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Post-Graduation Transitions: Non-EU International Student Mobility in The Netherlands

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Abstract

This study explores how non-EU international graduates from Dutch higher education institutions experience the transition from study to employment in the Netherlands, with particular attention to the Orientation Year and the subsequent move to the Highly Skilled Migrant (HSM) scheme. Despite an apparent mismatch between the volume of international graduates and actual labor market opportunities, the factors affecting the retention of domestically trained graduates have received little attention. To address this gap, this research will investigate the intersections of labor market entry, migration governance, and the lived experiences of migrant students using the analytical lenses of aspirations/capabilities and temporal governance. Drawing on in-depth interviews with non-EU alumni who are currently utilizing the Orientation Year to seek employment or have made the subsequent transition to the HSM permit, the study highlights the complex and intersecting dynamics of post-study mobility in the Netherlands by foregrounding the tension between the framing of international graduates as desirable talent with the restrictive governance structures that condition their stay beyond their studies.

Relevance to Development Studies

Highly skilled migration is widely recognized as a significant driver of economic growth and development, with migrants being perceived as agents of change, innovation, and knowledge transfer. Within this category, international students and graduates are increasingly viewed as an integral part of highly skilled or 'knowledge migration.' This study takes inspiration from Amartya Sen's (1999) conception of development, understood as a process of expanding the substantive freedoms (capabilities) people have. By critically examining how knowledge-based economies handle mobility through selective and managed migration regimes, the findings of the study aim to add to broader debates in migration and development studies.

key words: international student mobility, study-to-work transitions, The Netherlands, labor market entry, Orientation Year, Highly Skilled Migrant scheme

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Nature of the problem

In academic literature, international students are positioned as 'highly achieved,' 'skilled,' and 'preferred' potential highly skilled migrants with student migration being considered a desirable migration channel (Wu and Wilkes, 2017: 124). Accordingly, many host nations have liberalized their migration regulations to ease the transition of international students to the local labor market, viewing them as economic actors who boost global competitiveness (Riaño et al., 2018). Such facilitation makes it possible "to fill skill shortages with locally trained foreign students who also expand the demand for goods and services and add to gross national production" (Riaño et al., 2018: 283). This 'train and retain' formula encourages students to settle temporarily or permanently by making it easier for them to enter the workforce after graduation (Juter and Sandl, 2008: 403). Similarly, Faggian and McCann (2008: 210) contend that "the ability of a region to maintain its competitiveness depends crucially on its capability to retain its own graduates." As a result, the post-graduation migration decisions of international students have significant implications for nations involved in the global competition for talent.

In line with this background, the Dutch government has an objective to attract and retain talented international students, for which it provides a search year permit, giving non-EU graduates one year to seek employment without requiring a separate work permit. Graduates can apply for the permit for up to 3 years after their studies in the Netherlands. The current form of the 'search year visa' has been in existence since 2016, intended for international students studying in the Netherlands as well as international students who graduated from a top 200 university outside of the Netherlands (Government of the Netherlands, 2025). This permit replaced the previous (2009) 'Regeling Hoogopgeleiden' [Orientation Year for Highly Educated People], which was established with the intention of transforming the Netherlands into a "dynamic-knowledge-intensive economy and to build a strong position in the international battle for brains" (Huijsmans, 2025: 1513). The main difference between the 2009 and 2016 permit is that the newest form combines talent attraction from abroad and talent retention from within the country's graduates under one permit, which were two separate migration schemes. Huijsmans (2025), in the same study, goes on to indicate that the measure of the

Orientation Year only helped realize the government's aim of recruiting talent from non-EU nations to a limited extent. This aligns with the recent study from Nuffic (2023) — the Dutch organization for internationalization in education — which put forth that 6 out of 10 non-EU alumni ended up leaving the Netherlands because they could not get a suitable permit. These outcomes highlight a disconnect between the professed aims of the Orientation Year scheme and the lived realities of graduates navigating their post-study transition.

The present research focuses on the talent retention feature of the Orientation Year rather than talent attraction from abroad as it is concerned with the post-graduation transition of non-EU international graduates who completed their studies in the Netherlands. This emphasis on talent retention is deliberate as it attempts to understand how locally trained graduates already immersed in Dutch higher education and social networks make the transition to the job market. By restricting the scope, the study aims to provide an in-depth examination of how domestic study-to-work transitions are constituted within selective migration governance systems. In the Netherlands, the stay of non-EU international graduates through the Orientation Year visa is non-extendable and conditional, with this group being positioned as migrants with a temporary purpose of stay: 'people of foreign nationalities who enter a country with a visa or who receive a permit which is either not renewable or only renewable on a limited basis' (International Labour Organization, 2022: 6). Classifying certain forms of migration as 'temporary' or 'permanent' is primarily a political and ideological process that reflects states' concerns with preserving their sovereignty by selectively granting rights to certain groups of 'deserving' migrants, especially with regard to the right to citizenship and employment (De Haas et al. 2020: 27).

In the case of the Netherlands, the main option for further residency after one's studies [and/or the Orientation Year] is through the 'Highly Skilled Migrant' scheme (Immigration and Naturalisation Service [IND], 2025). This permit requires employment by a recognized sponsor as well as a minimum salary threshold concerning 'people who can contribute to the Dutch knowledge economy with specific knowledge or skills' (IND, 2025). The requirement for further mobility [through sponsored employment with a salary threshold] ultimately reinforces a 'high-skilled vs. low-skilled' binary as the Dutch government decides who is 'worthy' of remaining in the country by framing graduates based on their perceived talent and contributions to the knowledge economy. Such binary classifications are misleading, as migrants can be found with a wide range of skill levels, and the label 'low-skilled'

devalues various sorts of labor, which frequently entail vital responsibilities such as in the case of care work (De Haas et al., 2020: 30).

I became interested in exploring this topic as during personal talks, I encountered former students from Dutch institutions who are experiencing difficulties in their post-graduation prospects despite their motivation, skills, and advanced degrees. These graduates had additionally been left with uncertainties and ambivalence as temporal governance plays a role in shaping their mobility, illustrating that mobility *for* education is not always an indication of mobility *after* education (Findlay et al., 2017). The use of temporal governance in migration regimes shows that time is one of the most important tools that governments use to differentiate the legal privileges granted to different types of migrants (Stronks, 2022). The paradox of contemporary governments appears to be that they may be accessible and inviting to migrants while simultaneously being repressive and exclusive (Riaño et al., 2018). This dichotomy reflects a larger contradiction inherent to managed migration regimes where inclusion is conditional and shaped by specific eligibility criteria (Hackl, 2022). Policies can either encourage or discourage migration, and foreign students are subject to the impacts of the host country's migration or mobility policy (Gutema et al., 2024: 844) Additionally, even though student mobility is typically marketed as providing students with a competitive edge for their future careers, research on the relationship between student mobility and employability is surprisingly lacking, and little is known about how graduates actually experience this transition stage in their life. While skilled workers' employment difficulties are widely acknowledged in the literature, little is actually known about their job search processes in (re)building career paths (Çolakoglu et al., 2018: 259), an empirical gap to which this study aims to contribute.

1.2. Justification and relevance

In the Netherlands, recent political discourse has shown rising skepticism about migration, and international students are increasingly dragged into this narrative (Kuipers and van der Wal, 2023). This represents a shift in perception as just a few years ago the Netherlands boasted its international and English-oriented higher education profile, whereas now there are serious budget cuts in the direction of de-internationalization (Government of the Netherlands, 2024). As reported by *NL Times*, on 10 October 2025, "Fewer international students will cost the Dutch economy €5 billion," emphasizing how "regions, businesses, and society as a whole will feel significant, negative economic

effects" (NL Times, 2025). The internationalization of higher education matters because it not only contributes to the host country's economic activity, but it also enriches academic environments by fostering cross-cultural learning and knowledge exchange between domestic and international students. This allows international education to move away from emphasizing 'Western' knowledge and dominant ways of overseeing the curriculum (Tran et al., 2023: 1034). Having moved to the Netherlands four years ago for my bachelor's degree, I have witnessed firsthand the shifting perceptions of international students, leading me to argue that this context change not only affects incoming and current international students but also shapes the migration decisions and mobility trajectories of recent graduates.

