

Integration amidst division

A qualitative study on how refugee students perceive and strategize their integration trajectories in relation to the migration debates in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The influx of refugees the Netherlands has been faced with since 2014 has unleashed political and societal debates on the reception and subsequent integration of this group. The Dutch society is divided, and can even be described as polarized, on this topic. This thesis focuses on how refugee students navigate and perceive their integration trajectories in the context of this polarization, with special attention to the role of education. Because of refugee students' engagement with academics, the expectation was that this group specifically would be able to critically reflect on social processes as polarization and integration in the Dutch society and their own positioning therein. This research captures and creates room for the reflections and experiences of refugees on these processes, something that is largely missing from academic literature and debates. The data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups with seventeen refugee-students.

The results of my research show great willingness and effort from the refugee students to become part of and integrate into the Dutch society. In the face of significant challenges, such as lengthy asylum procedures, they sought and pursued opportunities to engage with the Dutch society, largely based on their acknowledgement of the importance of becoming integrated. Education was seen as significantly contributing to their integration trajectories, as it provided a space for them to become familiarized with the Dutch 'way of life' in an organic manner and in a context in which their refugee-being was less relevant. Regarding polarization, all the refugee students had some level of knowledge and awareness about the debates and dividedness present in the Netherlands. Within this context, through their individual narratives, they positioned themselves as agents of change, hereby challenging the dominant narratives and stereotypes present in the Dutch society.

Key words: Refugee students, education, integration, polarization, narratives, identity.

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1. Introduction

Since 2014, member states of the European Union have been confronted with a dramatically increased flow of refugees, posing significant challenges to those involved (Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken [ACVZ], 2017; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2018). In the Netherlands, as in many places, these developments have ignited political and societal debates on asylum seekers and their place in society. A growing number of people have expressed their concern about the situation (Den Ridder et al., 2016), and great differences in attitudes towards refugees have been detected (Kloosterman, 2018). Images of volunteers collecting clothing and distributing food coexist with images of (at times violent) demonstrations against new asylum seekers centers (Mensink, 2018). This illustrates well the dividedness that exists about the topic in Dutch society, which suggests the presence of polarization. The reserved attitudes and exclusionary rhetoric that predominate the debate (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018) create the challenging context in which refugees have to integrate into the Dutch society. This thesis focuses on how one such affected group, refugee students, perceives of and navigates through a society that seems to be characterized by polarization. Refugee students specifically form an interesting group to take into consideration, as they are expected to be able to provide critical reflections on their own integration trajectories in the context of this polarized society. Capturing their perceptions and experiences can lead to new and interesting insights on the migration and polarization debates in The Netherlands.

1.1 Problem description

Even though the so-called refugee 'crisis' seems to have passed its peak, the consequences of this influx are still tangible in the Dutch society. The asylum seekers that have sought refuge in The Netherlands now attempt to rebuild their lives in the midst of a society that seems deeply divided on their presence here. Many Dutch people see issues arise with regards to safety, culture and differences in norms and values, while others view refugees as an enrichment to society (Kloosterman, 2018). Even though a substantial more neutral or doubtful middle group is also present, the outlying opinions seem to be the voices most heard. This results in a society that can be described and experienced as polarized regarding asylum seekers (Mensink & Miltenburg, 2018). In the literature on this topic, the viewpoints of those whom it actually concerns are largely missing, as little is known about how refugees themselves perceive and experience polarization and integration. In general, the viewpoints of refugees and ethnic minorities largely remain underrepresented in research. There is little room for them to take part in the discussion about the meaning, purpose and necessity of terms like integration (Omlo, 2011). Several authors have called for approaches that focus on refugees' viewpoints, deeming it essential to understand social processes from the perspective of key actors (Castles et al., 2002; Korac, 2003; McPherson 2010; Strang & Ager, 2010). But even though some efforts have been made to include such voices, there is still limited insight into the perspectives of minorities (Omlo, 2011). This highlights the need for research that places minority groups front and centre, which is something that this research aims to do.

Beyond the focus on refugees, this research specifically aims to capture the views of refugees who engage in higher education in The Netherlands. Focussing on this particular group is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, there seems to be a significant lack of understanding of how refugees navigate higher education, as the majority of current research focuses solely on the compulsory schooling period (Morrice et al., 2019; R. Student et al., 2017). Young people form a relevant research group, as they find themselves in a critical life stage in which substantial transitions occur, and in which the opportunities they have and decisions they make greatly influence outcomes later in life. Following education is one of the main priorities for many in this life phase. Even though refugee youth share this with their peers, due to their refugee background they face specific and multiple challenges in their educational career (Morrice et al., 2019; SER, 2018; De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018), which emphasized the essentiality of focusing on this group specifically. Several authors have indeed pointed out the need for qualitative research on refugees' experiences in higher education, which assumably plays a big part in their integration and can tell a more complete narrative of their lived experiences (Federe, 2010; Morrice, 2013; R. Student et al., 2017). The need for such understanding is highlighted by the expectation that greater numbers of refugees are expected to enter higher education institutions in the coming years (Teunissen, 2016).

Furthermore, focussing on refugee students who follow higher education is thought to bring about interesting insights, as they study at sites that are known to greatly stimulate critical thinking. This research asks of respondents to critically reflect on the process of polarization in the Netherlands, and their own integration trajectory within it. Specifically engaging refugee students, a group that is thus expected to be familiar with and capable of critical thinking, in the polarization and integration debate is expected to bring forth insightful observations about the overall attitude of the Dutch society regarding refugees. Additionally, the environment in which this group moves around forms an interesting site when considering integration processes. Many higher educational institutions attract international students, thus creating a largely international context. As refugee students have their roots in different countries as well, the context of the university could provide them with a space in which they can blend in as international students, and in which their refugee background possibly becomes less relevant. Higher educational institutions are quite unique in providing such a setting, and studying how refugee students experience and move around in such an environment is thus of interest.

1.2 Research objective

The main goal of this research is to map refugee students' perceptions of and experiences with polarization in the Netherlands, and the ways they perceive and navigate their integration trajectories in the context of this polarization, especially concerning their education. Much has been written about refugees' integration processes, yet reflecting on these trajectories in the context of the divided and even deemed polarized Dutch society places this topic in a new light. With many opinions

about the refugee situation circulating through society, and with the forces of polarization that are currently experienced in The Netherlands (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2019), it has become increasingly important to also capture the views of refugees themselves on the topic. Thus far, little to no research exists in which refugees themselves are asked about their experiences with and opinions about the polarization in the Netherlands concerning the refugee crisis, even though they themselves are the topic of those debates. As this thesis attempts to highlight the views of refugee students, significant attention will be given to the narratives of this group. By observing their narratives, space is created for understanding how they make sense of the world and their (refugee-related) experiences, as well as how they position themselves, in this case as refugee-students, in relation to these experiences (Schuff, 2019). Refugee students are thus invited to reflect upon and narrate their integration processes in the context of polarization, which is expected to bring forth new and relevant insights, while simultaneously fulfilling the purpose of creating a space for their voices to be heard. Creating such a space can contribute to debates about refugee-related topics becoming more constructive, as well as achieving greater mutual understanding (Mensink & Miltenburg, 2018). It has also been shown that research with refugees can bring ideas, approaches and new conceptual models that challenge dominant discourse and policy (McPherson, 2010), once again emphasizing the importance of paying significant attention to the narratives of refugees. By providing a space where their voices can be heard, I contribute to closing the existing gap in the academic literature that largely excludes the viewpoints of refugees.

1.3 Research questions

The above-described problem and objective have led to the formulation of the following main research question: *'How do refugee students perceive and strategize their integration trajectories in relation to asylum and migration debates in the Netherlands?'* In order to come to an answer to this question, three sub questions have been formulated, each addressing a different aspect of the issue. First, attention will be given to the ways in which refugee students go about their integration process in the Netherlands. By adopting an actor-oriented approach, it is assumed that refugees play an active role in their adaptation to a new country. This has led to generating the first sub question as follows: *'How do refugee students navigate and strategize their integration process in the Netherlands?'* Additionally, since it is expected that education plays a specifically important part in the integration trajectories of refugee students, the following follow up question has been addressed: *'How do refugee students perceive education to play a role in their integration process?'*

Secondly, the context in which this integration takes place is central to this research. Namely, a society greatly divided, and even deemed polarized, on the topic of refugees. As mentioned, little is known on how refugees go about and experience this polarization, and to what degree these forces of polarization influence their integration efforts. The following sub question sheds light on this issue, and is

formulated as follows: *'How do refugee students experience and manoeuvre the polarization in the Dutch society regarding the asylum and migration debate?'*

The last sub question focuses on the narratives that the refugee students put forward, observing how they speak about and position themselves in the new context of the Dutch polarized society. Attention was given to how they reflect on both their refugee- and student being, also in comparison to other refugees. The following sub question was formulated concerning this issue: *'How do refugee students narrate their integration trajectories and position themselves in the Dutch society?'*

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

This theoretical framework will provide the academic background on which this thesis is based. First, the concept of integration and its ambiguity will be discussed, as well as different strategies refugees may use to go about this process. Furthermore, I will reflect on the role of social and human capital in refugees' choices for such strategies. Then, the process of identity construction and the role of education are highlighted as an important part of refugees' integration processes. The different perceptions about refugees present in the Dutch society will be discussed thereafter, as well as the extent to which the society is polarized, so providing the context in which refugee students navigate their integration trajectories. How they speak about and position themselves in the Dutch society will be observed on the basis of their narratives, a concept further unpacked in the third section of this chapter.

2.1 Integration

For many decades countries have struggled with the issue of how to best facilitate the settlement of a growing group of refugees, and how to encourage and enable their participation in society (Korac, 2003). It is widely recognized that this process is a crucial undertaking. However, the academic literature is far from reaching consensus about the understanding and even terminology of this process, which has been called e.g. assimilation, acculturation, incorporation or integration. Its broadness makes it challenging to capture in one single, agreed upon definition. Meanings change over time, differ from country to country, and are dependent upon the interests of those involved. Research on the integration of immigrants and refugees is often based upon a set of tacit assumptions and concepts, which are multi-layered, complex and at times even contradicting (Castles et al., 2002), and often focused on the practical and functional aspects of integration (Korac, 2003). This thesis aims to avoid using a preconceived, set definition of the process of settlement in a new society, from here referred to as integration, as to be sure to create space for the interpretation of the process from the viewpoint of refugee students. This will benefit the goal of including the voices of those who actually go through this process in the discussion about its meaning. This chapter will go on to further explore different facets and discussion points surrounding the term integration.

2.1.1 Defining integration

I have pointed out that integration is a complex and ambiguous, yet widely used, term. A view that is greatly supported in both society and policies is the assumption that integration is a one-way process. Refugees are hereby thought to, themselves, be fully responsible to integrate into the host society, with minimal support from the latter. In this one-way process refugees adapt in order to fit in with the dominant culture and way of life, whereby it is implied that they let go of their own culture (Castles et al., 2002). Current Dutch policies reflect this view, as integration policies have become more individualized and focused on self-reliance. Refugees are themselves increasingly responsible for their own integration process, while the

government facilitates this less (Leerkes & Scholten, 2016; ACVZ, 2017). The integration policies in the Netherlands have turned away from the previously pursued multiculturalism, towards an integration policy characterized by assimilation and polarization (Omlo, 2011). Integration can be polarizing in the sense that cultural, ethnical and religious differences are magnified and problematized. The assumption exists that migrants' culture and religion form an obstacle to integration and it is increasingly demanded that they should both socially and culturally conform to the Dutch society (Omlo, 2011). In policy climates where this conformance of 'outsiders' is seen as the path to social cohesion, migrants and refugees are represented as problematic and in need of change. Citizenship tests and language education are examples of vehicles through which the values of the host society are taught, and through which outsiders' supposedly problematic subjectivities can be corrected (McPherson, 2010). This, as McPherson (2010) calls it, twenty-first century post-multicultural integrationism, has marginalizing effects on resettled refugees. The emphasis on the unity and sameness of society, present in (policy) formulations of integration, constantly brings forward the contradictions between 'the society' and those ('the other') who still need to integrate. The articulation of how migrants differ from 'the society' makes it clear that they are not included, and actually find themselves outside of society (Schinkel & Van den Berg, 2009). The above pinpoints one of the main issues of the integration debate, as it is held in the Dutch society. Further reflections on this, and other aspects of the migration debate, will be reflected on in the next chapter.

In contrast to seeing integration as a one-way process, much of the academic literature stresses the fact that integration is actually a two-way process, requiring adaptation efforts from both the refugees and the host society, including changes in values, norms and behavior (Castles et al., 2002). Aligned to this view, integration can be described as *"a dynamic, two-way, multifaceted process, placing obligations on both the receiving community and refugees themselves"* (OECD & UNHCR, 2016: 6). Here, it is believed that integration can only be successful if the receiving country provides access to jobs and services, as well as opportunities for social interaction. Legally, the newcomers should acquire the same rights, enabling them to become equal partners (Castles et al., 2002). Refugees should be supported to fully access these rights through different interventions that help them to adapt, like language classes, skills (re)training and support in gaining social contacts (Strang & Ager, 2010). In this view it is thus believed that integration processes affect both the established community and the newcomers, requiring adjustment and participation from both (Korac, 2003). Hereby, integration is not *"... a kind of medicine that newcomers should take in order to 'fit in'"*, as in practice it seems to often be approached, but rather a process which ensures that refugees are provided with the rights and services they need (Castles et al., 2002: 124). When approached as a two-way process, it thus seems logical that refugees should be able to contribute to the definition, facilitation and assessment of integration (Korac, 2003).

Furthermore, the process of integration does not look the same for everyone. In mainstream discourse, integration is often thought to be a singular, universal

process, in which refugees pass through sequential stages at an equal pace. Consequently, refugees can be deemed less or more 'successfully' integrated, which is often measured using numerous sets of indicators (Castles et. al., 2002). For example, cultural orientation, education, labour market position, interethnic contact, identification patterns and political participation are central aspects in research by which integration is measured (Omlo, 2011). Although not unimportant issues, in mainstream studies it is the researchers who one-sidedly decide which measures and criteria are of importance in determining to what measure migrants have integrated. As mentioned, migrants themselves get little to no room to take part in the discussion about the meaning, value and necessity of the term (Omlo, 2011). Alternatively, Castles et al. (2002) proposes that integration is an umbrella term, consisting of different and overlapping processes, which translate into variable trajectories and outcomes. Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003) attest this critique, by stating that we must look beyond individual-level variables, and take into account the complexity of the integration process and the multitude of social factors that are involved. This points to the need for qualitative approaches when engaging with the topic of integration. This line of thought is also followed in this thesis, as the different migration and integration trajectories of refugee students will be explored in a qualitative manner, thus assuming a variety of trajectories.

2.1.2 Acculturation strategies

To gain insight into possible ways refugees can go about integrating into a new society, Berry (1992) has put forth a model presenting four different acculturation strategies. He hereby defines acculturation as the contact between two culturally different groups, resulting in various cultural changes in both parties (Berry, 2001). Before presenting this model, a short reflection on the notion of 'culture' is deemed necessary, as I do not wish to use the term, which is closely connected to integration, in a way that overlooks its complexity. Because, though widely used in social sciences, the meaning of 'culture' is far from clear (Hammersley, 2019). A popular idea among the general population is that culture is a set of ideas, norms and behavior belonging to a particular group or nation. For a certain time this definition was also largely used by anthropologists, who, however, in the last decades have moved away and critiqued its simplicity (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). For example, it is no longer believed that a collection of beliefs and norms corresponds one-on-one with an identifiable group of people; i.e. culture has no borders (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). A prevailing definition of culture among scientists nowadays, describes cultures as 'distinct ways of life'. This definition extends to all aspects of life, resulting in diverse cultures with each an internal coherence (Hammersley, 2019). Though much remains to be said about the notion of culture, the main point I intend to make here, in line with Anderson-Levitt (2012), is that we should avoid a simple concept of culture as beliefs and patterns of behavior typical for a particular group, and embrace a more complicated notion of culture.

After this brief reflection on the concept of culture, I will now go on to outline Berry's (1992) four different strategies that refugees can use to cope with a new and largely unfamiliar culture: *integration*, *marginalization*, *assimilation* and *separation*.

Which acculturation strategy is chosen depends mainly on two important issues. The first issue, 'cultural maintenance', deals with the question whether one's own cultural identity and customs are of value and should be maintained. The second, 'contact and participation', has to do with the desirability to have contact with the mainstream society and how much this is valued (Berry, 1992; Dow, 2011). These issues may be responded to on a continuous scale, but for conceptual purposes are laid out in a fourfold model (see figure 1). First, when individuals are concerned with both preserving their original culture and investing into becoming part of their host society, this is described as *integration*. The opposite is the strategy of *marginalization*, in which migrants show little concern with maintaining their original culture, while also not adopting the culture of the new country. It is characterized by feelings of alienation, loss of identity and an overall resistance to the receiving society. Thirdly, *separation* describes the situation in which no substantial relations with the host society exist, while original ethnic identity and customs are maintained. And lastly, *assimilation* is the situation in which one's own cultural identity is relinquished, while the new culture is adopted and much interaction with the host society is sought (Berry, 1992; Berry, 2001; Dow, 2011; Van de Vijver, 2009). Integration and assimilation are often used interchangeably, as both lead to a certain embrace of the new society. However, in the integration process, instead of renouncing one's cultural identity, people gradually develop additional facets of identity, skills, networks, and so forth, which are fitting with the host society, all the while preserving their cultural core (Remennick, 2003).

FOUR ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES AS A FUNCTION OF TWO ISSUES

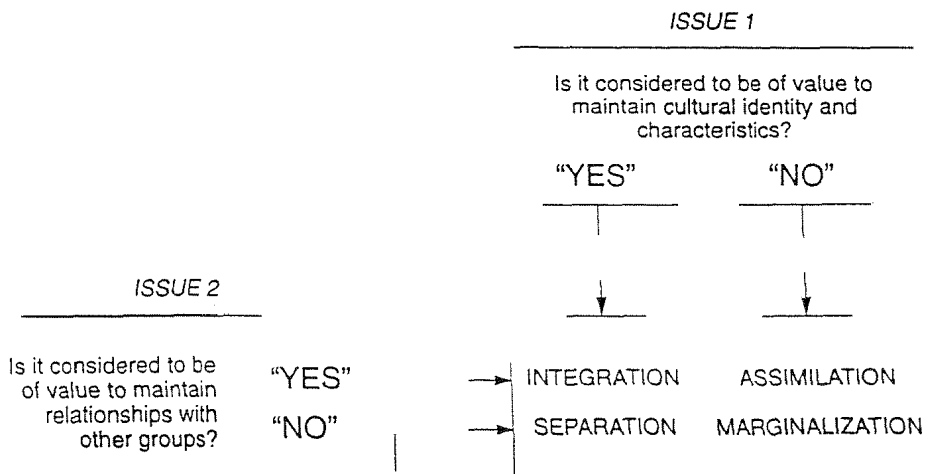


Figure 1

Source: Berry, J. W. (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International Migration*, 3, 1-16.

2.1.3 Social and human capital

Berry (1992) additionally observed that some individuals seem to adapt very well to a new context, while others experience much difficulty. He ascribes these differences mostly to a variety of psychological, social and cultural factors. Colic-Peisker & Walker (2003) argue that the kind of acculturation strategy 'chosen' depends largely on refugees' human and social capital. Human capital entails their education, skills, language and cultural know-how, and social capital is represented in their set of relationships with others and networks of social support, both of which can be lost or devalued upon arrival in a new cultural and social context (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Skills, language and rural-urban background are highlighted as elements of human capital that determine the type and intensity of interaction with the host society, and which are thus critical in shaping refugees' acculturation strategies. Refugees' human capital also determines their ability for language and culture learning. For example, refugees coming from urban places are more likely to have completed a considerable amount of schooling and speak some English upon arrival, while for those from rural places, language often remains a huge barrier, consequently leading this group to stick to their own ethnic communities, while having little contact with the host society. In turn, these factors thus give shape to certain acculturation strategies; the former is more likely to adopt *integration* as a strategy, while the latter tends to gravitate towards *separation* (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003).

Nee and Sanders (2001) similarly argue that the manner in which the integration process takes place largely rests upon the social, financial and human-cultural capital of immigrant families. Their research points to the conclusion that "... *the mix of capital immigrants arrive with, and subsequently accumulate, shapes the trajectory of their incorporation into the host society*" (p. 386), and additionally depends on "... *how these resources are used by individuals within and apart from the existing structure of ethnic networks and institutions*" (p. 388). These forms of capital reflect the pre-migration backgrounds of immigrants and refugees (Castles et al., 2002). Especially their financial and human-cultural capital, which are indicators of the class advantage these families enjoyed in their home country (Nee & Sanders, 2001). An approach as the above shifts the focus from solely factors that constrain refugees, portraying them as "... *mere pawns of wider systems and structures*" (Castles et al., 2002: 129). Instead, emphasis is put on their own motivations, strategies and networks. In this thesis, the acculturation strategies of refugee students will be observed, as well as the possible role of the different kinds of capital they arrive with.

2.1.4 Identity construction

Furthermore, identity construction is an inherent part of the integration and thus important to consider when researching refugee students' integration trajectories. Through the process of forced migration, refugees lose elements of their identity that were tied to their former jobs, skills, communities, culture and language. When fleeing, these ties are suddenly severed, often resulting in the experience of a loss of (parts of) their identity, and subsequently loss of control over their lives. They lose

much of what represented their social identity and are temporarily reduced to their physical selves. As host countries 'process' asylum claims, certain aspects of refugees' social identities are being re-attached, such as nationality, age, occupation and place of origin. Through this process they regain their basic 'legal identity'. Furthermore, the label of 'refugee' is thrust upon them, which comes with certain benefits, but its purely administrative nature cannot replace the aspects of refugees' social identities that were lost in flight. The label of 'refugee' is almost always experienced to be an undesirable one, especially among people with high human capital, who are aware of the low status of the label. The mainstream image of 'refugees' as traumatized and welfare-dependent people, who form a burden to the host society's welfare, makes many refugees reluctant to admit their status. Refugee status has even been listed as a major psychosocial stressor, partly because it can destroy people's sense of being part of the larger community (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Also in the context of education it seems to be an undesired label, as many students have reported being seen as different, and have felt teachers' unease towards them during their transition phase (Mosselson, 2006b).

