response rate, the number of in-depth interviews conducted was relatively small. Therefore, these interviews have been triangulated with the other research methods, i.e. participant and non-participant observation. The combination of these research methods has allowed to gain a thorough understanding of the topic, despite the relatively small number of interviews. The following section will provide more information about the selection of the participants.

#### **5.2.4 Sampling method**

The research group consisted of the people that are participants in SPARK's KabCare project. These are Afghan people that worked for the Dutch embassy in Kabul and were evacuated as a result of the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. Thus, they are considered recently arrived refugees, which entails people who hold a temporary residence permit, but have not been granted a permanent permit yet (Damen et al., 2022). The project that they are part of aims to support them in finding employment in the Netherlands and settling into Dutch society. The group in this project only consists of 37 people, which consequently posed limited possibilities for sampling. The sampling methods that were used were mainly a mix between using a register and formal networks. Register as a recruitment strategy refers to 'selecting participants from a register of people who meet the inclusion criteria' (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 98). The participants were accessed through the data that SPARK provided and based on this, they were selected for the research. In the meantime, this was combined with a formal network, in which participants are recruited 'from formal networks that represent a concentration of the study population' (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 98). Accessing them through the organization that they receive support from and given that they consist of a formal network of former employees of the embassy, this strategy seemed fitting. With the size of the research group, it has proved to be difficult to recruit participants for the research. With a high no-response rate, it was not easy to be able to talk to people and hear their stories. This was likely due to the many appointments and obligations that they had with regards to their integration, as well as lack of willingness to share their stories.

### **5.2.5 Discourse analysis**

In order to gain a detailed understanding of the stories that the participants have shared, a discourse analysis on the interviews was conducted, supported by non-participant and participant observation. A discourse analysis can be used to study how people's narratives reflect broader social structures. This type of analysis is generally used to understand the social constructions of reality (Hennink et al., 2020). This research has thus focused on the participants' narratives and how they reflect social structures, by identifying the issues that were raised by them and their interpretation of these events. The way in which they experience these issues is a core factor in this analysis. These narratives and the experiences of the participants have been compared to each other to create an overarching narrative of how the Afghans experience their integration into society and how this is affected by different factors. This has provided insight into how their experiences relate to the broader social structures that exist in the Netherlands.

## **5.3 Methodological considerations**

### **5.3.1 Challenges and limitations**

Similar to other research, this research is also subject to certain risks. This section will further elaborate on the most important shortcomings of this research, starting with a general yet highly relevant constraint. Time and resources have played an important role in this research, posing challenges to the data collection of the study. The duration of the research has limited its scope to exploring the experiences of one specific group of refugees. Further, in order to gather sufficient data, it was important to draw on (non-)participant observation methods and an evaluation survey commissioned by the host organization. This has contributed to the ability to finish the fieldwork period.

Secondly, some of the interviews have been conducted in an online manner. Due to the participants living in sometimes remote areas and their busy schedules, it was not possible to visit them. Furthermore, coronavirus played a role in this twice, forcing face-to-face interviews to be postponed or moved to online interviews. In the process of online interviewing, it may be more difficult to connect with the participants. However, this was solved by making sure to establish rapport early in the fieldwork period, as well as sustain it after the interview was conducted.

Another limitation that played a role in the data collection is language. None of the participants' first language was English, although they did speak it well enough for the

interviews to be conducted in English. In the interviews, there sometimes appeared some misunderstandings, due to the participant not understanding the question correctly, or due to the researcher not understanding the participant's answer. This was solved by rephrasing the question and probing to gain a clear understanding of the issues that the participants were discussing.

Lastly, the research group consists of a very specific group of people, namely ex-employees of the Dutch embassy in Afghanistan. Unlike other newcomers, they have been guided by SPARK in their integration process from the moment they arrived to the Netherlands. They were provided with Dutch language classes as well as career guidance, and some even with driving lessons. The fact that other refugees do not receive this kind of support, makes this group one of a kind. This has offered an interesting angle to the research, since it can be extended to use as a comparison to other refugee groups and their experiences with integration. However, as a result of this, the results of this research cannot be generalized.

### **5.3.2 Positionality as a researcher**

In researching a topic which can be considered sensitive by the participants, it is important to acknowledge that I am influenced by my background. Considering the fact that I have lived in the Netherlands my entire life, I was slightly familiar with the integration procedure before my research. To overcome any prejudiced opinions I might have had, I ensured to dive deep into the topic and take an open stance towards every individual story. Further, the fact that I am Dutch may have influenced how the research participants responded to my questions. While ensuring that their answers were not right or wrong, I aimed at making them feel comfortable to share their stories. Besides this, my role as being part of the host organization that they are supported by, also may have influenced their answers. Although I emphasized that I was performing research for my master's, the participants also knew me as intern at SPARK and undoubtedly connected me to this. Despite this, no direct limitations related to my position were encountered, although it must be taken into account that the interviewees' answers may have been influenced by this. Furthermore, it was noticed that some of the interviewees did not feel very comfortable with the audio being recorded. In such cases, either notes were taken, or I reassured that the audio will be kept in a secure location to respect their feelings. Although my positionality may have brought some challenges along, it has also allowed me to deeper reflect on the integration process in the Netherlands, as I am familiar with Dutch society and the rules and regulations that may impact these processes.

## **6. The Afghans' experiences of integration into Dutch society**

The integration process is often looked at from the perspective of the government, as indicated in the previous chapters. There is a lack of emphasis on how the refugees are experiencing their integration, including how they are hindered or enabled by structural factors in the host country (Phillimore, 2020; Van Heelsum, 2017). During the discourse analysis, a few themes have been found to be crucial with regards to the integration of the Afghans in the Netherlands that answers the first sub-question. The sub-section on employment will focus on the second sub-question. The last sub-question will be answered in the discussion section. Based on the conceptual framework by Ager & Strang (2008) and Phillimore's refinement (2020), the findings have been placed into a broader social, political and economic context, which will be examined in the discussion. Derived from the literature review, the participants' answers and the (non-)participant observation, four key themes have been identified. These include housing, language, employment and social life. This chapter will elaborate on how the different factors relate to the Afghans' integration from their perspective, which will then accordingly be used to relate these experiences to the broader social structures that exist in the Netherlands.

### **6.1 Housing**

In the literary section of this research, it became clear that housing is an important element in the integration process of refugees. During the interviews with the research participants, attention was paid to what role housing plays in their experiences regarding their integration. The interviewees were able to identify different factors related to their housing that influences how they experience their settlement into Dutch society, relating the matter to the main research question and the first sub-question. This chapter on housing is divided into different themes that are related to housing and their impact on integration. Although some research participants are living in their own houses already, this chapter mainly focuses on the living conditions in COA accommodations, since this is what has been discussed most extensively by the participants.