In the vast bulk of research, international student mobility is generally interpreted apart from other mobilities, with academic literature paying little attention to students as migrants and post-graduate migration literature remaining limited (Findlay et al., 2017; Wu and Wilkes, 2017). The traditional view on student mobility largely relates to the neoclassical perspective on the return-development nexus (Glorius, 2016: 242). In this view, researchers theorize student mobility as part of a life plan that involves returning to the nation of origin with attending university abroad being a device to develop cultural and social capital which can be turned into economic capital upon return to their home country (Findlay et al., 2017). When students migrate, it is generally believed that they will eventually return to their home country upon completion of their studies. However, many look for ways to extend their permits, find work, and become permanent residents (Okunade and Awosusi, 2023). A school-to-work transition is sometimes portrayed as a steppingstone for eventual gradual migration to other nations (Phalapong, 2025: 3). In the same study by Phalapong (2025), he touches upon the 'international unpredictability' felt by international students, understood as an uncertain future between settlement, future mobility, and return.

As this transition period lies between the policy and academic debates of student mobility and labor migration, less attention has been paid to it (Hao and Leung, 2023: 3124). Given this background, there has been minimal research on how international students perceive and navigate the opportunities as well as the restrictions to their mobility while making their post-graduate migration decisions which is a gap I wish to address. This study aims to problematize the blurred binary of 'staying' or 'leaving' (Wu and Wilkes, 2017) by exploring the in-betweenness and ambivalence experienced by non-EU international graduates in this transition stage as they experience it differently than EU/Dutch

graduates. This is because for non-EU nationals, leaving may mean being forced to leave if certain conditions are not met in time. Given that graduation marks a time of many significant changes in the lives of (young) people, this transitional period merits further attention. Therefore, studying this topic at this time will advance our understanding of the complex dynamics shaping international graduates' mobility trajectories within the Dutch context.

1.3. Background of the study

The infographic below from Nuffic (2025) illustrates the labor market access and residency options for non-EU graduates which is useful for understanding the current study's context.

Infographic I:

Infographic 1. Labour market access and residency for non-EEA graduates
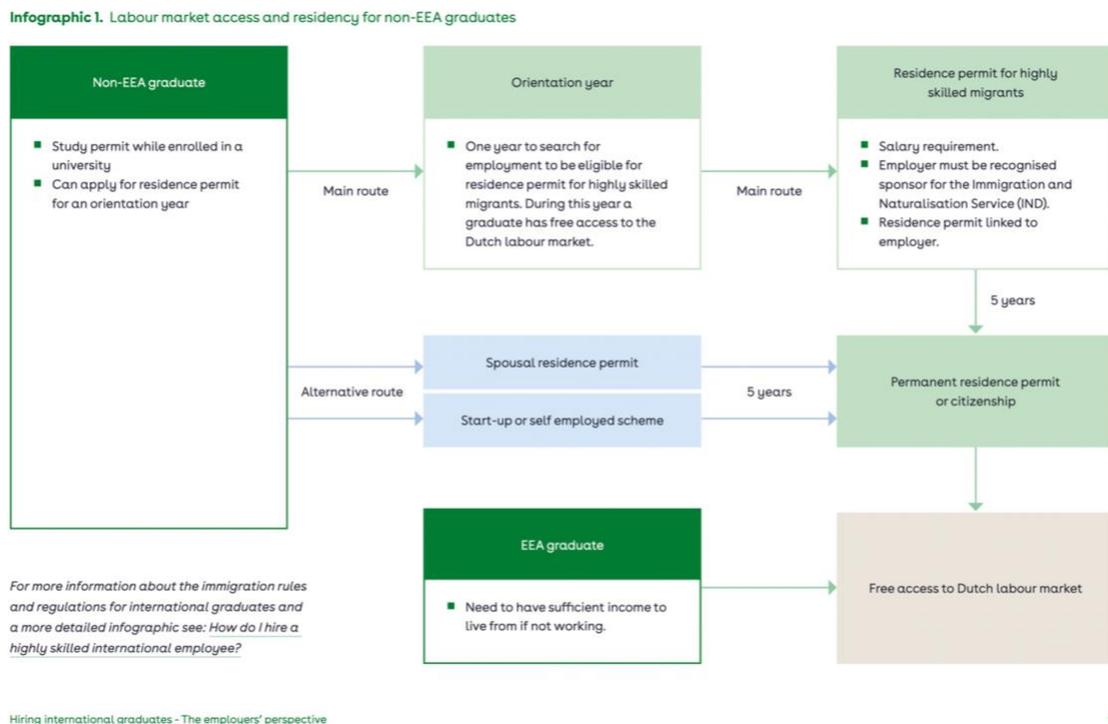
Despite the current political climate in the direction of de-internationalization, the Netherlands still portrays itself as an appealing country for international students, particularly given its knowledge economy and the large share of English-taught programs at both the bachelor's and master's levels (Study in NL, 2025). However, despite the welcoming attitude throughout the university phase, the

transfer to employment and consequently longer-term residence is far more conditional and restrictive. The Orientation Year provides non-EU graduates with a one-year post-study term to find job or establish a company in the Netherlands with the main avenue beyond this being the Highly Skilled Migrant permit, which requires employment with a recognized sponsor [*erkend referent*]. In order to become a recognized sponsor, firms must fulfill certain conditions including proof of solvency and reliability as well as hefty administrative charges [€ 4866 or in the case of no more than 50 employees €2432] (IND, 2025). Given these hurdles, NGOs and small organizations sometimes fail to qualify or choose not to sponsor employees' residency, essentially barring whole sectors from non-EU graduate retention.

Furthermore, the Dutch retention strategy has been primarily focused on STEM graduates, with targeted attempts to retain talent in science, technology, and engineering disciplines (IOM Nederland, 2025). While there are many graduates from the social sciences, arts, and humanities, they have fewer options for remaining in the Netherlands through employment with the Highly Skilled Migrant permit. As a result, while the number of international students remains high, the infrastructure for post-study retention remains rather limited, particularly for those outside of high-demand areas and making wages lower than the HSM salary requirement. This mirrors what scholars call 'selective openness' (Shachar, 2016; De Lange, 2018), in which states deliberately govern mobility by providing opportunities to people who align with certain economic and policy agendas. In the case of the Netherlands, this sense of selectivity can be seen in graduates' post-study pathways, where eligibility and long-term residency prospects are influenced not only by individual skills and merit but also by sectoral demand, income level, and employer recognition. This reveals a paradox in the Dutch migration system whereby international students are welcomed for the internationalization of higher education and increased global competitiveness, yet the migration framework that follows after graduation restricts their potential contributions to the host country.

1.4. Research objectives and questions

This research will be putting the experiences of international graduates in center stage through interviews to better understand how graduates navigate the Orientation Year and how they transition into the Highly Skilled Migrant status (HSM). By looking into the aspirations and realities of the post-

study mobility of recent non-EU graduates in the Netherlands, this research has the overarching aim to foster an understanding for the lived experiences of graduates in this transition period, striving to strengthen support mechanisms that help graduates achieve their professional and personal goals, including successfully entering the Dutch labor market and pursuing broader career and life aspirations.

Research objectives are as follows:

1. To explore how non-EU graduates from Dutch higher education institutions experience and navigate temporary migration regimes (e.g., Orientation Year) against the background of a selective migration governance system
2. To analyze how non-EU graduates respond to structural conditions by negotiating their legal status, employment prospects, and future mobility decisions
3. To offer a contribution to academic and policy debates on international student mobility, study-to-work transitions, and the retention of international graduates for the labor market

To achieve these objectives, this research is guided by the following research question(s):

Research Question:

How do non-EU international graduates experience the transition from study to employment in the Netherlands against the backdrop of a selective migration governance system?

Sub questions

1. How do the timebound and conditional nature of the Orientation Year influence non-EU graduates' perceptions and decision-making regarding their post-study trajectories?
2. How do non-EU graduates respond to the uncertainty experienced during their post-study transition?