Upon arrival in a host society, refugees face the task of reconstructing and rebuilding their shattered identities, which is often a time-consuming process. They need to find ways to rebuilt and reshape aspects of their social identity and previous statuses and roles in the context of a new society (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). This identity reconstruction finds place in the context of integration, since, through the process of integration, "*... refugees ideally re-acquire the social roles lost in forced migration, which are the 'building blocks' of identity*" (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003: 355). This process includes, for example, acquiring citizenship, finding a job, (re)enrolling in education, building social networks and developing a feeling of belonging (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Their identities are not formed in a vacuum, but are co-constructed through dialogues with members of the receiving society, deeming identity construction to be an interactional process (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Hatoss, 2012; Valenta, 2010). Several paradigms describe identity development as a linear sequence of stages one passes through to get to the goal of successful integration, leaving little room for the individual and actual experiences of refugees (Mosselson, 2006b). However, as identities change over space and time in response to past and current events, future aspirations and interactions with society, identities can preferably be described as "*fluid*" (Mosselson, 2006b: 22; Hatoss, 2012: 49), or as "*an ongoing conversation*" (Schuff, 2019: 277). Identities are more than a collection of traits, but are constantly worked, examined and refashioned in everyday life, resulting in a "*trajectory of the self*" (Valenta, 2010: 6). It is against the backdrop of these shifting everyday experiences that refugees constantly shape and re-shape their identities. What this process looks like for refugee students specifically, who face the process of identity construction in the context of a divided society, will be further explored in this thesis.

2.1.5 The role of education

Since refugee students are at the center of this research, it is relevant to consider education as part of their integration trajectories. Following higher education is one

of the main ways through which refugees can re-establish their lives and their (professional) identities (Morrice, 2009; Mosselson, 2006a). For the receiving country, it is of great importance that refugees quickly become acquainted with the education system and labor market, as involvement in these areas has shown to greatly contribute to their integration and economic independence (De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018). Especially having attained a Dutch diploma seems an important determining factor in labor market participation (Maliepaard et al., 2017). Refugees themselves also seem to highly value education, as in a meta-study concerning refugee resilience, young adults time and again voiced education to be the primary way of gaining control over their lives, as the key to higher status, and as a way out of their current disempowered positions (Sleijpen, et al., 2016). Likewise, Mosselson (2006a) shows that, concerning refugee youths, schooling can provide opportunities for healing in three ways. First, education can provide a sense of normalcy and constancy after a season of instability. Second, recognizing oneself as a “student” gives room to step away from the stigmatized identity of “refugee”, and may provide the environment in which they can make connections with people in their new society. Third, education may restore a sense of hope for the future, which may have been lost during the disruptive experiences they have faced.

Since 2017, the amount of refugees entering higher education institutions in the Netherlands has grown significantly. This increase can be explained by the influx of refugees entering the Netherlands, especially in 2015 and 2016. Overall, it often takes refugees two and a half years before starting up their professional development again (De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018). On paper, the prospects of successfully integrating this group look promising: they are young, educated and have often picked up on the Dutch language (Al Abdallah, 2018). For many of them, pursuing education seems to be the next logical step after having completed the asylum procedure and the obligatory integration course, especially for the purpose of broadening ones chances on the labor market. However, due to significant hurdles in the access to higher education, many (aspiring) refugee students end up dropping out of their studies, or not even starting at all (SER, 2018). Even though, after receiving their residence permit, refugees have the same educational rights as Dutch students, their unique position poses significant challenges and obstacles to being able to study (De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018). These include an insufficient preparation before entering the Dutch education system (including an insufficient level of the Dutch language), issues around funding, faulty transitions from previous education (including unrecognized previous diploma’s), social challenges and psychological problems stemming from their flight (De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018; SER, 2016; SER, 2018; Teunissen, 2016). Even though the respondents in this study did not remain untouched by these challenges, they still chose to follow education nonetheless. This thesis will further explore their reasoning for doing so, as well as ways in which they dealt with the challenges.

Furthermore, since this research seeks to shed light on how refugee students navigate and strategize their integration, of which education is believed to be a big part, it is of importance to look at the different strategies that can be deployed

regarding education. Glastra and Vedder (2009) have specifically researched the learning strategies of highly educated asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands. These learning strategies are mainly geared towards getting to know the (e.g. language and institutions of the) host country, (re)building of professional skills in order to build a life here, and re-assessing one's identity in light of transition. They found that all respondents were to some degree engaged in all these activities. The expectation is that this research will show similar results.

Glastra and Vedder (2009) set out five different patterns regarding the continuity and discontinuity in the educational careers of refugee students. Firstly, the *continuity pattern* shows respondents choosing the same academic subjects as they did in their countries of origin. The large majority of their research sample adhered to this pattern, as they showed great stability regarding their choice of academic subjects and goal formulations. Additionally, they found that refugees' stance towards the importance of higher education remained stable through their transition to a new country. Secondly, a *transformation pattern* was distinguished, where refugee students choose to pursue informal and often repressed intellectual interests and activities. Furthermore, in the *discontinuity pattern*, students choose to change the subject of their study. This change possibly stems from the wider range of possible study subjects in the Netherlands, which either was not available to them or could not be freely chosen in their countries of origin. Next, the *crystallization pattern* applies to young students who had not made choices in higher education before arriving in the host country. Lastly, a dominant *breakdown pattern* is described. Since the majority of asylum seekers in the Netherlands face strict rules and regulations regarding work and education, unemployment and unschooled work are more likely outcomes than furthering one's education. This is why many highly educated refugees are not able to access relevant fields (Glastra & Vedder, 2009; SER, 2018). Based on the above, it is expected that the refugee students in this research will also typically follow the continuity pattern regarding their educational choices.

2.2 Polarization

In considering how refugee students actually experience and navigate a society largely divided on their presence, and even deemed polarized, it is first and foremost important to gain insight into how this concept of polarization has been approached in the scientific literature. The word polarization stems from the natural sciences, in which it is used to refer to a movement towards the poles, the extremes, the opposites. The concept as used in the socio-political sciences is derived from this concept, and has been described as the enlargement and intensification of contradictions, whereby different groups in society alienate from and become pitted against one another (Kinneging, 2009). As a clarifying note; this does not mean that wherever diversity of opinions exist, contradictions and polarization are present. Diversity in and of itself does not have to be a threat to the peace and harmony of a society, and can even be an enrichment to society (Ghorashi, 2009). It is not until these differences create a conflict of interests, or contradict ideological ideas about what is true, holy and moral, that they evoke actual social contradictions and

possibly lead to polarization (Kinneking, 2009). The contradictions mentioned can, for example, be social, political or ideological in nature. When these enlarge and intensify, they have shown to be able to disrupt societies, which is a highly unwanted scenario (Kinneking, 2009). Shedding light on the contradictions that exist in a society thus remains an important focus of study. To what extent these divisions are present and experienced in the Dutch society regarding the current refugee situation, and what the debates surrounding this topic look like, will be discussed in the following.

2.2.1 Perceptions of and debates about refugees

From the images and stories portrayed by the media, it indeed seems like the Dutch society has become polarized with regards to the presence of refugees. On the one hand, a growing number of people have become more negative towards asylum seekers, while, on the other hand, a larger group has taken an increasingly positive stance (Leerkes & Scholten, 2016). During the last years various demonstrations have taken place opposing the reception of refugees and aiming to prevent the emergence of asylum seeker centers. At the same time, many Dutch citizens have taken action to help the newcomers, which is illustrated by the many initiatives for refugees that have been created (Kloosterman, 2018; Mensink, 2018; Den Ridder et al., 2016). This puts forward the image that people are either in favor or opposed to refugees entering the country. However, as will be unpacked here, this dichotomy is too simplistic.

In the Netherlands, great differences in attitudes towards asylum seekers can be observed. Many people are worried, and in recent years the arrival and retention of refugees has been the number one societal issue the Dutch express concern about (Den Ridder et al., 2016). A study identifying the perceptions of the Dutch population regarding refugees shows that over three-quarters of the Dutch believe that The Netherlands should receive refugees who have fled for war or persecution purposes (Kloosterman, 2018). However, the majority is also in favor of restrictive immigration policies, especially concerning economic migrants. Most people have difficulties with the large number of refugees coming in. Overall, a reserved attitude can be detected towards the incoming asylum seekers, which is also reflected in the rising popularity of populist parties since the summer of 2015 (Leerkes & Scholten, 2016). Reason of flight is a big factor influencing the willingness to welcome refugees. Those fleeing war, often labeled as 'real refugees', can count on compassion. This is in contrast to those fleeing poverty, towards whom few show understanding. Many negative associations accompany the term economic refugees, who are also often called 'fortune seekers' (*gelukszoekers*) or 'free riders'. A common idea in the Dutch society is that these people come to profit from social security benefits and housing (Den Ridder et al., 2016; Ipsos, 2018). Though the distinction between 'real' and 'fake' refugees is persistent in the debates about refugees, in reality this distinction rarely holds up, as reasons for flight are often more complex and numerous.

Besides worries and differences of opinion about the arrival and reception of refugees, another matter of debate is about the consequences of refugees' arrival. A significant portion of the Dutch population sees issues arise with regards to safety, culture and differences in norms and values. For example, one in five believes refugees form a threat to the national safety, which mostly stems from worries about increased criminality due to cultural differences. At the same time, fifty percent does not believe they form a threat. Similarly, over a quarter of the population thinks refugees form a threat to Dutch norms and values, versus almost half who disagrees. The group that is of the opinion that refugees form an enrichment to the Dutch culture is almost as big as the group that holds the opposite view (Kloosterman, 2018), pointing towards divided opinions about the consequences of refugees' arrivals among the Dutch population. This, as mentioned before, also links to the way in which debates on integration form grounds for polarization. Mainstream integration discourses tend to have an assimilating and polarizing character, in the sense that they have a strong tendency to enlarge and problematize cultural, ethnic and religious differences, which supposedly form an obstacle to integration (Omlo, 2011). There is great focus on differences in the mainstream integration discourse. Consequently, people tend to lose sight of the common ground, something that is crucial for constructive debate. The thinking in differences stems from a strong tendency of categorical thinking that dominates the Dutch discourse on migrants; meaning the thinking in absolute contrasts that excludes others from the outset. Migrants are thus viewed as inherently different, and sometimes even as a threat, which leaves little room for a sense of connection between and the coming together of people with different backgrounds (Ghorashi, 2009).

The above shows what, in this thesis, is understood with the asylum and migration debates present in the Dutch society. As can be observed, these debates go well beyond solely the granting asylum and reception of refugees in the Netherlands, and also entail issues related to their integration thereafter. Together forming a basis for division in the Dutch society.

2.2.2 A polarized society?

The above described perceptions and opinions in the Netherlands concerning refugees vary across a broad spectrum, so painting a more complex picture than solely those 'against' or 'for' refugees. Here, I come back to the question to what extent Dutch society can indeed be described as polarized when regarding the presence and integration of refugees. Kinneging (2009) has pointed out that a diversity of opinions does not necessarily mean that polarization is present. When polarization is strictly seen as a situation in which two extremes oppose each other, without there being a significant middle group, then it does not seem a suitable concept to describe the situation in The Netherlands (Den Ridder et al., 2016). Here, there is also a large group situated in the middle that takes a more neutral stance, and is doubtful and/or isn't too sure about the matter. Across the spectrum, people struggle with the matter. Being familiar with both sides, they struggle with finding their position (Den Ridder et al., 2016). For example, on the one hand people may

struggle with the amount of refugees coming in and can feel uneasy and threatened by it, while also being of the opinion that it is the moral duty of countries like the Netherlands to receive refugees. Overall, people are not solely for or against refugees, but are constantly nuancing their answers, going back and forth in what they believe. According to Mensink and Miltenburg (2018), this struggle with the different aspects of the subject is what primarily characterizes the refugee debate in the Netherlands. Furthermore, instead of describing the debate as polarized, they argue that it can most adequately be characterized as ambivalent. This describes a situation where there are supporters, opponents and a middle group expressing a range of opinions varying across the spectrum.

However, the term polarization should not be completely written down. In common parlance, polarization is thought to have an element of intensity, and also Kinneging (2009) describes it as the enlarging and intensifying of existing contradictions. Here, the differences of opinion do not increase, but they do seem to become more evident. A middle group can be present, but the outer extremes are the voices most heard, resulting in a debate that can indeed be described and experienced as polarized (Mensink & Miltenburg, 2018). In other research, polarization is, in fact, a term that is frequently used to currently describe the attitude of the Dutch society regarding refugees (e.g. ACVZ, 2017; Leerkes & Scholten, 2016; Ipsos, 2018). These more extreme voices are amplified in politics and the media, which contributes to the likeliness that, in some way or another, refugees will also be exposed to them.

2.3 Narratives

One of the main goals of this thesis is to capture how refugee students position and talk about themselves in relation to the asylum and migration debates described above. This will be done by capturing and analyzing the narratives of this target group. In this section, the concept of narratives will be further introduced.

Because this research largely revolves around the experiences and viewpoints as articulated by refugee students, it is of significance to reflect upon how these stories or narratives are given shape. Narratives form a means for people, as ‘experiencing subjects’, to express and negotiate their experiences. These narratives have raised the interest of researchers, as they provide a setting in which the meaning people ascribe to their experiences can be examined (Eastmond, 2007). Creating and exchanging narratives is one of the central ways through which meaning is constructed. Narratives not only display people’s interpretations of certain events, but also show how they position themselves in relation to their experiences (Schuff, 2019). Rather than a documentation of reality, narratives should be seen as creative constructions of past events, which are generated in specific contexts of the present. As Eastmond (2007) puts it: *“They can tell us something about how social actors, from a particular social position and cultural vantage point, make sense of the world”* (p. 250). Narration is a way through which people can cope and make sense of this world, which otherwise is filled with chaotic and ambiguous events. Because fleeing one’s home is an experience often characterized by such chaos, capturing refugee narratives is of central importance (Schuff, 2019).

In the field of forced migration, many have indeed deemed a focus on narratives important. Not only can they give insight into a world to which researchers' access is limited, they also create space for understanding how people themselves make sense of things like violence and disruptive change. Additionally, paying attention to refugees' individual narratives can bring to light the diversity of experiences involved in refugeehood, while dispelling stereotypical and universalized descriptions of 'the refugee experience' (Eastmond, 2007). Critiques have been raised concerning the tendency to label this 'refugee experience' as a uniform condition, irrespective of individual differences between refugees and the diverse contexts in which they have become displaced (Eastmond, 2007). In dominant narratives, refugees are often portrayed as helpless victims, potential criminals and burdens to the host society. Similarly, in educational environments both teachers and researchers tend to focus on what refugee students lack (e.g. limited English proficiency and interrupted education experiences), resulting in a deficit-oriented and disempowering narrative (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Conceptualizations of refugeehood tend to concentrate on notions of victimhood, and are linked to experiences of *"terminal loss, bereavement, and disempowerment"* (Korac, 2009: 7). In this victimhood perspective, refugees are very often represented and approached as *"... victims, traumatized, passive and helpless, rather than as people who actively struggle to overcome their victimization"* (Korac, 2009: 6). This ties into the debate around the issue of 'fake' versus 'real' refugees, in which the real, genuine refugees are described as 'ultimate victims', who thus are deserving of protection. The focus lies on those fleeing for their lives, solely acting upon instincts, whereby other human, moral, social or political needs are overlooked. Hence, refugeehood and victimhood are often viewed as being closely tied together (Korac, 2009).

However, Korac (2009) argues that becoming and being a refugee is not just the result of a set of static disempowering structures, but rather is a process that also entails empowering experiences, like adapting to new life circumstances and regaining control. Displacement can be experienced as breaking free from pre-established sociocultural norms of the home country, and can give access to new social spaces and opportunities for refugees. When also considering these empowering processes, a step away from the prevailing victimhood discourse is taken. Experiences of victimhood should not be denied, as loss and disempowerment are still characteristic to many refugee journeys, but it should be acknowledged that victimization and practices of overcoming it are simultaneously occurring processes (Korac, 2009).

Although the victimization of refugees is still common practice, researchers are increasingly emphasizing the importance of focusing on agency when studying the experiences of these people (e.g. Korac, 2009; Sleijpen et al., 2013). This thesis stands in line with this call by choosing to view refugees as people with agency, and recognizing the capacities these people have to make decisions in specific situations, locations, and points in time. This emphasis on agency encourages viewing refugees as "people like us", who have agency, the ability to make good judgments and act in

sensible ways. Contrary, denying refugees a degree of agency leads to their dehumanization (Korac, 2009); in which they are defined as the ‘other’ that is considerably different from ‘us’, and are therefore located as a ‘problem’ (Strang & Ager, 2010). By focusing on refugee’s agency, the existing construction of them being powerless and incapable of making life decisions is being opposed. During their migration and integration trajectories they constantly have to make decisions, and are able to create opportunities within the limitations of their challenging situations (Korac, 2009). Despite significant hurdles, refugees show great resilience to bounce back from adversity, and adjust to new circumstances. It is thus of importance to view refugees not as “... *passive victims without capacities but as survivors with social potential ...*” (Sleijpen et al., 2013: 6).

2.3.1 Re-establishing identity through narratives

Refugee narratives also give insight into how they re-establish identity in the face of their ruptured life courses (Eastmond, 2007). Displacement requires the “*re-negotiation of self in relation to new contexts*” (Eastmond 2007: 254). A new way has to be found to create a sense of continuity in who they are as a person. This often proves to be a challenge in the face of a future that seems to be characterized by ongoing uncertainty (Eastmond, 2007). It can be argued that the process of re-establishing an identity is especially interesting in the case of younger refugee groups, like refugee students, who find themselves in highly formative developmental stages of their lives (Mosselson, 2006a). Their re-negotiating of the self happens in the context of fleeing and resettling in new countries, where they often face skepticism and potential marginalization, while also dealing with multiple cultural norms and expectations. (Schuff, 2019). In the challenging post-migration context, refugees have the task of (re)creating a coherent narrative of their lives. According to Selimos (2018), it is a key task of any migrant to negotiate experiences of continuity and change. In doing so, they engage in biographical agency, which is the narrative decision-making that becomes necessary in the face of transitions, to make sense of who they are in the world (Schuff, 2019). Agency, that is, a person’s ability and opportunity to act, is indeed a significant component in the process of authoring identities and stories (Schuff, 2019; Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). While telling such narratives, the narrators position themselves vis-à-vis the stories told in the moment, the interactional situation, and the dominant narratives present in society. In this way, they implicitly and explicitly construct their identity, which can differ depending on interactional contexts and moments. And the stories they produce can thus at some times align with the dominant narratives, and at other times challenge them (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Observing refugee students’ narratives can thus shed light on how this group specifically positions itself in relation to the dominant narratives in society.

Dominant narratives, for example, can characterize refugees as “*exotic*” or “*foreign*” (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018: 543). Mosselson (2006a) describes how refugee youth experienced being seen as different, and felt unease from their classmates and teachers towards them. Likewise, Uptin et al. (2013, in Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018) collected stories of former refugee youths, which showed how they experience

being marginalized and 'othered' in schools because of their racial backgrounds and linguistic proficiencies. Some students in this research spoke up about this inequality, and shared openly about their past experiences. In doing so, they refused to be positioned in a way that would negatively impact their education. The research of Ryu and Tuvilla (2018), which focuses on the stories of former Burmese refugee adolescents, also exemplifies how dominant narratives can be challenged. While being aware of their marginalized position in the United States, the former refugees produced narratives of themselves that opposed such marginalized narratives. They provided a broad range of stories of refugee experiences that challenged the dominant ones, and positioned themselves as valuable members of society and agents of change (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). In contrast, and as mentioned, sometimes refugees also align themselves with the dominant narrative. In some cases, the categorizations of cultural "*others*" or "*multicultural*" are internalized, thus forming cross-cultural identities (Schuff, 2019: 264). The re-establishing of the self is thus a complex and fluid process. This thesis aims to shed light on what this process looks like for refugee students specifically.

3. Methodology

Much research on refugee related themes tends to focus on notions of victimhood, hereby largely overlooking refugee's agency (Korac, 2009: 9). In an attempt to step away from the prevailing victimhood discourse, this thesis strives to create a space in which the voices, experiences and actions of refugees can take the foreground. This chapter describes how the research has been given shape in order to accomplish such an actor-oriented approach. First, I discuss the chosen research strategies, followed by the research design and methods. Then, I will describe the sampling strategy and research population, describe the process of data analysis, and end with a reflection on ethical issues.

3.1 Research strategies

This research adopted a qualitative research strategy, in which the focus lies on meaning rather than on quantification (Bryman, 2012). A qualitative strategy creates room for respondents to voice their opinions, which is essential in conducting actor-oriented research. In this case, it created the opportunity to shed light on the experiences, strategies and viewpoints of refugee students regarding their integration in a polarized society. To be able to get a more comprehensive understanding of these perceptions, a qualitative strategy was thus the best fitting research strategy. Approaching this theme in a qualitative manner also helped to avoid treating refugees as mere *"data-gathering objects"*, as qualitative methods better address the unequal power relations embedded in refugee-related research. It secures the *"active involvement of refugees in the construction of data and knowledge about their lives"* (Korac, 2009: 18).

Furthermore, the research was conducted using the epistemological position of interpretivism, which is an approach often applied when seeking to understand human behaviour (Bryman, 2012). In order to dive into the social world of refugee students, and seek to interpret this world from their point of view, an interpretative stance was required. The aim was not to explain their behaviour, but, as the main research question states, to gain a deeper understanding about their perceptions and strategies regarding their integration trajectories in a polarized society.

