



# Labor Market Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in the Netherlands: A Qualitative Study

MASTER THESIS



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# Preface

Here starts the thesis which is titled as ‘Labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands’. This research was inspired by the human suffering caused by the war in Ukraine. Witnessing countless individuals being forced to flee their country resulted in a desire to better understand their experiences as they rebuild their lives in a foreign country. This thesis specifically focuses on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees as they navigate the challenges of integrating into the Dutch labor market. It was written between February 2024 and August 2024 as part of the master’s program ‘Strategic Human Resources Leadership’ at the Radboud University in Nijmegen.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all supervisors who have supported me throughout this thesis journey. Starting with Annabel Buiters, MA, who helped me choose a suitable topic for this thesis, followed by Dr. Sofija Pajic, who provided guidance during a period of absence. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Caroline Essers, my final supervisor, for her belief in my abilities during challenging times.

Lastly, I want to thank my family, friends, and partner for their continuous support.

Roos Ebersson

# Abstract

This research investigates the experiences of Ukrainian refugees as they integrate into the Dutch labor market. Drawing on theories of refugee and economic integration, it examines the challenges and successes encountered by this population. By focusing on this specific group, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing labor market integration in a rapidly changing context. Qualitative research, involving in-depth interviews with ten employed Ukrainian refugees, was conducted to explore their experiences. Key findings indicate that language barriers and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications are significant obstacles to labor market integration for Ukrainian refugees. While workplace inclusion was generally positive, instances of exclusion also emerged. These findings highlight the need for targeted support to facilitate successful integration.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, economic integration, barriers, and inclusion at the workplace.

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# 1. Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has resulted in Ukrainians fleeing their homes and seeking asylum in other countries, including the Netherlands (Elinder et al., 2023). This conflict has become one of the most pressing geopolitical crises of our time (Ratten, 2023). As violence intensifies, people from Ukraine are being forced to leave their homes and seek safety in other countries, such as the Netherlands. As of January 19, 2024, the Netherlands has registered a total of 106.150 Ukrainian refugees (Rijksoverheid, n.d.a). These Ukrainian refugees face the challenge of integrating into the Dutch labor market, also called their economic integration (Damen et al., 2021). Economic integration goes beyond being employed and includes engaging in economic activities which align with a refugee's previous qualifications and experiences (Lee et al., 2020). Unlike other asylum seekers, Ukrainian refugees are exempt from the standard six-month waiting period before working in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, n.d.b; Rijksoverheid, n.d.c). This exemption exists because Ukrainians can travel visa-free in Europe and are classified as refugees upon arrival (Philips, 2013), which grants them immediate access to the Dutch labor market (Rijksoverheid, n.d.c).

Despite the expedited access to the Dutch labor market, Ukrainian refugees encounter multifaceted challenges in achieving long-term economic integration (Udayar et al., 2021). These challenges exist in three different levels: the institutional-, organizational-, and individual level (Lee et al., 2020). However, through reviewing existing literature, it has been identified that no prior research has been conducted on the specific topic of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands, signifying a research gap in the field. Thus, it is currently unknown how Ukrainian refugees experience integrating into the Dutch labor market and what possible barriers they encounter.

Building on the above identified gap in the knowledge, the objective of this thesis is to explore and understand the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands as they navigate the labor market integration process. The aim of this thesis is to provide insight into the complexities of their economic integration and offer nuanced perspectives on the challenges and successes encountered by Ukrainians. The findings can be used to improve the economic integration of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. The research question for this thesis is

therefore as follows: “*How do Ukrainian refugees experience their integration into the Dutch labor market?*” This question is crucial as it addresses a less explored topic, offering a deeper understanding of refugees’ economic integration.

This thesis will contribute to the existing literature on labor market dynamics of forced migration. Refugees’ labor market integration has been widespread among scholars for the past two decades, as it is crucial for successful participation in the host country (Bešić et al., 2021). At this moment, however, the literature on this subject related explicitly to Ukrainian refugees is somewhat limited (Dimitrov & Pavlov, 2023). The war is still going on and many questions remain unanswered. The faced barriers are only briefly explained, and a more comprehensive analysis is needed to improve the integration of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. By conducting research on how Ukrainian refugees experience their integration into the Dutch labor market, this thesis aims to fill a significant gap in the existing literature. While challenges faced by refugees are generally known, the specific context, cultural background, and policies can create unique challenges and opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in the Dutch labor market.

The research findings are significant for both the Dutch stakeholders and Ukrainian refugees. The practical implications for the Dutch stakeholders are twofold. Firstly, policymakers can refine existing integration policies to address the challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees. As Wilkinson and Garcea (2017) stated, adapting economic integration programs to the needs of refugees will improve their economic integration process. Insights into the specific challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees can help policymakers tailor training programs and support initiatives to facilitate integration into the Dutch labor market (Khan-Gökkaya & Moesko, 2021). This targeted approach can facilitate seamless economic integration.

Employers and organizations in the Netherlands can benefit from a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes faced by Ukrainian refugees in integrating into the labor market. This understanding can inform inclusive training programs and cultural awareness initiatives (Slotwinski et al., 2019), contributing to the diversification of the Dutch workforce and benefiting Ukrainian refugees in entering the Dutch labor market. Additionally, assisting Ukrainian refugees with integrating into the labor market may improve other indicators of integration, such as their

social cohesion and personal well-being (Desiderio, 2016). Employers and organizations can play a crucial role in facilitating the successful integration of Ukrainian refugees into the Dutch labor market by addressing these aspects (Hynie, 2018).

## Outline of the thesis

This thesis begins with a literature review on Ukrainian refugees, the common barriers refugees face in economic integration, and issues of inclusion and exclusion (2). The following chapter, 'Methodology', provides a detailed account of the research design and implementation (3). Using a qualitative approach, this thesis explores Ukrainian refugees' perceptions of their integration into the Dutch labor market through in-depth interviews. The following chapter presents the research findings, including a detailed analysis of the interview data (4). Subsequently, the discussion chapter will evaluate the findings and assess the overall quality of the research (5), while the conclusion chapter will address the research question (6).

## 2. Theoretical background

This chapter provides an overview of the core concepts central to this thesis. Published research on these concepts has been reviewed to provide clarity and context. The chapter begins with a broad examination of refugees, followed by a focused examination of Ukrainian refugees (2.1). The discussion then turns to refugee integration, focusing on economic integration (2.2). This is followed by analyzing the challenges refugees face in economic integration (2.3). The discourse then shifts to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace, examining their significance in the context of refugee labor market integration (2.4).

### 2.1 Ukrainian refugees

The term refugee is often confused with migrant or asylum seeker (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017; Graf et al., 2023). All three terms refer to individuals forced to leave their home country. Asylum seekers have no legally recognized status in their host country (Graf et al., 2023). Because of the time it takes for an asylum seeker to receive confirmation on their request for international protection, the term migrant is frequently used instead of asylum seeker (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has clarified the definition of a refugee. A refugee is an asylum seeker who qualifies for international protection (International Organization for Migration, IOM, 2020; Graf et al., 2023). This thesis will focus on refugees, which includes individuals who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.