1.5. Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the nature of the problem, its justification and relevance, and the background of the study. Chapter 2 illustrates a review of related literature on international student mobility in the Netherlands as well as the theoretical frameworks employed in the study. Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion on the research procedure, as well as stating risks, ethical concerns, and limitations. Chapters 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings and analysis of international graduates' narratives in the Netherlands in relation to the research question and sub questions. The findings of the study are then summarized in Chapter 6, which also includes recommendations and key takeaways.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature, Conceptual, and Theoretical Frameworks

2.0. Introduction

This chapter reviews the key literature and conceptual frameworks that inform the study. It contextualizes non-EU graduates' post-study transitions within wider debates on migration and development studies, while also expanding the theoretical assumptions that underpin the analysis. The discussion unfolds in six main sections. Chapter 2.1 introduces the *aspirations and capabilities* framework as an analytical lens, exploring how non-EU graduates perceive and navigate their prospects of staying in the Netherlands after graduation. Chapter 2.2 explores the concepts of *employability* and *adaptive preferences*, highlighting the theoretical perspectives on how graduates navigate labor market demands and adjust their aspirations. Chapter 2.3 examines the governance of international student mobility with close attention to the tension between talent retention and selective openness. Building on this, Chapter 2.4 conceptualizes *time as a border* to analyze how temporal restrictions shape graduates' post-study experiences. Chapter 2.5 focuses on Highly Skilled Migrants' decision-making processes, offering a holistic understanding of the factors influencing individuals' trajectories. Lastly, Chapter 2.6 situates these discussions within the *migration-development nexus*, exploring the implications of post-study mobility for broader development discourses.

2.1. Understanding Post-Study Transitions as a Function of *Aspirations and Capabilities*

The aspirations and capabilities lens provides for a more in-depth understanding of how agency interacts with structure, demonstrating how graduates' aspirations to stay in the Netherlands are formed, adjusted, and sometimes constrained in relation to their actual capabilities within the host country's migration regime. This approach provides a helpful perspective for understanding the experiences of non-EU international graduates in the Netherlands, many of whom face difficulties between their desire to stay and work after graduation and the structural limitations that constrain their options.

Although not originally designed in the context of migration studies, Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach provides important conceptual tools that may be employed in migration analysis. Sen (1999: 3) conceptualized development as the process of expanding the substantive freedoms that people may enjoy, articulating this idea through the concept of human capability which refers to people's real freedoms to pursue lives that they find meaningful, and to expand the range of choices available to them. In this view, freedom is central to the process of development. Emphasizing human freedoms stands in contrast to more limited conceptions of development that equate progress solely with economic growth, rising incomes, industrialization, or technological advancement (Ibid).

Building on Sen's conception and applying it to migration studies, Jørgen Carling released a seminal paper highlighting the importance of aspirations and capabilities (abilities) in migration, introducing the concept of *involuntary immobility* to describe the growing number of Cape Verdeans who wanted to migrate but lacked the means to do so (Carling, 2002). To better understand of how agency and structure are mutually constitutive in migration processes, De Haas (2021) adopted and further elaborated on the aspirations-capabilities model, depicting migration as the result of both ambitions to move and the ability to act on that desire. This theoretical framework presents an understanding of migration as part of social change and development, viewing migration as a function of people's capabilities and aspirations to migrate within perceived geographical opportunity structures (De Haas, 2021: 17). Within this conceptualization, there are two types of aspirations: *instrumental* and *intrinsic*. While instrumental aspirations allude to the practical value gained from migration experiences through a functional and utilitarian point of view, such as higher income and better education, intrinsic aspirations reflect the value that individuals may attach to the migration experience such as self-realization, the wish to explore new societies, and pursuing 'the good life' (Ibid).

In the context of this study, capabilities relate to graduates' freedoms to pursue employment and residence paths whereas aspirations describe how graduates perceive their futures, and how time restrictions, such as under the Orientation Year, influence their future-making. Graduates may have intrinsic goals to stay and build futures in the Netherlands or instrumental aspirations to get international job experience, but both can be restricted owing to immigration regulations and the lack of employer sponsorship, influencing how they make decisions regarding their post-study trajectories. Moreover, this disparity between aspirations and capabilities may result in a form of 'involuntary return migration' (Adiku and Kandilige 2023: 63). This is the case in which the decision to leave the

Netherlands is not a question of choice but a consequence of constraints. This is especially relevant for non-EU graduates in managing their post-study transitions through the Orientation Year. Although their stay in the Netherlands during this year is described as an opportunity-driven choice, timebound processes limit their ability to remain, thereby blurring the distinction between voluntary and involuntary mobility.

2.2. The Role of Employability and Adaptive Preferences in Study-to-Work Transitions

Drawing on the Aspirations and Capabilities paradigm, the notions of *employability* and *adaptive preferences* provide valuable tools for analyzing how graduates navigate their post-study trajectories. Within this framework, aspirations reflect what graduates strive toward whereas capabilities refer to the possibilities available to them. Employability, therefore, interacts with the capability dimension as it reflects graduates' ability to transfer their skills and education into meaningful employment under a structurally constrained labor market. Adaptive preferences, in turn, relate to the dimension of aspirations, highlighting how graduates adjust or recontextualize their goals in response to these constraints.

First, expanding on the concept of employability, while alumni on their Orientation Year may be 'employable' in terms of skills and degrees earned, they are nonetheless hampered by visa instability or company aversion. This tension parallels a wider critique in the employability literature, whereby employability is frequently defined as the totality of an individual's attributes, yet in practice is strongly steered by structural constraints. As Tymon notes, one possible issue with attempting to conceptualize employability is a lack of clarity about what the term means and how it should be measured (Tymon, 2013). One definition that creates resonance for international graduates, however, is by Yorke (2004: 410), who defines it as:

> "A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."

Additionally, Bennett (2020) provides a description of employability that emphasizes 'the ability to find, create, and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan.' The development of graduate employability has become a top priority for universities and nations throughout the world because it

is viewed as an effective instrument for improving the quality of human capital (Tran et al., 2021). In this view, employability is paramount as it increases an individual's chances of achieving personal objectives, ambitions, and aspirations while decreasing the risk of job loss and the negative repercussions associated with job insecurity (Peeters et al., 2019). The difficulty that governments throughout the world face is improving the employability of their workforce for which key strategies include expanding access to higher education, removing obstacles to talent regardless of social conditions, and leveraging human ingenuity for increased employability in the contemporary information-rich, knowledge-based economies (Brown et al., 2004). However, as Brown et al. (2004) note, a university degree no longer serves as a direct route to secure employment. Instead, it provides only a gateway into highly competitive labor markets, where outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of institutional support, market conditions, and individual circumstances.

Despite the widely acknowledged need for a greater flow of qualified workers across borders, skilled migrants continue to confront impediments to entering the host-country labor market and typically endure protracted periods of unemployment (Farashah et al. 2023: 480). They are also likely to experience overqualification, underemployment, and work insecurity, for instance, as a result of short employment contracts (Ibid). This is further compounded by the particular expectations of employers, many of whom require Dutch language competence or local work experience (Dixon, 2024). As a result, for non-EU graduates, the move from study to employment is frequently fraught with uncertainty, notwithstanding formal yet nominal access to competitive labor markets. This situation can be better understood through the lens of '*adaptive preferences,*' which helps explain how individuals adjust their aspirations in response to structural constraints. Adaptive preferences have been defined as choices made by a person wherein they downgrade and re-contextualize their desires for what they cannot access (Masika and Bailur 2015: 47). Bruckner (2007: 307) similarly describes adaptive preference as "a preference that is regimented in response to an agent's set of feasible options." This concept is particularly helpful for understanding how non-EU graduates may reevaluate their career and migration desires when they encounter constraints to employment options. This dynamic speaks directly to the aspirations and capabilities framework, with aspirations being continuously recalibrated in response to the actual opportunities available to graduates.

The process of adjusting expectations is not unique to migrant graduates only as Dutch graduates also have to deal with a competitive and unpredictable labor market. However, the institutional and legal

circumstances in which non-EU graduates adapt are markedly different. This is because for this group of graduates, the right to remain in the host nation is often tied to employment status and one's employability is principally mediated by immigration status, which amplifies the stakes of unemployment or job loss. In light of this, these graduates may have to reduce their career goals and accept jobs below their skill level. This interaction between restricted employability and adaptive preferences shapes both individuals' labor market trajectories as well as reinforces patterns of underemployment and deskilling, aligning with the argument that preferences and bargaining should not be seen as irrational, or non-autonomous (Masika and Bailur, 2015: 63). Instead, they are negotiated within particular "rules of the game" and structural constraints, as well as individualized conceptions of a "good life" (Khader, 2009: 173).