#### **6.1.1 Emergency shelter versus AZC**

The housing situation has an impact on how the Afghans experience their integration process, as acknowledged by the participants. When asked what the living situation in camps was like for them, all of the respondents emphasized that the living conditions were not very good. *"It's traumatizing. (...) You know, camps are not that a good place to live."* (Leila, 26-year-old female). Although the living conditions in all camps are considered poor, the participants indicated a difference in living conditions between AZCs and emergency shelters:

*“For asylum seekers, the emergency shelter is a lot different. There is no privacy, you cannot cook or anything. In a regular AZC, it is not comparable. You receive money allowance to buy food and other necessities and you have a lot more privacy.” (Hakim, 38-year-old male).*

When the Afghans first arrived to the Netherlands, they were placed in an emergency shelter in Zoutkamp. They were promised that they only had to live there for two weeks in quarantine, after which they would move to another location. However, the group instead lived in Zoutkamp for two months, after which they were transferred to another emergency shelter in Harskamp. *“Zoutkamp was okay first, they said it was going to be for 14 days to quarantine. But it turned out to be two months, which was very boring.”* (Karim, 32-year-old male). Whereas the evacuees were willing to accept the circumstances at first, they soon became less willing to. In the emergency shelters, the conditions were mostly considered worse than in AZCs. First of all, they were not able to and allowed to cook for themselves, but they also had to share a room with people other than their own families. Yasamin, a 28-year-old female, emphasized that emergency camps lack more privacy compared to an AZC:

*“The AZC was much better than the other places, but all the others had more problems, especially the Heumensoord camp. I think how they put like 200 people together with no rooms. And yeah, like every one person talks, everybody would hear that and the lights were on for everyone, like sometimes we would want to read the book, but they would turn it off because of the children.”*

This lack of privacy is also displayed in Figure 7, which contains a photo of a room in the emergency shelter in Heumensoord, which Yasamin discussed. Here, it can be seen that the room cannot be closed with a door, but merely closes with a curtain. Furthermore, it also does not have a ceiling, creating open rooms in which privacy is lacking considerably.



Figure 7: Room in emergency shelter Heumensoord (Source: ANP).

Furthermore, living in such an emergency accommodation creates a distorted reality of the Netherlands for refugees. Hakim explains that living in such a camp makes it difficult to get to know the Netherlands. He thinks *“the emergency shelter does influence this. It influences your thoughts, the experience you have. You think differently about the Netherlands, because you don’t see the Netherlands.”* Furthermore, Leila emphasized that she did not learn much about the Netherlands while living in a camp. She explained that she *“lived like four to five months in a COA location. And then two months, with a family. Half Afghan, half Dutch. I learnt more Dutch than when I was in camp, I didn’t learn a single word other than ‘alsjeblieft’. Yeah, that was not very well, too.”* All in all, the situation in AZCs is considered better than in emergency shelters, in which the participants experienced a lack of privacy.

### **6.1.2 Living conditions in the accommodations**

Other than the lack of privacy as discussed by Yasamin and not being able to cook for themselves in an emergency shelter, asylum seekers have to adhere to more rules and regulations set by COA (personal communication, April 2022). This includes a curfew, as well as not being allowed to invite visitors. *“We are not allowed to cook ourselves, we have to eat what they prepare, it is, you know it’s always same food. (...) We are not allowed to invite someone into our room.”* (Ibrahim, 41-year-old male). In addition to this, Mahin, a 34-year-old female, explained what happened when she wanted to leave the camp in Harskamp for an appointment:

*“And because all the time, when we go out, we had to show our COA cards and for a check-in and check-out. And then we cannot, we couldn't easily go out for you know, for to have, for example, to go to one of the family members' house, because you need the COA's permission, and you have a specific time you have to come back again.”*

As mentioned by Ibrahim, asylum seekers cannot cook for themselves in emergency shelters and have to eat what has been prepared by COA. At these locations, refugees have to stand in line to receive their meals. However, if they miss a meal, they are not provided with food at that moment. At the time that language classes were arranged for the research group in Zoutkamp, they had to travel to Groningen early in the morning and the afternoon. This caused them to miss breakfast and lunch, since COA did not provide breakfast at that specific time and did not allow them to pack a lunchbox. Given that these people are also not provided with an allowance, this meant that they had to purchase their own two meals a few times a week (personal communication, March 2022). Furthermore, the people in the emergency shelters were not allowed to receive food for more than one person: they were not allowed to ask whether they could receive the meal for a family member as well (personal communication, March 2022). In AZCs, however, the refugees are able to cook for themselves. As mentioned by Hakim, they receive an allowance with which they can purchase groceries.

Other than the problems the group has experienced with food in emergency shelters, the crowdedness in all camps also influences how the Afghans experience their integration. Saif, a 47-year-old male, emphasized that living in a camp makes it difficult to study the language and creates stressful situations:

*“And you know, it was the time of that we were very under the stress in the camp. I couldn't find a place to study on the days that I had to join and I had to travel to the class and then come back I was looking for a place. Imagine a family of seven people in a room and if you wanted to walk outside in the ‘gang’, in the corridor. Like 60 kids are cycling in the... So how could you get something from the book.”*

Further, the hygiene conditions were found to be lacking in the camps, especially in emergency shelters. According to the participants, they had to share rooms, share bathrooms with both men and women, and they were not cleaned regularly enough. This caused many women to get infections in the camps and led them to bring their own cleaning wipes before

going to the bathroom, which were actually small portable toilets (Yasamin). The living conditions thus also impacted the health conditions of the refugees, next to the ability to study and the degree of freedom.

### **6.1.3 Location of COA accommodations**

Another factor that influences the integration process of newcomers, are the locations of the camps. Often, these camps are situated in remote areas, creating a distance between the newcomers and the local population. Ibrahim emphasized that not all camps are located in rural areas. He currently lives in an emergency shelter in Amsterdam, which is a hostel that was changed to a COA accommodation for the large number of refugees that were expected to arrive in the past few months. Here, according to him, *“the situation is that at least it's good. You're in the city, not in the suburbs or far away from the city.”* Furthermore, according to Saif, living in a camp that is located in a remote area did not represent the Netherlands, whereas an AZC in a city did:

*“What we heard now in Zoutkamp, we are the middle of nowhere and we are all those uh, European big and beautiful cities and we didn't know anything and we haven't seen. So the first night that we moved to Gorinchem, it was nice because the camp was in the middle of a city. And we said, I think now we are in Holland and now we are in Europe.”*

Especially the emergency shelter in Zoutkamp was considered a problematic location for the Afghan evacuees, according to Hakim *“Zoutkamp is a bad situation in the middle of nowhere as you Dutch people would say.”* This camp is located in the north of the Netherlands, in the province of Groningen. Living in this camp hampered the integration of the Afghans, given that they were living far from the local population. The nearest large city took a long bus ride, and the village was a 45-minute walk.

*“We wanted to buy some vegetables. And just to buy some vegetable like for example 5 euro vegetable we had to pay €16.00 the bus ticket to go to Groningen 33 kilometres. (...) It happened like four months like this and because there was no shop around. Or we had to walk eight kilometres or you had to... Because to the direction of the shop 8 kilometres, there was no bus but to the direction of the city was the bus.”* (Saif).

Even though the people living in Zoutkamp were provided with three meals a day, there were some strict rules attached to this, as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, Mahin further emphasized that Zoutkamp is located in a very remote area, wondering how they can start their integration process *“because when you go out just you can see the trees and grass, everything, and you're far from the other people, how can we integrate ourselves?”* (Mahin). Although refugees are allowed to move freely outside of the camps, they still have to report frequently to COA, as mentioned by Mahin in the previous section and emphasized by Bakker et al. (2014). Figure 8 displays an overview of the current COA locations, including both temporary (emergency) locations and permanent camps. This map shows that the COA locations are spread over the country and on top of this they are mostly located in rural areas, which hinders the Afghans' integration process according to themselves.



Figure 8: Map of COA locations in the Netherlands (Source: COA).