Refugees leave their country due to extreme circumstances such as natural disasters, oppression, war, economic disadvantages, and poverty (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017; Su et al., 2022). As a result, many refugees experience trauma, including physical danger and near-death experiences (Wehrle et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2019). While processing this trauma, refugees are often forced to flee to another country, which becomes their host country. Integration here is crucial for both the refugees and the host country (Brell et al., 2020). A relatively new group of refugees consists of Ukrainians who fled their country in response to the war created by Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022 (Pereira et al., 2022). Russian soldiers invaded Ukraine from the Crimean Peninsula, Belarus, and Russia itself (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2023). Within six months of

the invasion, 13 million Ukrainians fled their country, making them the third largest group of refugees (Elinder et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2023). Ukrainian refugees in all EU member states are granted automatic temporary protection, which includes access to education, the labor market, and other social benefits (Trauner & Voladskaitė, 2022). This protection lasts a minimum of one year and can be extended twice for six months. There is a debate within literature regarding whether immediate access to the labor market facilitates or hinders the process of refugee integration (e.g. Marbach et al., 2018; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Sinnerbrink et al., 1997; Valenta & Thorsaug, 2013; Mayblin, 2016).

## 2.2 Refugee integration

Ukrainian refugees' integration experience into the Dutch labor market is part of their whole integration within their host country. As refugees are among the most vulnerable groups within the immigrant population, they face the biggest obstacles in integration (Martén et al., 2019). Consequently, refugee integration has received considerable attention since the European refugee crisis in 2015 (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017). The term 'refugee crisis' refers to the influx of over one million asylum applications in the EU in 2015. It tested the implementation of immigration and asylum policies under international and European standards and laws (Saatçioğlu, 2020). The concept of integration lacks a universally accepted definition (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Therefore, for this thesis, the definition of integration is a mutual process that begins with the arrival of the refugee in the host country (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Within this process, refugees must adapt to the host country's lifestyle, norms, and values, which may differ from those in their home country (Da Lomba, 2010; Groen et al., 2019). Furthermore, refugees may encounter language barriers, resulting in reading and communication difficulties, potentially leading to misunderstandings. In addition to refugees needing to adapt to the host country, it is the responsibility of the host country to facilitate their integration (Damen et al., 2021; Bakker et al., 2014). By fostering a shared sense of responsibility between the host country and the refugees, this collaborative approach promotes the long-term integration of refugees (Dimitrov & Angelov, 2017; Da Lomba, 2010). Ager and Strang (2008) identified four markers of integration: housing, education, health, and economy.

### 2.2.1 Economic integration of refugees

While the other three markers of integration are undeniably important, economic integration holds a unique significance. It goes beyond the mere acquisition of employment and includes attaining a job that matches the refugee's skills, qualifications, and educational background. Therefore, the following definition of Lee et al. (2020) of economic integration will be used for this research: "a process in which refugees engage in economic activities (employment or self-employment) which are commensurate with individuals' professional goals and previous qualifications and experience and provide adequate economic security and prospects for career advancement" (p. 195). This commensuration is crucial as it enables refugees to utilize their skills fully, contribute meaningfully to the labor market and improve their overall socio-economic status. It also fosters a sense of belonging and purpose within society. By securing meaningful employment, refugees can actively participate in the local economy, build social connections, and develop a sense of self-reliance and autonomy (Ager & Strang, 2008). Because of this unique significance to integration in a host country, this thesis focusses on economic integration.

### 2.3 Challenges to economic integration of refugees

As stated before, refugees face significant challenges regarding integration, particularly their economic integration (Muller-Dugic et al., 2023). These challenges can be attributed to various factors and can be divided into three groups: institutional, organizational, and individual-level challenges (Lee et al., 2020). By distinguishing between these three levels of challenge, it is possible to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaced challenges refugees face during their economic integration.

The institutional-level challenges include immigration regulations, qualification accreditation, and socio-political climate (Lee et al., 2020). As for immigration regulations, the length of the asylum process may hinder refugees' economic self-sufficiency while waiting (Hainmueller et al., 2016). However, as Ukrainian refugees are immediately granted access to employment, this challenge does not hold for them (Rijksoverheid, n.d.c.). Furthermore, in many OECD countries, including the Netherlands, there is a prevailing belief that refugees are not fully integrated into the workforce. Their skills and knowledge are generally overlooked (Lee et al.,

2020). The challenge of qualification accreditation for economic integration revolves around barriers refugees face in having their foreign qualifications and education recognized in their host countries (Lee et al., 2020; Ager & Strang, 2008). Refugees often face challenges in proving their previous qualifications, making it difficult for them to secure employment that aligns with their skills and prior work experience (Davey & Jones, 2019). Even when they can provide evidence, employers frequently do not recognize their credentials (Ager & Strang, 2008). This lack of recognition results in systemic discrimination against refugees, where their qualifications, experience, and educational backgrounds are undervalued or denied (Lee et al., 2020). Lastly, the socio-political climate, encompassing formal and informal institutions, highlights the importance of polarized debates on refugee acceptance and integration. This leads to perceptions of refugees as a burden or competition in the labor market. This politicization exacerbates discrimination, hinders refugees' career adaptability, and perpetuates cultural stereotypes. Ultimately, these factors influence policy decisions and employer perceptions, shaping refugees' employment prospects and perceptions of their professional self-worth.

The organizational-level challenges include employers, self-employment, and the support of organizations (Lee et al., 2020). Challenges falling under employers related to recruitment and selection, training and development, and remuneration. Discrimination during the recruitment process, such as biases based on legal status, gender or ethnicity, forms a challenge for refugees (Hugo, 2014). Furthermore, lack of training and cross-cultural support limits skill development, hindering opportunities for refugees (Lee et al., 2020). Additionally, refugees often face lower wages and worse employment conditions than other employees, due to previously mentioned challenges in recognition of qualifications. These challenges form a sense of exclusion and exploitation among refugees in the workplace (Boese, 2015). The challenges posed by self-employment for economic integration are multifaceted. Due to the limited opportunities in traditional employment, refugees turn to entrepreneurship (Crush et al., 2017). This is out of necessity rather than choice. However, self-employed refugees often experience marginalization in the labor market (Lee et al., 2020). Moreover, self-employed refugees' businesses typically operate within small co-ethnic communities and focus on lower-skilled industries (Lee et al., 2020). This can restrict opportunities to develop social and human capital further. Lastly, support organizations are essential for assisting refugees in resettlement and economic integration, offering services like

job counselling and training (Lee et al., 2020). However, they face challenges in providing practical assistance, leading to disappointing employment outcomes. Additionally, they may prioritize immediate jobs over long-term career planning, limit refugees' career choices, and struggle to effectively communicate refugees' needs to employers (Steimel, 2017).

The individual-level challenges include individual demographics, language, social networks, psychological responses, and motivations (Lee et al., 2020). Demographic characteristics, such as gender and age, play an important role (Khawajana & Hebbani, 2018). Refugee women often encounter more obstacles in finding employment compared to men. Also, older refugees face more barriers and find employment less quickly than younger generations (Lee et al., 2020). Language proficiency is another critical factor (e.g., Udayar et al., 2021; Bakker et al., 2017; Reitz, 2007; Lee et al., 2020). As refugees are uncertain about their destination, there is no preparation for learning a new language (Desiderio, 2016). Insufficient language proficiency often leads to refugees being confined to low-skilled jobs or the informal economy, limiting their economic prospects (Lee et al., 2020). Then, social networks also influence economic integration (Fozdar, 2012). The effectiveness of these networks depends on their structure and composition. Long-term engagement in social groups and vertical support from governmental support can facilitate better economic integration. However, for psychological responses, mental health challenges and trauma present significant barriers to economic integration (Lee et al., 2020). Refugees often experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, which can negatively impact their ability to secure and maintain employment (Brell et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Lastly, motivation plays a role in refugees' economic integration, with refugees often highly motivated to improve their language skills, obtain qualifications, and secure employment (Lee et al., 2020). However, weak economic conditions and limited job prospects can lead to demotivation over time.