2.3. Talent Retention or Selective Openness? The Governance of International Student Mobility

While employability and adaptive preferences influence migrants' study-to-work transitions, these processes do not occur independently. The institutional and policy context is crucial in determining the 'rules of the game' that limit or enable career paths. In response to the growing urgency toward establishing knowledge-based economies, along with rising internal political conflicts around migration, economically developed countries have been compelled to adopt selective migration policies (Liu-Farrer, 2025). De Lange et al. (2019) argue that states try to 'manage' migration and often attempt to distinguish the 'desired' from the 'undesirable' migrants (De Lange et al., 2019). In line with this, many nations' migration rules have started to emphasize skills, that is professional experiences, educational credentials, and language proficiency, as the primary determinant of a migrant's eligibility (Shan and Fejes, 2015). The skills and human capital possessed by migrants are seen as a source of competitive advantage for the host nation as well as a solution to societal challenges, such as the aging of the population and labor shortages (Shan and Fejes, 2015).

Today's migration policies are typically characterized as restricted or at the very least selective rather than inviting, which is why a 'welcoming' policy might be a valuable tool in the talent competition (De Lange, 2018). To those who have gained the specialized skills and human capital coveted by governments functioning in a more competitive and global knowledge-based economy, the global talent competition opens previously closed gates of admittance (Shachar, 2016). Governments express

their preference for a specific class of migrants—well-educated and innovative people—by establishing human capital requirements for admittance (Shachar, 2016). In terms of international student mobility, policies designed to retain skilled human capital increasingly target foreign graduates who have previously lived in the host nation for a considerable amount of time and are used to its social and cultural norms (Suter and Jandl, 2006).

Compared to existing policies for other migrant groups, some disputes could be more noticeable when it comes to regulations for international students. While certain types of migration flows, such as family migration and asylum, are covered by international treaties, student movement is not protected by international law since there is no internationally recognized 'right to study in another country' (Levatino et al., 2018: 367). This results in countries having more flexibility in how they control student migration. Policies may either promote or restrain migration, and international students are vulnerable to the impacts of the host country's migration or mobility policy (Gutema et al., 2023: 844). Ultimately, it appears that international students are viewed as both a threat and an opportunity as the constant conflict between 'open' and 'closed' borders characterizes policies (Levatino et al., 2018). This conflict between selective openness for the few and restrictive closure for the many is evident in the global talent competition (Shachar, 2016). And this seems to apply to the Dutch case too, as we observe similar tensions emerging. Programs like the Orientation Year and the HSM permit may offer opportunities for non-EU graduates, but strict eligibility criteria and timeframes create constraints that shape their experiences.

2.4. Time as a 'Border': The Temporal Governance of Non-EU Graduates

Building on the subject of selective migration policies, it is critical to analyze not just *who* can enter or stay in the host country, but also for *how long*. While migration studies have extensively investigated geographical features of movement such as borders, temporal elements remain under-theorized (Griffiths, 2017: 49). This paper makes use of the theoretical framework known as *temporal governance* which refers to a "governmental strategy to control and discipline migrants by means of time" (Reneman and Stronks, 2021: 302). Rather than emphasizing just physical borders or legal categories, temporal governance examines how time restrictions, deadlines, waiting periods, and expiration dates influence migrants' experiences and prospects. Researchers are now increasingly focusing on how time

frames, limits, and provides opportunities for mobility (Griffiths, 2017). While scholars have used this notion mostly to describe asylum procedures under EU migration law (Stronks, 2022; Griffiths, 2014), this paper argues that the lens of temporal governance is also applicable to the case of managed and temporary migration channels, such as the Dutch Orientation Year scheme. While the permit is presented as an opportunity for recent graduates, it has a fixed time limit of twelve months, essentially placing temporal limits on legal status and labor market access. This in turn, transforms time into a controlling force. Although the Orientation Year is defined as a voluntary, post-study opportunity with low barriers to apply (e.g., no requirement to show funding/income during application), its voluntariness is conditional and strictly managed. For many non-EU graduates, it becomes the sole practical way to remain in the Netherlands after graduation to seek entry to the labor market, especially in the lack of other available residency alternatives.

Scholars have shown that temporal dynamics are integral to how state bureaucracies and legal systems function (Griffiths 2017: 50). Migration governance is no exception as the exercise of power frequently occurs through temporal mechanisms such as qualification periods, age limits, waiting times, and fixed eligibility windows (Ibid). In this way, temporal governance has been critiqued in the literature as a purposeful creation of 'institutionalized uncertainty,' understood as a sort of manufactured volatility that is likely to worsen the instability felt by migrants (Bornemann and Maiani, 2025: 374). A migrant's ability to exercise control over their situation shapes how strongly they experience this sense of uncertainty (Ibid). This dynamic is visible among international graduates who are on the Dutch Orientation Year permit. Although the policy is intended to promote labor market access and talent retention, its temporary nature creates uncertainty about the future. Graduates must find qualified employment within the specified timeframe, putting them in a time-constrained situation in which their ability to work and make long-term decisions is closely restricted by policy mechanisms. In this way, the Orientation Year may be framed within wider discussions about how migration regimes employ time as a regulatory tool, permitting, as well as constraining mobility.

2.5. Highly Skilled Migrants' Decision-Making Processes

A major cause for why individual migrate is seen as to be economic benefits or 'upward mobility' by attaining higher-level work (Ressia et al. 2018: 2) However, there is an emerging body in migration and mobility studies that offers a critique to such oversimplification and calls for greater understanding that migration decision-making is a complex endeavor influenced by a variety of elements, including not only economic, but also social, political, psychological, and environmental factors (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013: 182). In line with this viewpoint, explanations of skilled migration should strive for a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing individual trajectories through an exploration of non-economic rationales; one that highlights the impact of social factors, household characteristics, the institutional settings associated with individuals' legal status alongside other motivators like the wish to gain cultural experiences, improving foreign language skills and the search for higher quality of education (Ibid).

This broader understanding of migration decision-making challenges the conventional view of highly skilled migration as wholly voluntary and beneficial which has resulted in a lack of critical attention to the decision-making processes underlying it (Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022). In migration literature and politics, highly skilled migrants are frequently described as 'desired, welcome, and unproblematic' (Triadafilopoulos, 2013), largely related to the associated human capital and innovation that they bring while being viewed as facing fewer challenges to integration into host society. This especially applies to international students who are assumed to have become accustomed to the local culture over the course of their studies (Weinar and Klekowski Von Koppenfels, 2020). Despite the widespread acceptance and positive framing of highly skilled migrants, there is no universally accepted definition of who qualifies as a highly skilled migrant with attempts to define the term raising questions (Ibid). Moreover, Scholars have attempted to deconstruct the prevailing highly skilled migrant category by also including international students and graduates, particularly given governments' adoption of the 'train and retain' formula with respect to the recruitment of international students as being part of a broader policy in managing highly skilled migration flows (She and Wotherspoon, 2013). In academic literature, students constitute a special categorization who are in some cases considered as highly skilled whereas in others they are not (Ibid).

Studies have shown how temporary migration of highly educated migrants such as is the case for study or work permits, may often lead to actual or aspirational pathways towards permanent residency (Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022). Studying abroad may also constitute a strategy for gaining admittance to a foreign country in order to realize a longer-term 'migration and life-making project' (Carling, 2002: 15). The decision of non-EU graduates to remain in or leave the Netherlands is also shaped by the *push* and *pull* framework, which identifies the factors that push graduates away from their home countries and those that pull them toward remaining longer in their country of education (Hao and Leung, 2023). Previous studies have widely used the *push-pull* model to uncover variables influencing students' decision to pursue education abroad and stay (Ibid). Some students are 'pushed' by unfavorable conditions such as unemployment and economic and/or political instability in the home country while being 'pulled' by the acquisition of scholarships, improved job opportunities, and lifestyle freedom in the host nation (Güngör and Tansel, 2014: 3; Li and Bray, 2007: 793). The host nations' pull factors additionally include the presence of advanced research facilities as well as the facilitation of friendly socioeconomic and political environments, and the chance of studying with multinational classmates (Li and Bray, 2007).