#### 6.1.4 COA's moving policy

Besides the situation in the camps and their locations influencing how these Afghans experience their integration into the Netherlands, their housing trajectory is also found to play a role in this. COA moves asylum seekers to new locations frequently. They do this for different reasons: 1) the asylum seeker starts with a new phase in their procedure; 2) the asylum seeker lives in a location that will be closed; 3) the asylum seekers themselves choose to move to another

location, for example to an AZC where their family lives, and; 4) the asylum seeker needs extra guidance and is moved to an intensively guided location or the enforcement and monitoring location (COA, n.d.-c). The group of Afghan evacuees from the embassy first arrived in the emergency shelter in Zoutkamp and lived there for two months. After two months, they were moved to another emergency shelter in Harskamp, where they lived for a month. Afterwards, they were moved back to Zoutkamp and lived there for another period of time, ranging from a few days to six months. This continued for many Afghans in the group, who were not assigned their own house yet. In some cases, people were moved from emergency shelter to emergency shelter, or even to an AZC and back to an emergency shelter. Refusal to move is not an option, since COA threatens to involve the police or remove them from the system, leaving them to their fate (personal communication, March 2022; personal communication, May 2022). To provide an insight into how the Afghans experience this policy, Figures 9 and 10 display the housing trajectory of Karim and Yasamin, respectively.



*Figure 9: Housing trajectory of Karim.*

Karim and Yasamin both started their trajectories in Zoutkamp. Karim lived there for approximately four months, with a one month period in which he lived in Harskamp. He was then moved from Zoutkamp to Delfzijl, after which he was moved to AZC ‘s-Gravendeel. He is currently still living there and awaits the moment when he gets appointed a house in his assigned municipality. Together with the other Afghan evacuees, Yasamin started living in

Zoutkamp and was transferred to Harskamp after two months. Then she was moved to the emergency shelter in Heumensoord after which she lived in the AZC in 's-Gravendeel for a period of time. From there, she got assigned a house in her municipality: Nijmegen. Yasamin explained that this caused some problems for her and her family:

*“We were also in 's-Gravendeel, so it was also very long way to like find help so they didn't also think about making it easier for us to be like somewhere near and then work on the house because it's not easy in a completely new country. (...) during the time that we moved they give us two weeks.”*



Figure 10: Housing trajectory of Yasamin.

COA provides asylum seekers a two week period to move once they have been assigned a house, in order to renovate it, purchase furniture, and move their personal belongings. Mostly, they aim at placing asylum seekers near their appointed municipality, however, this is not always possible, as in the case of Yasamin. Other than this, COA is also known to move people abruptly on very short notice. Mahin explained that this is something that bothers them: *“When they're changing a lot of the refugees from one camp to another camp and one camp to another camp, even. You are sitting at a table for lunch (...) And then suddenly they inform us you have*

*to transfer to the Harskamp.*”. The people at COA informed the Afghans on the day of moving that they had to move to Harskamp (personal communication, April 2022). The fact that the Afghans do not know where they will be living and when, creates a lot of uncertainty for them, as according to Ibrahim *“it's not clear it's an emergency camp as well here as well. Maybe they decided to move us other place. Or maybe we go to our house from this place, it's unclear.”* All in all, the housing trajectories and the uncertainty that comes along with this influences the way in which these Afghans can settle into Dutch society.

## **6.2 Language**

Another important factor as indicated by literature and the participants that influences integration and the experience of integration, is language. All participants have indicated that everything dials back to language, because *“language is everything,”* (Karim). Without speaking Dutch, you cannot integrate well into the Netherlands, they emphasized when asked about their personal responsibilities for integration. Most often, the first element that they mentioned was learning the language. *“Language is the first. To know the law and the culture second, and to study a subject, or skills to live with is also important. And to be part of the society and active in the society”* (Saif). Although they acknowledged that there are other important aspects to integration, language is thought to be one of the most important factors. For many, just like Ibrahim, learning the language first is more important than focusing on other aspects of integration. He said that he has *“to learn language, after language I have to get jobs”*. Yasamin highlighted that participation in society is important for her, but emphasized that learning the language is crucial: *“For me like, I think I personally really like to just be part of the society, be active and just smoothly learn those things and specially learn the language.”*

In order to make a head start and prepare for their official integration, the participants have received language classes during their participation in the KabCare project at SPARK. Receiving language classes this early in their integration processes *“helps a lot to understand, this is the most important thing of integration and to get me further”* (Karim). Many have indicated that the language classes have been helpful, but according to Ibrahim, having class more frequently will make it even more beneficial. According to him, the class *“is good. Uh, actually it's not enough, twice a week. We need more time to learn because you know, it's a very difficult language.”* The difficulty of learning Dutch has also been highlighted by Ehsan, a 43-year-old male. He has been assigned a house already and started his integration process with

his municipality. He explained that they did an intake with the municipality, but experienced quite some difficulty while learning Dutch:

*“Because we knew a little bit English: we could talk, we could read or write a letter. So the people who interviewed us they thought, “okay, they are very clever people. Maybe they learn Dutch very well.” But when they put me in the language centre, even first I thought, okay, maybe I can do this, but when I went into it was completely difficult, really.”*

The difficulty of the language and the level of the classes play a role in how the Afghans experience learning the language. Following a too difficult class demotivates them, as indicated by Ehsan, and might impact other domains of integration as the participants have indicated that language is a priority in their integration processes.

The participants have indicated that not knowing the language makes their integration process more difficult and hinders them in their ability to obtain a job or get to know people. Leila, a 26-year-old woman, was rejected for a job because although *“they find me qualified, the problem is my Dutch, because on the job that I applied, Dutch language is very required. I found that how the Dutch language is important for your integration into society.”* Once the participants reach a certain level of language, it is easier for them to apply to jobs. Knowing the language furthermore makes it easier to participate in society by making new connections and makes the participants feel more included:

*“I think you feel more part of the country and you don’t feel that you know, that separation from the society, from people once you also know the language. I think people can be more welcoming, you can make more friends, you can get more job opportunities as how the requirements are. I think yeah, it just makes life completely easy when we can speak the language.”* (Yasamin).

Whereas speaking the language makes their integration processes easier, not knowing the language serves as a barrier to this. Yasamin further explained that she experiences problems due to not knowing the language:

*“I still have problems with how I received the post, I received the emails. I have to deal with all the official stuff. It’s all in Dutch. (...) Uh yeah, I think that’s weird because for refugees how like? Because they can*

*lose, like miss a lot of information, they cannot understand it and the purpose is at the end of the day to inform them or ask them to do something. And if they are not able to get the message, then how will they do it?"*

Language plays a crucial role in the integration process of the Afghans and they see it as a priority in their settlement into society. Derived from all of their answers, it can be established that learning the language will make their integration much easier.

## **6.3 Employment**

The research group acknowledged that obtaining a job supports them in their integration process. They have identified different factors that are impacted by being employed in the new country. This section will therefore focus on how employment helps with their settlement, and also looks at how career guidance influences the Afghans' experiences with obtaining a job and their integration.

### **6.3.1 Integrating on the job**

In the previous section, it was explained by Leila that she was rejected for a job because she did not speak the language. In some cases, it might therefore be difficult to obtain a job. Saif explained that *"it depends again back to language and the driving license."* According to him, not speaking the language and not having a driving license hinders their ability to work in the Netherlands. On the other hand, however, the participants have indicated that they expect that having a job contributes to their settlement in society. For instance, Yasamin said that she is *"very positive about that. I think having a job really helps you to like be in between people. Learn about the culture, learn the language, feel more part of the community."* Merging into a community and getting to know people is an important aspect that has been highlighted by the participants when asked how having a job influences their integration process. Mahin further emphasized that *"especially when you work and you can know more about the culture, know more about, even they help you with the Dutch language as well. You can talk with each other all the day, different personalities, different perspectives, or different ideas. It helps not only living by yourself, but it helps by living within society."* Having a job provides the participants with different opportunities that helps them adapt to life in the Netherlands, of which learning the language, knowing about the culture and expanding their social network are key features. However, they have indicated in other personal communication that they encounter some difficulties in finding employment. These concern the recognition of diplomas as well as lack of knowledge about the labour market.