## 2.4 Inclusion and exclusion within the workplace

The importance of inclusion and exclusion within the workplace plays a significant role in the economic integration of refugees for several reasons. Inclusion is defined by Shore et al. (2011) as “the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work

group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (p. 1265). First, inclusion ensures that refugees have equal access to job opportunities, training programs, and career advancement pathways (Shore et al., 2018). This facilitates their economic integration by providing them with the chance to secure stable employment and improve their economic well-being. Second, inclusive workplaces often support skill development and adaptation to the local work environment (Knappert et al., 2020). This is particularly beneficial for refugees who may possess valuable skills and experiences but require assistance in aligning them with the requirements of the host country’s labor market (Krahn et al., 2000). Inclusion fosters social integration by promoting interactions and relationships between refugees and their colleagues (Jeske & Ruwe, 2019). This can help refugees feel welcomed, valued, and connected with their workplace community, enhancing their sense of belonging and well-being. Lastly, addressing exclusionary practices in the workplace, such as discrimination or bias, is essential for ensuring that refugees are not unfairly marginalized or denied opportunities based on their refugee status (Galabuzi, 2004). By promoting inclusive policies and practices, workplaces can help migrate these barriers and create environments where all employees can thrive. Thus, fostering inclusion and minimizing exclusion within the workplace is crucial for maximizing the economic integration of refugees, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society while realizing their full potential in their host country.

## 3. Methodology

This third chapter discusses the methodological approach that was used to answer the research question of this thesis. It elaborates on the research approach and design (3.1), criteria for selecting participants (3.2), data collection (3.3), data analysis (3.4), and ethical considerations (3.5).

### 3.1 Research approach and design

A qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews (Ritchie et al., 2013; Rinehart, 2021), was chosen to explore the subjective experiences of Ukrainian refugees integrating into the Dutch labor market. This method aligned with the research objective of uncovering these lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews aimed to provide insight into experiences, allowing researchers to ask additional questions to elaborate on certain topics when necessary (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring subjective experiences. Using semi-structured interviews allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives.

The aim of this thesis was to uncover experiences. However, it is essential to note that a subjective perspective was taken, as it was believed that objective observation is impossible (Symon & Cassell, 2012). This thesis recognized that ideas of truth and objectivity are constructed through discourse and that perception is shaped by our observations of the world. It is important to note that the researcher was not entirely impartial. The aim was not to uncover the truth but to gain insight into a personal topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and the personal experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands.

This thesis introduced a relativist ontology, which posits that reality is composed limited subjective experiences, a concept known as relativism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to this view, reality and human experience are intertwined (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), with reality being shaped by the subjective experiences of individuals. Reality is formed by the subjective experiences that people hold. Their experience is their reality. This aligned to explore the subjective experiences of refugees. So, the purpose of the relativist ontology for this research was to get insight into the

subjective experiences of Ukrainian refugees integrating into the Dutch labor market (Levers, 2013).

From a constructionist epistemological perspective, reality is socially constructed, which aligns with the subjectivist stance and relativist ontology (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The interpreter and the interpreted interacted to generate meaning, with the interpreter being aware of their influence on the interpretations made. The aim was not to discover objective truth, as reality comprises subjective truths (Levers, 2013).

To summarize, qualitative research with a subjective stance, relativist ontology, and constructionist epistemology was highly congruent and suited to the research question and objective.

## 3.2 Participants

For this thesis, participants for the interviews were selected from Ukrainian refugees. The selection criteria were as follows: first, participants must be of Ukrainian descent and have sought refuge in the Netherlands due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Second, participants should be employed in the Netherlands, given that economic integration encompasses more than mere employment acquisition and involves engaging in economic activities aligned with refugees' previous qualifications and experiences (Lee et al., 2020). This ensured they had first-hand experience with the integration process and could provide insights into the challenges and successes. This thesis focused on individuals employed in the Dutch labor market; therefore, participants must fall within the age range of 18 and 67 years. Participants must demonstrate proficiency in Dutch or English to facilitate effective communication during the interviews.

Dworkin (2012) recommends conducting a 5 to 50 interviews to ensure adequate data collection. Convenience sampling was used to select participants, meaning the easiest to access were selected (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Via online media such as LinkedIn, general digital letters such as e-mails and WhatsApp, and by spreading flyers, the need for participants was advertised. The researcher also called companies of which it was known that Ukrainian refugees were working

there. With convenience sampling, nine respondents were found. Also, snowball sampling was employed to try to recruit additional participants. Here, the initial participant was asked if they were aware of any other Ukrainian refugees who would be willing to participate in and meet the criteria of this thesis. One participant sent a message in a WhatsApp group, via which a new participant was found. Unfortunately, this was the only participant recruited via snowball sampling. Despite extensive outreach efforts, obtaining a representative sample was difficult. Eventually, a total of ten interviews were conducted, with participants ranging in age from 25 to 51 years. All participants were women. An overview of all ten participants is included in Appendix 1.

### 3.3 Data collection procedure

To collect data, an interview guide was developed beforehand and can be found in Appendix 2. The guide included questions about the refugees' experience of integrating into the Dutch labor market and the challenges that they have encountered during this process. Additionally, questions were asked to allow refugees to share their stories, perceptions, and feelings. All interview questions were open-ended to ensure reliable answers (Guion et al., 2011).

Interviews were held online and in person. The interviews were preferably conducted in person, but due to distance, they could also be held online. Conducting interviews in person was preferred as it allows for observing social signals, which could be crucial in uncovering experiences (James & Busher, 2006). However, the choice of setting ultimately depended on the participants preference. Eventually, eight out of the ten interviews were held online, either via Teams or Zoom. The other two interviews were conducted in person, one at the university and one at the researcher's home. Both these locations were chosen by the participants. Before each interview, participants were asked for permission to make an audio recording of the conversation, for verbatim transcription, on which all respondents agreed. All interviews were held in English. An audio recording was made of each interviews, which are transcribed verbatim.

### 3.4 Data analysis method

The analysis of the data was conducted using abductive reasoning. While the theoretical background provided a framework for interpreting the experiences of Ukrainian refugees, it did not

fully capture all the nuances of their experiences. The abductive analysis is a method that utilizes both theory and data to develop codes without being driven solely by either (Rinehart, 2021; Thompson, 2022). The text alternates between transcripts of the interviews and the theoretical background to iteratively develop and improve explanations (Thompson, 2022). The theoretical background provided a foundation for the coding process, including the challenges faced by refugees integrating into the labor market. The abductive analysis enabled the researcher to draw on a theoretical foundation while remaining open to emergent themes and patterns in the data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach allowed for the development of new insights and theories that may not have been explicitly articulated within the theoretical background (Thompson, 2022), resulting in a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Ukrainian refugees.

The coding process started with open coding, which is the process of breaking down raw data into smaller, meaningful units and assigning codes to them (Williams & Moser, 2019). The next step was axial coding, which refines and connects the codes identified in open coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). Here, all concepts that derived from the theoretical background could be used. For example, within the institutional-level challenges, the codes ‘*immigration regulations*’, ‘*qualification accreditation*’, and ‘*socio-political climate*’ were used. But also new codes were created when quotes could not be linked to codes arrived from the theoretical background. Examples of these new codes are ‘*preparation*’, ‘*job search*’, ‘*work experience – Ukraine*’, and ‘*work experience – Netherlands*’. The last step was selective coding, where key themes from the axial coding were integrated and connected (Williams & Moser, 2019), resulting in the following selective codes: ‘*personal information*’, ‘*institutional-level challenges*’, ‘*organizational-level challenges*’, ‘*individual-level challenges*’, ‘*inclusion*’, and ‘*exclusion*’.