Using the push-pull theory in research, scholars have uncovered specific factors that drive international student mobility and assist institutions in understanding how to attract and retain international students (Gutema et al., 2023: 845). For example, if a country is recognized for its high-quality education but has limited employment possibilities after graduation, policymakers may need to implement programs that encourage firms to hire international graduates (Ibid: 846). Additionally, according to Mathies and Karhunen (2021), the opportunity to work after graduation is a powerful motivation for international students to study abroad and stay in the host country in search of better employment chances. In this way, studying abroad, formerly viewed as a temporary venture, becomes an instance of labor migration (Mathies and Karhunen, 2021: 2).

2.6. The Migration-Development Nexus

Beyond individual decision-making processes and policy regulations, migration has an impact on development outcomes in both sending and receiving countries. Migration, in line with Sen's (1999) definition of development as the expansion of real freedoms people can enjoy, may be considered as

a facilitator of human development. The migration-development nexus has generally been studied using economic measures such as remittances or contributions to growth. However, seeing migration through a capabilities lens reveals that the value of migration extends beyond economic achievements to encompass the enhancement or restriction of individuals' choices to pursue a lifestyle that they value. In this way, migration is linked to larger processes of development and change within society (De Haas, 2019: 17). Yet, the effects of migration on the development of both sending and receiving nations have been a topic of divisive discussion in academic literature (Ullah, 2022: 295).

Researchers have shown that migration may influence both the nations of origin and destination in both positive and negative ways. Within this broader debate, *brain gain* and *brain drain* dominate discussions of skilled migration. The perspective on brain gain emphasizes the potential benefits of skilled migration for sending countries where migrants can act as agents of enculturation and acculturation, facilitating the transfer of technology, skills, and knowledge, and promoting the circulation of human and social capital across borders which boost sustainable development (Ullah, 2022; De Haas, 2019). A second major axis around which debates on migration and development revolve, brain drain*,* argues that this migration causes a significant withdrawal of human and intellectual resources from developing countries (Ragruham, 2009: 106). Since the 1960s, skilled migration has, for the most part, been understood through the lens of brain drain by sending countries, referring to worries about the 'magnetic effects' of well-funded scientific working environments in the United States and Western Europe on scientists and doctors in the rest of the world, notably in nations from the global South and Eastern Europe with the repercussions of these movements being quantified as gains and losses in the perspective of the nation-state (Ibid). Brain drain for some was perceived to be offset by the brain gain for others. During the 1960s and 1970s, the non-return of foreign students became a major concern in the economics literature, as it was seen to contribute to the loss of valuable human capital in developing countries (Güngör and Tansel, 2014: 208).

Beyond the issue of non-return, scholars have also drawn attention to the problem of deskilling, whereby inadequate recognition of migrants' qualifications leads to a loss of human capital for the individual migrant as well as for both destination and origin countries (Ragruham, 2009). One study focusing on female migrants further suggests that deskilling and downward occupational mobility are not exceptions but are often common outcomes of migration processes (Ressia et al., 2017). For destination nations, the mismatch between migrants' capabilities and job results indicates that potential

talent is underutilized. For origin nations, it implies a "brain waste" impact since competent individuals are unable to fully utilize their experience elsewhere (Ragruham, 2009). On a human level, these experiences might erode migrants' sense of self and belonging in the host nation (Ibid). These dynamics are consistent with the experiences of non-EU graduates in the Netherlands, who, although hold degrees from Dutch universities, frequently face comparable difficulty in finding work that fits their skills. This demonstrates how the move from student to highly skilled migrant status is a transition that is deeply influenced by policy design and labor market dynamics.

Taken together, the literature highlights several key debates relevant to non-EU graduates' post-study transitions. Scholars have discussed the significance of the aspirations and capabilities framework in migration decisions, as well as how employability and adaptive preferences affect graduates' responses to labor market demands. Research on the governance of international student mobility highlights the contradiction between selective openness and host nations' professed talent retention goals, while research on temporal governance can be understood in the context of the study by looking into how time-bound structures affect graduates' experiences in their transition to employment. The review then focused into Highly Skilled Migrant decision-making processes, unpacking and connecting the concept to the present study. Lastly, with attention to the migration-development nexus, the study-to-work transitions of non-EU graduates were explored within broader development debates. These discussions provide the critical literature that underpins the focus of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

3.0. Introduction

Building on the conceptual groundwork detailed in the previous sections, this chapter describes the structure and approach used to fulfill the aims of this research, that is, to explore how non-EU graduates from Dutch universities experience and navigate the Orientation Year against the backdrop of a selective migration governance system. It summarizes and justifies the research techniques used to obtain data for analysis, as well as their constraints.

3.1. Research Design and Participant Selection & Sampling

This research adopts a qualitative approach to problematize the post-graduation mobility and labor market entry of non-EU international students in the Netherlands. The qualitative method of data collection and analysis provided a suitable way to access meaning and identify issues from the perspective of participants within complex social contexts (Hennink et al., 2020). With this purpose, this study involved participants whose backgrounds and experiences with international student mobility aligned closely with the aims of the research. The criteria for this included:

1. Holding a non-EU nationality.
2. Having completed a bachelor's and/or master's degree at a Dutch higher education institution.
3. Having used the Orientation Year (*zoekjaar*/search year) and/or having transitioned to a Highly Skilled Migrant permit in the Netherlands in the past 5 years (regardless of current visa, employment status, or change in country of residence).

To capture the lived reality of the transition from study to employment, this study utilizes semi-structured interviews as its research method, drawing from dialogues with non-EU graduates. Two sets of data collection exist, consisting of semi-structured interviews with four non-EU graduates from Dutch universities are currently on their Orientation Year to seek employment as a HSM while six interviews were conducted with graduates who utilized the Orientation Year and transitioned to a

HSM permit in the last five years who now may or may not hold different residence status at this moment such as a partnership permit, permanent residency, or naturalization.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms such as LinkedIn, for instance by posting a call for participation, which can be found in Appendix A, as well as reaching out to the alumni group of ISS. I also conducted direct outreach to potential participants via a month-long free subscription trial to LinkedIn Premium, which allowed me to message individuals who were not a part of my network. Two participants were recruited through this method using keyword searches (e.g., 'Highly Skilled Migrant' and 'Orientation Year,') which allowed me to find individuals publicly posting about their job searches in the Netherlands. I also sent a text message in my building's WhatsApp group chat as its 200 residents are either students or young professionals between the ages of 18 to 32, however, I did not receive any responses through this medium. In addition to these methods, snowball sampling was employed, as at the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they knew anyone who met the study criteria and might be willing to share their experiences, allowing the recruitment network to expand through referrals. This was the most effective method of recruitment for this study as the referrals helped establish trust and credibility, which was particularly important given the personal nature of the study.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or online based on the participants' preference and the location was also decided by the participant. The fieldwork was conducted over a two-month period. The interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were recorded with consent, and later transcribed through the Microsoft Word's free transcription tool. The resulting transcripts were subsequently corrected by the researcher. All of the transcripts were, in the end, edited and non-verbatim, meaning that filler and repeated words were removed from the analysis. While I recognize that pauses and repetitions can be analytically useful and hold significance as they can reveal the emotional weight surrounding migration experiences, the choice to edit the transcripts in a non-verbatim manner was taken to favor clarity and thematic focus. This decision was also influenced by my positional engagement with the material, since the emotionally charged nature of many of the interviews necessitated a reflexive approach to ensure that participants' narratives were handled with care. I reflect further on how my positionality shaped this research in the following section.

3.2. Positionality and Ethics

Acknowledging the researcher's positionality and the values and perspectives they contribute to the research environment is essential for understanding the context and dynamics of the study (Hennink et al., 2020). As a non-EU international student who is currently pursuing a master's degree in the Netherlands, I bring closeness and personal experience to the topic of international student mobility. Values and perceptions gained through my own experiences as an international student may have shaped my perspective going into this research, but they also helped me build rapport and gain the trust of the graduates I interviewed. This was particularly important given that I had not met any of them in person before, and I aimed to avoid the extractive feeling of simply entering their lives to gather the information I needed.