Ontologically, this research adopted a constructivist position. In this view, social phenomena and their meanings are not believed to be pre-given, as is the case in an objectivist position. Instead, it is believed that these are constantly constructed and reconstructed by the actors involved (Bryman, 2012). Likewise, in this research the concepts of integration and polarization are not put forward as pre-conceived notions, but as social phenomena that gain meaning through the interpretation of, in this case, refugee students. Applying the above research strategies contributed to revealing the subjective world of refugee students' experiences.

3.2 Research design

This research adopted a case study design, which entails *"... the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case"* (Bryman, 2012: 66). An advantage of applying

such a design is that it allows for an in-depth analysis to take place, which is necessary for elucidating the unique viewpoints of a target group. Generally, the results of a case study are not generalizable, because they are based on one specific case (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless, because this research aimed to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of one specific target group, namely refugee students, a case study was still the best fitting research design. Additionally, rather than aiming to produce ambitious generalizations, this research strived to bring insight into the complexity of navigating integration in a polarized society, and so offer “... *in depth knowledge of a small ‘slice’ of reality*” (Korac, 2009: 18).

3.3 Research methods

To conduct this research, I made use of two different research methods; semi-structures interviews and focus groups. Below, I will explore both methods and their suitability to this research in more detail.

3.3.1 Semi-structures interviews

In order to come to an answer of the research questions, semi-structured interviews were employed. This research method allowed rich and detailed answers to come about, and so insight into the perceptions and experiences of refugee students could be gained. In these in-depth interviews, the interviewee’s point of view is central (Bryman, 2012). It is an important way to gain insight into the realities of refugees, because “... *it permits fuller expression of their experiences in their own terms*” (Korac, 2003: 53). Since their voices and perceptions are central to this research, semi-structures interviews were thus a good fit. The emphasis was consistently put on how refugee students themselves frame and understand issues related to (their experiences with) polarization and integration. Additionally, employing qualitative, semi-structured interviews so also provided room for the respondents to create and express their own narratives about their integration trajectories. Analyzing these narratives was an important research aim, for which this research method proved useful.

An advantage of using a semi-structured interviewing technique is that the interview tends to be flexible. This thus allows room for the respondents to interpret questions in ways that are relevant to them, and even to possibly bring up unforeseen but significant issues (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, it allows the interviewer to draw up topics and open questions in advance, while keeping the flexibility of diverting from the order and formulation of questions, depending on the input of the interviewee. In this research, I indeed drew up an interview guide (Appendix A) with leading topics and questions ahead of time, allowing for specific topics to be covered. The interview guide was used in a flexible manner. Although the main topics were addressed in all interviews, some topics were more or less elaborately discussed, depending on the response of the respondent. Throughout the course of the interviews, adjustments to the interview guide were made, as some questions were found less relevant and dropped completely, and others were re-formulated or added as the (focus of the) research progressed.

I conducted eleven face-to-face semi-structured interviews between November 2019 and January 2020. Among these eleven respondents were two couples that chose to be interviewed at the same time as their partner. The setting for the individual interviews was largely left up to the respondents. I offered to meet them at a place and time that was convenient for them, so to make it as easy as possible for them to participate. In the end, four interviews took place in café's, three at different universities, and both couples were interviewed in their home setting, of which one was at an asylum seekers' center. On average, the interviews lasted 1 hour and 25 minutes. At the start of each interview, as well as during the focus groups, the respondents were informed about the goal of the research. The confidentiality and anonymity with which the data would be handled was emphasized, as well as their freedom to skip certain topics or questions.

3.3.2 Focus groups

In addition to the individual interviews, several focus groups were organized, which provide the setting for a specific theme to be explored in depth by a number of people. This method is a suitable way to interview people who have had a specific experience (here: the experience of integration into a polarized society). It also adds an interesting dimension to data collection, as it can be observed “... *how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group*” (Bryman, 2012: 501). In focus groups people tend to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view, through which a deeper understanding of interviewee's perceptions can be obtained. Additionally, when being confronted with different views, interviewee's might want to modify or qualify their opinions, which in the end leads to a more realistic account of what people think (Bryman, 2012). Conducting a number of focus groups was thus expected to bring a valuable layer of depth to the perceptions of refugee students. Organizing focus groups did prove to be challenging; due to busy schedules, travel, and/or personal circumstances the groups never contained more than two respondents. Despite the limited size, different advantages of focus groups were still benefitted from, such as the possibility to compare experiences and discuss differences of opinion, while still allowing considerable time for refugee students' individual narratives to be expressed. Furthermore, many focus group participants expressed that they found it a valuable experience to connect with and hear from others in similar situations during the focus group.

In the months December 2019 and January 2020 I conducted three focus groups, each with two respondents. The focus groups took place at the University of Wageningen, where I was able to reserve a study room. This proved useful for practical reasons, as the focus groups could be planned before or after classes. Additionally, the university provided a setting with which the respondents were familiar, which may have contributed to them openly speaking their minds. On average, the focus groups took 1 hour and 16 minutes.

3.4 Sampling strategy and research population

The respondents for this research were selected by way of purposive sampling, so that the people participating would be relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The population that is of interest for this research is students with a refugee background who are currently studying at a higher educational institution (HBO or university) in The Netherlands. Also those who, due to their pending refugee status, had not yet been able to officially enroll, but who were following one or several courses at a higher educational institution, were included. Thus, when in the proceeding the term 'refugee students' is used, this is not a term indicative of the legal status of the respondents, as in this research asylum seekers also fall under this term. Getting in touch refugee students proved to be a challenge. Unfortunately, some of the organizations working with refugee students specifically that I had identified as potential central gatekeepers to my target group were unresponsive and/or unable to help.

Reaching out to my own network proved more helpful. Through church I already knew one possible respondent, who agreed to do the first interview with me. Moreover, a church youth-leader was able to connect me to another respondent. I also reached out to a previous classmate who I knew had done refugee-focused research herself, who was able to introduce me to a refugee student as well. Simultaneously, I contacted several universities about the possibility of getting in contact with refugee students. The focus was on higher educational institutions that had programs set up to help asylum seekers access education. InClUUsion, from Utrecht University, and WURth-while, from Wageningen University, were very helpful; InClUUsion by enabling me to post a message on their Facebook account, as well as inviting me to a social gathering with refugee students and their Dutch student buddies. Here, I was able to connect with multiple refugee students, of which I ended up interviewing four. Furthermore, the contact person of WURth-while provided me with a list of e-mail addresses of refugee students willing to partake in my research. From this group, three focus groups were formed and one individual interview was conducted. The fact that these organizations ended up being central in providing access to my target group, explains the high number of respondents still in the process of obtaining their refugee status in my research (twelve of the total of seventeen).

Following establishing these first contacts, the method of snowball sampling was applied, where participants are asked to propose other participants who also fit into the target group of this research (Bryman, 2012). This method was less fruitful; it just led to the recruitment of one more participant. Though the respondents knew other refugees in the Netherlands, few to not any of these contacts also studied at higher educational institutions.

In total, seventeen respondents were interviewed for this research. This sample size was guided by the concept of saturation; once I realized that no new information was obtained from the interviews, the data gathering process was stopped. Of the

respondent group, nine were female and eight were male. Age wise, they ranged between 22 and 36, with an average age of 28. This relatively high age was expected, as refugee students generally (re-)start studying at a later age than Dutch students (Teunissen, 2016). Regarding countries of origin, it was noticeable that all but one respondent came from Middle-Eastern countries, like Iran, Iraq or Syria. The only exception was Samira, who came from Cameroon. The research was not limited to one specific city or area, but aimed to include refugee students who are following education at different places, so to get a better idea of the experiences of this group in the Netherlands as a whole. Furthermore, this research included people that fled their home countries at different points in time; some had lived here for thirteen years, others had arrived seven months ago. The length of time already spend in the Netherlands proved to influence respondents' experiences with both integration and polarization, as will be reflected on in the results chapters. An overview of these and other personal details about the respondents can be found in Appendix B.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

In order to accurately process the collected data, the (group) interviews were recorded with a voice-recorder and were thereafter transcribed manually as soon as possible. The method used for the collection and analysis of the data is *grounded theory*, in which coding is a key process. Coding entails the reviewing of, in this case, transcripts, and labeling component parts that seem significant. Instead of working with preconceived codes, the codes are shaped by the researcher's interpretation of the data (Bryman, 2012). The coding process was done in two steps. First, through *initial coding*, detailed labels were ascribed to almost all sections or lines of the text of the first four interviews. In this way, a first impression of the data could be obtained. During this step, I tried to keep an open mind, so that new ideas arising from the data could be captured. The second step was *focused coding*, through which the most important and common codes were chosen and grouped together. So, the most important and recurring themes could be pinpointed. The focused codes were thereafter categorized into five main themes; integration, education, polarization, identity and narratives, based on which the results chapters were written. Appendix C gives an overview of the coding process.

3.6 Ethical consideration

In this research a number of ethical considerations was taken into account. This is particularly important in research involving refugees, as this kind of research is often undertaken in politically complex and difficult situations, with participants who may be traumatized and/or vulnerable (MacKenzie et al., 2007). It is therefore important to critically assess and reflect on the possible (negative) effects of the research on the respondents, while aiming to minimize the harm caused.

A first way in which this was established, was by ensuring meaningful, verbal consent from the participants. While reaching out to possible respondents, I was open about the goal and purpose of the research up front, hereby making sure they were well informed before making the decision to (not) partake in the research. Then, before the start of the actual interview, I would once again explain the

research purposes. Their permission was always asked about voice recording the interviews, to which all agreed. I made sure they knew the data would be handled confidentially and their anonymity would be ensured. Already during the transcript phase I worked with pseudonyms, so the names of the respondents would appear nowhere in my data. Additionally, at the beginning of the interviews I emphasized the respondents' freedom to skip any questions or themes they were uncomfortable with, so to not cause them potential distress.

Ethics were a reflexive and on-going part of my research; as (new) issues arose, I at times felt the need to make adjustments to my research. For example, during the second interview I was confronted with the sensitivity of the themes we discussed, as this respondent got quite emotional. This event made me reconsider the need to ask about the respondents' flight stories, as this might cause harm and this part of their story was not necessary for gaining understanding about their integration process in and relation to the Dutch society. Instead, from then on, I chose to focus on their trajectories from the time they arrived in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I made the decision not to ask about the reasons for their flight specifically, as to avoid making them feel uncomfortable. When respondents would bring this up, it was their own decision. In this thesis, I at times mention a reason for flight when deemed relevant, but always in a brief manner.

Furthermore, I was made aware by one of my respondents that by doing refugee-focused research, and thus so positioning them as 'different' from the Dutch population, I contribute to sustaining or even enlarging the divide between these groups. She did choose to partake in this research, as she could see the scientific benefits of specifically focusing on this target group. In the same line of thought, I also chose to continue with this research focus, as the value and need for research that puts refugees' narratives at its centre is great.

4. Research results I: Integration

From the theoretical framework flows the conclusion that integration is a broad and complex concept. Instead of approaching it as a singular, universal process that all migrants and refugees go through at an equal pace, this research chooses to follow Castles et. al. (2002) in acknowledging that integration consists of different and overlapping processes which translate into various trajectories. In this chapter the integration trajectories of the refugee students that were interviewed will be outlined, as to come to an answer to the question: *'How do refugee students navigate and strategize their integration process in the Netherlands?'* First, as I aim to include the voices of this target group in discussions on concepts like integration, attention will be given to how the respondents themselves define this concept. Thereafter, I observe how the respondents themselves go about their integration processes in the Netherlands, using Berry's (1992) model of acculturation strategies. Following this section, possible explanations will be presented the acculturation strategy mostly pursued. The chapter ends with the hurdles respondents encountered in their integration trajectories

4.1 Definition integration

In an attempt to include refugees' voices and opinions in the discussion about the meaning of the term integration, something that until now is largely missing (Omlo, 2011), the respondents were not presented with a definition of the term upfront. Instead, they were asked about their own perceptions of the concept integration. I hereby contribute to creating more understanding about social processes from the perspective of key actors. This is deemed essential as, currently, there is still limited insight into their viewpoints (e.g. Omlo, 2011; Strang & Ager, 2010).

As became clear from the theoretical framework, integration is not an easily captured concept (Castles et. al., 2002). Many respondents were aware of this as well, as they often emphasized the broadness and complicatedness of the term in their answers. Jamila, a 25-year old refugee student originally from Iraq, who, of all the respondents in this study, had been in the Netherlands the longest (13 years), for example, noted: *"Integration is different for everyone. Integration has to do with how you behave in day-to-day life. It is a very broad concept."* Farid complicated the term as well:

It has a lot of aspects. I mean, what does integration mean in the first place? Is it speaking the language? Or is it knowing traditions and applying them? Or is it to understand the jokes for example? It's just something relative.

In addition to pointing out the broadness of the concept, Jamila continued to explain another crucial question with regards to integration: when does it end? Gowricharn (2000, in Omlo 2011) describes integration as a mystic concept, because *"no one can exactly explain when you are sufficiently integrated, what the beginning and end of*

that process is, when you thus are to stop ‘integrating’, and especially what price you should not pay for it” (p. 12). In the same line, Jamila pointed out:

When are you integrated very well? When you speak the language? That is not enough, because you should also have a fulltime job. Are you well integrated then? No, you must understand the Dutch jokes and expressions. Are you well integrated then? No, you must also watch the Dutch television channels.

Adding to the point of Jamila, Sarina, a 30-year-old refugee student who had fled Iran one year ago, likewise pointed out that integration does not have a clearly described endpoint. She did this by comparing the integration process to the process of learning a language:

If you learn a language, you cannot say: ‘I am perfect, I know the language.’ Because language doesn’t finish, it doesn’t have any end. [...] Being integrated is something like this for me. It doesn’t have any end.

The respondents thus knew well how to reflect critically on this concept. It is likely that their high level of schooling contributed to this. They knew how to point out crucial critiques on and shortcomings of the term. However, four respondents were unfamiliar with the term and needed further explanation during the interview. This might have also been due to translation.

Overall, the respondents’ descriptions were in line with the theory of Castles et al. (2002) and Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), who state that the complexity of the integration process must be taken into account. Though the respondents agreed that no one set of indicators can encapsulate the entirety and complexity of the term, as is often still done in mainstream studies (Omlo, 2011), upon further questioning about what integration entails specifically, they did highlight a myriad of aspects they deemed important. First and foremost, almost all respondents did explicitly mention the importance of learning the Dutch language as an integral part to integration:

In general, first of all, you have to learn the language. This is the first step to get integrated. Otherwise you will not understand what the traditions are, the community, or not understand the jokes, how the system goes, the politics, how to vote. (Farid)

Farid spoke from his own experience here, as he, since he fled Syria five years ago, had acquired a good level of Dutch, which helped him with further familiarizing himself with the Dutch society. With him, many respondents showed great commitment towards learning Dutch. Some even already in the early stages of their asylum processes, as was the case for Farid’s girlfriend Amina, a 26-year-old refugee student who had fled Syria around the same time:

I started in the camp. Honestly, from the first day I started. I was already interested in languages, and I am also very good at languages. [...] The policemen in the camp, they would always say 'goedemorgen' [good morning]. So I would hear these words and I would start to speak with them. (Amina)

In addition to learning the language, a broad range of different aspects came forward in the interviews. These ranged from finding a job (preferably one that matches ones' educational level), having Dutch friends, knowledge of the country and its character and history, understanding jokes and sayings, participating in Dutch events such as Sinterklaas and carnaval, knowing the norms and values and how to behave in certain situation, to, more specifically: how to vote, when to eat and how to catch the train.

4.2 Integration as a two-way process

Furthermore, much academic literature stresses the fact that integration is a two-way process that requires adaptation efforts from both the refugees and the host society (Castles et al., 2002). Concerning the respondents, the majority indeed emphasized the need for integration to be a two-way process. They did not speak about this in the context of services they expected to be provided with, but rather as openness and adaptation needed from the host society: *"I would like that if we are together, a Dutch person and a Syrian person, that we would be adjustable to each other. I can change a little bit, and you also have to change a little bit. Both sides."* (Amina). Yusuf emphasized the open attitude needed from the host society:

As a refugee, for me, the first step is that I need to integrate myself to the public. The native people, they help by accepting us and by becoming more willing to learn about refugees. Actually, they have to become more open. (Yusuf)

Nadia, who had fled from Azerbaijan to the Netherlands as a young child, seemed well informed about integration debates. She expressed her frustration with political parties like the VVD, who, according to her, frame integration too much as a process of assimilation: *"How they frame it was like: 'you should do this and this, otherwise you are not welcome. You are not part of us.' But there is nothing in return."* She emphasized that, instead of integration being a one-way process, effort is required from both sides.

Yusuf explained this two-way integration in the context of a party, where there should be room for cultural exchange, and for both parties to come closer together:

If you go to an event, like a party, you share some things. Like your foods, your ideas, your thoughts. And they [the natives] are also trying to learn something about you. This is integration I think. Because you share something about you and we are coming closer together.

The fact that a role for the host society is clearly stressed, does not take away from the important role the respondents see for refugees themselves to play. They are the

ones that should get out into society, make an effort for contact and adapt. Farid explained this as follows:

I don't have the right to impose my traditions. I have to adjust because it is their country, and I am coming to it. If someone comes to your house and you say: 'take your shoes off.' He has to take it off. He can't say: 'no, I am going to come in with my shoes.' No, it's your house and you have rules. And so it is their country. They have rules and we have to respect that.

Amina likewise pointed out the big role that refugees have in the integration process: *"When a huge amount of people [referring to the 2015 refugee influx] comes here, they need to work, they need to learn the language, they need to be effective in the society."* Leila also saw the necessity and role for refugees to integrate: *"We have to learn the culture here. If not, we can't go on and be in a good way of life. You have to learn."*

From the respondents' reflections on the term integration can be observed that their views do not align with the, both in society and in policies, widely supported view that integration is a one-way process, with a strong focus on adaptation required from the refugees. Though the respondents accept and, as will be shown in the next section, take responsibility to play their part in the integration process, they strongly highlight the important role the host society has to play, by, for example, being open and interested and willing to adapt.

4.3 Acculturation strategy

After having observed how respondents conceptualize the term integration, I will now outline the different ways they themselves (have) cope(d) with the, to them, new and largely unfamiliar culture of the Netherlands. The theoretical framework laid out four different acculturation strategies that migrants use to adapt to a new culture. These were measured on the basis of 'cultural maintenance' and 'contact and participation' (Berry, 1992). The respondents were questioned about both these issues. Generally, it was observed that they all articulated the importance of preserving their own culture, while also investing into becoming part of the mainstream society. Basir's comment on integration captures this well: *"For me, integration is like, you respect and accept the Dutch culture, and at the same time you keep your own things, your own culture"*. It thus seems that the strategy 'integration' is the most fitting category for the respondents. The following section will unpack this conclusion further.

However, first a note must be made on how the respondents deal with the term 'culture', as, like in the quote above, they would often refer to the notion of 'the Dutch culture' in speaking about their integration processes. At times it seemed to be approached as a static concept, consisting of a certain set of aspects that can be learned and understood, such as language, norms, values, behavioral customs, etc. However, as came forward in the theoretical framework, the notion of culture is more complex and fluid than this. For example, beliefs and norms are often not

confined to a certain geographical area (e.g. a country) only (Anderson-Levitt, 2012; White, 1959). It is important to keep this in mind when encountering references to (the Dutch) culture in the following chapters.

4.3.1 Cultural maintenance

Concerning the first issue, cultural maintenance, it was observed to what degree respondents “*pertain to the maintenance and development of one’s ethnic distinctiveness in society*” (Berry, 1992: 5). All respondents expressed the importance of retaining their own cultural identity and customs. Their cultural identity should not, and even can not, be put away, and will remain an important part of them:

It is the thing that I was raised with, I cannot hide it. I cannot put it in a box and close it. Even if I wanted to do that, you still have that box with you. You should go and open that box! (Sarina)

Many were of the opinion that there is room for cultural maintenance, as long as this does not clash with the Dutch society: “*We live here, so we have to learn a lot of things. [...] But some culture, why do I have to put it away, when I don’t disturb other people?*” (Leila). Some things need to be adjusted; the Iranian way of driving would not work here, as Ava jokingly explained. But everyone felt strong about their own culture continuing to be an integral part of themselves: “*You never can be apart from your culture. It is always something with you*” (Salem).

Some respondents expressed the importance of maintaining their cultural identity more strongly than others, attesting the statement that the issues can be responded to on a continuous scale (Berry, 1992). For example, Hakim, who had only been in the Netherlands for seven months, commented: “*Of course I don’t want to maintain my culture. I want to be really integrated*”. He was one of the respondents most extremely focused on becoming part of society, even tending towards assimilation, be it not that he did also say that he saw value in maintaining some of his own cultural traits. Hakim had to flee his home country, Lebanon, because he was being prosecuted there for being gay. He expressed that in the Netherlands he experiences great freedom and acceptance in that regard, thus to some extent explaining why he was so eager to make this country his home. Yusuf, a 29 year old refugee student from Turkey, was another respondent who made assimilation-like remarks, like: “*If you want to live here, first, as a refugee, you have to give up, and you have to sacrifice from your traditional culture*”. Yusuf also later on expressed the importance of keeping and sharing his Turkish culture in the Netherlands, but his main focus was on integrating himself into the Dutch society as soon as possible.

4.3.2 Contact and participation

The importance that the respondents gave to maintaining their own cultural identity, did not take away from their efforts for contact with and participation in the Dutch society. According to Berry (1992), this is the second important issue migrants face: “*deciding whether relations with the larger society are of value and*

should be sought" (p. 5). Generally, there was a great willingness to adapt to the Dutch society and seek contact: *"You have to be willing, and you have to take the steps towards making those relationships. Just making yourself present in the community of people."* (Azar). Many echoed this view, by expressing the need for refugees to get out of the asylum seekers' centers (asc's) and their own bubbles, and to not isolate themselves.