The analysis process will utilize Thompson’s (2022) eight-step guide for abductive thematic analysis, as summarized in *Table 1*.

| Step | Description   |
|------|---|
| 1.   | <i>Transcription and familiarization</i> : Recording interviews to allow for verbatim transcription. These transcripts are stored at my own OneDrive. |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 2. | <i>Coding</i> : The word or short phase will capture the essence of a certain amount of data as summary. The first round of data arrived both from data and from cognitive interpretation, the second round consolidated code to one single heading, and the third round again consolidated codes. The coding process was done using ATLAS.ti, a computer program for structured coding (Hwang, 2008). |
| 3. | <i>Codebook</i> : Providing clarity and structure to the previous mentioned coding process.  |
| 4. | <i>Developing themes</i> : More complex than codes. Consolidated codes to explain phenomena.   |
| 5. | <i>Theorizing data</i> : The relationship between different themes and dataset was theorized. This was guided by the theoretical background; however, the theoretical background did not determine this theorization.  |
| 6. | <i>Comparison of dataset</i> : This step was omitted, as it is not required and was not doable due to time limitations.  |
| 7. | <i>Data display</i> : This step was omitted, as there is no requirement to conduct this step, and was not doable due to time limitations.  |
| 8. | <i>Writing up</i> : Writing up the findings by each theme and explain how theory is linked to the data, using quotes as support.   |

Table 1, based on Thompson (2022).

In addition to the abductive reasoning approach, a discussion must be incorporated on reflexivity to address potential biases during data analysis and interpretation. Reflexivity is defined by Haynes (2012) as “an awareness in the researcher’s role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes” (p. 72). Reflexivity is crucial in recognizing how the researcher's background may impact the research process and outcomes. As the researcher, a young Dutch white woman and student, personal experiences and perspectives influenced the approach to this research. Participants may have perceived the researcher differently based on factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity. To address and mitigate potential biases, reflexivity was maintained throughout the data analysis process. Assumptions and interpretations of the data were actively questioned, with careful consideration given to alternative explanations and perspectives. By systematically exploring these alternatives, a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data was achieved.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

Refugees may have found it challenging to discuss their experiences due to the sensitive and complex nature of the subject matter. Therefore, ethical considerations must be considered in this thesis. To ensure integrity, this thesis adhered to the five principles of the Netherlands Code of Conduct (NWO, 2018): honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility.

The principle of ‘honesty’ in research requires transparency in methods, proper referencing to avoid plagiarism and acknowledgement of any limitations (NWO, 2018). Accuracy in reporting results is also essential. Additionally, ‘scrupulousness’ entails the use of scientifically responsible methods. The methods used in the thesis are described in detail to ensure transparency and reliability of the results (NWO, 2018). No new content was added beyond the original text. This means ensuring the thesis is free from biased positions that could compromise its integrity (NWO, 2018). Additionally, the principle of ‘responsibility’ entails considering the legitimate concerns of all participants (NWO, 2018). To achieve this, each person involved in the thesis was informed of its aim. Participants were asked to provide consent for recording the interviews and using their answers to address the research question. Participants were allowed to refuse to answer without providing a reason. Anonymity is ensured for all participants, and the transcripts do not contain any identifiable information that could reveal the respondent’s identity. Participants’ anonymity is maintained in all research outputs, and they will be referred to as “Respondent #”.

In conclusion, this methodology provides a framework for exploring the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the Dutch labor market. The qualitative approach, combined with the use of semi-structured interviews and abductive reasoning, allowed for a deep understanding of the respondents’ experiences.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of this thesis exploring the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in integrating into the Dutch labor market. The research question guiding this thesis was: “*How do Ukrainian refugees experience their integration into the Dutch labor market?*”. The results are organized according to three primary levels of analysis: institutional (4.1), organizational (4.2), and individual-level challenges (4.3). Additionally, a separate section focuses on experiences of inclusion and exclusion within the workplace (4.4). By examining these dimensions, this chapter provides insights into the challenges and successes Ukrainian refugees face in their economic integration.

### 4.1 Institutional-level challenges

The institutional-level challenges for Ukrainian refugees could include immigration regulations (4.1.1), qualification accreditation (4.1.2), and socio-political climate (4.1.3).

#### 4.1.1 Immigration regulations

As Ukrainian refugees are granted immediate access to the Dutch labor market, they do not face the negative impact of lengthy asylum processes. Despite their immediate access, Ukrainian refugees still encounter difficulties linked to their unique status. For some, their work experience aligns well with their current job in the Netherlands. Respondent 1 (43 years) mentioned that her current role as a database developer was a continuation of her previous job. Similarly, when asked about the alignment between her last and current job, Respondent 2 answered: “*Perfectly. That’s what I was doing. (...) So, it’s basically, there is not much difference*” (Respondent 2, 27 years). These quotes show that there are Ukrainian refugees whose job align with their previous job. Other respondents mentioned their job not aligning with their education and previous work experiences. “*It does not match my qualifications at all. (...) But it’s actually not a goal for me at the moment. For me at the moment, it’s to improve the language*” (Respondent 10, 42 years). Similar to Respondent 10, all respondents whose job did not align reported being satisfied with this mismatch, often citing it as a conscious choice.

### 4.1.2 Qualification accreditation

As undervaluation of refugee qualifications is a common challenge for refugees, the recognition of Ukrainian refugees' qualifications within the Dutch labor market could be a complex issue. Four of the respondents experienced difficulties in having their qualifications acknowledged. The four respondents highlighted the disparity between their acquired qualifications and the specific requirements of the Dutch labor market. For instance, Respondent 1 expressed frustration over the non-recognition of her master's degree: *"Here in the Netherlands, I was recognized by NUFIC as a bachelor WO. Not as a master"* (Respondent 1, 43 years). This discrepancy aligns with the findings of Lee et al. (2020) who emphasize the challenges refugees face in having their foreign qualifications recognized. Furthermore, Respondent 9 mentioned: *"I think it's more of a paper world, where you have to show papers, and you have to have a certain degree or certain education"* and *"I get it you know education and everything is important but I feel like what they do not understand is that it's different in different countries and that they should also keep that in mind when hiring a person"* (Respondent 9, 25 years). This reveals the tension between formal qualifications and the ability to prove your qualifications. It indicates that it is difficult for Ukrainian refugees to prove their previous qualifications. Respondent 9 also emphasized the challenges associated with providing work references, as such documentation is not standard practice in Ukraine. Beyond formal accreditation, two respondents described challenges related to establishing credibility and gaining employer trust. Respondent 2 reported experiencing extended probationary periods compared to Dutch colleagues: *"Because they will never trust you like a Dutch person, I think. So, that's the thing which I needed more time to prove that I'm okay"* (Respondent 2, 27 years). Right after, she described a difference in the timeline for obtaining a permanent contract compared to a Dutch colleague occupying the same position. While her Dutch colleague secured a permanent contract within six months, Respondent 2's contract was finalized after two years. This shows that there is a lack of recognition and undervaluation of qualifications and experiences. Accordingly, Respondent 3 (38 years) perceived a need to continually prove her knowledge in the workplace. However, she acknowledged that this perception may not have been grounded. Thus, while most participants did not encounter significant challenges in having their qualifications recognized, a subset of respondents described difficulties in proving previous qualifications and gaining employer trust.