### 6.3.2 Preparing for the Dutch labour market

To overcome the struggles that the Afghans experience regarding the labour market, most people within the research group receive career guidance. This entails that they are provided with trainings about cultural differences, skills recognition and identifying professional ambitions. This places the research group in an exceptional position, given that refugees do not receive career guidance in such an early stage of their integration, normally speaking. This is something that a few of the participants also have highlighted. Yasamin emphasized that *“I think I feel more supported than a lot of other refugees, because yeah, there’s this specific organization which focuses on you, which tries to help you up so it’s good and I’m now trying to use it as much as I can.”* Mahin also emphasized the meaning of the fact that they receive support from SPARK stating that *“SPARK takes the lead and is the guide for everything, from the language course till finding a job, for linking us with our job coach. You know, this is a big opportunity for ourselves here, in the Netherlands. I don’t think so that for every refugee it’s going to happen like this.”* They acknowledge they find themselves in an exceptional position compared to other refugees, and they have indicated that they want to take the opportunity with both hands to get the best out of this support.

Although those two women themselves believe that the job coaching that they receive is helpful for their future careers, one of the job coaches, Merel, thinks that the job support has come too early for this group of people: According to her, *“it really is just way too early. I think it would have been better if they were linked to us after 1.5 years, because then they have that stable foundation I was talking about. Because now, it just will cause problems.”* She emphasized that she normally works with status holders who have lived in the Netherlands for three to six years and guides them in seeking employment. She works with the research group and provides them with trainings on cultural differences, identifying their aspirations and makes CVs for them. She acknowledged that this can be helpful for them in their future careers, but doubts whether it brings added value in comparison to the regular integration classes they will receive once they live in their municipality. She stated that *“it’s always useful to receive more information, but I don’t know whether the fact that they received this information early will really help them with faster integration.”* On the other hand, she also emphasized that *“regular status holders that I work with, who all finished their integration exam, they know just as much as our Afghans about the Dutch culture.”* Ultimately, it can be established that early career support can be beneficial for this group, although it remains uncertain how much added value it actually brings to their adaptation to life in the Netherlands. On the other hand, Ellen, another

job coach that guides the research group, believes that the information they receive from them is useful for their future pathways. Although she emphasizes that one can never be sure of the effectiveness, she surely hopes it is helpful. However, she acknowledges that the job coaching and the expectations that come along with it can bring pressure to the participants, since they have a lot of other things on their mind as well, such as housing, language class and mental health.

Among the participants, there are varying opinions about the career support they receive, although the overall opinion leans towards positivity. For instance, Ibrahim has explained what he learned from Merel and that according to him it has been very useful:

*“It’s very, very important, it’s very important and very useful. A lot of sites were introduced and then we have to look the sites, how to find a job, how to make a CV (...) before I didn’t know how to find a job but then they told us where they should be, where should we go to find a job, how to apply and how to make a CV to be accepted.”*

It is emphasized that they have gained more knowledge about how to approach the Dutch labour market and feel that it may also be useful for their future. Mahin is employed already, but emphasized that *“I’m employed by [organization], I used the opportunity also from my job coach, if in the future, if I found another job after the one year contract with [organization] maybe I found another job, another place, that all this guidance is very effective for me as well.”* Receiving job coaching in an early stage of their integration process is in some cases considered effective. It familiarizes them with the Dutch labour market and could increase their ability to find employment, due to the trainings and information that they receive.

On the other hand, though, others have indicated that the job coaching is not as effective as they hoped it would be. According to Leila, the trainings should be more directed towards her needs, so that she can integrate well into the Dutch labour market:

*“I don’t really need it. It’s not very useful. (...) I know better myself. Yeah, I just know. (...) You know, I’ve worked in Afghanistan, not here. So I really need the training courses. They don’t give me that, which I need. (...) I mean, they are trying their best. I’m not blaming them. It’s just that I want more.”*

Furthermore, the support is appreciated, but it is emphasized by Saif that the effectiveness of it is dependent on other factors: *“They somehow, they try their best to find the job for us, but it depends again back to language and the driving license.”* According to him, speaking the language is a major requirement to be able to find employment. Other factors also impact the effectiveness of job coaching, as Yasamin emphasized:

*“I think the fact that I was also not in a more stable and certain situation or state that made it difficult to follow up rightly and be like more focused and use whatever that was coming out of these programmes for myself effectively, so I think that there is like the kind of gap which makes it less nice than it could be, but I’m happy that I have this support.”*

Here, she refers to being in the middle of moving to her house, decorating and repairing it, which put stress on her. Her priority was to reach a stable housing situation, before she could focus on the job coaching. This is also something that was specified by Ellen, one of the job coaches in the project. She emphasized that there are many different factors that impact the effectiveness of job coaching: *“The basic things, so a house. (...) I think family is a big influence as well as the expectations that they have. (...) Housing, this will provide you with a base and a home so that you can build something new. (...) Language is an important factor.”* All in all, career counselling is considered useful by the group of Afghans, despite it being dependent on many other factors in their lives. The most important factors defined by the group of Afghans and the job coaches include housing and language. A stable basis is deemed necessary for the job coaching to be effective and for the participants to be open for new job opportunities.

## **6.4 Social life**

Social life, social connections and the host country’s society play an important role in how the Afghans experience their integration process. Social connections are seen as a driver for integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), and the reception of refugees by the host country can also play a role in how they experience their settlement into society. The interviewees have emphasized that having social connections is important to achieve their goals, but also to receive support in their settlement. Therefore, first the importance of social networks and making new social connections is discussed, after which the acceptance and attitudes towards the group is reviewed.

#### 6.4.1 Social network and making new connections

It is argued by many scholars that social network is crucial for the integration of newcomers into a host country (e.g., Ager & Strang, 2008; Alencar, 2018; Nasrat, 2020; Phillimore, 2020). However, this was not something explicitly mentioned by the research group as something that influences their experiences with integration. Nonetheless, when asked about the importance of social connections, they acknowledged that having these is useful for their integration into the Netherlands. Having social connections provides them with new learning opportunities, such as learning about the culture and learning the Dutch language. Furthermore, having connections in the host country allows them to ask for advice regarding issues about housing, language, employment etcetera. Ibrahim said that *“it’s very important to have a connection with the people. If you want to have good life and easy life, at least you should have a good connection to the people”*. The Afghans make a distinction between having connections within their own, Afghan community, or outside of their own community and the usefulness of it. All of the Afghans emphasized the importance of having social connections outside of their own community:

*“I am lucky that there are no Afghans around me. Which is good, because my children don’t have to talk Afghani with people and they just concentrate on their language, Dutch, with their friends. So it’s not very important to have Afghan friends here, because we have a lot of Afghan friends there”* (Ehsan).

The emphasis is specifically on learning about the new culture that they live in, learning the language and asking for advice. However, it has also been highlighted that it is important to have a mix of both within and outside of their communities. According to Yasamin, *“it is much better if it’s combined, because I think it shouldn’t be only within the community of those refugees from whichever country they come, but I think it’s more important that it’s more mixed”*. A mix of both communities allows them to maintain their Afghan identities, while simultaneously learning about Dutch society through other connections.