Almost all respondents abode by this view themselves. During the interviews, many situations were described where a respondent would make a conscious effort to establish contact with Dutch people. Whether it be in the train, in church, in the library, a café, by inviting Dutch neighbors over for dinner, or at events or university. Amina, for example, overheard some classmates talking about wanting to learn Arabic, so she initiated contact with them and offered to help: *"I thought: 'they are doing Arabic, that's my path to get to know them, to make friends'"*. Similar to her, many showed effort to come into contact with their classmates: *"The first day, the first two session, I just tried to say 'hi' to everyone"*, as Sarina mentioned. In the next chapter I will show that making contact with classmates turned out to be a struggle for many of the respondents. These actions demonstrate a desirability to have contact with the mainstream society. The value of this contact was also widely recognized among the respondents: *"Of course we need Dutch people around us."* (Amina). Yusuf also emphasized this value: *".. to integrate yourself to the public, and to get more contact and communication with the native people. This is the most important thing"*.

Because of the expressed desirability and value placed on contact with the mainstream society, it can be concluded that the acculturation strategy 'integration' is indeed highly prevalent among the respondents. To different extents, all respondents had indeed established relationships with the Dutch population. These came about through, for example, becoming part of a church, visiting public lectures, meeting fellow-students and teachers in university, visiting different events or becoming part of the gay community in the Netherlands. Even though a handful of respondents did seek and maintain contact with their own cultural group in the Netherlands, no one was solely bound to this.

Some respondents expressed experiencing much social support from their Dutch contacts, through, for example, financial support or language teaching. Hakim experienced this mostly from the gay community: *"I didn't use to have friends around me, because everyone rejected me for who I was. But when I came here, I found a lot of people that care and support. Especially from the gay community."* Leila and Javad, a couple who had fled Syria almost a year ago because they were persecuted for their faith, were quick to become part of a church community in the Netherlands. Here they established many contacts with elderly Dutch people. Javad expressed feeling very close to these people: *"I love some people in church. Sometimes I sit around them, and I feel like I am sitting close to my mother."* Additionally, as also other respondents described, their Dutch contacts would support them in their integration efforts. Leila described how some people from church came to visit them

in the asc to discuss ways in which they could help. One of them, for example, offered to help teach them Dutch, another was willing to take them out into nature and tell them about the Dutch culture, another helped them with a Dutch bible study.

However, there was also an exception to the above described attitude. One of the respondents, Ammar, a 36 year old refugee student from Iraq, expressed that *“I don’t want contact with people”*. He did not show any effort to come into contact with Dutch people, or even fellow asylum-seekers at the asc. Throughout the interview it became clear that his attitude derived from a fear of not being able to stay in the Netherlands, since, after being here for eight months, he had not obtained his refugee status yet: *“I don’t know anything about my future in this country. This is my problem. Because of that, I don’t want to make contact with Dutch people at this time.”* His approach to acculturation here gears towards separation: a situation in which no contact with the host society exists, and cultural customs and identity are maintained (Berry, 1992). However, he did express a desire to become part of the Dutch society once he had more certainty about his future here: *“If I live here? Then yes, you have to be open with all, and not staying in your house. You have to have contact with the people living in this country.”* His expression of the value of contact and adjustment to the Dutch society predominated in the interview, and thus he still seems to fit the description of ‘integration’ best, even though this might be a delayed form of integration because of the uncertainty of his situation.

4.4 Explaining the great drive to integrate

Since another eleven of the respondents did not have permanent residency yet, it would not have been surprising if this reluctance towards integration would have been more prevalent while their situation remained uncertain. Yet, the overall willingness to integrate was great. Different explanations for this can be found in the interviews. Firstly, several respondents seemed confident that they would acquire refugee status. They spoke in a manner of ‘once I get my status’, not ‘if I get my status’. For them, it thus makes sense to not wait with integration efforts, as they expect to be able to stay in the Netherlands. There were also some who were more uncertain about their future in the Netherlands. However, they were also unwilling to just wait around for the outcome of their procedures. Some had been waiting for over a year. Instead of wasting this waiting time, many chose to engage with and adjust to society. As Samira explains:

Some people stay here [at the asc], and by the time they have status, they already have limits to certain things. So, the time you spend in the asc, what will you with that time? That was my thinking. Even if your procedure comes out negative, you didn’t just waste time.

Another explanation can be found in the high education level of these students. With about four exceptions, the majority of respondents was well-familiar with the term integration, as was shown in the beginning of this chapter. Having knowledge on this concept and understanding its importance, may have motivated them to invest

in their own integration processes soon upon arrival. This indeed seemed to have been the case for Hakim, who already had several years of experience working at a refugee-centered humanitarian organization in Lebanon, and thus was knowledgeable on the theme. Upon mentioning the term integration, he was quick to recognize it as one of the pillars of the UNHCR. Having this background knowledge led him to consciously strategize his integration:

When I came here, I focused on integration. I knew that the first step should be to be part of the community, part of the society. To get out of the asc, out of this bubble, and get out and explore myself outside. [...] Integration was my focus and strategy. Maybe because I already knew and understood how important integration is from my previous work. I always try to go out of the asc, cycling outside, trying to say hello to everybody I see on the street. I try to see what events are happening, and attend these events. Because I know in this way I can get close to more people and understand more about the Dutch society and how things are going.

This last argument made is in line with the theory of Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), who argue that the kind of acculturation strategy chosen is largely depend on refugees' human and social capital. Refugees who have previously acquired schooling and speak the English language are more likely to adopt 'integration' as an acculturation strategy. The respondents in this study indeed had all previously followed education in their home countries. Some already spoke English upon arrival and those who did not picked it up fast. Yusuf, for example, did not speak English when he arrived in the Netherlands, but put much effort into teaching himself the language as quickly as possible. A couple months later, his English was at a good enough level to follow education at university level. This highlights how refugees' human capital determines their ability for language and also culture learning (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003), making the 'integration' strategy a more viable and likely option for this particular group of refugees.

Another interesting, and possibly explanatory factor to why the respondents seem eager to integrate into the Dutch society, is that fact that they generally speak in very positive terms about the Netherlands. A couple even preferred the Dutch culture over their own: *"I hope I would have spend my childhood in the Netherlands, not in Iraq. Because here, if you want anything, you can get it. And everything in this country is nice."* (Ammar). Even though there were also some critical sounds regarding the asylum procedures and treatment of refugees in the Netherlands, the overall attitude was one of gratefulness for being able to be here: *"It is an amazing country and they gave us a lot of things"* (Farid).

Various aspects were raised about the Dutch culture that the respondents deemed positive. For example, some expressed enjoying the food, the high level of organization and orderliness, the timeliness and traffic regulations. Many described the Dutch people as being friendly, polite, helpful, and, more than once, people's directness was mentioned to be appreciated. Furthermore, it regularly came

forward that respondents enjoyed the freedom they experienced in this country. Azar, like Javad and Leila, fled Iran because her family was being prosecuted for being Christians. At the time of the interview, she had been in the Netherlands for five years. They all expressed being very unfree in Iran and subsequently really enjoyed the freedom of speech and religion in the Netherlands. Respondents who had fled because of their sexual orientation or political views expressed similar feelings. The enthusiasm many respondents expressed regarding life in the Netherlands, may have contributed to the great drive they showed to integrate here.

4.5 Hurdles to integration

Even though much effort to integrate is shown, the respondents also expressed their frustration with obstacles that hindered a smooth integration process. Especially the twelve respondents who were still in the process of attaining legal status, and thus awaiting permission to stay in the Netherlands, voiced many frustrations about the Dutch asylum system hindering their integration. It should be noted that most of these respondents still lived in *acs*'s, which oftentimes was one of the roots of their frustrations: *"For me, it's like a temporary prison that you have to live there. It's not like a home"* (Ava).

First of all, the limitations the respondents experienced regarding what they were allowed to do formed a hurdle to their integration. Ava, a 25-year-old respondent from Iran, whose asylum procedure had already taken more than a year, summarizes these limitations as follows: *"Now, all the refugees stay in the *asc* for more than one year. And they do not have permission to go out, they do not have permission to study, they do not have permission to learn Dutch."* She continues to reflect upon the fact that these regulations make sense in a situation where an asylum procedure takes a limited amount of time. But currently, the waiting times are long and procedures can take up to 20 months (VluchtelingenWerk, 2019, November 19).

The Dutch asylum system is indeed built upon the idea that asylum procedures are short. Upon arrival in the Netherlands, asylum seekers first have to report at the registration center. Afterwards, the general asylum procedure takes approximately eight days. During this time the asylum seeker has two interviews with the Immigration- and Naturalization Service (IND), on the basis of which is decided if the asylum claim is legitimate, based on the Refugee Convention of the United Nations. If more information is required for the IND to make a decision, the asylum seeker will be placed in the extended asylum procedure. During this time he/she stays in an *asc*. Officially, the IND has a maximum of six months to come to a final decision about the asylum claim (VluchtelingenWerk, n.d.). The last years, due to planning errors and shortage of staff, the IND struggles with major delays, as has been the case before. The waiting times before asylum request can be processed can take up to one and a half years. Besides practical issues, this brings much uncertainty and worries to the asylum seekers (VluchtelingenWerk, 2019, April 18).

These worries were also very present among the respondents who were still waiting to hear about their future in the Netherlands: *“I want the process to get faster. Waiting can kill you honestly.”* (Salem). Hakim also strongly expressed his frustrations, explaining that asylum seekers have nothing to do during their time in the asc and there is no help for traumatized and depressed people. He even expressed that it is horrible when governments let people die at sea, but it is equally horrible to thereafter let them die in asc’s. Ava, as did others, indeed shared that she felt depressed: *“When I arrived here a year ago, I was really depressed, because I had nothing to do in the asc. It is a very closed place. And we cannot communicate with other people.”*

Many respondents voiced that the uncertainty about their future also hindered their integration process. Basir, a thirty-one-year old respondent from Afghanistan who had been waiting for his procedure to start for eight months, expressed this as follows:

Living in uncertainty, you really cannot have long term plans, or a vision or mission. So this is a very big obstacle. I sometimes ignore this obstacle, and I go into the Dutch society and speak Dutch with them. But, as long as you are in the asc, it is like you don’t have that motivation to go and be part of the society.

Again, it seems quite remarkable that all respondents showed high motivation to get integrated in the Dutch society, even though they had this uncertainty lingering over their heads. Because, as Basir said, not being sure about your future here does not motivate to adapt to the Dutch society. And, likewise, it doesn’t encourage the government to invest in these people: *“They [the government] don’t know if they [asylum seekers] are going to stay in the Netherlands or not. So they don’t want to invest in those people.”* (Nadia).

Additionally, having to move many times during the asylum procedure or waiting period, as well as a fear of losing the relationships build here in the Netherlands when an asylum request has been denied, were mentioned by several respondents as hindering factors in fully focusing on integration.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the views of the respondents on the concept of integration, and how they themselves went about their own integration processes. Leading to the answering of the following sub question: *‘How do refugee students navigate and strategize their integration process in the Netherlands?’*. Before reflecting on the integration processes of the respondents themselves, it was important to consider their understanding and conceptualization of the term, hereby providing space for their voices to be included in discussions about integration. The chapter showed that the respondents were able to critically reflect on the concept; pointing out several key issues, such as its broadness, complicatedness and endlessness. And even though they saw a large role to play for refugees in the integration process, they were unified in describing integration as a two-way process, needing effort and

adaptability from both refugees and the host society. To gain insight into how the respondents navigated and strategized their integration processes, Berry's (1992) four acculturation strategies were used. It was concluded that the respondents all fit the strategy 'integration' best. Meaning they found the maintenance of their cultural identity and characteristics of value, while also showing effort and valuing becoming part of the host society. The great integration efforts the respondents showed were remarkable, and seemed surprising for those that were still uncertain about their future in the Netherlands. I have put forward several possible explanations for this high willingness to integrate. These included a confidence that they would indeed acquire refugee status, not wanting to waste time waiting for the outcome of procedures, knowledge of the importance of integration, probably stemming from their previously acquired human capital, and a positive impression and experience of the Dutch society. The chapter ended by showing that the respondents were also confronted with significant challenges along their integration trajectories, many related to the limitations imposed by Dutch asylum policies, such as not being allowed to officially enroll in university, or to find work. Many voiced frustrations with the lengthy asylum procedures, causing much uncertainty, worries and even depression among the refugees. This chapter has shown that, even in the face of these challenges, the respondents find ways to connect to the Dutch society and pursue integration. One way in which they did this is through education, which will be further explored in the next chapter.

5. Research results II: Education

Since the respondents in this study are refugee students studying at higher educational institutions, it was assumed that education is a crucial part of their integration trajectories. Additionally, in the theoretical framework Morrice (2009) points out that education is one of the main ways through which refugees can re-establish their lives. This chapter will dive in to the respondents' experiences with education in the Netherlands, as to be able to answer the following sub question: *'How do refugee students perceive education to play a role in their integration process?'* First, the respondents' previous as well as current educational trajectories will be outlined, highlighting (dis)continuity patterns in their study choices. Then, attention will be given to the extent to which the respondents strategize these choices. Next, their reasons for pursuing education, despite strict regulations and limitations will be outlined, as well as the challenges the respondents encountered in accessing and following education in the Netherlands. I will then close with a reflection on the key issue of this chapter: the ways in which education can be a path to integration.

5.1 Introduction to the respondents' education trajectories

All the respondents were following higher education at the time of the interviews. However, only the five respondents in possession of their residence permit were officially enrolled in educational institutions. Two of them, Nadia and Jamila, had been in the Netherlands for over ten years and thus started their academic education here. All others had previously followed higher education in their countries of origin. A surprising finding was that nine of the respondents had actually already completed their education in their countries of origin. Many already had multiple years of working experience there. Ammar had even already worked for ten years as a civil engineer in Iraq. Their motivation and reasoning behind the choice to still pursue educational opportunities in the Netherlands will be explored further on in this chapter. The other six respondents' education was unfortunately interrupted because of their flight.

Only the five respondents in possession of a residence permit were able to officially enroll at educational institutions. The other twelve respondents were still in the process of obtaining their residency. In the Netherlands, all asylum seekers aged 18 and over need a residence permit to study (Immigration and Naturalisation Service, 2020). Officially, these twelve respondents were thus not allowed to follow education. However, some universities have started to offer asylum seekers the opportunity to follow courses, thus enabling them to start studying before they have been granted a residence permit. This initiative was first started by InClUusion (Utrecht University), and followed by others (for example, WURth-while from Wageningen University, InClUusion from Leiden University and TU/enable from Technical University Eindhoven). These initiatives were started based on the belief that it is of great importance that asylum seekers are not put 'on hold' during lengthy asylum procedures, but that they keep developing themselves and so make

use of their waiting period. In this way, these universities attempt to avoid long-term exclusion of participation in society, which, as research of e.g. Bakker et al. (2014) shows, forms one of the explanations of the lower participation of refugees in the labour market and society as a whole (Utrecht University, 2020a; Wageningen University & Research, 2020). Of the twelve respondents without a residence permit in this research, five followed (a) course(s) through the InclUusion program, and seven did so through the WURth-while program.

Students' continuity or discontinuity patterns in the study direction they choose tells a lot about their strategies regarding education in the Netherlands (Glastra & Vedder, 2009). The respondents showed a wide variety in chosen study directions. These included engineering, law, linguistics, social work, economics, psychology and biology. Eleven respondents show the continuity pattern: choosing the same academic subjects in the Netherlands as in their countries of origin. It should be noted that those studying through the InclUusion and WURth-while program had limited options as to which courses to follow. However, this group still chose the courses that were closest to their previous studies and/or work field. Oftentimes it was reasoned that it was the most logical choice to continue to build upon previous knowledge and experience. This is in line with what Dutch educational institutions tend to recommend: to build on one's initial academic choice as much as possible (Glastra & Vedder, 2009). One respondent, Azar, did choose to change her study direction, thus showing the discontinuity pattern. In Iran she studied medical engineering. She viewed her interruption of education as an opportunity to reevaluate what she wanted in life. In the Netherlands she switched to electrical engineering, as this would give her more career options in the future. Furthermore, there were three respondents aligned with the transformation pattern. Farid exemplified the transformation of informal (and often repressed) intellectual interests into educational careers nicely. In Syria he completed the first two years of an archeology degree, but chose to change his study direction in the Netherlands:

When I came here, I thought: 'I am not going to study archeology.' Because it wasn't my choice in the first place. [...] So I started looking for a new study. I found linguistics. I liked it because, even in Syria, I wanted to study like French literature maybe. You know, just a different language.

Hakim and Amina also both fall under the transformation pattern. Interestingly enough, both were inspired to do so by their experiences as a refugee. After finishing his degree in finance business administration, Hakim worked for seven years as a social worker helping refugees in Lebanon. In the Netherlands, he chose to follow courses on e.g. migration and minorities, as he saw this as an opportunity to gain more theoretical knowledge about a topic he had been working with in practice. Furthermore, his current choice to study Dutch law stems from the wish to make a difference for fellow asylum seekers in the Netherlands (and the world). He believed that knowledge about his rights would give him the ground to fight for himself and others: "So I can know how to fight, or how to stand up for myself, to protect myself". Amina similarly changed her study direction from informatics

engineering to Middle Eastern studies. This was driven by her already existing interest in the political sphere, as well as the desire to contribute to change in her country of origin: Syria. Lastly, both Nadia and Jamila started their higher education in the Netherlands, and thus show the crystallization pattern.

The above relates back to the agency perspective described in the theoretical framework; the refugee students are not portrayed as passive victims, but they are recognized as people with agency who are capable of making life decisions. Instead of solely focusing on the disempowering experiences that indeed are often part of refugees' journeys, their capacity to make decisions regarding their education shows an empowering experience. Especially those who chose a new path of study, pursuing interests they did not have the opportunity or freedom to pursue in their home countries, form a clear example of how displacement can also give access to new opportunities for refugees (Korac, 2009).

5.2 Strategizing educational opportunities

As already shines through these described learning strategies, the respondents showed strong strategizing efforts with regards to their education. The subjects and study directions they chose were well thought-through decisions, often aimed at contributing to achieving their future (career) goals and plans. For example, Yusuf chose to follow an introduction course to Dutch law at Utrecht University. By doing so, he strategically gave himself a head start in obtaining his goal of working as a lawyer in the Netherlands.

All students put efforts towards deliberately thinking out and strategizing the (in many cases limited) educational opportunities they had, as to be able to use these opportunities the best they could. Furthermore, some saw education as opening doors to other opportunities. Hakim, for example, applied for (and got) a volunteering job at Doctors Without Borders. As he send his application there, he was aware of the added value of pursuing education: *"Because I am doing his course, they find me more interesting."*

Among the respondents Samira, a 29-year-old refugee student from Cameroon, and Salem, a 34-year-old refugee student from Iran, formed two unique cases, as both of them already were in the Netherlands for educational reasons before ending up in the situation of having to apply for refugee status. During their studies, the situation in their homelands changed significantly, putting them in a difficult position. Both of them reflected upon the choice to apply for asylum in the Netherlands. In this process they carefully weighed their options, seeing both positive (e.g. the costs of studying being lower after obtaining a residence permit) and negative (e.g. getting the label 'refugee') effects of the decision to apply for asylum. In the end, both did choose to apply for asylum, which significantly altered their experience of being in the Netherlands. These cases again exemplify how respondents strategically navigate their lives; even in circumstances that are constricting, they actively seek out the options that are most in their benefit.

5.3 Motivations for pursuing education

The theoretical framework showed that, due to strict regulation and limitations regarding work and education for asylum seekers and refugees, unemployment and unschooled work are generally more likely outcomes than furthering education (Glastra & Vedder, 2009). The target group of this research is an exception to this observation, as they chose to pursue education anyway. Here their reasons for doing so will be outlined.

As already touched upon, many students have their future careers in mind when deciding to sign up for education in the Netherlands. They do not come here as blank slates, but arrive with hopes and dreams and plans for their future. Even though their lives have taken a dramatic turn, they seek ways to keep pursuing their (often modified) dreams and plans. Many see the opportunity for education in the Netherlands to help them with this:

I always thought having an academic degree would help me to build a good future for me and for my kids later. But also, if I go back, if the war stops in Syria with a miracle, then I can do something there. Because also there I cannot work without a degree. Having a degree would be a huge step in your future.
(Amina)

They see how education can significantly increase their abilities to build a future in the Netherlands. A couple respondents described how there is much competition in the labour market, and a degree would help their chances of finding a job: *“I wanted to get education here, because it is good to have a paper, or recognition from a Dutch university, that I attended certain courses at university.”* (Hakim). Of those who had already finished their degrees, many were also aware of the fact that these degrees might not hold the same value in the Netherlands. Yusuf, for example, knew that his Turkish law degree would not translate to the Dutch system, and thus made plans to pursue a Masters degree in law in the Netherlands.

A second important motivation came from the respondents who had not yet obtained their residency permit. The need to keep busy and beat boredom during the waiting period continuously came forward during the interviews. Sarina explained that it was important for her to do something valuable with her waiting time: *“I am now waiting for one year and it is not easy to fill this time. [...] At this moment in time, it was the first and best opportunity for me to attend this university course.”* Others also mentioned this need to be busy with something worthwhile, instead of waiting around: *“A goal that you want to wake up. I wake up so I can go to university. On other days I wake up to study and to do something positive.”* (Ava). Many described frustrations with being stuck in the acs. Education gave them an opportunity to get out of the centers and find some distractions: *“My mind was switched off from the location when I was at the university”* (Basir).

The experience of living in the acs and having to wait thus weighed heavy on the respondents. Some expressed that the opportunity for education didn't just help them with keeping busy, but additionally helped them to battle the feelings of depression. This was the case for Leila and Javad:

We felt depression. And we went to a psychiatrist here. He talked about some way to help ourselves feel better. Because, we lost a lot of things by coming here. We lost our families and we lost our jobs. So here, I think this opportunity for education helped us to feel better. Yes, it is about our resumes too, but it is more than that. [...] It is about helping ourselves feel better."