Like the participants, I will soon navigate the Orientation Year and seek employment under the Highly Skilled Migrant scheme. I believe that this proximity stemming from a sense of 'being in the same boat' offers empathy and a deeper understanding as well as help build rapport during the interviews, however, it also necessitates reflexivity to avoid projecting my own beliefs and experiences onto the participants' stories. Through a dedication to participant-centered research, this study seeks to help ensure that their experiences inform the analysis and conclusions but also align with the ethical principles of doing qualitative research. Having said that, in several encounters, it was helpful for me to share a little bit about myself, even if the interviewer's primary role is to listen and steer the conversation. To create a relaxed atmosphere where participants felt free to take the lead and express their views and experiences, I tried my best to explain the purpose of my study and briefly discuss my personal history. This occurred in a number of cases pretty spontaneously.

Additionally, it is essential for me to discuss my emotional engagement with the research as the interpretive approach acknowledges subjectivity and the need for reflexivity on how their 'social background, assumptions, positioning, and behavior impact the research process' (Hennink et al., 2020: 19). During the fieldwork, no matter how much I tried to mitigate too much closeness or maintain a certain degree of distance with the participants, I often found myself emotionally affected by the stories that were being shared. Several of the interviewees proved to be quite emotionally intense, both for the participants and for myself as a researcher. Many participants spoke openly about their experiences of stress, uncertainty, and the emotional toll the job search process took on them.

An additional compounding factor was that, upon graduation, I myself would enter the Orientation Year which created a heightened sense of personal resonance with participants' experiences, as I was anticipating many similar challenges and uncertainties that they were telling me about. It took emotional presence and sensitivity for me to engage with these stories, and I became deeply aware of the moral responsibility that comes with correctly portraying such personal life stories. After conducting the interviews, I found myself needing to take about one month for myself before I could return to the recordings and begin transcribing them, as I initially found the material too emotionally intense to engage with immediately. I used this time to focus on conducting the remaining interviews, allowing myself to maintain progress in the fieldwork without dwelling too much on the earlier accounts. This period of distance was essential for me to process the emotional weight of the narratives and to re-approach the material when I felt ready. Throughout this fieldwork experience, I became aware as a researcher of how my positionality and emotional responses shaped the study.

Following this, considering ethics, informed consent is a primary tool to provide information and protect the participants' rights, giving them the chance to withdraw at any time with voluntariness being at the heart of the project. The research involves the collection and processing of personal data as well as participants from whom voluntary consent needs to be sought. To inform the participants of their rights, at the start of the interview a brief verbal explanation was provided with oral consent being asked. It was reassured that confidentiality is to be maintained, which can be achieved by anonymizing the data and stripping it of any identifiable information, meaning that pseudonyms were used, underscored by a genuine wish to avoid causing harm and pain (Reich, 2021). Building on this basis of informed and voluntary engagement, the acquired data were examined using a systematic data analysis approach which I unpack in the next section.

3.3. Data Analysis

Prior to the data collection, an interview guide was created and utilized during the interviews which can be viewed in Appendix B. The guide featured a number of questions; however, the order and wording of questions were adapted from interview to interview consistent with the semi-structured approach. During the interviews, some questions were adjusted with some questions being omitted or redirected depending on the level of rapport with the participants. I transcribed the interviews as

verbatim as possible while excluding some small talk that I considered as irrelevant to the research objectives as it was mainly to build rapport and connect with the participants.

The interview data was examined using qualitative thematic analysis through an inductive approach (Williams and Moser, 2019). This technique is appropriate for exploratory research that tries to understand complex and intersecting social issues. In order to find recurrent themes, experiences, and meanings expressed by participants, I began by open coding the transcripts and then moved on to axial coding which included grouping similar codes to highlight emerging patterns. Finally, selective coding was used to refine the categories and uncover overarching themes relevant to the study topics. The codebook is available in Appendix D. While software-assisted coding methods such as Atlas.ti can help organize large datasets, this study uses manual coding which is useful and practical for limited datasets as it provides for greater flexibility and nuanced interpretation. It was also the method I was the most comfortable with as I previously had experience with it during my bachelor's thesis. I mainly chose to code manually as I believe that it allows for a more active and immersive engagement with the dataset, supporting a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives.

3.4. Limitations and Challenges

While the reflexive approach to data collection and analysis underpinned the study, several limitations and challenges that were present should be acknowledged. Despite receiving over 5.000 unique views and 20 reposts in three weeks, the LinkedIn call for participants I shared with my network and beyond, did not garner as much interest as I had previously hoped. Although this may be called a 'small' sample, the sampling procedure only ended when empirical saturation was reached, which meant that no new topics emerged from the interviews. I even had the opportunity to interview one more Highly Skilled Migrant, but it was ultimately not conducted as I found myself emotionally overwhelmed at that stage of the research process to go through with it. Also, acknowledging the qualitative nature of the study that has the aim of providing rich and in-depth insights into the lived experiences of international graduates, the focus is on depth and quality over quantity.

As mentioned in the section above, pauses and repetitions were removed from analysis which may in turn have limited the ability to fully explore graduates' experiences and navigation strategies. On top

of this, I acknowledge that the use of purposive and snowball sampling may result in the overrepresentation of specific networks, disciplines, or topics of study as participants were often in overlapping circles. In case of this study, the call for participants largely received support from graduates of the Development Studies programme at the Institute of Social Studies, same as the researcher. Consequently, the diversity of disciplinary perspectives was limited as there was an absence of STEM graduates which resulted in the study to focus on the challenges faced by social sciences and humanities graduates in navigating employment in the Netherlands. Overall, it was a difficult task to find individuals who fit the research criteria and were willing to be interviewed which at times disheartened me. Additionally, I received direct and indirect refusals to participate. For instance, one potential participant expressed that it would be better for them to participate in this research once they found a job while another potential participant did not show up during the interview time and was unresponsive at my attempt to reschedule.

Despite some setbacks, I acknowledge that participant access is a privilege rather than an entitlement (Ballamingie and Johnson, 2011). This admission allowed me to reflect more positively on the fieldwork process and feel grateful to those who decided to help with my research by making the time. As a consideration for how I can give back to people for their time and honesty, I asked participants whether they would be interested in receiving the key findings of the study once it was completed to which they were open to. Also, given the period of the fieldwork during summertime and the non-availability of the research participants, scheduling interview appointments proved difficult, hence why most of the participants chose their interview to be online. This, however, did not compromise the quality or depth of the conversations given the normalization of online modes of communications in both academic and professional settings. Participants appeared to be comfortable speaking from their own homes, which created a relaxed atmosphere and allowed us to engage in open conversations rather than being at a fixed location outside.

3.5. Participants' Characteristics

The participants in this study consisted of two males and eight females with ages ranging from 20 to 40. Participants come from a variety of non-EU countries including Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Russia. Four of the participants were currently on their Orientation Year whereas six of the participants had acquired the Highly Skilled Migrant status upon the completion of their Orientation

Year permit. Two of the participants held a bachelor's degree from the Netherlands and two of the participants held a master's degree from the Netherlands as well as a bachelor's. Six of the interviewees held a master's degree from the Netherlands with a bachelor's degree from their home country. The recruiting method did not limit participation by field, but in the end, all participants were from the humanities and social sciences which was was not a predetermined criterion, but rather a reflection of who responded to the recruiting calls. This is telling as it illustrates both the mix of international graduates who are close to my network as well as the heightened hurdles that non-STEM graduates face when pursuing job opportunities. Degree programmes of the participants differed with various Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Master of Science in fields such as Development Studies, International Relations, and International Law. Those who are currently in employment work in fields related to sustainability, academic publishing, research, and marketing. The following table lays out the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

No.	Name	Gender	Brief Profile	Years in the Netherlands	Online/ In-Person
1.	Lily	F	Orientation Year visa holder, from Bangladesh, in her 40s, three master's degrees in the Netherlands	9 years	In-person
2.	Isabella	F	Orientation Year visa holder, from India, in her 20s, Dutch master's degree	2 years	Online
3.	Noah	M	Orientation Year visa holder, from Sri Lanka, in his 20s, Dutch bachelor's and master's degree	6 years	Online
4.	Sophia	F	Orientation Year visa holder, from the US, in her 20s, Dutch bachelor's and two Dutch master's degrees	6 years	Online
5.	Iris	F	Highly Skilled Migrant, from Korea, in her 20s, Dutch master's degree	5 years	Online
6.	James	M	Formerly Highly Skilled Migrant, now permanent resident, from Malaysia, in his 20s, Dutch master's degree, working at a publishing company	8 years	In-person

7.	Amelie	F	Highly Skilled Migrant, will soon be a PhD student under the researcher directive, from Indonesia, in her 20s, Dutch master's degree, researcher	4 years	Online
8.	Mina	F	Highly Skilled Migrant, from Turkey, in her 20s, Dutch bachelor's and master's degree, legal counsel	6 years	Online
9.	Emma	F	Highly Skilled Migrant, from Indonesia, in her 20s, Dutch master's degree, marketing specialist	5 years	Online
10.	Polina	F	Formerly Highly Skilled Migrant, naturalized Dutch citizen, from Russia, in her 20s, Dutch bachelor's degree, sustainability consultant	7 years	Online

Note: The names are pseudonyms.