Other than learning the language and learning about the culture and society, social networks are also important for finding employment. According to Merel, one of the job coaches, having a social network is one of the most important, if not most important, aspects in seeking employment: *“I think that is a big one, because most people do not have that, even if they have been living here for a few years, while having a social network especially helps with*

*language, finding employment, making friends, those kind of things.*” This aspect has been emphasized less by the Afghans, although they have pointed out that having a job will help them in creating a social network around them. When asked about what they think of making new connections, the responses were mixed. Some indicated that it has been easy for them to make new connections, whereas others feel it is slightly difficult to do so. Ultimately, it depends on the person themselves, their openness to making new connections and their ability to do so. However, the environment someone finds themselves in also plays a role in this. Yasamin said that she finds “*it a bit difficult, especially like as I said in environments where there is not a lot of diversity, it’s much more difficult to make friends, to make connections*”. Others, however, do not find it difficult to get to know new people, but Saif emphasized that “*it depends on the person. If you are very restricted and very wanted to cover yourself, it belongs to every individual person, but I am a person which always wanted to have some chat with different people*”. Their ability to make new connections influences how they experience their integration. For some, it is easier, which results in learning more about the new society they live in. For others however, it might be more difficult to get to know new people, which may slow down their integration process, as they have less access to informal networks.

#### **6.4.2 Acceptance towards the Afghans**

The participants experience the acceptance towards them differently. Whereas some have not experienced any kind of negativity towards them, others have emphasized that they have been treated unequally at times. This kind of treatment has been found to differ per location, but here people also have had different experiences, as Mahin emphasized “*it depends to the environment, it depends what’s happening*”. In the camps, they were treated equally according to Leila, who said that they were “*treated like a human... but like an unfortunate human*”. Overall, the interviewees considered Zoutkamp to be a place where they were treated equally. Saif emphasized that “*the rest of in the north and here is people are normal and there was only some certain places that there was some reaction against*”. In Zoutkamp, the group felt most welcomed and safe, which was ascribed to the fact that there were only Afghans living in the emergency shelter. This created a safe environment for them, although they felt that attitudes towards them were questionable at times, since “*in Zoutkamp, because they were more like, they are not very diverse. They were more Dutch and they are a bit far*” (Yasamin). The diversity of the local population is thought to play an important role in the attitudes they have towards refugees. According to them, they feel more welcomed when living in a city compared to living in a remote area. Ibrahim lives in Amsterdam and said that “*it’s a very nice city. And*

*very nice people and different people and from different cultures*". In general, Dutch people have been quite welcoming towards the group. Some have not experienced racism at all, like Ehsan. He feels very welcomed due the support he has received from the people around him: *"the way people are treating us, the community, you know. Even the people from COA, they did lots for us, you know"*. Furthermore, the participants have received help from their Dutch neighbours and language teachers. This has contributed positively to how they experience their settlement in the Netherlands.

Despite this, the negative stance towards refugees in the Netherlands, especially with an Islamic background, has increased over the past few years (Kuppens et al., 2020). The research participants have also indicated that in some places they have lived, they received negative attention. This was especially the case in Harskamp, where the local population was demonstrating against the arrival of the Afghans: *"especially when we were in Harskamp and they were not like people who very much... there were protests against, like they protested against refugees, especially from Afghanistan, they didn't want them there"* (Yasamin). This demonstration against the arrival of the Afghans is shown in Figure 11. During these demonstrations in Harskamp, COA closed the shelter for three days, meaning that the refugees were not allowed to leave and no one was allowed to come in.



*Figure 11: Demonstration in Harskamp against the arrival of Afghan refugees (Source: ANP).*

It was furthermore emphasized by the participants that the locals in Harskamp had hostile reactions towards the refugees and displayed symbols of hate and discrimination. In most cases, the elderly women in the camp did not even understand what these slurs and

symbols meant, and they came asking to the younger people in the group. Additionally, they were often not accepted in the shops and the shop owners raised problems with taking the money or allowing the Afghans to enter the shop. *“They would just create those small kind of problems because they don’t, just don’t like you.”* (Leila). The interviewees relate this kind of behaviour to the people being *“very Dutch”* and/or *“old”*. Although they experienced this as unpleasant, they tried their best not to let it get to them and imagine that the situation would improve in the future.

While the Afghans were still living in emergency shelters and other COA accommodations, the Netherlands welcomed Ukrainian refugees as a result of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Some have highlighted this trend when asked whether they are treated equally compared to other refugees or locals. According to the group, *“Ukrainians wherever they go, they’re welcomed. And they are supported, but the same people from another country were treated completely differently”* (Yasamin). Even though they experience that this is unfair towards other refugees, they do understand the situation. They emphasized that they have been through the same kind of situation and that they appreciate that people want to help, even if they have not received the same kind of support from the local community.

## **7. Discussion**

In this thesis, the different experiences of integration of recently arrived Afghans to the Netherlands have been analysed. This chapter will discuss the most prominent results with regards to these experiences and how they are influenced by the context that they find themselves in. The results of the research will be placed into context, according to the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1982; Bakewell, 2010), the IIF (Ager & Strang, 2008) and Phillimore's opportunity structures (2020). The chapter will focus on the different aspects that the Afghans have indicated as being important in their integration process, linked to the theoretical framework and the larger debate on refugee integration. Afterwards, it is important to emphasize the interrelatedness between all domains, how these domains influence each other, as well as how they are influenced by the contextual structures that they are situated in.

### **7.1 Living conditions, location and the impact on integration**

The Afghans in this research have indicated that housing is a prominent factor influencing how they experience their integration process. The outcomes of the research confirm that housing is considered a marker and a mean for integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), as most of the Afghans have indicated that their integration process can only really start once they have their own house. However, whereas Ager & Strang (2008) focus mostly on the outcomes of integration on the personal level, the Afghans' narratives have reflected the dominant social structures that influence their housing situation. The road towards being assigned their own house contains many obstacles that hinder the integration process of the refugees, which can mainly be ascribed to living conditions and the location of the accommodations. The opportunity structures locality and structure introduced by Phillimore (2020) are reflected in the Afghans' narratives and have shown to influence how they experience their settlement into society. It was emphasized that living in a rural, remote area hinders their ability to participate in society and has caused feelings of exclusion. Living in their own house provides them with the opportunity to settle and participate in society. Further, in some areas of the COA accommodations, refugees are generally not accepted. The Afghans shared that there were demonstrations held against their arrival in Harskamp and indicated that living in rural areas made it difficult to connect with the local population. They experienced feelings of exclusion and racism, hampering their integration. This is also supporting the work of Bakker et al. (2016), Bakker et al. (2014) and Van Heelsum (2017), who found that refugees experience more marginalization and racism in remote areas.

The living conditions in the camps, and especially in emergency shelters as emphasized by the research group, impact how the Afghans experience their integration process. The camps are in poor condition and provide few facilities. Further, the refugees have to report frequently to COA and adhere to other rules and regulations that were set by this institution. Although they are free to move outside of their accommodations, this obligation restricts them in their autonomy, along with having no choice about where they are accommodated. This supports the findings of Bakker et al. (2016), who found that AZCs are often overcrowded, have poor conditions, with a lack of resources and in which refugees are moved around frequently. However, these experiences with housing conditions are often related to the social and cultural impact it may have on integration as indicated by the Afghans. Mental health was mentioned briefly by some of the participants, but the majority linked it to social implications. The emphasis in this research was less on the fact that housing is a basic human need and contributes to feeling welcome, as argued by Adam et al. (2021) and Ager & Strang (2008), which plays an important role in integration as well. Therefore, it might be essential to further examine what role the social implications of housing play in integration, instead of focussing on housing as a basic human need.