Lastly, and most importantly, many respondents expressed that they saw education as an opportunity to get integrated into society. This motivated them to seek out educational opportunities, even while still awaiting their residency permits. Some expressed that the possibility to make connections with Dutch people at university contributed to their integration: *"Getting education is so important. It is so important to integrate yourself into society, and to communicate with people, and to meet with new people."* (Yusuf)

Being around Dutch students also gave them the unique opportunity to experience the Dutch society and culture up close. They saw that these experiences with education in the Netherlands contributed to their own integration trajectories, thus emphasizing the significant role education can play in integration: *"You see Dutch students, and with time, you learn about their culture, about their life, how they live in this country and how they think. And now, I am totally different compared to before participating in this course."* (Ammar). Salem likewise pointed out how education can help in the process of becoming integrated: *"As a student, you are in school all the time. And most of the classmates and lecturers are Dutch. So, directly, you are interacting with Dutch people. You learn how they behave, how they dress. You know, small things."*

Besides learning about the Dutch 'way of life' from fellow students, participating in university also provided insight into how the educational system in the Netherlands is set up. For Sarina, getting an idea of what life as a student looks like was a big reason to follow InclUUsion classes:

The whole idea for me was to learn more about how the university classes, and the university process, takes place in this country. [...] So I can get a feeling for the university: how it goes, how you should be participating, how much time you need to spend on it, can you have work besides it, or not?"

She subsequently planned to use this foretaste of university as a basis for further decisions about her future: *"Because I am thirty, and I don't know where I should start. Maybe it would be better to start with a job. So this was a good experience for me, so I can decide more wisely about my future."* This reasoning is yet again an example of the way respondents consciously strategize the (educational)

opportunities on their paths to benefit them most in the future, as well as an example of how education can contribute to their integration trajectories. Later on in this chapter, I will reflect on the extent to which education can indeed be a path towards integration.

5.4 Obstacles in access to and participation in education

In the theoretical framework it was mentioned that the unique position of refugee students poses challenges and obstacles to their study experiences (De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018). The road to and participation in education in the Netherlands indeed came with challenges for the respondents. Firstly, accessing education was not easy for most respondents, particularly those without residency permits. As explained, officially students without a residency permit are not allowed to enroll in higher education institutions. The students had to find their way to education opportunities themselves. Many described going online and searching for possibilities for education or hearing from friends or others in the camp about programs like InclUUsion and WURth-while. Generally, no help to access education was received from organizations working in the camps, like VluchtelingenWerk or COA (the central organ for the reception of asylum seekers), even though the respondents asked for it: *“COA didn’t know anything. They only said: ‘you don’t have permission to study, because it is one of the rules.’”* (Ava). Likewise, Hakim asked COA for help with transportation costs to and from the university once he was accepted into the InclUUsion course. His request was declined.

The respondents had to find a way to obtain access to education themselves. Many showed great motivation and effort to do so. Yusuf explained that before being accepted, he needed to write a motivation letter: *“I prepared three letters about why this program is essential for me and why I want this program that much”*. The effort needed to access education raises the concern that the general lack of help from and/or possible unawareness of the organization present in the asylum camps may cause many others to miss out on possibilities for following education. The respondents in this research showed great motivation, but it is not expected that this necessarily is the general sentiment of the entire group.

Besides obstacles to accessing education, the respondents also experienced different difficulties with following education. Firstly, there were fast differences between the Dutch education system and the systems in the respondents’ countries of origin. When they attempted to explain their previous education, difficulties with the comparison of the systems continuously came up. Additionally, the education style and teaching methods were different than what they were used to. Many described how following education in the Netherlands requires a more active stance from the students:

The education that I experienced here was very different, because students were much more involved in the class. They had to discuss, they had to tell their ideas, and the professor wanted them to ask questions, wanted them to participate in the discussion”. (Sarina)

In this same sentiment, Salem noticed that “... *the teachers are not there to teach you. But they are always there to guide you.*” Many compared this with the situation in their countries of origin, where teachers generally teach a class and give homework without requiring much involvement from the students. Additionally, relationship between students and teachers was described to be different. Leila described how, in Iran, students would generally be more polite and shy to speak their opinions. Generally, the respondents were very positive about the Dutch style of education: “*It was challenging for me. But at the end of the day I think I prefer it, because it makes me work more.*” (Samira). Many did experience the transfer as being challenging. It took time to get used to the way of teaching.

Another main obstacle brought up by the respondents was the language. Besides Azar and Jamlia, who followed education at a hogeschool (college) instead of at university, all the respondents followed education in English. Even though most respondents spoke some English upon arrival in the Netherlands, it remained a struggle for them to follow education in academic English: “*It was difficult for me to focus on what the teacher said, and what he wants exactly. I had difficulty with listening and speaking, because I don't feel confidence in English.*” (Sarina). Generally, it took them more effort to concentrate and understand the materials and discussions.

Another difficulty that was widely recognized and brought up by the respondents, were the worries and problems related to their experiences as a refugee. Many expressed that the situation in their home countries occupied their minds. The fact that Farid and Amina had a Syrian news channel on during the interview, shows this point. Likewise, during the interview with Leila and Javad we spend quite some time discussing the situation in Iran. They were up to date about the most recent developments and shared about a protest that had happened the week before that had been shot down by the government. This news really affected them, as they had not heard back from their families yet. Worries about their home countries and family and friends there were experienced as an obstacle to studying:

You can't feel like a normal student [...], because you have a lot of difficulties. You don't have a quiet space for your studies and you have a lot to worry about. What is happening with your family in your home country affects you a lot. Maybe you spend two days not able to do anything, to read anything, because you are really affected by everything going on.” (Tara)

Furthermore, the uncertainty experienced concerning their futures in the Netherlands brought additional challenges to being able to focus on studying: “*When you think about studying, and after that you think about your future in this country: maybe they don't accept you, maybe they accept you. It is not helpful for studying.*” (Ammar). Many expressed that these worries are constantly on their minds, taking away from their ability to focus on studying. Moreover, the practicalities of obtaining a residence permit would at times interfere with studying. For example,

appointments with lawyers or preparations for interviews with the IND would ask time and energy from the respondents.

The situation of living in an asc proved to further complicate the respondents' abilities to study. Often respondents would live in rooms with many other asylum seekers, thus lacking a quiet place for studying: *"You don't have the right room to study, because you are living in a shared room. Then you really struggle. You don't have the peace of mind, and you don't have the peace of area to do your studies."* (Tara). Moreover, asc's were often not practically located near the universities. Many respondents had to travel long distances to be able to follow education. Samira, who was relocated from the asc in Wageningen to one near Breda, even had to stop her participation in the WURth-while course because the distance and costs became too much.

A last struggle almost all respondents highlighted was the difficulty they experienced with establishing contact with Dutch students. Some described being hesitant and at times shy to speak to the other students in class, since they were in an unfamiliar environment:

In the beginning you are afraid of people. It's hard to make contact. You don't dare to say anything because you don't know what to say. The context is different, people are different, and the environment is different than we are used to. So you don't know how to react in some contexts. How do you make contact with your teacher? Or with fellow students? (Nadia).

The majority of the respondents did show initiative and willingness to reach out to the students around them, but to actually build relationships and friendships remained a challenge. Some pointed to the individualized Dutch culture as an explanation for this. Moreover, several times it was mentioned that groups of Dutch students had often already formed and it was difficult to become part of these, despite significant efforts: *"I want to make connections, but people are very individualized. They don't want to allow anyone to get in their circle. So all the time I was trying to break the ice between me and anyone."* (Hakim). Some respondents felt lonely and excluded. Some respondents pointed to the fact that the university environment does not seem to contribute to the establishment of contact between students. Usually there are large numbers of students present in the lectures, the contact hours are sparse and the focus is largely on individual work: *"There are too many students. All the assignments and projects were individual. So you didn't have to interact with them that much."* (Salem). Additionally, students would often leave soon after the class ended and be on their phones during breaks. This generally described student culture did not ease the contact respondents were able to make with fellow classmates.

The respondents who had also followed classes with more international students attending, described that it was easier to build relationships in this context. These students were often also looking to establish a social circle in the Netherlands and

generally seemed more open to contact: *“Because everyone is international, they want to meet somebody new. They want to know about the other person. But Dutch people, they have already found their friends. They have their network and connections.”* (Hakim). Where, with Dutch people, they would often feel a divide (*“There was quite a gap between us”* – Farid), generally the respondents felt less like outsiders in an international environment: *“I didn’t feel that I am a refugee, because everybody is a stranger, coming from different countries.”* (Yusuf).

For refugee students to come into closer contact with Dutch students at university, which is thought to significantly contribute to their integration processes, extra opportunities thus might need to be created. For example, Utrecht University has set up a buddy program that connects refugee and Dutch students for a period of at least ten weeks. The aim of the program is to help refugee students with their (academic) integration, by showing them around the university for example, and to help them build a social network by joining events (Utrecht University, 2020b). During my visit to one of these events, I observed how these events can indeed be useful for establishing contacts with Dutch students. Almost twenty students were present; a mixture of both refugee and Dutch students. I observed that they were quite intermingled: almost all Dutch students were talking to refugee students, at times in groups, at times in one-on-one conversations. Most buddy duos had already hung out several times before and it was mentioned that friendships had been formed. The conversations I was a part of often revolved around university life, but also certain aspects of both the Dutch and the refugee students’ cultures came up. This unrestrained setting, where a group of students was just hanging out while drinking a beer, showcases how engagement with Dutch students can contribute to the integration of refugee students in an organic way.

5.5 Education as opportunity for integration

This chapter started with the assumption that education was likely to be a crucial part of refugee students’ integration trajectories. I will now turn to shed some light on this matter, based on the observations done in this chapter. As described, the respondents themselves were indeed of the opinion that education was a very important factor in their integration processes. They named integration to be one of the most prominent motivations to pursue educational opportunities, pointing to the fact that they saw it as a path to integration. The results of this study have shown that education gave them the opportunity to connect with Dutch students and get familiarized with the Dutch culture and university system. This is exactly why education indeed can be seen as an important part of integration: it gives students the unique opportunity to observe, experience and be part of a central Dutch institution and its workings, and so become familiarized with the Dutch way of life. As argued, integration is too complex of a term to encapsulate in one description, and certainly not something migrants and refugees can reach by simply following an integration course. Steps towards integration can only be made by engaging with society, its people and its institutions, so subsequently both can make adjustments towards each other. For example, as Salem mentioned, him observing that a teacher can eat his sandwich with cheese, a typical Dutch lunch, in front of the

class, added to his knowledge of the way of life in the Netherlands. Based upon the experiences like these of the respondents in this study, it seems that universities provide a suitable place for familiarization with and adaptation to the Dutch society can take place. By following education, a look inside the world of the Dutch university, and thereby Dutch society is given. In this setting, integration can take place in an organic way, as both refugee and other students come there first and foremost for the reason of following education. As they pursue this common goal, they get united with their peers in the Netherlands, contributing in an organic way to their integration process.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on refugee students' experiences with higher education in the Netherlands, as well as the role they perceive education to play in their integration trajectories. The respondents proved to make strategic choices with regard to the field of study they chose to pursue. The majority stayed in line with their previously followed educational direction, and some chose to pursue a different study direction. These decisions regarding education were often made in a strategic manner; the respondents made well thought-through decisions, often keeping their future goals in mind. The chapter also showed the motivations that lead the respondents to choose to pursue education in the Netherlands. These included their belief that following education would help them attain their dreams and goals for the future, as well as providing them with something valuable to do in their time of waiting for their residency permit. And, most importantly, education was seen as an opportunity for integration. Following education at higher educational institutions provided them a space to meet and interact with Dutch students and teachers, and gave them the opportunity to observe and engage with the Dutch 'way of life'. The chapter also showed how they were faced with significant hurdles in access to and participation in education. Despite these challenges, the respondents found their way to educational opportunities. I argued that education indeed is an important path to integration, providing refugees with the opportunity to engage and become familiarized with the Dutch 'way of life' in an organic way. This highlights the need for education to be made more easily accessible to different groups of refugees.

6. Research results III: Polarization

In the theoretical framework, I described polarization as the enlargement and intensification of contradictions, whereby different groups in society alienate from and become pitted against one another (Kinneking, 2009). Furthermore, I showed that a great variety of opinions about refugees was measured amongst the Dutch population; the society can even be deemed polarized on the topic. In the previous chapters I described how refugee students go about their integration trajectories and how education plays a role in this. In this chapter, these trajectories are placed in the context of the polarization that is assumedly present in the Dutch society. Light will be shed on the question: *'How do refugee students experience and manoeuvre the polarization in the Dutch society regarding the asylum and migration debate?'* First, the degree of awareness of the presence of polarization in the Dutch society present among the respondents will be discussed. Then, I will reflect upon their experiences with those in the Dutch society with positive and welcoming attitudes towards refugees. Thereafter, I will pay attention to the negative stances the respondents have encountered and their responses to these, all the while considering how these experiences with and views on polarization might be specific to the target group of this thesis: refugee students.

6.1 Awareness of polarization

Throughout the interviews, I observed that different levels of knowledge and awareness about the assumed polarization in the Netherlands regarding refugees were present among the respondents. Those who had been in the Netherlands for at least some years were especially able to reflect on this issue. For example, Nadia, who had lived in the Netherlands for over 10 years, was one of the respondents most vocal and knowledgeable about polarization on this topic. She was quick to start describing some instances that reflected her opinion that polarization is present and growing in the Dutch society: *"Two days ago, they were building an asc somewhere in Belgium, and people have put it on fire. And it is already for two or three days in the news and I am seeing reactions that some people are happy with it."* Furthermore, she emphasized that polarization even goes beyond the refugee topic. For example, she mentioned the *Zwarte Piet* ('Black Pete') discussion, discussions regarding the calls to prayer in mosques, and general discrimination as processes present and intensifying in the Dutch society:

Polarization is broadly present in the Dutch society. Everyone who does not have the same skin colour or language and culture and background, there is quite some hostility against them. While for years the Netherlands has been the prime example of tolerance.

Nadia's extensive reflections on the processes in the Dutch society and how these have changed the last years, seem to be a result of her interest in these issues, as well as the amount of time she has lived in the Netherlands. Likewise, Farid and Amina, who both had been in the Netherlands for five years, were knowledgeable

about the turbulence in the Dutch society regarding refugees. They described certain stereotypes about refugees that are present in society, reflected on the stances of different Dutch political parties on theme of migration and pointed out different attitudes towards refugees in the countryside and the city. The respondents who had come to the Netherlands before the 2015 peak of the refugee 'crisis', sometimes mentioned how their arrival was different and easier from those that came after them. Jamila, who came to the Netherlands at a young age, described 2015 as a turning point, after which the attitude of the Dutch society towards refugees changed:

If you talk about Syrians now, then Dutch people think: 'those refugees that have come here and don't do anything, and live off welfare and are not thankful.' Refugees are now often associated with that image. I have not experienced this myself.

Generally, the majority of the respondents showed awareness and knowledge about the refugee crisis and the responses it had stirred up in the Dutch society. As described above, some were aware because they lived through it. But also those arriving in the Netherlands later showed awareness. For example, Basir (8 months) brought up in the interview himself: *"You know the debate that is going on about for and against these flocks of refugees in whole Europe?"* He had first heard about these debates in Germany, where similar processes were happening. Yusuf (8 months) likewise showed knowledge of the refugee situation in the Netherlands before he came: *"In 2015 especially, a lot of refugees came to Netherlands."* He showed awareness of polarization by describing:

In the past, there happened a lot of things. I already knew that. And I think that they [Dutch people] didn't want the asylum seekers center and wanted to close it. Especially in 2015. But at this moment, it is a little bit easier to live in the Netherlands.

The respondents seemed well aware of the critical stance parts of the Dutch society seemed to take regarding the reception of refugees: *"I know many Dutch people are not happy with the fact that there are too many refugees nowadays."* (Salem, 3 years). Interestingly, Salem, who had come to the Netherlands as an international student, was at first not engaged with the refugee topic at all: *"My procedure started four months ago. Before that I was just far away from refugee stuff. I was not following the news about them because it had nothing to do with me."* It was only when he applied for asylum himself that his awareness and interest in the topic grew. Tara (9 months) was also well aware: *"Generally, you know that whenever you go to a country, there are people for and against these things"*. She went on to describe how she deliberately took time upon her arrival in the Netherlands to do research about the position of refugees here, as to be able to position herself better.

There were also some respondents that were quite shocked upon learning about the polarization in the Dutch society. Javad (10 months) and Leila (12 months)

described feeling very welcomed in the Netherlands. They were both shocked when a Dutch friend informed them about the dividedness present in the Netherlands:

She said that some people don't like refugees, because they think they are bad for the country. After that, I became sad. And when we went home, I cried. [...] I said that I didn't think that people in the Netherlands are racist. I think they like refugees. But she wanted to say: 'Not all of them are good. Some of them don't like you. Be careful.'

Ava (13 months) had a similar response when someone from VluchtelingenWerk told her about the situation in the Netherlands:

I know that there are some groups that are against the refugees. [...] He told me that: 'you have to know that Dutch people don't like refugees anymore. So you can try to build a life here, but you won't reach anything.' And because of that I went back to my room and cried.

Apart from demonstrating the emotional impact that learning these things can have on refugees, these instances also show how respondents sometimes were at first unaware of the negative stances towards refugees in the Dutch society. In both cases, they had to be informed about the situation because, based on their own experience, they had come to the conclusion that the Dutch are very welcoming. Later in this chapter I will further unpack how the respondents experience the assumed polarization in the Dutch society themselves.

The theoretical framework showed how different researchers put forward an image of two opposing groups in the Dutch society: one that opposes the reception of refugees and one that takes action to help the newcomers (e.g. Den Ridder et al., 2016; Kloosterman, 2018; Mensink, 2018). The image of two groups greatly opposed to one another was also described by some of the respondents. Nadia described this contradiction as follows:

There are two different parts of the society. One is very open minded and trying to help. Like, there are so many volunteers, even in Greece, who are trying to help refugees. And also here in the Netherlands. For example, there was an event where people collected coats and warm clothes for refugees in Greece. [...] That is a sign of solidarity among the Dutch society towards refugees. [...] But at the same time, there are also some people, mainly on social media, who are hostile about or against refugees.

Others also described observing and experiencing two different sides in the Dutch society: "On the street, I can pretty much tell that either they want, or they don't want refugees." (Amina). Tara also described observing the two different attitudes towards refugees, purely based on people's actions:

From people's actions you experience that some people are for or against refugees. [...] Even if you wouldn't tell them, I think they would recognize you as a potential refugee. And they will start to treat you as a supportive person or not.

Several respondents reflected on the role of social media as contributing to and as a platform of the dividedness present in the Dutch society. Especially those opposed to refugees' reception in the Netherlands seemed vocal on social media: *"I don't experience polarization in my immediate surroundings. Just on the internet. [...] What I read and saw there was drama. Even people wishing refugees would die, even though they don't know them. I find it horrifying."* (Jamila). Amina made the same observation: *"I see that the left wing is more vocal on the street and face to face. But the right wing is vocal on social media more. They can't express their real opinions in real life."* She went on to describe how she wished she would encounter these opinions in real life more often, as to be able to have conversation with them. Furthermore, some respondents depicted the media themselves as the source for negative opinions about refugees: *"Some people don't know anything about refugees. [...] They just look to the media and see: 'they are economic refugees.' And they just copy this opinion and believe it."* (Kamil).

Overall, polarization thus seems to be observed by the respondents, as many describe two opposing groups in the Dutch society. In the theoretical framework some nuancing notes regarding this dichotomy were made. For example, the research of Den Ridder et al. (2016) and Mensink and Miltenburg (2018) showed that there is also a large group situated in the middle that takes a more neutral stance, struggles with different aspects of the issue and/or has doubts about the topic. Apart from Nadia, who did mention a middle group (*"There are people who are already open minded about it. And people who are definitely not. And then you have this grey place."*), not many respondents reflected upon this fact.

From the above can be seen that refugee students were capable of extensively reflecting on complicated processes like polarization. Generally they were knowledgeable of the broader European and Dutch responses to the refugee crisis and the dividedness this oftentimes produced in society. Some respondents even reflected on polarization as a broader theme in society, beyond the topic of refugees. Some did research and sought knowledge on the refugee situation in the Netherlands, and many reflected on potential sources and explanations for the polarization (e.g. the role of the media). These results show a certain degree of reflexivity and critical thinking among the respondents, which is indeed generally thought to be characteristic for students studying at higher educational institutions.

6.2 Positive experiences in the Netherlands

Following these reflections of the respondents on polarization in the Dutch society, this section will now dive in to how the respondents experience this themselves, starting with positive observations and followed by negative ones. I so shed light on what polarization actually looks like in the lives of refugee students, and sketch the

(at times challenging) situations and encounters they have to manoeuvre while integrating into the Dutch society. We will so gain a more comprehensive and complete understanding of how refugee students experience polarization.

First of all, nearly all the respondents felt welcomed upon their arrival in the Netherlands: *“As a general feeling, I feel like I am welcomed here. And they want to help you.”* (Tara). Many respondents echoed this general impression of the Dutch society being open and welcoming to refugees. Several instances were described where respondents were invited into the homes of Dutch people: *“We invited to have dinner with them. We were invited to birthday parties. We were really included.”* (Nadia). Dutch people were often described as kind and friendly: *“They say ‘hello’ and ‘good morning’, with a beautiful smile. Just positive. And I feel very nice because of this friendly and lovely behavior.”* (Leila). Several respondents described feeling supported and encouraged in their interactions with the Dutch. For example, Ammar recounted different instances where Dutch people told him: *“You can start a new life here, step by step. This country is good for you and you have a good academic certification. [...] Don’t worry about your past in your country. You can make your future in this country.”*

Furthermore, a couple respondents compared their experiences with reception in the Netherlands to that in different European countries. They often had less positive experiences in these countries and emphasized how the Dutch are generally welcoming and open towards foreigners: *“I love Dutch people. Based on my own experiences interacting with them. They are so kind and polite, especially to the foreigners. When I compare them to other nationalities, they are super nice. And less racist too.”* (Salem). Javad described a similar observation:

When I talk with my friends or family in Iran, I always say that I like the Dutch people, because they are so welcoming to strangers. I had a different experience in Poland. There they are not so welcoming and even racist. But not here.