Chapter 4: Navigating Structural Conditions and Temporal Constraints

4.0. Introduction

This and the following chapters delve into one of the main objectives of the study: understanding the lived experiences of non-EU graduates in their study-to-work transition in the Netherlands. To engage more deeply with the relevant literature and debates, the findings are organized and presented across two interconnected chapters, each corresponding to one of the study's sub questions.

Chapter 4 explores how the time-limited and conditional nature of the Orientation Year shapes non-EU graduates' post-study experiences and decision-making processes. The analysis reveals three central themes: (1) temporal pressures and emotional distress, (2) recalibrating aspirations in response to structural constraints, and (3) the uneven terrain of highly skilled migration in the Netherlands. Chapter 5 extends this examination by analyzing how graduates respond to the uncertainty of their post-study transition, identifying two further themes: (4) (conditional) inclusion through the HSM transition, and (5) the search of a better life and self-realization. Together, these chapters draw on participants' narratives and situate them within wider discussions in migration and development studies.

4.1. Temporal Pressures and Emotional Distress

One of the strongest themes emerging from participants' narratives was the search year being met with emotional distress with feeling such as the fear of time running out, instability, and burnout, capturing how international graduates face strict temporal pressures that condition their labor market access and residency beyond their studies. In the context of the Orientation year, graduates' inclusion in the host society is temporary in nature and dependent on securing sponsorship during the time-limited permit. While put forward as an opportunity for graduates to explore the Dutch job market freely for one year, Isabella, an Indian national with a Dutch master's degree and currently on the Orientation Year permit, regarded the current period that she is in as a 'race against the clock', highlighting how graduates' legal status, mobility rights, and long-term aspirations are dependent on quick success in finding suitable work.

Polina, for instance, who is originally from Russia and came to the Netherlands for a Bachelor of Science and after five years of staying here and transitioning to the Highly Skilled Migrant permit, became a Dutch citizen through naturalization, reflected on her initial approach with the Orientation Year:

> 'Maybe my approach was not as strategic at that time… I had kind of a burnout… so I took a few weeks off and I thought at that time that there was more time, like there was an abundant amount of time, and so I took it slow. But just because mentally that is all I could handle at the time.'

Her comment underscores the mismatch between the need for personal adjustment following an intensive study period with the policy's tight 12-month deadline. Similarly, Mina and Iris reflected on their experience of this one-year window, saying:

> 'The fact that the Orientation Year visa had a deadline did not feel real to me, at least not until it actually came.' (Mina, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'The more time went by the more pressure I felt to apply.' (Iris, Highly Skilled Migrant)

Mina, a recent master's graduate in international law, and Iris, a recent master's graduate in development studies, both sought to remain in the Netherlands after graduation. The sense of temporal governance they talk about echoes the work of Stronks (2022) who argues that migrants are regulated by the state not only through legal categories but also by means of time. In the context of the Orientation Year, residence rights are limited to a specific window which in turn shapes graduates' decisions and disciplines their behavior. The Orientation Year thus represents a sort of conditional inclusion whereby graduates are welcomed, but only conditionally with their acceptance being predicated on demonstrating their employability within a certain term. James, a Malaysian national who is now a permanent resident in the Netherlands after 5 years of continuous stay, reflected on how this one-year conditioned him to act by saying:

> 'It motivated me to do a lot in that one year for better or for worse.'

His perspective encapsulates the emotional contradiction of living under a temporary migration scheme, providing him both incentive and worry, and illustrating how the twelve-month clock 'disciplines' non-EU graduates during the Orientation Year. For non-EU graduates who have spent several years studying in the Netherlands, these initial years can offer crucial opportunities to engage with peers, faculty, employers, and local communities. In the case of the Orientation Year, however, time serves as a disciplining mechanism during which migrants must operate in a one-year period during to secure employment in order to justify their continued residence in the Netherlands. This time constraint may in turn cause students to lose out on the social capital they have built over the years in the host nation, as they are now left with only one year to leverage these connections.

Other participants mentioned temporal constraints as generating worry and uncertainty, particularly in combination with external uncertainties such as is the case for Polina who linked her looming visa expiration to her Russian citizenship. Her concerns were heightened that her passport might become a problem for future migration. She reflected on this by saying:

> 'The deadline was approaching to apply for another visa… and it was very important for me to have continuous residence here because I wanted to eventually get Dutch citizenship as soon as possible… there was so much instability, uncertainty, and limitations to having a Russian passport.'

Here, time refers not just to the one-year window of the Orientation Year, but also to the longer timelines for settlement and citizenship attainment with comments such as:

> 'I thought that I would stay for at least five years or so, and if I do like living here, then I would try to settle down here or something like that. So, I think finding a job and creating a stable life.' (Iris, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'I think for some people, when they come to the Netherlands to study, there is a very clear sort of like motivation to stay beyond that. And for me there was too.' (James, Permanent resident)

These reflections illustrate that some graduates approach their studies and the subsequent Orientation Year as steppingstones for a longer-term 'migration project' (Carling, 2002).

4.1.1. Unclear Procedures and Borrowed Time

A further source of temporal pressure stemmed from procedural ambiguity as for multiple interviewees there were misunderstandings as to when the Orientation Year permit actually starts, resulting in an early application and consequently shortening the already time-sensitive job search duration.

> 'I personally did not know that you when you apply for the Orientation, your visa that it starts on the date that you apply as opposed to when it gets accepted and then when you actually get the new permit. I thought it would be on that that particular a date, but I think I understood it wrong, and I ended up applying for it much earlier than I should have. Because with you know, with the student visa, you have three more months, so you have until March and then you could apply in say end of February or March. But I ended up applying in December. So now I only have time until December with this current visa to get a job here.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

> 'I actually physically got the permit in June, but it started from when I applied. I think it is so unfair because I had to wait like basically a month and a half anyway. So, you do not even get the full 12 months, you get 11 maybe 10 and a half months' (Sophia, Orientation Year visa holder)

> 'I had read that you should apply for the Orientation Year three months before your student visa expires. So I applied exactly about three, three and a half months before, and I got my visa about two weeks later. Then when I received it, I realized that actually I could have postponed it for a few more months. Looking back now, I kind of started it a bit early, and honestly that turned out to be a bit of a disadvantage for me.' (Mina, Highly Skilled Migrant)

For the affected interviewees, this created even more unnecessary temporal pressures as the one-year window was effectively shortened due to bureaucratic hurdles. Their experiences suggest that information provision regarding the start date and application timing of the Orientation Year visa remains unclear, prompting some graduates to apply early, and reducing their available time to find suitable work. Following this, when enquired about whether the one-year search period should be

longer, participants opinions reflected various concerns rather than a straightforward agreement, saying that:

> 'I mean, one year was difficult enough. So, if it were longer, you have to support yourself even longer. So, it is more of a trap.' (James, Permanent resident)

> 'At one point I had to take a break. I went to Turkey about two months before my Orientation Year ended because I was really struggling here both financially and emotionally, being unemployed.' (Mina, Highly Skilled Migrant)

Although it is not a required to demonstrate income or funds during the application stage, James and Mina's experiences highlight how the financial burden of sustaining themselves without a guaranteed income for one year shaped their Orientation Year experience. James' framing of the Orientation Year as a 'trap' rather than an opportunity reflects the selective openness rooted in the migration governance system. The search year thus acts as a 'double-edged sword' as it permits graduates to stay, but at the same time it causes financial stress and pressure. Along these lines, Noah critically reflected on the issues inherent to the Orientation Year by saying:

> 'With students who graduate and get the Orientation Year, I feel like you become sort of like this temporary capital for the economy…I think it is this system that sort of extracts a lot from you and then sends you back home. For most people right now, it does not lead to staying longer so I think right now it is not a realistic transition for any person from outside the EU. It is all borrowed time' (Noah, Orientation Year visa holder)

Noah, who completed his bachelor's degree in the Netherlands and later returned to his home country before coming back to pursue a master's degree, makes a sharp remark here, using the term 'extracting and sending back home' to describe how we views the system to be profiting from the skills, labor, and expenditure of international graduates. This comment underscores the perceived double standards embedded in the Orientation Year policy wherein international students are welcomed as sources of economic value but remain a temporary economic asset. By defining the study-to-work transition in the Netherlands as one of borrowed time and temporary capital, Noah's personal experiences with

the scheme contradicts the official rhetoric that places the Orientation Year as an opportunity-driven choice for talent retention.