Further, the outcomes of the research have shown that the moving around of the Afghans by COA influences their integration process. Due to their moving, they almost deem it impossible to build a life and a social network, which is also found by Strang et al. (2018), who argue that it undermines friendship and access to schools. Further, the group has highlighted that they have to adhere to the rules and regulations that are set by COA and that this moving provides a lot of uncertainty for them. Their narratives have shown that these rules and regulations reinforce an entrenched structure within which they have no choice to exercise their autonomy and act on their preferences. This supports the ideas that were discussed by Archer (1982) and Bakewell (2010), in which it is emphasized that agency is limited by structural processes. Additionally, the group has further emphasized that they are dependent on COA with regards to their housing situation. Although their wishes are taken into account with regards to the municipality that they want to live in, this cannot always be assured, and it may take a long period of time before they get assigned a house. This can be ascribed to the rules determined by COA as well as the housing shortage in the Netherlands (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2021), which makes it more difficult for newcomers to rebuild their lives. In the meantime, they continue to live in COA accommodations with few facilities and often in remote areas. According to the group, this impacts their ability to start their integration. These findings

support other research done by Bakker et al. (2016) and Van Heelsum (2017) who found that housing and the structural factors impacting this greatly impact how a newcomer experiences their integration in the Netherlands.

While housing plays a considerable role in the integration process of the Afghans, which is continuously impacted by structural factors, it remains important to reflect on the role that personal factors play in their housing situation. The results predominantly focus on the fact that structural factors impact the Afghans' experiences with housing negatively. However, it should be acknowledged that their experiences are not solely subject to these structural factors. Instead, personal factors continue to play a role in this, albeit of less influence on their housing situation than structural constraints. Such personal factors can be related to family size, age, and the ability to make social connections or the extent to which a refugee already has an established social network in the host country (Ager & Strang, 2008; Van Heelsum, 2017). On the other hand, having established the importance of housing in the integration process contributes to the debate on refugee integration. The implications of this research regarding housing emphasizes the importance of societal context and the role of structural institutions. In this sense, future research should take into account the role of structures in relation to housing that can enable or hinder integration.

## **7.2 Integrating into the labour market**

The results of this research have shown the importance of finding employment for the Afghans' settlement into society. Their narratives confirm that employment is a marker and mean of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). In line with Ager & Strang's (2008) ideas, the Afghans assert that finding employment will allow them to integrate better into society. It will provide them with the opportunity to learn the language, the culture and build a social network. Whereas Ager & Strang (2008) indicate that employment is also seen as a marker of integration, the Afghans do not necessarily recognize this as such. They certainly attach value to this, but the results show that their priorities lie with other facets of integration.

However, they have indicated that they encounter difficulties in finding employment. The recognition of diplomas and having to follow new courses to meet the requirements to work in the Netherlands is something that has been indicated as a barrier by the group. This is in line with the work of Battisti et al. (2019), who argue that refugees often experience more difficulties in entering the labour market due to lack of resources, knowledge about the labour market or because of diplomas not being recognized. Further, Bakker et al. (2017) found that there exists

a refugee gap in the Netherlands, which entails that refugees hold the worst position on the labour market compared to other migrant groups. This is due to the fact that refugees experience more difficulties in finding employment, which has been highlighted by the Afghans as well as the job coaches. The Afghans' narratives have shown that they are restricted by the structures within which they can seek employment, emphasizing the personal and structural limitations that they encounter in finding a job. Additionally, the difficulties that they encounter may differ from the difficulties that refugees encounter when they have settled into Dutch society. This may be ascribed to the fact that this research was conducted in a relatively early stage of the participants' integration process. However, employment was not considered a priority by most of the participants. Instead, housing and gaining cultural knowledge and learning the language was thought to contribute to obtaining a job. In this sense, employment is considered a marker of integration: once they have achieved the aforementioned factors, they can find employment. However, the results also show that employment can be considered a means and/or facilitator for integration. Accordingly, having a job contributes to building a social network, learning the language, gain knowledge about the culture, etc. Therefore, it is crucial to explore what kind of different roles employment precisely plays in integration.

The results show that the career guidance the Afghans receive is considered useful for their integration into the labour market. Although most indicate that the effectiveness of it is influenced by other factors concerning their integration, they believe that career counselling provides them with new skills and knowledge for their future careers. This supports the findings of Phillimore (2020), who found that initiatives and support may serve as an opportunity structure that can either facilitate or undermine the integration of a refugee. The job support that the Afghans receive is thought to facilitate their entrance into the labour market. This further supports the findings of Udayar et al. (2021) and Van Riemsdijk & Axelsson (2021), who both assert that career guidance can boost the motivation of refugees and contribute positively to their integration into the labour market. On the other hand however, it should be taken into account that the job support is situated within certain economic, political and societal structures which may not include the needs of refugees. These programmes may be more directed towards control rather than what the refugee needs for integration (Phillimore, 2020). In this sense, it remains important to examine the effectiveness of these programmes and whether it really benefits the Afghans and other refugees in their integration by taking into account their needs.

### **7.3 Settling and social network**

Similar to an abundance of scholars (e.g. Ager & Strang, 2008; Alencar, 2018; Nasrat, 2020; Phillimore, 2020), the Afghans have acknowledged the importance of having social connections for their integration process. They especially recognized the relevance of social bridges, in which they attach value to making new connections with people outside of their own community. Some considered having connections within their own community, social bonds, less important for their integration. Nonetheless, the majority argued that a mix between social bonds and social bridges is most important. According to them, they learn more from social bridges, such as language, culture and they can ask for advice, which is considered beneficial for their settlement into society. This is supported by Ager & Strang (2008), who base their argument on Putnam's social capital theory. Accordingly, it can make refugees feel more welcomed, but it can also foster feelings of exclusion when one is not accepted. According to the Afghans, social bonds make it easier for them to feel at home, which is in line with Ager & Strang's (2008) ideas about social bonds. Similarly to their assertion, the Afghans believe that social connections are their own responsibility, however, they acknowledge that it can be influenced by other structural factors.

For instance, the way refugees are received in a community, city or area can influence whether it is easy or difficult for them to make new connections outside of their own community. This was particularly emphasized when the Afghans discussed the situation in Harskamp and other rural areas. This can be explained as the fact that social relations can be considered an opportunity structure. These social relations concern relations on the local or national level and are related to an open and welcoming environment versus a hostile environment (Phillimore, 2020). In a hostile environment, the Afghans felt excluded from society and experienced more difficulties with settling and making new connections. According to them, this hindered their ability to participate in society and integrate well. This is in line with Strang & Quinn's (2019) findings, who assert that living in remote areas results in isolation, lack of learning opportunities and ultimately hindering integration. Moreover, this can also be related to the rating by MIPEX (2020c), in which the Netherlands is classified as halfway favourable for integration. The experiences the Afghans have had with how they are perceived by the population indicate that there is room for improvement. This research therefore emphasizes the importance of taking into account the host country's stance towards integration.

By taking this into account, a more comprehensive understanding of societal connections and the environment and their role in integration can be achieved.