Besides feeling welcomed by the Dutch people they encountered in society, some respondents also expressed feeling welcomed by the Dutch government through its regulations towards refugees. For example, Farid mentioned how his family’s procedure went very fast, they got appointed a house quickly and received a loan for Dutch language classes, which made them feel welcomed in the Netherlands. It should be noted that Farid arrived in the Netherlands before the peak of the refugee ‘crisis’, causing his experiences to probably be different from those that have arrived since. Indeed, many respondents still in procedure were very frustrated with the lengthy asylum procedures. Nonetheless, throughout many interviews gratefulness was expressed towards the Dutch government and their willingness to receive refugees.

Besides feeling welcomed and accepted in the Netherlands, many respondents also described witnessing a willingness of Dutch people to help them with different matters. It was mentioned several times how the respondents had received help

from Dutch people with learning the language, as was the case for Leila: *“When I was in church, I didn’t have any contact with Dutch people. One time, Hannie came to me, and she asked me: ‘What can I do for you?’ I said: ‘Maybe teaching Dutch’. After that we became very close.”* Some respondents also received help from different organizations, like VluchtelingenWerk, UAF or Taalcoach. These organizations would help them get connected to Dutch people, companies and language schools.

The respondents were also aware of groups of people protesting and standing up on their behalf. Ava described an occurrence where people in Zutphen came together to fight against the closure of the asc there. Javad referred to an event where different pastors, including his own pastor in the Netherlands, kept a church service going in a church in The Hague, to prevent the deportation of an Armenian refugee family.

These described experiences likely shape and form the respondents’ (mostly positive) opinions and views of the Dutch society. These positive expressions and experiences can be surprising when considering the situation described in the theoretical framework, where it became obvious that the Dutch welcoming climate leaves much to be desired (e.g. Kloosterman, 2018). However, this is not the full picture yet. The following section will show that the respondents also have had negative encounters in the Dutch society, subsequently influencing their view of it.

6.3 Negative experiences in the Netherlands

As described above, the respondents generally spoke in very positive terms about the Dutch society and first and foremost mention positive encounters. However, at the beginning of this chapter it was concluded that the respondents do have an awareness about part of the Dutch society being critical or even opposed to refugees residing in the Netherlands. This section will discuss if the refugee students have experienced any negative encounters themselves, as to gain further insight into how this group specifically experiences polarization.

Initially, almost all of the respondents indicated that they themselves had never or hardly ever encountered negativity towards refugees: *“I don’t have any bad experience or got in like a bad situation. And I also didn’t experience bad words about the refugees, about me.”* (Yusuf). As was shown before, many did have the knowledge that these negative opinions and encounters existed, even though they themselves did thus not seem to have experienced it in real life: *“There are plenty of people who have experienced negativity. So I will not say: ‘everything is fine.’ Because I know it exists, you cannot deny that. That it doesn’t happen to me doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen at all.”* (Nadia).

However, upon asking further questions, almost all of the respondents could mention incidents where they did encounter some form of negativity towards refugees: *“With time, I have also met people that are not very welcoming to foreigners and black people”* (Samira). Even though it is not always as clear, respondents generally do pick up on unfavorable attitudes towards refugees. Upon hearing some stories about the municipalities lack of help to refugees, Sarina concluded: *“I felt like*

there were some signs that they cannot accept us as refugees". Ava described being able to read it off of the faces of people:

We see in the faces of the people that they hate us. It was one of the biggest reasons that I became depressed here. Because when I went to shop in the supermarket I saw that they really hated me. [...] I heard that in Wassenaar, all people are against the refugees. [...] And when I went to the church, I heard that they asked the people to write letters to the municipality, because they don't want the refugees to come back next winter.

Ava did add that her experience in Wassenaar was very different from that in Zutphen, where she experienced the people to be more open and welcoming towards refugees. Like Ava in Wassenaar, Farid also experienced not being welcomed, by his neighbor: *"The neighbor downstairs wasn't really comfortable with our arrival. [...] When the neighbor came to us to say hi, he didn't really want to shake hands. He was upset or something."* These examples stand stark against the earlier described sentiment of the refugees feeling mainly welcomed in the Netherlands.

Furthermore, the respondents did also describe many instances where the negativity towards refugees was very clear and articulated, directly confronting them. Oftentimes these were quite harsh statements: *"I am not a fan of Dutch people who say: 'if you don't like it here, go back to your country.' I would never say that in my country, to someone who is not Syrian. (Amina). Hakim was even told this by an employee from COA: "He told me to go back. He said: 'go back to your country, why are you here?'"*

Apart from questioning refugees' being here, some respondents were also faced with remarks about the unfairness that tax money is used for the reception and integration of refugees. For example, Salem was confronted about this by a colleague: *"He was saying that: 'I am not happy that I have to work and pay taxes, and my government spends this tax money on refugees who come here.'" And Amina was told by the friend of her neighbor that she voted for the right-wing party Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy) because: "The policy of the Netherlands is soft towards refugees, so we need a right wing party to balance that.'" In each of these cases a negative and unwelcoming attitude towards refugees comes forward.*

Several instances were also described where, surprisingly, staff from refugee-related organizations made negative statements about refugees' presence in the Netherlands. Jamila critically observed how the IND does not treat asylum seekers fairly. Additionally, at the refugee-organization she worked at, one of the coordinators did not treat the people they were helping well: *"The way she dealt with the people was terrible. [...] You work with refugees and asylum seekers, but you actually hate them. How you treat them is inhumane."* Leila likewise had a detrimental encounter with a worker from COA. Leila and Javad had asked for help with transportation costs to be able to go to university in Utrecht: *"One man said: 'I*

didn't send you an invitation to come here. I think Iran is safe. I don't know why you came here. So no, you can not go to university.' And I was shocked."

Furthermore, the open and friendly behavior of the Dutch people earlier described, was contrasted by experiences of distant behavior. In respondents' attempts to reach out and make contact, several noted Dutch people taking a step back. Amina experienced this at her university, as she felt excluded and avoided by fellow classmates. Yusuf described a situation where he noticed a severe change in behavior when some Dutch friends found out that he was a refugee: *"I was together with my Dutch friends. We had great conversations, we laughed. But all of the sudden, when they learned that I am a refugee, that stopped. They didn't want to talk to me anymore."*

Basir likewise experienced a stark contrast between different attitudes towards refugees. One night he was stuck at a train station and asked someone for help. He met a man who was willing to go out of his way to drive him home. When the man's daughter entered the car, she portrayed a less welcoming and more hostile stance:

The daughter came in the car and said: 'who is this guy?' I told them I was living in a refugee camp. Then the daughter said: 'I don't know what this damn man is doing in Holland and why they are not closing the borders.

Additionally, instances of discrimination came forward. Some respondents described being treated differently because of the way they looked: *"Every person who does not have the same color or language, or who doesn't share the same cultural background, there is hostility against them."* (Nadia). Some respondents noticed being treated differently because of wearing a headscarf, or having a different skin color. Salem, for example, got picked out of the line by employees three separate times to check if he had scanned all his groceries.

Interestingly enough, although the respondents generally spoke in positive terms about the welcoming climate of the Dutch society towards refugees, they thus did not lack encounters with those critical even opposed to their being in the Netherlands. It is possible that the positive, personal encounters of the respondents with Dutch people overshadow the criticism that is present (and they have thus experienced to be present) in the Dutch society.

It remains difficult to say to what extent these both positive and negative experiences are unique for refugee students specifically. It was noticeable that the encounters they described took place in various locations, largely outside of their study context. It is possible that, as their refugee-being became less relevant and obvious in an international study environment where they blended in with other (international) students, this was not the context in which polarization regarding their refugee-being was necessarily experienced. The influence of studying at university thus seems to be limited on their experiences with polarization. However, their strong preference for the acculturation strategy 'integration' may contribute to

their broad range of experiences with polarization. All showed much effort to be in and engage with the Dutch society, which increases their chances of coming into contact with both side of the polarized Dutch society, as opposed to those refugees with little to no engagement.

6.4 Responses to negative encounters

The previous two sections shed light on what polarization actually looks like in the lives of refugee students. In this section I will turn to discuss the ways in which they cope with and respond to the negative stances towards refugees they encounter, so to gain insight into how refugee students manoeuvre polarization. I end with a reflection on the degree to which this response is thought to be specific to refugee students.

Firstly, through their telling of negative experiences, it became clear that the respondents did not remain indifferent about them. The negative remarks seemed to really affect them: *“For a whole week, and maybe even for a longer time, these things can smash you.”* (Basir). For Ava, the hostility she felt was even one of the main reasons she became depressed. Many were also shocked by the negative comments and encounters: *“When a person talks to you, against you, you are shocked. You can not have a reaction. You are just shocked.”* (Basir). Some struggled to find the words to respond. Encountering negative opinions would often drive them to want to do something, but they didn’t always know how to: *“I think every time when I read that kind of news that I need to do something about it. But I still don’t know what I can do. It bothers me a lot.”* (Nadia). Some even held back to go into discussions about the refugee theme: *“If I want to respond, then it will be a hot debate. Because it is his or her opinion, that is okay. We can not change it with just one discussion.”*

The above paints a picture of shocked, hurt and confused respondents. Although this is indeed part of the picture, there were also many respondents who did open their mouths. For example, Amina responded back with bold words: *“I get a bit furious when a Dutch person says: ‘go back to your country.’ I would say: ‘don’t stick your nose in our business.’ If you are going to talk this way, I am going to talk this way.”* Some respondents also undertook action when they encountered harmful behavior. For example, Hakim send a letter to his gym to address the unfairness and discrimination he experienced there, to which was responded with an apology. And Jamila made sure the director of the refugee organization she worked at was aware of the negative behavior towards refugees of her coordinator. This portrayal of refugee students will be further unpacked in the next results chapter, which shows that refugee students position themselves as agents of change.

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents indicated that they would like to have discussions with the people who hold negative opinions about refugees. And some actually do: *“When I encounter these people, I do say something about it. For example, I would say: ‘you are very against refugees, but why are you against them? Why do you have this fear?’”* (Jamila). For more respondents the negative encounters stir up critical questions towards these people. For example, Azar showed understanding

for the fact that Dutch people are not happy with the amount of foreigners entering their country. However, she asks critical follow-up questions: *“You don’t want more foreigners, sure. But are there any other option? Are you helping to create other options, or are you just saying ‘no’ and this is it?”* In the same sentiment as many other respondents, she also expressed: *“I am always interested in the ‘why.’”*

Besides these encounters stirring up questions, many respondents also showed understanding for the negative and critical views people in the Dutch society can hold. For example, Salem was confronted by his colleague about tax money going to refugees, he showed understanding: *“If I put myself in his shoes, he’s right. I wouldn’t feel very happy with that either. But on the other hand, it’s helping a person who needed help. It is very complicated.”* Yusuf also expressed understanding the reactions of people taking a step back from refugees: *“If you don’t have positive feelings about immigrants or refugees in your background, then that’s understandable. You avoid yourself from dangers.”* This lack of understanding of and familiarity with migrants and refugees was also mentioned by Tara as grounds for understanding people taking a step back. She described a situation she encountered with her classmates:

I told them the truth that I am still waiting for my residence permission. Everyone in the group was shocked and I felt they took a step back. I can’t blame them for that really, because if I were in their place and someone came from a far country, and my only information about that country is about killings and terrorists, I would maybe feel the same. I would take a step back.

The responses to polarization shown in this section seem well fitting with the target group of refugee students. The questions they raise and attempts to understand others hint at a group familiar with and capable of critical thinking. Their previously described reflections on the presence of polarization in the Dutch society add to this image. It shows a certain degree of analyzing and critical reflection, skills typically encouraged in the context of higher education and, as this data suggests, characteristic for refugee students.

6.5 Conclusion

The previous chapters described how refugee students navigate and strategize their integration trajectories and the role of education in this. This chapter outlined the context in which this finds place: a society that is divided, and can even be deemed polarized, on the asylum and migration debate, as well how refugee students experience and manoeuvre this context. First, it was concluded that all respondents had some level of knowledge and awareness about polarization in the Netherlands, in which their length of stay seemed to be an important factor influencing the depth of their reflections. The large majority was well aware of the critical stances present in the Dutch society, while there were also some respondents shocked to learn about this. Overall a high level of critical reflection and thinking about polarization was observed among the respondents, indicative for university students. Regarding their own experiences with polarization, they strongly emphasized feeling

welcomed in the Dutch society. They mentioned many positive encounters with people that showed an open, accepting and helpful stance towards refugees. It cost them more difficulty to describe encounters with those against and/or critical of refugees, but throughout the interviews more and more of these examples came to light; examples of observing unfavorable attitudes, harsh words or being treated differently. The respondents were thus familiar with both sides of the refugee debates, which illustrates how polarization took form in the lives of the refugee students themselves. Subsequently, this chapter showed that the negative encounters deeply affected the respondents, stirring up both shock and hurt, as well as a drive to stand up for themselves, ask further questions and understand these viewpoints. These responses seem well fitting with the target group 'refugee students', as being able to critically think about complex processes as polarization and question and seek further understanding for different viewpoints requires a certain ability for critical thinking and reflexivity; skills typically encouraged in those studying at higher educational institutions.

7. Research results III: Narratives and identity

In the interviews the respondents have put forward narratives about their lives, showcasing their interpretation of certain events as well as displaying how they position themselves in relation to their experiences (Schuff, 2019). Where the previous chapters described refugee students' experiences and reflections, this chapter will analyze their narratives as to be able to interpret how they speak about and position themselves in the Dutch society, specifically in relation to polarization. Analyzing this positioning of refugee-students is thought to bring forth interesting insights, as this group, because of their engagement in higher education, might speak about their integration process in a specific way. Observing how refugee students position themselves in relation to the asylum and migration debates, as well as compared to other refugees, requires an approach that focuses on and analyzes their narratives, which is what I do in this chapter. Additionally, a focus on refugee students' individual narratives contributes to diversifying 'the refugee experience' and so helps to step away from generalizations (Eastmond, 2007). First, this chapter will pay attention to these generalizations, or dominant narratives, about refugees present in the Dutch society. Then, it will dive into respondents' individual narratives, showing how the respondents position themselves in relation to the dominant narratives. Next, by further observing their narratives, the process of identity de- and reconstruction will be explored. Specific attention will be given to their student-being, and how this factor might cause them to position themselves differently in comparison to other refugees. In this way, an answer is sought to the sub question: *'How do refugee students narrate their migration and integration trajectories and position themselves in the Dutch society?'*

7.1 Dominant narratives

Before diving in to how respondents narrate their own experiences and trajectories, I will shortly outline the dominant narratives about refugees that are present in the Dutch society. The theoretical framework showed that dominant narratives are often deficit-oriented and disempowering, as they portray refugees as, for example, helpless victims, potential criminals and burdens to the host society (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). During the interviews with the respondents it became clear that they had observed similar narratives in the Dutch society. These seemed most prevalent in the media and among those critical of refugees' being here.

Firstly, some respondents pointed out that refugees are seen as a threat to national safety: *"People think they are criminals. They can't contribute anything to the society."* (Nadia). This corresponds with Kloosterman's (2018) finding that one in five Dutch people believe refugees are a threat, as opposed to fifty percent not supporting this claim, hinting at the polarization described in the previous chapter. Nadia reflected on the fact that (Islamic) Arabic countries in general are often perceived as a threat. Furthermore, besides a threat to national safety, some respondents also pointed out that refugees are often perceived to be a threat because they would steal away jobs and houses from the Dutch.

This links to a following point that is experienced by the respondents to be part of the dominant narrative: the belief that refugees are a burden to society. The theoretical framework indeed showed that a common image of refugees among the Dutch is that of 'fortune seekers', coming to the Netherlands to profit from social security benefits and housing (Den Ridder et al., 2016; Ipsos, 2018). Salem observed this as follows: *"Mostly people think that if you become a refugee, it helps you. You get a house, they support you to study, you don't even have to work, you get benefits, they say. These are the things many people consider."* Besides profiting from the Dutch system, the general image of refugees being lazy was also prevalent.

Certain stereotypes of what refugees are seemed quite persistent in the Dutch society. Amina described an image of the characteristics refugees are often thought to have:

I think the picture of a refugee is: brown, Muslim, uneducated, wants money, only can speak Arabic, the girls always have headscarves, the women are always oppressed. That is not true. We have a lot of powerful women in the Middle East. Not all the Middle East is the same.

While describing these images, many respondents were inclined to dispel and bring nuance to them. As Amina does here; she opposes this common image of refugees by emphasizing the strength of women, as well as the diverseness of the Middle East. She hereby contributes to fighting against the tendency to label 'the refugee experience' as a uniform condition, while disregarding individual and contextual differences (Eastmond, 2007). Later on, this chapter will show how many other respondents also contributed to diversify 'the refugee experience' by putting forward individual narratives.

Furthermore, some respondents encountered people that assumed refugees are uneducated and unknowledgeable. For example, Ava had several encounters with Dutch people who assumed she was not familiar with certain devices, like a washing machine. In the dominant narrative refugees are also often portrayed as poor, suffering and inactive people. Kamil observed this narrative as follows: *"I think people have this image of refugees, as this kind of suffering persons."* These images seem in line with the victimhood perspective described in the theoretical framework, which views refugees as passive victims without capabilities. Even though researchers increasingly emphasize the importance of viewing refugees through an agency lens (Korac, 2009).

These examples of dominant narratives that the respondents observed concerning refugees, clearly reveal the earlier described polarization present in the Dutch society. There is a group of people present in society that upholds the image of refugees being a threat to national security and the job and housing market and a burden to society, as well as viewing them as uneducated, inactive, 'free riders', victims, etc. This image is oftentimes enhanced by the media. Considering the

polarization present in the Dutch society, this dominant narrative as experienced by the respondents is unsurprising. Such a narrative suits the image of a society divided about the presence of refugees.

7.2 Individual narratives

The views and experiences of refugee students stand central in this thesis. The theoretical framework showed that paying attention to individual narratives can help diversify experiences involved in refugeehood, while also contribute to dispelling some of the stereotypical descriptions of ‘the refugee experience’ (Eastmond, 2007). As shown above, the respondents in this study were aware of certain dominant, stereotypical narratives about refugees in the Dutch society. This section will show how, through their individual narratives, they attempt to dispel and bring nuance to this.

Through the interviews it became clear that many respondents felt called to stand up against and change the dominant narratives they would encounter in society. Hakim seemed especially driven to do so: *“Refugees are just normal people. This is what I am trying to tell everyone I meet here. I don’t see myself as different. I am the same. I am liberal. I am open-minded. I just face extraordinary situations.”* Upon encountering stereotypical ideas about refugees in society, he would feel inclined to put forward a different, more humane image of refugees.

Other respondents also attempted to dispel the stereotypes they encountered. Tara explained that she regularly came across incorrect ideas about her country of origin, Syria. She described how Dutch people would often think of it as an underdeveloped country in the desert, because this is the image the media shows. She would try to counter this image of refugees coming from underdeveloped countries: *“They were surprised when I started to tell them about my country. That I finished my education, have good English language.”* Likewise, when Farid and Amina encountered stereotypical images of Arabic men, they countered this: *“This picture of Arab men, is like Saudi men. You know, with this headband. But no, we are not like that”* (Amina). Farid added: *“Yeah, we are normal. We are not from another planet. It’s not like that.”*

Most respondents did not mind to take the task upon themselves to explain their individual narratives for the purpose of dispelling incorrect images present in the Dutch society: *“I don’t mind explaining. Maybe it is something they need to learn. If they didn’t know, then I am happy to be the first person to make them aware”* (Samira). Salem showed himself willing to share his story of refugeehood to oppose the common association of refugees with criminality:

I don’t mind to be an example to them. To tell them about the reason I am here. Like, I did not want it. The situation brought me here. I am not happy with the current situation. But I am human, just like you. If I can change and challenge their idea of what a refugee is, make it better, then yes, I would definitely do that.

As can also be seen from the above examples, respondents would often counter these narratives by emphasizing the humanness and normalcy of refugees, bringing similarities to the foreground. For example, when Hakim encountered a lack of understanding from his classmates about his refugee-being, he explained to them: *“I am a refugee, this is what happened to me.’ I told my story. Because I want them to learn about that. And I want them to see that refugees are just ordinary people, with extraordinary situations.”*

Many respondents thus seemed motivated to change the dominant narrative in society. Telling their own individual narratives to do so was seen as key. Besides explaining their own stories and views, a prominent idea among the respondents was that actual contact with refugees could be a huge factor in dispelling, or at least nuancing, stereotypes. Farid mentioned: *“Do not prejudice me. Just get to know me, and know that I am not as bad as in your imagination.”* Yusuf explained seeing the attitude of his classmates change from reserved (taking a step back upon learning he was a refugee), to more open: *“Over time, they see that I am not dangerous for them. And I am smiling, I am friendly. After that, they want to get more in contact with me.”* He was one of the respondents most convinced of the fact that contact between Dutch people and refugees could contribute to a more positive narrative about refugeehood. He described that, as the Dutch population and refugees naturally come into contact more, through becoming colleagues or classmates e.g., the dominant narrative would become *“softer”* over time. This idea is very similar to intergroup contact theories, which claim that contact between different cultural groups can enlarge mutual understanding, in turn leading to the possibility of preconceptions changing to more nuanced and experience-based perceptions (e.g. Van de Vijver, 2009).

Upon being confronted with dominant narratives about refugeehood, likely present because of the polarization on this theme in the Dutch society, the respondents thus put forward a different narrative. They present their own stories, emphasize their humanness and challenge and dispel dominant, stereotypical ideas about refugees. The following section will further dive into how respondents position themselves in relationship to these dominant narratives, according to their individual narratives.

7.3 Positioning

As refugees tell their individual narratives, they place themselves vis-à-vis the dominant narratives present in society. At times these stories can align with the dominant ones, and at times they can challenge them (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). The individual narratives refugees produce about their lives thus display how they see and position themselves in society. How the respondents in this research do so, will be explored in this section.