### 4.1.3 Socio-political climate

The uncertainty surrounding the future status of refugees, as highlighted by the theoretical background, adds complexities. Respondents expressed concerns about job security and career advancement due to their temporary status. For example, Respondent 2 described her employer as being hesitant to include her due to her uncertain residency permit: *“I think I should mention that at the beginning, the company was also afraid to include me in quite some stuff because, with this permit of a refugee, you don’t really know what’s going to happen”* (Respondent 2, 27 years). She also stated that it would be nice if the Dutch government would help her to understand what will happen when war finishes. It indicates how employers’ perceptions of instability associated with refugee status can hinder career advancement for migrants, even when they possess the necessary skills and qualifications. Respondent 3 further emphasizes this, with many employers questioning her commitment to stay in the Netherlands if the war in Ukraine ends: *“Still people thought probably it will be over soon and the employers in all interviews they asked me what I’m going to do when the war is over”* (Respondent 3, 38 years). As employers asked this during the hiring interview, it indicates that they are hesitant to hire refugees due to the uncertainty of their residency status in the country.

The socio-political climate also fosters discrimination, both overt and subtle. Respondent 4 acknowledges the presence of racial discrimination in the job market, though she hesitates to discuss it in detail: *“I don’t actually would like to mention that, but racial discrimination, I must say”* (Respondent 4, 51 years). Additionally, language barriers play a role in this context. Respondent 3 notes that her CV was rejected simply because she is not a Dutch speaker. This illustrates how cultural integration expectations can disadvantage refugees, particularly when language skills are used as an excuse to reject them. Not all respondents experience the socio-political climate the same way. Some do not see their refugee status as a hindrance. As Respondent 5 said: *“No, absolutely no, because I don’t feel that I’m a refugee. I used to be independent and self-managed”* (Respondent 5, 26 years). This suggests that while the socio-political climate can impose significant barriers, individual resilience and perception possibly mediate these challenges to some extent.

## 4.2 Organizational-level challenges

The organizational-level challenges include employers and self-employment (4.2.1), and the support of organizations (4.2.2).

### 4.2.1 Employers and self-employment

The analysis of the interviews reveals a range of organizational-level challenges that are related to recruitment and selection, training and development, and remuneration. The recruitment process presents mixed experiences. While some respondents did not struggle finding a job, for example through platforms like LinkedIn, others highlighted systemic barriers and biases. For instance, Respondent 2 mentioned the importance of networking and how the lack of connections can pose a challenge: *“I’ve heard from a lot of the colleagues that still now in the Netherlands it works like, oh, I know someone, that someone knows someone, and for us, it’s very difficult because we don’t know anyone” (Respondent 2, 27 years)*. These informal networks are a taken-for-granted aspect of the Dutch labor market, but difficult for refugees to obtain. Moreover, Respondent 5 mentioned not feeling understood during the hiring process. She shared an experience where her preference to not work with Russian colleagues was negatively perceived: *“They gave me a response well we have a very nice Russian in the team and we are very inclusive so it’s Dutch policy that we’re inclusive and we can’t discriminate... It was implied that I was being discriminating other people” (Respondent 5, 26 years)*. This illustrates that the specific conditions and challenges faced by refugees are often not fully understood by employers, making it difficult for them to find suitable employment. No respondent experienced any form of discrimination during the recruitment process.

Training and development opportunities appear to vary among employers. Some respondents received substantial support, including language classes and ongoing professional development. For example, Respondent 3 mentioned different kind of classes offered by her employer, to develop her skills, which she appreciates: *“Any different courses what they offer for everyone. Yeah. So I can apply for different courses” (Respondent 3, 38 years)*. This emphasizes the importance of continuous training and development offered by the employer for refugees’ labor market integration. Conversely, those who felt undervalued highlight the challenges in accessing opportunities for training and development. As such, Respondent 4 expressed frustration over being

denied growth opportunities in becoming store manager, despite her qualifications: *“But I wanted to grow up. They didn’t give me this possibility. Never mind that I have a diploma in here. Completely equal to their requirements. Some store managers have a lower degree than me”* (Respondent 4, 51 years). She here describes perceiving an unfair situation regarding her development, due to her being a refugee. All respondents who receive training and development from their employer expressed satisfaction and indicated the necessity of it. Conversely, those who did not receive such opportunities reported them lacking. This indicates that the lack of training and development hinders opportunities for refugees.

Disparities in wages compared to colleagues was only mentioned by one respondent. *“I have lower salaries than my colleagues because there is no ruling for Ukraine”* (Respondent 6, 42 years old). Respondent 1 mentioned *“I cannot get even the slightest rise of payment”*, but this is only due to company politics as it is not only her facing this problem. All other respondents did not mention disparities in wages, and therefore there is no indication of Ukrainian refugees receiving lower wages compared to local employees.

Only one respondent was self-employed, and this was by choice rather than necessity (Respondent 7, 28 years). Furthermore, this participant did not report experiencing the challenges typically faced by self-employed refugees. Respondent 1 wants to be self-employed and start working as a psychologist. However, she states: *“As a ZZP, you cannot get a legal reason for staying in the Netherlands”* (Respondent 1, 43 years). This suggests that self-employment may be a less desirable form of economic activity for Ukrainian refugees.

#### 4.2.2 Support of organizations

Perceptions of organizational support were mixed. For instance, Respondent 2 appreciated the structured support, such as language courses and personal development meetings, stating: *“Now, every month, we have a meeting with the manager regarding personal development”* (Respondent 2, 27 years). It could help her during her integration. However, three respondents expressed that while general support was available, it was often not sufficiently tailored to their specific needs as refugees. When asked about support initiatives at the workplace, Respondent 3 answered: *“No. Sometimes I’d like to say, like, I’m not only a migrant from other country. I really have some special situation or special case. And yes, sometimes I’d like to say about this, but no, no one ask me or no*

*one like to give me some additional supports or something else” (Respondent 3, 38 years).* It indicates that even though support is available, it should be tailored to specific needs of Ukrainian refugees. In total, seven respondents mentioned challenges with the received support of their organization. Two respondents only experienced good support of their organization, one did not mention anything about it.

Communication within organizations was a challenge reported by five respondents. For example, Respondent 1 mentioned issues on how her feedback was received: *“There are some issues here and there. Mostly connected to communication styles and communication processes in the company. This is seen from my psychology part. And when I bring those questions and issues to the table, they are usually taken. Okay, we know. They don’t really listen” (Respondent 1, 43 years).* This indicated that while organizations might acknowledge concerns, they often fail to act on them effectively. Conversely, Respondent 10 explained: *“We have email, where you can actually write any initiative you would like to improve. (...) They see it actually could work. They listen (Respondent 10, 42 years).* This shows that not every organization fails to act on concerns effectively. Being listened to attentively may contribute positively to her integration process. Four respondents did not mention communication within their organization.

Initial support was a positive aspect reported by four respondents. They noted that organizations provided significant help with financial issues, relocation, and other practical matters. For example, Respondent 2 highlighted the assistance she received: *“I actually got support. They helped me to manage my mortgage. They helped me when I got big dept in bank. And they helped me to refinance it” (Respondent 2, 27 years).* The positive experiences indicate that the initial support provided by organizations was a positive aspect of their integration. Initial support was not mentioned by the other respondents.