However, the results also show that the ability to build a social network depends on the individual, i.e. being introverted or extraverted. This is less emphasized in academic literature, whereas this personal characteristic may play a crucial role. Although the research mainly focused on how the Afghans' experiences are situated within a societal context, it should be acknowledged that this personal factor can play a role in how the Afghans experience their integration overall. Further, the results have not emphasized the role that social media can play in feeling welcomed and building new social connections. Research by Alencar (2018) and Alencar & Tsagkroni (2019) have argued that social media can be of incredible importance for the integration of refugees, as it contributed to making new connections, feeling welcomed and receiving information about the host country. Social media may not be of as much importance for the research group, or they have not yet discovered the value of it yet with regards to integration. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to further explore what role social media can play for refugee integration.

#### **7.4 The value of language**

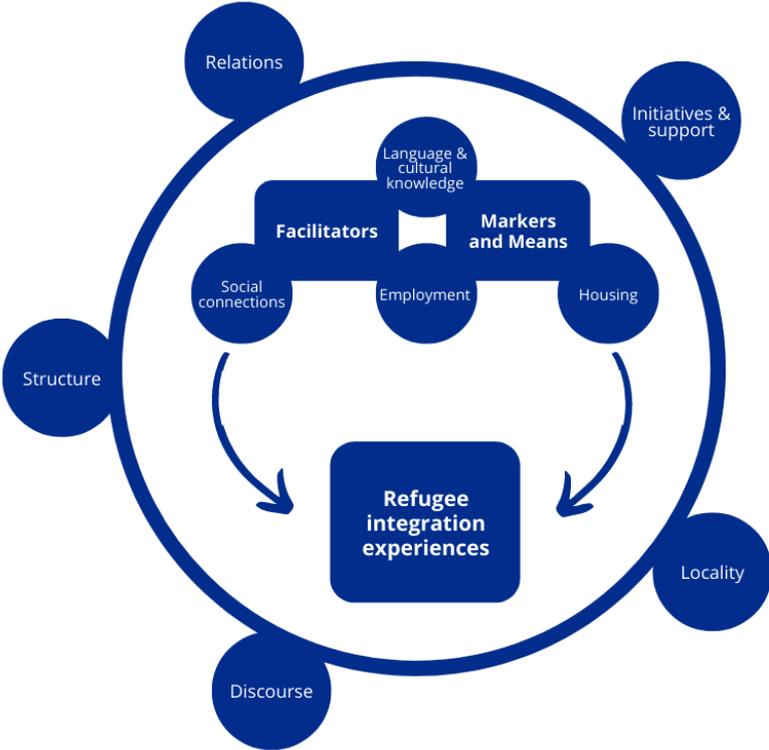
Although language is considered a main factor in the integration process of refugees, scholars often neglect the value that refugees attach to speaking the language. It is often mentioned briefly, while the Afghans have extensively emphasized the importance of being able to speak Dutch. Language is often related to other domains of integration by scholars, such as employment and social networks, in which it is examined how these domains allow language learning. The Afghans, however, highlight the importance of learning to speak Dutch in the early stages of their integration, arguing that it is everything and that without language, their integration process is much more difficult. Battisti et al. (2019) also argue that lack of language skills impact refugees' ability to enter the labour market, which is also found in the outcomes of this research.

According to the findings in this research, there should be a more prominent focus on providing Dutch language courses for refugees in the early stages of their integration. In line with Ager & Strang (2008), the Afghans have indicated that language serves as a facilitator for their adaptation to life in the Netherlands. Additionally, they have mostly indicated that they can use language to achieve their goals. While language is mostly classified as a facilitator for integration, it could also be seen as a marker and mean for integration as derived from this

research. Language as a marker entails having been able to learn the language and therefore determining the success of integration, while at the meantime it can be seen as a means to achieve integration goals. With regards to the debate on refugee integration, perceiving language from this perspective may allow for a more thorough understanding of its role in integration. Furthermore, acknowledging this importance could also contribute to implementing a more inclusive integration policy that is focussed on language learning as a priority for refugees.

**7.5 Beyond the division between the domains**

In the above, all domains that have been found most crucial in the integration process of Afghans have been discussed separately from each other. Based on the results, a new indicators of integration framework has been created. Figure 12 displays this framework, based on the most important factors in that came forward in this research.



*Figure 12: Indicators of integration framework based on the results of this research.*

This framework consists of an outer circle, which resembles the broader societal context to which the opportunity structures are attached. Within this circle, the markers and means and facilitators of integration are displayed, which are constrained and influenced by this broader societal context. These markers and means and facilitators influence refugee integration

experiences. The facilitators include social connections, language & cultural knowledge and employment. The markers and means include language & cultural knowledge, employment and housing. Both language & cultural knowledge and employment belong to markers and means as well as facilitators. The results have indicated that language & cultural knowledge and employment can serve as a facilitator for integration, but it can also be considered a means to achieve integration and as a marker that indicates the success of integration.

Although the domains have been discussed separately from each other, the Afghans have indicated that all these factors are influenced by each other. The research has shown that especially employment is impacted by the other factors. The group has prioritized finding a house for themselves before being able to start with their integration process and being ready to seek employment. Additionally, many prioritized learning the language and believe that without speaking Dutch, it is more difficult to acquire a job. Further, although it has not been emphasized as much by the Afghans themselves, having a social network greatly contributes to the ability to find employment, as indicated by the job coaches. Vice versa, employment also impacts the other domains of integration, as found in the results of the research. Having a job allows refugees to make new social connections and build a social network. Additionally, it contributes to learning the language and culture. Further, COA and the MFA have emphasized that having a job speeds up the housing procedure for the group. However, practice has shown that this has not been the case for the Afghans. Participants who have been employed for over four months now, still have not been assigned a house in their appointed municipality. The slow process of finding housing is inherent to rules and regulations in the Netherlands and COA that emphasize the role of structural factors in the integration process of newcomers.

Further, housing has shown to have an impact on the ability to settle in a society. This facet is closely related to making new social connections, participating in society and learning the language. Living in rural areas hinders the ability to build a new social network and connect with the local population. The acceptance from the local population also plays a role in this. In areas where refugees are less welcomed, they may feel excluded and marginalized, which hinders their settlement into society. Social networks are a crucial component of the integration process, since it enables refugees to learn the language, learn about the culture or to obtain a job. This component is heavily influenced by housing and employment. This also applies to language. Language learning is encouraged more when refugees live in an accepting area, since they are able to make new connections. Currently, the domains are mostly considered to be self-standing entities in practice. The relation between some of the domains is acknowledged in

practice and academic literature, but it is not recognized sufficiently. However, the fact that all factors are interrelated with each other has implications for policy-making and the understanding of integration. It is important to understand the underlying connections in order to implement an inclusive integration policy that takes into account the refugees' needs. Further, it contributes to the debate on refugee integration by establishing the importance of underlying relations between different facets of integration. All in all, the discussed facets of integration are closely interrelated with each other and are bounded by the structural context that they are placed within.

## 8. Conclusions

This study has examined how the recently arrived Afghans in the Netherlands experience their integration process and how these experiences are influenced by the structural setting that they are placed in. The analysis of secondary data through a literature review and the interviews with the Afghans and two job coaches have contributed to a thorough understanding of the research topic. Further, the non-participant and participant observation have contributed to contextualizing and understanding how the Afghans experience their integration into the Netherlands. In order to answer the main research question, three sub-questions were formulated: 1) What barriers and enabling factors exist for refugees in their integration into the Netherlands?; 2) How do career guidance and language classes contribute to the integration of the Afghans?, and; 3) How do the different enablers and barriers relate to each other and fit within the broader social structure of the Netherlands? This chapter will provide the concluding remarks of this research.