Many respondents positioned themselves as agents of change: capable and willing to fight for realizing certain changes in society, especially regarding inequality. Quite some respondents were involved with organizations or initiatives focused on improving the lives of refugees in the Netherlands. Nadia was involved with the

Refugee Point at Leiden University, as well as other initiatives: *"I am supporting every initiative which is helping people in general, and especially refugees. So I am everywhere. We are demanding that these things should happen. And if you are demanding, you should help."* Furthermore, Jamila worked at an organization focused on helping asylum seekers and refugees, and was involved with the work of VluchtelingenWerk and UAF. Help was also provided through less formal paths. For example, Samira was committed to informing others at the asc about opportunities for education and helped them with registration. Different respondents also expressed having the desire to fight for the rights and wellbeing of refugees in the future. For example, Hakim mentioned: *"I want to stand for refugee rights. And really shed light about the reasons why people flee."* Several respondents mentioned wanting to go back to their country of origin, when the situation allows, and set up Ngo's and/or businesses to help improve and rebuild these countries.

Furthermore, a couple instances were mentioned where respondents were given the opportunity to add to the migration debate in a political setting. Nadia was invited to a meeting with the right-wing party VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), to discuss integration policies. She spoke her mind critically there. She addressed the fact that integration is valuable and should happen, but she saw that the way the party approached it now was simply assimilation: requiring refugees to adjust while not showing a willingness to do so themselves. Likewise, Farid freely spoke his mind when he was invited by a member of parliament to discuss migration flows. The focus of the discussion was how to stop the influx of migrants and refugees in the long term, whereby increased border control was mentioned as possible solution. Farid responded by posing critical questions, as he did not agree with this plan. Both respondents were knowledgeable enough about the topic to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way, even posing critical questions. This, at least partially, confirms the assumption that was made at the beginning of this research: the fact that refugee students studying at higher education institutions are able to critically reflect on processes of migration and integration, which are part of their own trajectories as well.

Moreover, adding to their positioning as agents of change, the respondents were generally not afraid to speak up about unfairness and inequality they encountered in their journeys. Throughout the interviews, many expressed their frustrations with and injustices of the asylum procedures. For example, Samira confronted a worker from COA about the, in her eyes, unfair rule that asylum seekers are not allowed to work during their procedures: *"I told them that they should make it possible that, if asylum seekers stay longer than six months, they should have the possibility to work. Just give them the freedom to do it."* Hakim also expressed great frustration and disappointment with the asylum procedures in the Netherlands: the fact that it takes a long time, while not being allowed to do anything, resulting in depression for those waiting. He had often spoken up the COA and IND, both in person and through e-mails, yet he did not feel heard or taken seriously. During the interview, he was eager to tell me about these frustrations, expressing a hope for things to change when more people would become aware of the dire situation in

acs's. I felt the need to somewhat modify these expectations, as, although attention is given to it, the goal of this research was not to capture and identify the unfairness present in the Dutch asylum system.

Hakim most likely felt comfortable speaking out because he had substantial knowledge about his rights as a refugee: *"I know that they cannot cut their assistance to me as an asylum seekers. That would be humiliating for international human rights."* In his case, his knowledge mostly stemmed from his work experience with refugees in Lebanon. Many other respondents also showed to be knowledgeable about their rights, most likely stemming from the high education they had obtained. In this way, education can thus seem to help in speaking out and so positioning oneself as an agent of change. Simultaneously, the 'agents of change' narrative counters the dominant narrative of refugee as passive victims, unable to fend for themselves (Korac, 2009). By positioning themselves as people who can make a difference, the respondents clearly do not conform to this victimhood narrative: *"I speak out and face COA with their rules. I face them because I am strong and I don't believe that I am from a minority. I have rights. I can use the law and my rights."* (Hakim).

Many of the respondents seemed aware of their qualities and skills, and confident in what they had to offer, also here in the Netherlands. Being educated often contributed to this confidence: *"If I have a good education, I can be useful. I can do something to bring improvement to society."* (Ava). Likewise, Kamil expressed wanting to use his education to do something meaningful: *"Not just for myself, also for the people. Because I feel that, because I am educated, the other people need my mind to help them"*. These statements exemplify that many respondents positioned themselves as valuable members of society, capable of contributing. They see education as a crucial factor that enables them to make a change.

The theoretical framework showed that, at times, refugees internalize the dominant narratives present in society (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Analyzing the narratives the respondents constructed about themselves has shown that this is not the case for these refugee students. They position themselves as agents of change: showing effort and willingness to make a difference in society. They are not afraid to speak out against unfairness they encounter and position themselves as valuable members of society who have something to offer. Their education seems to significantly contribute to this positioning.

7.4 Identity construction

Besides being able to counter the dominant narratives present about refugees, refugees' own narratives also give insight into how they (re)construct their identity in relation to new contexts. The theoretical framework has shown that refugees must recreate a coherent narrative of their lives in their post-migration contexts (Selimos, 2018), because they often lose elements of their identity in the process of forced migration (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). This section will reflect on how the respondents go about this process of the *"re-negotiation of the self"* (Eastmond,

2007), paying special attention to the extent to which being a refugee and student are part of their identity.

7.4.1 Identity deconstruction

Through their narratives, it indeed became clear that most respondents experienced a loss of parts of their identity, and they had to rediscover and re-build who they were in the context of the Dutch society. Salem was one of the respondents who struggled the most with identity deconstruction. He had first lived in the Netherlands for a couple years as an international student, before having to apply for refugee status. The transition was rough for him:

It was very awful. For me, it was from like hero to zero. I was working, my financial situation was really good, I had my own place, I had everything I needed. I was quite happy. But then I lost many things. In Iran, with my family, and the things I earned here.

The experience of becoming an asylum seeker caused Salem to lose much of what represented his social identity. As Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003) have shown: this temporarily reduces refugees to their physical selves. In the process of applying for asylum, certain aspects can be re-attached and new ones added, such as the label 'refugee'. The fact that Salem's identification card changed when he received refugee status, literally shows this change of identity: *"When I was living here as a student, my identity card was different than the one I have now. Now it says: 'this is not a travel document.' And the refugee status is mentioned."* Even though largely accepted, the fact that being a refugee was now a substantial part of their identity proved to be challenging to most respondents. The ways respondents coped with the label refugee will be further elaborated on later in this chapter.

I observed further identity deconstruction among by the respondents, as they expressed 'feeling different' from the person they used to be in their country of origin. For example, some described a lack of self-confidence:

We are not the person we used to be in our home country. Because you don't have the self-confidence that you had in your home country. Personally, sometimes I feel very different, because my mind was not working sometimes. You are very fragile. And you are not the person you used to be. (Basir)

It was a common theme that the respondents felt stripped of the identity they used to have, including their former student life: *"The difficult thing is that you can not feel like a normal student, with a normal student life. Because I experienced the normal student life in my country, and here it is way different. Because you have a lot of difficulties."* (Tara). Even though being a student was a part of their identity they regained through following education here, some respondents thus still expressed feeling different from their former student-identity. As well as feeling different from the students around them: *"I am shy, because I think that I am different from all the students here. I have something less. They have more than me. So I don't feel confident*

in the class and I cannot focus." (Ava). Especially in education environments where the respondents would be the only foreigners, they would feel different: *"I felt that I was a refugee, because I was the only stranger, or foreigner. All of them were Dutch people"* (Yusuf). In the theoretical framework, Mosselson (2006b) indeed described how refugee students would often report being seen as different. Salem experienced this as the teacher welcomed him as 'the refugee student': *"Then everyone in the class turned back to me. I felt so uncomfortable at that moment. I felt like the black sheep. You know, different."* Similarly, even though Farid described himself as well integrated in the sense of working and studying, when considering his social life he felt like an outsider: *"In the sense of the social aspect, feeling comfortable, feeling myself, I feel like this is not my country. I do not feel comfortable in the Netherlands."* Identity deconstruction can thus be observed in respondents in their expressions of feeling different from their former selves and from others, from feeling shy, uncomfortable, different, a black sheep and a lack of self-esteem.

7.4.2 Identity reconstruction

The theoretical framework has shown that, in the process of integration, refugees find ways to rebuild- and shape aspects of their identity: identity reconstruction (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). This section will show what this regaining of (lost) parts of identity looks like for the refugee students in this study.

One mentioned way in which the respondents experienced to regain part of their identity, was through practical issues like obtaining possession of a Dutch bank account, social security number, or transportation card: *"Having those things makes me feel more Dutch. It gave me more identity. That is very important for me, to be more seen. I am trying to build a new identity for myself."* (Hakim).

Additionally, developing feelings of belonging can be a part of this process (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). The majority of respondents, to different degrees, indeed indicated experiencing a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. For those who had grown up here this is a logical conclusion, as they had built much of their life here: *"I feel more Dutch. I don't know anymore about the past actually. What I know about myself is all in the Netherlands."* (Nadia). But also some of those who had not been in the Netherlands for so long experienced feelings of belonging, for which building social networks seemed of high importance: *"Making friends has really helped me to feel like this is my home. After three months I already felt that I am at home."* (Yusuf). Though most respondents expressed experiencing some feelings of belonging, the majority did not (yet) feel like the Netherlands was their home: *"Here, I sometimes feel that it is pleasant. But, home is something different."* (Javad).

Another way of rebuilding one's identity is by (re)enrolling in education (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Education indeed played an important role in helping the respondents rebuild parts of their identity. Being able to engage their minds academically again allowed them to (re)connect with the part of themselves that identifies as a student: *"I feel like one of the students"* (Hakim). Several respondents mentioned how studying helped them regain the confidence that they had lost

during migration trajectories: *“When I find myself in class, I am another person. Everything is better. I gained some confidence back through studying, to have a normal life.”* (Ava). Leila also expressed how following education helped her feel confident again about the person that she is. At university, she was able to think intellectually and use her mind:

I feel that I am alive. My mind works, my thinking works and I can gather a lot of new information. My ears love to hear these things. My eyes love to see these things. And my mind wants these kinds of challenging things.

Many respondents described how valuable and positive the experience of being able to follow education in the Netherlands was. Besides being able to engage their minds, it also gave them a sense of normalcy again: *“I feel like I can just be a student. I can act like I was in my home country, more similar to that. I feel like I have a normal life.”* (Tara). In the theoretical framework, Mosselson (2006a) also pointed this out as one of the main ways in which education can provide opportunity for healing for refugee youths. The sense of normalcy was enhanced by the fact that the university oftentimes provided an international environment, where respondents felt like they could blend in: *“Here you are just a student. You can live as normal people. [...] We can blend in with the international students. We can hide.”* (Ava).

Furthermore, the possibility to identify as a student again enabled the respondents to shift away from the undesired ‘refugee’ label: *“Being a student in that class, I don’t feel the refugee label.”* (Sarina). Again, the international environment that the university oftentimes provided helped here: *“In the second program, I didn’t feel that I am refugee. Because everybody is a stranger, coming from different countries. They also don’t know this country. And because of that, I didn’t feel like I am refugee.”* (Yusuf). This finding seems to be in line with Mosselson’s (2006a) conclusion that being able to recognize oneself as a student gives room to move away from the undesired identity of refugee. Additionally, seeing education as a key to (regain their) higher status, as was found by Sleijpen et al. (2016), was also mentioned by some respondents in this study. For example, Amina pointed out a certain status that is obtained when studying: *“You get respect when you say: ‘I am a student and I am working. That gives a good feeling.”*

7.4.3 The refugee label

Apart from the above-mentioned way of re-establishing their identity, the respondents were also confronted with the fact that they were now considered ‘refugees’ in their new context. According to Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), this is almost always an undesired label, especially to those with high human capital. Through the respondents’ narratives in this study it became clear that, generally, they did identify as refugees: *“I am a refugee. I am not going to deny it, you know. It’s true.”* (Farid). All recognized that, upon their arrival in the Netherlands, the label ‘refugee’ was thrust upon them, which did not leave them unaffected. This label has different indications, e.g. bureaucratic or social. Most expressed a strong repulsion against the refugee label in general: *“The label refugee bothers me a lot. I have never*

predicted to come as a refugee to Europe. I don't like this label, it is a weakness for me." (Leila). The negative connotations attached to the label made it very undesirable for the respondents. Ava described how she had a certain idea of what a refugee was before she became one, adding to her aversion to the label:

For me it is terrible. Because before I thought that a refugee is a very poor person, who comes from a very poor country, with a bad situation, to a country for eating something, for having a place to live. I think that a refugee is that. And now I am a refugee too.

Furthermore, some respondents felt that the label emphasized and added to the divide between 'the Dutch' and 'refugees', or 'the other': *"I don't like when they say: 'you are refugee', or 'you are other'. Because just this word means that you are different than me."* (Kamil). Another eye-opening example of the downside of the label refugee and how it can create gaps between groups was put forward by Nadia:

One time I gave a presentation or lecture about being a refugee. Later, when I reflected back, I wasn't sure if I was happy about this meeting at all. Because you get the label of refugee. You are standing in front of people, as a refugee. And I am not sure if that is the right way to get people to feel more included. It all seems positive, but, in the end, it was them against me, as a refugee. This label was bothering me a lot at the end.

Her example shows how, even in attempts to be inclusive, a focus and emphasis on only people's refugee-being can actually lead to feelings of exclusion. The fact that this part of their identity is put in the spotlight emphasizes the differences between 'us' and 'them', instead of bringing them closer. By her example, I, as a researcher, was also confronted with the fact that I approached my respondent group (refugee students) according to a categorization that was here found to be problematic.

Their unease with the term translated to generally being reserved about sharing their refugee-being with others. Most respondents said they do not bring it up in conversations, unless they are asked. Some felt uncomfortable and shy to tell others, indicating a sense of shame about being a refugee. Others' reasons to be reserved were because they did not want to be treated differently, solely because they were refugees: *"I tried from the early beginning not to go to this topic, because I wanted them to treat me as my mind and as myself."* (Tara). When asked about their being here, a handful of respondents would say they were here for study purposes, exemplifying again how their student-being can be used to distance themselves from their refugee-being. This unease with the refugee label reflects a general reluctance and unwillingness of the respondents to embrace this as part of their identity. Across the line, when people seemed genuinely interested in their backstories, almost all respondents would share about their refugee-being. But a general reluctance remained present.

Though largely experienced as an undesired label, the respondents for the most part did seem to internalize the fact that they were refugees. They spoke about themselves in these terms, often emphasizing the legitimacy of their being here. They often referred to the fact that they had good reasons for being here, that they were forced to flee that going back was not an option for them: *“Because of the things that happened to me, I can not go back to my country. It is risky. If I go back, my life would be in danger.”* (Salem). Generally, it was emphasized that people would not flee their countries if they didn’t have to: *“No one wants to flee their country. If they are coming here, they have a reason.”* (Nadia). To gain insight in the respondents’ ideas about who should and should not be granted refugee status, I presented them the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines a refugee as:

... a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2011: 3).

With few exceptions, all respondents agreed with these conditions: *“I agree with that terminology. If you don’t have any serious reason, I think it should be impossible for you to come here as a refugee, and to get social benefits.”* (Yusuf). It thus was important to the respondents that these guidelines be followed, so that only those with serious reasons to flee their country will be able to obtain refugee status. As mentioned, they position themselves to be part of this legitimate group.

7.4.4 Distinguishing differences among refugees

However, they also seemed aware that not all those applying for asylum conform to these conditions. Throughout the interviews it was observed that, at times, the respondents called into question the legitimacy of certain groups of refugees in the Netherlands: *“Of course not all the people are saying the truth.”* (Salem). Some expressed frustrations with those coming without, in their eyes, legitimate reasons: *“There are some people in the camps, maybe half of them, they are very bad. They are abusing the asylum seeker system.”* (Hakim). Economic reasons were mentioned as frequent but illegitimate reasons to come to the Netherlands, and it was observed that this group of asylum seekers lies about their reasons for coming here by, for example, pretending to be gay or to be persecuted because of religious beliefs. The respondents were thus quite firm about the need to follow the criteria for obtaining refugee status closely.

In addition to the (il)legitimacy of certain asylum claims, through the narratives of the respondents it also became clear that they described and positioned themselves differently than they did other asylum seekers. Oftentimes, at times caused by some prompting, differences between themselves and other groups of asylum seekers were emphasized. Hakim pointed out the following differences between himself and others at the asc:

What helped me with integrating well: being gay, being educated, acceptant, liberal, being not religious, being open minded. I see different people living in the asc. They are really afraid to get out, because they are afraid to lose their culture, their traditions, their ideologies. That is why they prefer to stay inside, in their own group, not to be outside the groups.

This fear of losing one's own culture was put forward several times as an explanation as to why certain groups of refugees and asylum seekers choose to stay in their own cultural groups, not getting involved with the Dutch society. When reflecting upon reasons for this lack of interest and effort for integration, compared to the high motivation of the respondents themselves, explanations as being young, highly educated and open-minded were put forward.

Additionally, some respondents detected a general unwillingness of certain groups of refugees to put effort towards adapting: *"They don't want to learn the language for example, or do the hard work."* (Ava). Farid was one of the respondents who expressed his frustrations with this group most vigorously: *"There are a lot of Syrians that I completely do not like. It's like they don't want to participate in the society. They are very lazy. They want everything, like social benefits and stuff. Really, I don't like it."* Amina made similar statements, again positioning herself as different from these refugees: *"I am trying to study, and build my own future, and I am working, and they are only going out, smoking, doing nothing, living on social benefits. I don't have any respect for this kind of people."* A certain unfairness was expressed by the respondents concerning this group, and they clearly distanced themselves from them.

The respondents thus very clearly drew a line between themselves and 'other refugees'; those who are here without legitimate reasons, those who stick with their own cultural groups, those who show a lack of willingness and effort to integrate, and those profiting off the Dutch asylum seekers system. They positioned themselves as distinctly different from this group, emphasizing their legitimacy and their efforts for integration and building a life here.

7.5 Conclusion

In this results chapter the respondents' narratives were observed, as to come to new insights about how they speak about and position themselves in the Dutch society. The chapter firstly focused on the dominant narratives about refugees that the respondents observed and experienced to be present in the Dutch society, which included refugees as threat, burden, 'fortune seeker', lazy, uneducated, poor, etc., attesting to the observation of Rye and Tuvilla (2018) that dominant narratives are often deficit-oriented and disempowering. By telling their individual narratives, and therein emphasizing their humanness, the respondents attempted to dispel and nuance the dominant, stereotypical ideas about refugees. Their narratives subsequently demonstrated how they see and position themselves in society. Firstly, many respondents positioned themselves as agents of change: fighting for a

more equal society, as they were involved with different social initiatives and (political) discussions. They were not afraid to speak out against unfairness they encountered during their migration trajectories, and spoke about themselves as valuable members of society, with much to offer. By positioning themselves in such a way, they thus provided a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative that views refugees as helpless, passive victims and burdens to the host society. The fact that the refugees in this study were highly educated played a significant role in positioning, as their education contributed to their knowledge, qualities and skills that were helpful in the fight for change and (high-level) discussions they partook in.

Furthermore, their narratives gave new insights about their process of identity de- and reconstruction during their migration and integration trajectories. A loss of (parts of) their identity was indeed experienced by the respondents, as they experienced a shift in status (*"from hero to zero"*), struggled to accept their new status of refugee, felt different from who they used to be and from those around them, lacked self-confidence and generally felt shy and uncomfortable in their new setting. Through the process of integration, the respondents seemed to find ways to rebuild aspects of their identity. At times this happened through practical ways, like gaining a Dutch social security number or bank account, and/or by developing feelings of belonging, which all respondents to some degree experienced. Furthermore, the possibility to follow education seemed of great importance for the re-shaping of respondents' identities. Being able to feel like a student and engage their minds academically, helped gain lost confidence back and re-connect to their identity as a student. It helped them to move away from the undesired refugee label, which many struggled with to embrace as part of their new identity. However, the respondents did speak about themselves in terms of being a refugee, thus to some degree accepting it as a (temporary) part of their identity. Interestingly enough, they often emphasized their own and other refugees' legitimacy for being here, while contrasting this with a different group of refugees whose legitimacy they called into question. They narrated a clear divide between themselves and this group, that was described as showing a lack of effort to integrate, and as lazy and profiteers. They clearly positioned themselves as different from this group, whereby their own age, level of education and open-mindedness were put forward as distinguishing factors.

8. Conclusion and discussion

The main aim of this research was to map refugee students' perceptions of and experiences with polarization in the Netherlands, and the ways they perceive and navigate their integration trajectories in the context of this polarization, especially concerning their education. The experiences and viewpoints of refugee students studying at higher educational institutions were placed front and center in this thesis, as to create space for their voices to be included in the asylum and migration debates, something that up till now is largely missing in research. Refugee students were thought to be able to critically reflect on these debates and their position therein, hence the focus on this group specifically. In this conclusion I answer the research questions introduced at the beginning of this thesis, which all add to the answering of the main research question: *'How do refugee students perceive and strategize their integration trajectories in relation to the Dutch asylum and migration debates?'* I will do so by summarizing and connecting the results presented in the previous chapters. These results will also be placed in light of the earlier presented existing literature on this topic, as to be able to reflect on and demonstrate the added value of this research.

8.1 Refugee students' integration

The first results chapter focused on capturing how refugee students navigate and strategize their integration processes in the Netherlands, while leaving space for their own interpretations of and reflections on the term integration. The respondents were largely aware of the difficulty of capturing the term in one agreed upon definition, pointing out key issues like its broadness, diverseness, complicatedness and endlessness. They voiced critical remarks about the both in society and in policies widely supported idea that integration is a one-way process, in which the responsibility to adjust lies with the refugees and differences are seen as problematic (e.g. Castles et al., 2002; Leerkes & Scholten, 2016; Omlo, 2011). Though the respondents did not lack the motivation and commitment towards adjusting to the Dutch society, they strongly emphasized the importance of integration requiring adaptability and openness not only from refugees, but from the host society as well. In discussions about the meaning of integration, refugee students thus align themselves with the majority of the academic literature, which stresses the fact that integration is a two-way process (e.g. Castles et al. 2002; Korac, 2003; Strang & Ager, 2010). Their reflections confirm the assumption that this group is familiar with and capable of critical thinking about the concept and process of integration. Including refugee students' voices in the discussions on integration is an important contribution of this thesis. By giving substantial attention to their views on and experiences with integration, my research adds to the understanding of social processes from the perspective of key actors, and so responds to the call of several researchers who deem it essential to capture these viewpoints (e.g. Castles et al., 2002; Korac, 2003; Strang & Ager, 2010).