### 4.3 Individual-level challenges

The individual-level challenges include language (4.3.1) and social networks (4.3.2).

### 4.3.1 Language

Language has emerged as an important factor influencing the economic integration experiences of the respondents. The interviews indicated the significance of language in shaping Ukrainian refugees' economic integration.

One of the most mentioned themes in the interviews was the necessity of speaking Dutch to access better job opportunities. Respondent 1 noted: *“I contacted a lot of local psychology clinics, agencies, etcetera. They want people with Dutch CI”* (Respondent 1, 43 years). Also, Respondent 2 mentioned: *“But the Dutch language, it’s really a deal breaker”* and *“Dutch, obviously, you need to know Dutch and a lot of doors will open”* (Respondent 2, 27 years). Respondents 3 and 8 described the language difference as the main challenge while integrating into the Dutch labor market: *“The main challenge? Of course, it’s my language gap”* (Respondent 3, 38 years) and *“the main problem is language”* (Respondent 8, 44 years). These statements underscore the notion that language plays an important role in the labor market, often downgrading those without sufficient Dutch skills. Accordingly, Respondent 7 mentioned the Dutch language being an obstacle to many job opportunities: *“I would say that the Dutch language is quite important. (...) Many job opportunities within the Dutch companies, which are usually required Dutch language since I’m the one who speaks a lot in my profession, I have to speak to the clients. So, it’s a first obstacle”* (Respondent 7, 28 years). Respondent 9 experiences language differences as a hindrance in her economic integration as well: *“What’s it been for me regarding the employment is it’s like you find it but then again they’re looking for like Dutch speaking for example. Like that’s been a huge thing. That’s really really prevented me from taking in many jobs that I would really like to do. Because I don’t speak Dutch”* (Respondent 9, 25 years). Given that the Dutch language was one of the most frequently discussed topics in the interviews, it appears to have a substantial influence on the economic integration experience.

For the respondents working at an international company, English is the primary language used for communication, allowing for a more inclusive environment. However, Respondent 6 noted that not all Ukrainian refugees have such opportunities, especially those who do not speak English: *“Most of people that don’t speak English well actually they cannot get a little or high paid jobs here”* (Respondent 6, 42 years). She said that only 5% of the Ukrainians speak English, supported

by Respondent 8 stating: *“A lot of Ukrainians don’t speak English”* (Respondent 8, 44 years). This suggests that while international companies might offer a more accessible environment for non-Dutch speakers, most jobs require either Dutch or English language, hindering Ukrainian refugees during their economic integration.

### 4.3.2 Social networks

Respondents shared diverse experiences regarding their social networks. Limited social support was mentioned by six respondents, as they noted the challenges of building deep connections with Dutch people. They often feel that a “wall” exists between them and Dutch society. As Respondent 7 mentioned: *“It’s easier for me to find the connection between international people and friends there rather than with Dutch”* (Respondent 7, 28 years). However, she expressed a desire to build friendships with Dutch people. Respondent 3 also misses personal connections with Dutch people: *“I stayed overnight in Den Haag, but no one, never offered me to like, to spend some time after work together. (...) It’s a bit like, yeah, surprise, I didn’t expect this”* (Respondent 3, 38 years). Respondent 9 mentioned missing connections with other Ukrainians: *“I’ve not met anybody from Ukraine of my age you know my age group like it’s hard to find people of the same age group as well”* (Respondent 9, 25 years). However, some respondents found social support within their own community. Respondent 3 (38 years) mentioned participating in volunteer-led groups organized by and for Ukrainians, where they could seek help and discuss various challenges they faced. This kind of horizontal support within the refugee community was an important resource, especially when local community support was perceived as lacking. Another example is Respondent 7 (28 years) mentioning meeting two Dutch women at a railway station, who eventually assisted her in finding employment in the Netherlands. Such examples underscore the importance of social networks in integrating in new environments.

## 4.4 In- and exclusion

The significance of inclusion and exclusion in shaping the economic integration of refugees posits that employees’ perceptions of being valued and unique members of their workgroup are crucial for maximizing economic integration.

#### 4.4.1 Inclusion

Consistent with this perspective, all respondents shared positive experiences of feeling included in their workplace. For example, Respondent 1 (43 years) expressed a strong sense of being valued by her colleagues, noting that she often hears that she is the best database developer they have had in years. This acknowledgment of her professional skills significantly contributes to her feeling of inclusion and worth within the team. Similarly, Respondent 2 mentioned: *“I feel, I think, incredibly included, but I think it’s also the personality because I try to be everywhere. So, basically, when they don’t have me for a month, they feel like something is missing”* (Respondent 2, 27 years). This enhances her feeling of being part of the organization. It suggests that her active participation and engagement in workplace activities are crucial to her feeling of belonging. Respondent 3 (38 years) highlighted the efforts made by her colleagues to include her in social interactions by switching to English during casual conversations, despite working in a Dutch company. This effort to accommodate her language preferences indicates a clear commitment to making her feel welcome and valued. Respondent 5 described several instances where she felt included and valued: *“And then people actually just listened to my professional input and it’s like oh, yeah, you’re right. Let’s write this down. We will have to adjust for this when we are implementing stuff, and I was like what that was possible? Yeah, no one is trying to fight me on my opinion. No one is trying to shush me or mute me or whatever”* (Respondent 5, 26 years). Additionally, she appreciated the support she received from her team during a personal crisis, which allowed her to take sick leave and return to work without pressure, feeling valued as a person rather than a professional. Respondent 8 also shared positive experiences of inclusion, emphasizing the friendly and supportive atmosphere among her colleagues. As she mentioned: *“We’re making jokes, we’re singing songs, we can a little bit do some funny things during the working day. So, I think that I’m absolutely included, and I like it”* (Respondent 8, 44 years). Overall, these responses point to a variety of factors that contribute to a sense of inclusion. They include recognition of professional skills, active participation in workplace activities, consideration of individual needs, and a supportive and friendly work environment.

While all respondents reported positive experiences of inclusion, not all participants felt equally included. More specifically, four respondents indicated areas where inclusion could be enhanced. For instance, Respondent 3 acknowledged: *“I feel that I’m included in my workplace,*

*but it could be more inclusive” (Respondent 3, 38 years).* She identified a potential area for improvement related to meeting participation. While meeting materials are provided in English, discussions frequently occur in Dutch, limiting her involvement in the conversation. This highlights the importance of inclusive communication practices in fostering a sense of belonging among all employees. Respondent 7 expresses the desire for more involvement in more highlighting projects. As she said: *“The highlights and projects were given to our design lead. (...) He was working on them alone” (Respondent 7, 28 years).* This limits her opportunities for professional growth and indicates that not all team members have equal access to impactful work. Respondent 9 (25 years) noted that while her colleagues engaged with her on a personal level, asking about her family and well-being, she did not feel that her professional contributions were equally valued. This suggests that while social inclusion is important, it is not sufficient on its own. Feeling valued for professional contributions and having equal opportunities are also indicators for inclusion.