First of all, it was found that the Afghans encounter a considerable number of difficulties in their settlement into Dutch society. The main findings have shown that they attach great value to their housing situation, language, employment and social network. In their case, housing has mainly served as a barrier to their settlement in the Netherlands. The conditions in which they lived in COA accommodations as well as the locations of these camps have mostly discouraged the integration of the Afghans. Another barrier in this is language, although it can also be defined as an enabling factor. Currently, the Afghans are learning Dutch to make their integration easier. However, since they have not acquired sufficient language skills yet, it still serves as a barrier in their integration. The group mainly communicates in English, but for those who do not speak the language, adapting to life in the Netherlands is even more difficult. Employment has mainly been found as an enabling factor in the settlement of Afghans in the Netherlands. Although the road towards being employed contains structural obstacles which serve as a barrier, having found employment is considered to be an enabling factor for their integration. It provides them with a broader social network, new professional skills and language skills. Ultimately, social networks and the environment are considered an enabling factor by the Afghans. Many already have a social network which they can rely on, due to their former employment at the Dutch embassy. According to them, having these bridging connections contributes to their settling into the Netherlands by being able to ask for advice, learn about the culture or the language. Although health and education have been identified as

markers and means for integration by Ager & Strang (2008), these two domains have not shown to be relevant for this specific research group. Both health and education, except for language learning, simply do not play an important role in the integration process of these Afghans, which is why these domains have not been included in the conclusions of this research.

Secondly, career guidance and language courses both have shown to play an important role in the integration of the Afghans. The career guidance was deemed useful by most of the participants. According to them, they have been provided with new knowledge about the Dutch labour market, which has allowed them to be able to apply for a job and manage their expectations. Additionally, the career counselling focused on identifying the participants' strong assets and provided them with additional trainings that they can benefit from in their future careers. Although the effectiveness of the job support has been influenced by structural factors, such as housing and rules and regulations that the Afghans need to adhere to. Such rules include frequent reporting to COA and a curfew. Additionally, it should be taken into account that the career guidance the refugees receive is bound by the economic, political and societal context of the Netherlands. Although it might be considered effective, it should also be considered whether the refugees' needs are taken into account. Besides career guidance, the group has been provided with Dutch language classes from December 2021 onwards. Considering that COA does not provide language classes in emergency shelters, these arranged classes have been helpful to the group. Following these courses allowed them to start with their pre-integration and focus on learning the language. However, some difficulties were experienced with this. Some structural factors, such as moving to another location or having other obligations at the time of class have hindered the effectiveness of language classes. On the other hand, however, the Afghans have emphasized that they appreciated the provision of Dutch classes and indicated that this has contributed positively to their integration process.

As reviewed in the discussion, it can be concluded that all of the facets that were identified as crucial for integration are closely interrelated to each other. Especially the reciprocal relationship between housing, employment and social network considerably influences the integration of the Afghans and how they experience it. For instance, not having a house and living in a remote area influences the ability to establish a social network but can also influence the process of finding employment due to being dependent on public transportation for example. Other than this, not having a social network can have an impact on finding a job, but having a job allows for building new connections. Language is especially related to employment and social life. Being able to speak the language contributes to finding

employment and building new connections, however vice versa it works the same. Having new social connections and a job supports the learning of the Dutch language. The results and discussion have illustrated how these domains fit within the broader social structure of the Netherlands. The Afghans are restricted by the rules and regulations of the integration policy and COA and have little say about their housing situation. Further, the other domains that they have deemed important are restricted by certain opportunity structures as well. Structure is an overarching opportunity structure in which the procedures for integration are determined. The refugees are highly dependent on this structure, as well as on the locality, discourse and social relations. Initiatives and support are important, too, but rather serve to facilitate integration than undermine it, depending on the programmes that are provided.

All in all, this research has examined the Afghans' experiences of integration into Dutch society in a very early stage in their integration process. This has allowed to bring new perspectives to the debate, given that refugees may have different experiences and opinions in the early stages of their integration. Furthermore, it has contributed to reaching a more extensive and inclusive understanding of integration (Damen et al., 2022). Including the Afghans in this research has raised awareness about their needs and experiences and contributes to understanding how their narratives reflect the dominant discourse, which can be used to further study how the integration process can be made more inclusive and effective. Further, this research has shown how the domains of integration influence each other, as well as the experiences people have with their settlement. However, given that this research has only focused on a very specific and unique group of refugees, it is not possible to reach general conclusions. Hence, it is recommended that this research be conducted on a larger scale among recently arrived refugees, to investigate whether the same patterns will come forward. However, given that all newcomers have to adhere to the Dutch rules and regulations and mostly encounter the same issues as this research group, it can be assumed that housing, employment, language and social connections also play an important role in their integration process and are all interrelated to each other. Similar to the research group, other newcomers therefore are also likely encounter the same issues and experience their integration similarly. However, unlike the research participants, other newcomers do not receive the same amount of support. Therefore, it should be taken into consideration that these facets of integration may even have a larger impact on how they experience their settlement into Dutch society. Additionally, the fact that this research group received support from several institutions should be taken into account in the outcomes of this research, given that it may have influenced the trends that were unravelled.

Therefore, it may be beneficial to conduct this research based on a comparative analysis, including groups that do not receive support in their early stages of integration and a group that does. The last recommendation for future research concerns the domains of integration that were discussed. In itself, these domains are rather large concepts that are influenced by many different factors. Therefore, it might be beneficial to focus on a certain domain of integration and completely explore the experiences refugees have with this domain and how it is influenced by broader social structures and other factors in the integration process.

## **8.1 Recommendations**

Derived from this research, a few implications regarding the integration policy in the Netherlands have been established. This last section will shortly provide a few recommendations to improve the integration policy, with a shift towards including refugee perspectives. First of all, it should be actively acknowledged that integration is a two-way street, in which both the individual and the government play an important role. Currently, the success of integration is mostly considered from a governmental perspective, in which the government determines whether a person has integrated well. In this assessment, refugees experience that they are restricted by the policies that are in place and can only act within a certain structure or set of rules and regulations. Although the WI2021 has transferred more control to the municipalities, the government should take more responsibility in the integration of newcomers. It should be acknowledged that refugees can both benefit from and be obstructed by these structures. Accordingly, the government should put more effort into refugee integration. A simple adjustment would be to prepare standardized letters in the most common languages of newcomers. This prevents misunderstandings and being reliant on others, as letters are only provided in Dutch currently. Based on an emphasis on governmental efforts, the second recommendation insists that more state-led programmes should be provided in the early stages of integration. These programmes should be tailored to the refugees' needs, so that newcomers can benefit from this while they are waiting in AZCs to start their integration. After being granted a residence permit, the government should provide career guidance programmes. Currently, the government only supports societal initiatives, but there should be a larger focus on state-led programmes focusing on career guidance, language learning and building a social network. Further, the importance of having a social network should be acknowledged. It is recommended that the government encourages the local population to connect with newcomers. They can do so by providing information or incentives to get involved. This can contribute to

the wellbeing of an individual and boost their integration process. Lastly, it is highly recommended to accommodate the refugees as much as possible in one location or area without having to move them around frequently. This will allow them to start their pre-integration, after which refugees can benefit from this in their official integration process. Altogether, it should be acknowledged by the government that tailored programmes to the needs of the refugees and shared effort are crucial in the integration process of refugees.

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