Upon speaking with the refugee students, it became apparent that the migration and integration trajectories they described significantly differed from each other. This

confirms the theoretical position taken at the start of this thesis; that integration consists of various overlapping processes that translate into different trajectories and outcomes, instead of a singular, universal process with sequential stages (Castles et al. 2002). Though the stories were thus diverse, there was a consistency observed in the acculturation strategies they chose to pursue; namely, integration. All the respondents were motivated and showed effort to adapt to and become part of the Dutch society, by, for example, desiring and pursuing contact with the Dutch population, while also still placing value on maintaining their own culture.

The use of Berry's (1992; 2001) theory on acculturation strategies proved useful here, as it put forth two important issues to be considered when looking at how refugees cope with a new context and culture, without assuming all choose the path of integration. However, the theory also has its limitations, as the strong focus on 'cultural maintenance' and 'contact and participation' may cause other important issues to be overlooked. Furthermore, the placement in one of the categories may promote a simplification of the complex lived realities of refugees. Even though the respondents in my research all fit the category 'integration' best, in practice they still go about their acculturation processes differently. Additionally, the theory may overemphasize the degree of strategizing that takes place prior to acculturation. The very likely possibility should be considered that, at times, refugees navigate and cope with situations as they come up, without much prior conscious strategizing. Besides these critical remarks, the theory still proved useful for capturing the main sentiment and general attitude of the respondents regarding adjusting in the Netherlands.

Explanations for the finding that all refugee students in this study chose the path of integration can partly be found in the theories of Nee and Sanders (2001) and Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), who argue that the degree and type of acculturation depends largely on refugees' human and social capital. The respondents in this study also arrived with forms capital, as everyone, besides those who had come to the Netherlands at a young age, had already followed higher education in their countries of origin, and some had working experience and/or spoke the English language. These forms of capital determine refugees' ability for language and culture learning (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003), and so help explain the respondents' strong tendency for the acculturation strategy 'integration'. What remains surprising is the fact that also the eleven respondents that were still in the middle of their asylum procedures were committed to becoming integrated in the Dutch society. I have put forward several explanations for this, including the confidence many had about being able to stay in the Netherlands, an unwillingness to waste time during the long asylum procedures, knowledge of the importance of integration and a generally positive view of the Dutch society, igniting a motivation to become part of it. These newly generated insights add to our understanding of refugees' choices and movements with regards to their integration trajectories. To what extent these reasons are specific to refugee students, or perhaps are common among those awaiting residency permits, would be an interesting research direction for the future.

8.2 The role of education in integration

Adding to our understanding of refugee students' integration strategies and trajectories, the second results chapter paid specific attention to the role of education. It was shown that education is of significant importance to the progression of the integration of refugee students. The existing literature on the subject indeed points to education as a central way for refugees to reestablish their lives (e.g. Morrice, 2009; Mosselson, 2006a). The results of this study are in line with this observation, as it was shown that refugee students pursue and see education to bring them closer to their dreams and goals, as a way to spend their waiting period in the asc doing something valuable, and as a path to become integrated into the Dutch society. They were highly motivated to seek out and pursue educational opportunities, even though access to education often proved to be a struggle. Though deemed of high value for their integration, their experiences at higher educational institutions came with significant challenges that they had to wrestle with. The refugee students' refusal to give up in light of these struggles shows great willpower and perseverance, and demonstrates another side to the previously mentioned finding that many (aspiring) refugee students drop out of or do not even start their studies because of significant hurdles (SER, 2018). For the students in this study, higher education was found to form a path towards integration. The university and colleges proved to provide refugee students with the opportunity to come into contact with Dutch people in an organic way, as well as get familiarized with the Dutch culture at a central Dutch institution.

Capturing the views and experiences of refugee students who follow higher education is an important contribution this thesis makes, as the majority of current research focuses solely on the compulsory education period (Morrice et al., 2019; R. Student et al., 2017), and several researchers have pointed out the need for qualitative research on refugees' experiences in higher education (Federe, 2010; Morrice, 2013). The respondents of this study were, with an average of 28, generally older students, who had either already completed a degree in their country of origin, or whose education had been interrupted due to their flight. Little was known about the experiences of this group specifically. By giving insight in their views and experiences I therefore contribute to filling this gap and create a more complete narrative of refugees' lived experiences in higher education.

An important point of discussion concerning the role of education in refugees' integration trajectories is the matter of accessibility, since only those able to access education profit from its benefits. Several studies (e.g. De Voogd & Redjopawiro, 2018; Teunissen, 2016), as well as this research, pointed out significant hurdles in refugees' access to education, which can prevent them from enrolling (SER, 2018). Indeed, the respondents in this thesis had to actively seek out opportunities for education themselves; it was not a given. Their previous experience with higher education and their possession of the English language formed an advantageous starting point for gaining access to education, and their efforts and determination paved the way. In line with Glastra and Vedder (2009), this points to the possibility

that refugees studying at higher educational institutions might be more than averagely resourceful and persistent. It is likely that those with less motivation or resourcefulness have a harder time accessing education. Though education has proven to be a valuable path to integration, it is possible that this thus only seems to be the case for a select group of refugees. This points to the need for greater attempts to make (higher) education accessible to a larger portion of this group, as well as the need for research focused on accessibility of education for different groups of refugees.

8.3 Refugee students' views on polarization

The main research question of this thesis asks how refugee students perceive and strategize their integration trajectories in relation to the Dutch asylum and migration debates. As can be seen above, the first two results chapters captured the respondents' strategizing efforts regarding their integration trajectories, with a specific focus on the role of education. To add to further answering the main research question, it was of importance to consider the context in which this takes place: a society largely divided, and even deemed polarized, on issues of asylum and integration. How refugee students experience and manoeuvre the polarization in the Dutch society was discussed in the third results chapter. Reflections of refugees are largely missing from discussions on polarization, a gap that this chapter contributed to filling.

An important finding of this chapter was that there was a general awareness present among the refugee students about polarization in the Dutch society regarding the refugees. Though some were surprised to learn about the negative stances present, the majority was aware and knowledgeable about the division the influx of refugees had brought about in the Netherlands. Especially those who had been here for several years already had extensive thoughts on different social processes that reflect division among the Dutch population, even beyond the migration debate. Many respondents observed and experienced two groups opposing each other; those in favor of refugees, and those with a negative stance. They were familiar with both actions taken to help refugees, as well as demonstrations opposing their reception, as is in line with observations from e.g. Kloosterman (2018), Mensink (2018) and Leerkes and Scholten (2016). Many critically pointed to the media as a source of and feeding the division, as it was especially observed that those with negative viewpoints were vocal there. These observations substantiate the assumption made at the beginning of this thesis that refugee students are able to critically reflect and think about the processes surrounding them, like, in this case, polarization.

Their abilities to critically reflect on the society around them likely also shaped their response to encountering polarization. Though negative encounters affected them personally and emotionally, it also stirred up a desire to change something, and some indeed spoke and stood up in unjust situations they encountered. In the chapter on narratives it even became clear that they positioned themselves as agents of change. The respondents expressed a general interest in the 'why' behind

unfavorable views of refugees and asked critical follow up questions. They were willing to have conversations with those opposed to their being in the Netherlands, so, from both sides, understanding could be gained about each other's positions. This wanting to gain and showing understanding of viewpoints other than their own, seems in line with the assumed ability of refugee students to critically reflect upon the world and themselves. It would be interesting to look into if this curiosity and ability to critically reflect upon polarization is unique for refugees studying at higher education institutions specifically, or if it is a more general attitude among different groups of refugees.

Further insights on how refugee students manoeuvre the polarization in the Dutch society were highlighted in the fourth results chapter, which focused on narratives. Here, it was observed that the dominant narratives about refugees that the respondents experienced to be present in the Dutch society, were greatly in line with the aspects of the debate described in the theoretical framework. They described that in mainstream views refugees were often portrayed as a threat to national safety and the job and house market, a burden to society, as fortune seekers, lazy, uneducated, and poor and suffering victims. This image supports the theory of Ryu and Tuvilla (2018), who argue that dominant narratives about refugees are often deficit-oriented and disempowering. Furthermore, my results add to their theory that this dominant narrative is also actually felt and observed by the people whom it is about; the refugees themselves. The refugee students reflected critically on these dominant narratives and often felt the need to dispel and bring nuance to them. They often did this on the basis of their own individual narratives, which were unpacked in the fourth research question, focused on analyzing the narratives of refugee students.

8.4 Refugee students' narratives

The last results chapter zoomed in on exploring refugee students' individual narratives regarding their integration trajectories, as well as shedding light on the ways in which this group positions themselves in the Dutch society. A chapter solely attributed to the analyzing of refugees' narratives was deemed necessary, as, in addition to capturing their reflections on polarization, analyzing their narratives made it possible to capture the ways in which they talked about themselves in relation to this polarization.

First, I observed in this chapter that the refugee students countered the dominant narratives present in the Dutch asylum and migration debates, by, through their own individual narratives, putting forward a different and more diversified picture of what refugees are. This is in line with Eastmond's (2007) theory that states that individual narratives can reveal the diversity behind over-generalized notions of refugeehood. The refugee students countered the dominant narratives by emphasizing the humanness and normalcy of refugees, and underlining similarities. Telling their individual narratives, as well as increasing contact between refugees and the Dutch population to create space for these narratives to be told, were seen as important factors in dispelling, or at least nuancing, stereotypes. By creating

space for refugee students' individual narratives, my research contributes to creating a greater awareness and appreciation for their diversity of experiences, and so helps to overcome the strong tendency to label 'the refugee experience' as a uniform condition. Moreover, though this is a valuable contribution in and of itself, I have shown how these individual narratives help to challenge the dominant narratives and stereotypes present in society, which is especially important in the context of a polarized society.

Furthermore, by observing refugee students' narratives, insight was gained into how they position themselves vis-à-vis dominant narratives. The refugee students provided a counter narrative by positioning themselves as agents of change, showing effort and willingness to fight for realizing certain changes in society, specifically for refugees. They often spoke out against the unfairness and inequality they encountered. They positioned themselves as valuable members of society, by confidently speaking about what they have to offer in terms of qualities and skills. This confidence was largely rooted in the respondents' education, which they saw as central in being able to realize change for themselves and others. Their student-being thus significantly influenced the way in which they positioned themselves in the Dutch society.

Analyzing how refugee students (re-)established their identity in the new context of the Dutch society gave further important insights into how they position themselves. In the Netherlands they experienced a loss of certain aspects of their former identity, e.g. by feeling different from their former selves. In line with the theory of Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), this thesis found that, in the process of integration, refugees found ways to rebuild aspects of their social identity and statuses. Following higher education helped respondents significantly with re-acquiring important parts of their identity. Through education they were able to 'feel like a student' again, and so reconnect to this part of their identity. Engaging their minds academically helped them to gain back lost confidence in their (study) abilities, their lives and themselves. Having the opportunity to follow higher education thus allowed the respondent in this study to identify and position themselves as students, whereby their refugee-being became less relevant, especially in the international context of the university. They largely experienced this to be beneficial, as the negative connotations of the 'refugee label', as well as the divide it produced between themselves and the Dutch population, made it a highly undesirable one. This finding is in line with the previously described literature on this topic that states that the awareness of the low status of refugees is especially acute among those with high human capital (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). They distanced themselves from the negative stereotypes related to the term, while also positioning themselves as significantly different from the refugees who did comply to these connotations, e.g. a group whose legitimacy they questioned, that showed a lack of effort to integrate, and profited from the Dutch system.

8.5 Methodological reflections

In this section I will reflect upon the methodological choices made in this thesis and the possible implications these might have had on the results. A first point of reflection is the fact that only a small portion of the refugee students interviewed was officially enrolled in university; most of my respondents partook in higher education as part of the WURth-while or InclUUsion programs, and were still in the process of obtaining their permanent residency. The relatively short time these respondents had spend in the Netherlands and at Dutch universities might have limited their capability to reflect upon the social processes happening in its society. Furthermore, certain struggles specific to asylum seekers might have been overrepresented; such as studying while living in an asc and being uncertain about the future. It is likely that the research results would have looked different if the sample had included more students in possession of permanent residencies.

Furthermore, the fact that the focus groups only consisted of two people was a weakness of this research. Though I had planned bigger focus groups, in practice this was difficult to realize, due to e.g. differing study schedules and last minute cancellations. Though respondents were still able to react to and prompt each other, which highlights the maintained added value of these small focus groups, real group discussions on e.g. the meaning of certain concepts were not realized. This could be an interesting approach to take in future research studies, especially with this target group, since refugee students have shown to critically reflect on the topics they are presented with. As well as possibly extending this research to other target groups, like refugee students following more practical education, or those willing but unable to access education.

Finally, the length and unique timing (i.e. during the global COVID-19 pandemic) in which this research took place might have influenced the results. Fortunately, I was able to hold all interviews and focus groups in person in the months before the pandemic. This significantly aided my research, as I was still able to attend social gatherings to meet my target group, organize focus groups at university, visit an asc and conduct interviews in public spaces. The writing phase of my thesis largely took place in a lock-down situation, which I found affected my mental health and added additional stress and uncertainty. Furthermore, this thesis was written over an extended amount of time, due to health challenges and a seven-month internship I did after the data collection phase. One of the downsides of this thesis break was that I became more distanced from and forgetful of the interviews I conducted. On the upside, I was able to view my data with a fresh perspective. Taking a step back actually helped me to see some results more clearly.

8.6 Personal reflections

Writing this thesis has both been an enlightening as well as a challenging process, for both educational and personal reasons. It was the first thing I picked up after a study-break of over a year due to health reasons. I found being able to focus on academics a welcoming distraction, which helped me to feel like a student again, something I seem to have in common with my respondents. In this section I will

proceed to reflect upon how I experienced conducting this research, as well as on some of the lessons I have learned throughout.

Despite a long-standing interest in the refugee-topic, I had hardly had any personal contact with asylum seekers or refugees prior to this research. I had read a lot about this group, and subsequently certain images and expectations had grown in my mind of what refugees were like. I am quite used to being in international environments (in church and university), but somehow I (perhaps subconsciously) expected that meeting refugees would somehow be different from meeting other internationals. I realized quickly that refugees are indeed people 'just like me'. Their stories might be different, but at the core, they are also just young adults trying to figure out life; studying subjects they find interesting, plowing through difficult courses, changing majors, finding ways to make friends, envisioning a future for themselves. In this way, this research caused me to deal with my own preconceived ideas about refugees.

Furthermore, in my role as a researcher, I found the fact that, like my respondents, I am also a student at university, quite helpful. It created a certain relatability and contributed to an open and honest atmosphere during the interviews. At times I also struggled with this role. Hearing the respondents' stories did not leave me unaffected, something that ahead of time I underestimated. Many (have) face(d) significant challenges and dire situations, and I often felt compassion for them. At times I found it challenging to stick to my role as objective researcher and continue with the planned questions and topics to discuss.

Regarding my academic skills, writing this thesis has helped me take steps in coping with perfectionism in an independent research project. At times I struggled with wanting to perfect certain sections before moving on to the next. I have learned that, in research, sometimes it can be useful to just take the next step. Previous parts can always be returned to and/or altered, and stepping away from them can actually bring clarity. Furthermore, in hindsight, the concepts I chose to work with were quite large and complex. With them, I covered a lot of ground, but at times it proved challenging to remain concise. Lastly, I found that writing the results chapters was a smooth process that I enjoyed. Having to take a step back afterwards, fitting topics together and finding the red line, proved to be more of a challenge. Keeping the overview without getting lost in the (interesting) details is a challenge I hope to keep growing in.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview guide

Interview guide
Personal data <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Age- Country of origin- Length of stay in the Netherlands- Living situation
Transition <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Can you describe your journey from when you first arrived in The Netherlands, to where you are now?
Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are you currently studying? And where?- Can you describe the education you've followed before coming here?- Why did you want to pick up studying (again)?- How has the process of entering university in The Netherlands been for you? How did you handle the challenges you encountered?- How have you experienced following education here?- Are there things you struggle with at university? How do you deal with these things?- Can you describe the contact you have with your classmates?- Do you tell people you are a refugee? How do people tend to respond when you tell them?- Having a refugee background, do you feel different than other students in your class?
Polarization <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do you engage in conversations about the refugee crisis? What about in the context of the university?- Can you describe some of the different opinions about the refugee situation that you have encountered in the Dutch society?- Have you encountered negative or critical opinions about the refugee crisis? How do you respond?- In your experience, how do Dutch people receive/treat refugees?- In your view, what characterizes the Dutch refugee debate?- Some would characterize the Dutch society as being polarized on the topic of refugees. How have you experienced the Dutch society when it comes to this?
Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none">- In your view, what is integration? Questions for elaboration:

- What would you consider to be a successful integration?
- To what degree do you think refugees should adapt to the Dutch society?
- Do you see a role for the host society as well?
- What are your thoughts on people maintaining their own culture in the Netherlands?
- Can you tell me about your own integration process in the Netherlands?
- How do you view education to play a role in your integration process?

Identity

- To what extent do you feel at home in the Dutch society?
- How do you feel about the label 'refugee'?

Social

- How did you go about making contacts after arrival in the Netherlands?
- How would you describe your social network here in the Netherlands?
- How much contact do you have with native Dutch people? How important do you find this?
- What is your view on maintaining relationships with people from your original culture? To what extent do you maintain these contacts yourself?

Legitimization

- Would you say you are well adapted to the Dutch society? Can you explain?
- Do you have thoughts about why some people seem to adapt to the Dutch society better than others?
- The Refugee Convention states that, strictly speaking, only people with a well-founded fear of being persecuted, or who are fleeing war or violence, have the right to come here. What are your thoughts on that?
- Do you think that some of groups of people deserve to be in the Netherlands more than others? What about people who do (not) show effort to integrate?

Future perspectives

- What are your hopes for your life in The Netherlands?

Appendix B: Overview respondents' information

#	Name	Age	Lives in	Home country	Time in NL	Study
R1	Azar	23	Almere	Iran	5 years	Electrical engineering at HvA
R2	Nadia	22	Leiden	Azerbaijan	10 years	International studies at Leiden University
R3	Sarina	30	Almere, asc	Iran	1 year	Course InclUUsion: Intercultural communication
R4	Yusuf	29	Weert, asc	Turkey	8 months	Course InclUUsion: Dutch Law
R5	Hakim	28	Veenendaal	Lebanon	7 months	Course InclUUsion: Dutch Law.
R6	Jamila	25	Leusden	Iraq	13 years	HBO Social Work,
R7	Farid	27	Den Haag	Syria	5 years	Linguistics
R8	Amina	26	Den Haag	Syria	5 years	Middle Eastern Studies
R9	Leila	34	Deventer	Iran	12 months	Course InclUUsion: Psychosocial development and problems
R10	Javad	33	Deventer	Iran	10 months	Course InclUUsion: International economic and business economics
R11	Ava	25	Zutphen, asc	Iran	13 months	Course WURth-while: Chemistry
R12	Ammar	36	Wageningen, asc	Iraq	8 months	Course WURth-while: Basic technology for environmental management
R13	Basir	31	Wageningen, asc	Afghanistan	8 months	Completed two WURth-while courses, related to development
R14	Tara	27	Wageningen, asc	Syria	9 months	Course WURth-while: Argumentation skills
R15	Salem	34	Wageningen, asc	Iran	3 years	Course WURth-while: Marketing and Management
R16	Kamil	30	Wageningen, asc	Palestine / Syria	4 years	Course WURth-while: Physiology and development in agriculture
R17	Samira	29	Gilze, asc	Cameroon	2 years	Course WURth-while: introduction to cell-biology

Appendix C: Coding scheme

Main concept	<i>Focused coding</i>	<i>Initial coding</i>
Integration	1) Language	Learn language Human capital: language
	2) Culture	Adjusting to culture Positive about NL Cultural maintenance Cultural exchange Cultural know-how Differences
	3) Contact	Contact with society Contact with classmates Value contact with society Effort for contact Contact = solution Contact to integrate Difficulty establishing contact Social support Contact own nationality No contact
	4) Two-way process	Role refugees Role host society Effort to integrate
	5) Struggles	Not feeling at home Waiting Depressed / traumatized No help Refugee status Critical of integration system Lack cultural know-how Uncertainty Being limited Asc
Education	6) Changes	Different education system Study change Diploma evaluation Study/ career interruption Education environment
	7) Strategize	Opportunity for education Strategize education Education as integration Importance of education

	<p>8) Obstacles</p> <p>9) Motivation</p>	<p>Effort for education Human capital: education, skills Plan for future</p> <p>Not flexible Language Refugee worries/ problems Requirements Limited options Finances Distance</p> <p>Keeping busy Connections Experiencing university Future Integration Battling depression Knowledge</p>
Polarization	<p>10) Positive experiences</p> <p>11) Negative experiences</p> <p>12) View on polarization</p>	<p>Welcoming refugees Accepting refugees Helping refugees Experience of recognition Surprised reactions Interested</p> <p>Distant/unwelcoming/hostile/ inhospitable No negative experience Experience of exclusion Social media Discrimination Response</p> <p>No polarization Two extremes Middle group Understanding negative views Knowledge of crisis Awareness of polarization Discussions refugee crisis</p>
Identity	<p>13) Refugee label</p> <p>14) Re-building identity</p>	<p>Identification as refugee Open about being refugee Undesired label Reserved about being refugee</p> <p>Dutch culture shaping identity</p>

	15) Identity deconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feelings of belonging Identifying as Dutch Identifying as student Feeling different Low self esteem
Narratives	16) Deservingness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legitimate refugee Agreement with standards Critical of asylum system Invalid refugees Difference between refugees
	17) Dominant narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited language Foreign Afraid/ threat/ criminals Othering Burden Uneducated Weak/ victim Stereotypes
	18) Individual narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispelling stereotypes Agents of change Speak up Valuable members Knowledge about rights