#### 4.4.2 Exclusion

While all participants reported feeling included in their workplace, three respondents mentioned feelings of exclusion as well, where language emerged as a significant factor for two of them. Respondent 2 works at a company with mostly internationals. However, she noted: *“Sometimes you feel excluded only when they start to speak Dutch. And that’s it, because when we go for some team building stuff, of course, normally the Dutch people want to speak Dutch between themselves. So, that’s the only moments when you feel really excluded” (Respondent 2, 27 years).* Thus, Respondent 2 feels excluded when colleagues are talking Dutch between themselves, because of which she cannot participate in the conversation. Respondent 3 (38 years) shared a similar experience when the spoken language was Dutch during a big meeting. She could not participate and thus felt excluded. This suggests that language can be a significant obstacle to inclusion in workplaces where Dutch is the primary language of communication. Lastly, Respondent 9 was marginalized unfairly based on her refugee status, as her employer kept taking her sick days from her vacation days: *“Calling in sick and stuff like... They kept taking from my vacation days and I never understood why I never had like a full 25 days and then they were like oh we were just every time you were sick they would just take you from my vacation days. Which is illegal but yeah we didn’t know that. So I think the system has been a bit abusing in that sense” (Respondent 9, 25 years).* This indicates a more systemic form of exclusion, rooting in discriminatory practices. The other eight respondents did not experience any exclusionary practices.

## 5. Discussion

This section includes the theoretical implications (5.1), methodological contribution (5.2), critical reflection on the limitations of the research and the directions for future research (5.3), and practical implications (5.4).

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this thesis contribute to existing theories by providing empirical evidence specific to Ukrainian refugees in the Dutch labor market. They affirm key concepts from existing literature, such as the impact of language barriers, qualification recognition, and the socio-political climate on refugee integration. It underscores the role of the three different level factors in shaping integration experience, reflecting with theories by Lee et al. (2020) and Ager and Strang (2008). However, these findings also introduce nuances.

To be more specific, regarding the institutional challenges, the claim of Hainmueller et al. (2016) about the negative impact of lengthy asylum processes does not hold for Ukrainian refugees due to their immediate access to the labor market. This contrasts with the longer and uncertain processes faced by other refugee groups. However, the respondents did find encounter difficulties in having their qualifications acknowledged, which is a common issue for refugees (e.g., Lee et al., 2020; Ager & Strang, 2008). These difficulties are due to the undervaluation of refugee qualifications or proving these qualifications (Lee et al., 2020; Davey & Jones, 2019). The uncertainty surrounding the future status of refugees also adds complexity, as highlighted by the theoretical background. The socio-political climate does impose barriers but could be mediated by individual resilience and perception. As for the organizational-level challenges, no respondent experienced any form of discrimination during the recruitment process, as Lee et al. (2020) state most refugees face. The respondents did confirm the importance of continuous training and development offered by the employer for refugees' labor market integration (Lee et al., 2020). Respondents who did not receive such opportunities reported them lacking and confirmed that the lack of training and development hinders their opportunities. For the individual challenges, language appeared to be crucial in shaping refugees' economic integrations, aligning with authors such as Udayar et al. (2021) and Lee et al. (2020). Also, the importance of social networks in

integrating in new environments was highlighted, which confirms the theory of Fozdar (2012) mentioning this importance. Lastly, the results confirm that inclusion and exclusion within the workplace play a significant role in the economic integration of Ukrainian refugees.

This thesis adds to the understanding of refugee integration by illustrating how the experiences of Ukrainian refugees differ from those of other refugee groups, particularly due to their unique legal status in the Netherlands. The immediate access to the labor market for Ukrainian refugees contrasts with the asylum processes that other refugees face, leading to different challenges and opportunities. For instance, while language barriers and qualification recognition are common issues, the uncertainty of long-term residency for Ukrainian refugees adds an additional layer of complexity to their integration process. Furthermore, the findings suggest that despite legal access, Ukrainian refugees still encounter significant organizational, institutional and individual barriers. This thesis thus contributes to a nuanced perspective to refugee integration, emphasizing the importance of context-specific factors.

## 5.2 Methodological contribution

The qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews, proved to be a valuable method for uncovering the subjective experiences of Ukrainian refugees as they integrate into the Dutch labor market. Through in-depth interviews it was able to gather depth and richness of the data, including detailed insights into respondents' experiences and perspectives. It also allowed to capture the nuances and complexities of the integration process, that might have been missed by quantitative methods.

Although this method offered flexibility and rich data, it is important to recognize its limitations. Convenience sampling may have introduced biases. All respondents who agreed to be interviewed had a higher level of education, which could mean that they are not representative of the broader population of Ukrainian refugees. Furthermore, as English proficiency was a prerequisite for conducting interviews, the study sample was limited to English-speaking Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, the findings may not be transferable to Ukrainian refugees who do not speak English. Those who can speak English are likely to have an advantage in the

integration process due to their language skills. Lastly, while qualitative research prioritizes depth and richness, a larger sample size may have improved the findings transferability. This means that the results might be more applicable to other similar situations or contexts.

### 5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Reading the implications of this thesis' findings requires considering the following limitations. The first limitation is language. It is important to acknowledge that this research involved participants and a researcher who were not native English speakers. Although all interviews were conducted in English, potential language barriers could have, at times, hindered effective communication and may have influenced the data collected. To mitigate this, efforts were made to ensure clear communication. These efforts included repeating participants' answers to verify understanding (e.g., "So, if I understand correctly, you're saying...?"). Additionally, participants were encouraged to indicate if they did not understand a question and ask for clarification.

Recruitment for this research was challenging, potentially due to the sensitive topic. This may have resulted in a sample that does not fully capture the entire spectrum of experiences of Ukrainian refugees integrating into the Dutch labor market. The aim was to add diversity in terms of age, gender, educational background, occupation, and length of time spent in the Netherlands, to capture a broad range of perspectives on economic integration. Their varied experiences provided a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees' while integrating into the Dutch labor market. However, due to the difficulties in recruitment, the sample population in this research consisted solely of female Ukrainian refugees. All of them arrived within three months after the full invasion started. Also, their age was not diverse, only varying from 25 to 51 years. While this focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of their experiences, it also limits the transferability of the findings. Future research could benefit from including a more diverse sample, encompassing both genders, a broader range of age and different occupations, which now will be explained.

Five of the ten respondents in this research are employed in the IT sector, which is a limitation for several reasons. Firstly, in the IT sector is more talked in English compared to other

professions. IT professionals may have a higher comfort level communicating in English due to the global nature and technical terms in English. This means the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in IT may not be representative of the broader refugee population integrating into the Dutch labor market, where it is more common to speak Dutch. Secondly, the IT sector is generally known for having a higher demand for skilled workers, potentially making it easier for Ukrainian IT professionals to find employment compared to refugees with skills in other sectors. This directs the data towards a potentially more positive integration experience that may not be representative of the overall challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees.

Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insights into the experiences of Ukrainian refugees integrating into the Dutch labor market. By acknowledging these limitations and pursuing future research, we can continue to build a more comprehensive understanding of this complex issue.

Future research on this subject is recommended to explore the long-term integration outcomes for Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands, especially regarding how their temporary status is resolved. This research captured a snapshot of Ukrainian refugees' experience at a specific point of time. However, integration is a dynamic process. Thus, research could adopt a longitudinal approach, tracking refugees' integration experiences across several years. Additionally, while this research considered some individual-level factors like age, future research could delve deeper. Into how these factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background affect the integration experiences of Ukrainian refugees. These intersecting factors could influence refugees' access to employment opportunities and could uncover barriers that are otherwise overlooked. Lastly, this research is primarily focused on the refugees' perspectives. Future studies could expand this by including perspectives of employers who hire Ukrainian refugees, to provide valuable insights into improving workplace integration strategies.

## 5.4 Practical implications

This research has delved into the experience of Ukrainian refugees of integrating into the Dutch labor market. To address challenges they experience during this process, a combination of practical implications can be recommended. At policy level, it would be recommended to improve the procedures for assessing foreign qualifications, facilitating faster job placement. Additionally,

implementing language training programs adjusted to the specific needs of refugee job seekers is advisable to enhance their employability. Raising awareness among employers about the skills and potential contributions of Ukrainian refugees through, for example, educational campaigns is lastly recommended.

From a practical viewpoint, establishing mentorship programs could provide valuable support to Ukrainian refugees as they are integrating into the Dutch labor market. Mentors can offer guidance on career development, job search strategies and cultural adaptation. Furthermore, creating opportunities for networking can connect refugee job seekers with potential employers. Additionally, recognizing the psychological impact of war on refugees, and offering mental health services would be recommended for supporting the overall well-being of Ukrainian refugees.

By implementing this policy and practical implementations, the Netherlands can create a more supportive environment for Ukrainian refugees, enabling them to fully participate in the labor market.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis explored how Ukrainian refugees experience their integration into the Dutch labor market. By doing so, the thesis answered the following research question: *How do Ukrainian refugees experience their integration into the Dutch labor market?* Through in-depth interviews with ten Ukrainian refugees employed in the Netherlands, the research delved into the challenges and opportunities encountered during this process.

At the institutional level, this thesis found that Ukrainian refugees benefit from their immediate access to the labor market. However, despite this advantage, the uncertainty surrounding their long-term status in the Netherlands remains a concern. This uncertainty affects their job stability and future planning, as respondents expressed insecurity about their long-term prospects regarding their job. Additionally, the accreditation of qualifications posed a barrier for many respondents. The Dutch system's recognition processes often undervalue foreign qualifications, leading to frustration among highly educated refugees finding themselves in roles below their qualifications. This reflects broader challenges identified in the literature, where refugees struggle to have their skills and qualifications adequately recognized. Organizational challenges varied, with respondents experiencing mixed outcomes in recruitment, training, and support. The necessity of networking was highlighted as barrier to securing employment. Additionally, some respondents felt their unique situations were not addressed adequately by their employers. While some respondents reported receiving training and development, others felt excluded from such opportunities, underscoring differences in organizational support. On an individual level, language emerged as a critical factor influencing job prospects and workplace integration. The necessity of learning Dutch was emphasized by several respondents, who saw it as essential for accessing better opportunities and feeling fully integrated. Social networks also played a crucial role, with those lacking connections facing greater difficulties in job searching and adapting to the new environment. The importance of building social networks, both within the Ukrainian community and with Dutch locals, was underscored, although many respondents felt a barrier in integrating with Dutch society.

Inclusion in the workplace was generally positive, with respondents reporting a sense of being valued and included in their teams. However, instances of exclusion were also mentioned, often tied to language barriers, where Dutch-speaking colleagues excluded Ukrainian refugees from full participation, by speaking Dutch. Moreover, one respondent experienced exclusionary practices linked to her refugee status, highlighting ongoing issues of discrimination and inequality within certain organizational contexts.

To enhance the integration of Ukrainian refugees into the Dutch labor market, policymakers and employers should prioritize initiatives addressing mostly qualification recognition and language support. Furthermore, research on the long-term integration outcomes of Ukrainian refugees is essential to inform future policies and interventions.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I Respondents overview

| Respondent # | Gender | Age | Study   | Work experience<br>Ukraine  | Work experience<br>Netherlands                             |
|--------------|--------|-----|---|---|--|
| 1            | Woman  | 43  | Applied math<br>master<br>Psychology master                         | Programmer<br>Psychologist  | Programmer   |
| 2            | Woman  | 27  | International<br>economics  | Restaurant manager/<br>office manager                                     | Office manager   |
| 3            | Woman  | 38  | Marketing master<br>Economics<br>bachelor<br>Psychology<br>bachelor | Customer experience<br>manager  | Business analyst<br>Digital transformation<br>expert       |
| 4            | Woman  | 51  | Technology and<br>design master                                     | Sewing factory<br>Pattern maker and<br>technologist<br>Department manager | Cleaning<br>Costume work at New<br>Yorker<br>Social worker |
| 5            | Woman  | 26  | Software engineer<br>bachelor                                       | Outsourcing jobs  | Software engineer  |
| 6            | Woman  | 42  | Ecology master<br>Quality systems<br>master                         | Quality worker  | Quality worker   |
| 7            | Woman  | 28  | Tourism master  | Tourism<br>management   | User interface<br>experience designer                      |
| 8            | Woman  | 44  | Marketing and<br>economics master                                   | Head marketing<br>department<br>Public relations in<br>publishing house   | Chief assistant in<br>restaurant                           |
| 9            | Woman  | 25  | Political science   | Business English<br>Commercial place<br>Translator                        | Hotel worker   |
| 10           | Woman  | 42  | Pedagogic   | Teacher<br>Finance  | Cashier at Primark   |

## Appendix II Interview guide

### Introduction questions

1. Please, could you introduce yourself?
  - a. How old are you?
  - b. Could you tell me about your family situation? (partner, children)
  
2. Please, share your experiences of living in Ukraine?
  - a. Where were you born?
  - b. What educational background do you have?
  - c. Could you describe your work experience in Ukraine?
  - d. Can you provide insight into what your life was like just before you had to leave Ukraine?

### Life in the Netherlands

3. How long have you been in the Netherlands?
  - a. Was the Netherlands your first destination upon fleeing, or did you spend time in other countries first?
  - b. How did you prepare yourself before fleeing?
    - i. Did you have a plan of where you were going?
  
4. Could you elaborate on your life in the Netherlands?
  - a. What is your current living situation? (where, with whom)
  - b. Where are you currently employed?

### Economic integration into the Netherlands

5. Can you share your personal experience of finding employment in the Netherlands as a Ukrainian refugee?
  - a. What are some of the chances and opportunities you experienced during this process?
  - b. What were some of the challenges you encountered during this process?
  - c. How well does it align with your qualifications and previous work experience?

6. How do you feel your current job utilizes your qualifications and expertise gained before arriving in the Netherlands?
7. Could you discuss any particular barriers you faced in securing your current job, especially related to your refugee status or background?
  - a. And could you discuss any particular challenges you face(d) in securing employment that fully utilizes your skills and experiences?
8. What support systems or resources did you find most helpful in your journey to finding employment in the Netherlands?
9. Can you reflect on any instances where you felt your qualifications or previous work experiences were undervalued or overlooked by employers in the Netherlands?
10. How do you navigate cultural or language differences in the workplace?
  - a. Have they posed any challenges for you?

**Inclusion and exclusion in the workplace**

11. How included and valued do you feel in your current workplace?
  - a. Can you share any experiences where you felt particularly included or excluded?
12. What kinds of support initiatives in your workplace have helped you adapt to the local environment and develop your skills?
13. Have you experienced any exclusionary practices in your workplace? (discrimination, bias)
  - a. How did you handle these situations?

### **Positive experiences and reflections**

14. Can you share any positive experiences or successes you have had in your current job that you feel are worth highlighting?
  - a. Possibly in relation to the alignment between your qualifications and economic activities?
  
15. In your opinion, what specific actions or policies could be implemented to better support Ukrainian refugees in finding employment that fully utilizes their qualifications and experiences in the Netherlands?
  
16. How do you think your experiences in the Dutch labor market have shaped your sense of professional identity and self-worth?
  
17. Are there any additional insights or perspectives you would like to share about your journey of integration into the Dutch labor market as a Ukrainian refugee in general?
  - a. And specifically concerning the alignment of economic activities with your qualifications and experiences?