4.1.2. Time as a Governing Mechanism

When it comes to how graduates spent this one year, graduates emphasized that they did not solely use it to look for employment. They often worked in various forms: whether it was volunteering, interning, or through temporary contracts, for instance, working on a part-time contract for food delivery services, cafés, or restaurants. However, they recalled how the time needed to spend on job applications in order to secure a long-term position often clashed with the work they were carrying out in the meantime. Participants reflected on this dilemma by saying:

> 'I think at that time it was also more difficult because I knew some people at that time had really started taking part-time jobs. And do I start taking part-time job do I should I work in a restaurant or something, which you know, I have done before. But that is just one of the things where when you dedicate more time to that, then you will not be able to dedicate as much time as to looking for a job that would be more long term.' (James, Permanent resident)

> 'I went on to the Orientation Year visa and I did a few jobs during that time, like I did a small waitressing job and then also an internship that was related to my field of work and then the deadline was approaching for applying for another visa. So that was quite a difficult period for me.' (Polina, Naturalized Dutch citizen)

Migrant students often report feeling pressured by permit deadlines, which shape their job search strategies, career decisions, and even self-perceptions, with some describing the process as 'dehumanizing.' For instance, Noah and Isabella, both Orientation Year visa holders, reflected on their job search experiences that have increasingly been involving automated filtering.

> 'The actual return on how much I have prepared for interviews, I mean, I got that one interview from 350 plus applications. And to me, it has become a very dehumanizing process because I have gone up against a lot of what I think is just AI filtering people out.'

'The challenge that I am facing at this point is that I know that my CV is mostly not being read by a human being. It is being processed by AI and AI is looking for certain keywords in my application and if it's not able to find it, I just get an AI rejection e-mail. It is not even from the HR person, so I think I think that's the main challenge and I personally find that very demotivating. The fact that also a human being is not really taking the time.'

Following this, and much like the Orientation Year, time once again plays a big role as a governing mechanism within the Highly Skilled Migrant scheme. The stability associated with the permit is ultimately conditioned by time limits. As Emma, an Indonesian national who is working as a Highly Skilled Migrant and Amelie, also an Indonesian national who is currently working as a Highly Skilled Migrant and will soon go on to do a PhD in the Netherlands explain:

'In terms of stability, it depends on what your employer offers you. If it is permanent contract right away, great for you. But if it is not, I think it is even more chaotic because you only have three months to find another job.'

'It is very stressful because three months before your visa expires, you are wondering whether you have to pack your whole life.'

The limited period allowed to secure a new job before the expiration of one's permit reproduces a form of institutionalized uncertainty as described by Bornemann and Maiani (2025). This sense of uncertainty was further echoed by Iris who described the risks tied to losing one's employment:

'Once you quit your job, which provides you with a work visa, you have three months to look for a job. And then after those three months are up and you cannot find a job then you need to go back.'

This was surprising as the study had initially presented the HSM permit as a more secure status with fewer restrictions. However, the right to stay under this permit is highly contingent on the continuation of migrants' employment contract with only a three-month window to find a new position. The expectation of stability from being a Highly Skilled Migrant following the Orientation Year is thus

undermined by migrants' dependence on the employer. In this way, the experiences of alumni show that the HSM scheme works to restructure rather than eradicate uncertainty.

In conclusion, graduates viewed the Orientation Year and the subsequent move to the HSM permit as conditional opportunities where their migration projects and mobility aspirations become increasingly governed by time. Within this context, temporality becomes employed as an instrument for selection and exclusion, shaping the lived experiences of international graduates seeking employment in the Netherlands.

4.2. Recalibrating Aspirations in Response to Structural Constraints

A frequent theme in participants' accounts was the necessity to adapt or readjust professional goals when confronted with both the reality of the Dutch job market and the conditionality of their immigration status. While many graduates initially hoped for a smooth transition into roles related to their field of study, structural barriers such as employer sponsorship requirements and the temporary nature of Orientation Year permit frequently forced them to either broaden their horizons or change on their initial objectives. As a result, graduates described how they structured their job search in response to structural constraints. As James, who is a graduate of Development Studies and currently works in the Netherlands as a permanent resident, explained:

> 'I wanted to work for international NGOs or NGOs in general. I wanted to work in nonprofit. I wanted to work on human rights issues and things like that. But then it just was difficult to get anything. I mean I think because it is, you know there aren't many vacancies and even if there are vacancies, there are lots of applicants, very capable of eligible applicants. So, I think at some point I eventually decided that if I wanted to stay, I had to cast a wider net. I had to be a bit more open in potentially working outside of my field.'

In line with James' comment, several interviewees stated that their personal ambitions and the university programme they undertook had prepared them for specialized occupations, but labor market regulations as well as their conditional status made their aspirations unachievable. This resulted in many graduates to feel pressured to accept roles that satisfied sponsorship requirements but did not satisfy their career and life aspirations. Mina expressed this mismatch between education and employment by saying:

'I am not working in my specialization field right now. I would really like to, but the opportunity just never came up.'

In relation to the degrees studies which range from Development Studies to Sociology and International Law, participants also expressed interest in working in NGO sectors but cited constraints related to immigration rules and the sector's ongoing financial cuts as frequently hampering these objectives, forcing them to reevaluate and adapt their career goals. The near lack of visa sponsorship and the perceived instability of this sector worked to reshape life plans with participants reflecting on this by saying:

'But right now, especially like to be perfectly honest for the development economics degree itself, I think it is very important to also understand the landscape around us. And you know how funding is being cut from so many different parts of the sector, so for me, on a personal note, it's kind of dissuaded me from really going towards like the NGO space, for instance… while I do really want to stay true to the degree that I studied I'm also just trying to be practical.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

Another aspect of recalibrating aspirations relates to taking jobs which at first do not meet the visa requirement but may allow for the formation of networks as well as experience and funding during the search year. James described this period as:

'I was applying more and more and the more I applied, the more rejections I got. I think it then I eventually decided that, you know, I am just going to try some other jobs, even jobs that did not pay. So, I got like, a volunteer position working for an NGO in Amsterdam. And I thought, you know, maybe can get to a job, maybe not, or maybe it just helps you open some doors.' (James, Permanent resident)

This decision demonstrates how international graduates handle the limits of their immigration status not only by cutting back on or altering their goals but also by implementing what scholars describe as adaptive preferences. Adaptive preferences have been characterized as decisions made by people who, when confronted with systemic limits, degrade, or re-contextualize their desires for what they cannot

access (Masika and Bailur, 2015: 47). These preferences are expressed under certain "rules of the game" (Ibid: 63) and reflect structural conditions as well as how to bring about the individualized notions of a "good life" (Khader 2012: 173). In this sense, international graduates' willingness to accept jobs outside of their field of specialization, or to pursue positions that do not initially meet visa requirements, can be viewed as a recalibration of aspirations in response to structural constraints. This is consistent with the capabilities and aspirations framework (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021), which emphasizes how migratory decisions are influenced not just by individual aspirations, but also by the capabilities accessible within certain geographical contexts. An account that reflects this lived reality where Noah expresses how he feels about going back home after his job search in the Netherlands proved unfruitful. Noah, originally from Sri Lanka, exemplifies how selective migration regimes impact both aspirations and capabilities. Faced with hurdles to staying in the Netherlands, he opted to explore chances in Austria while he returns to his home country for the time being.

> 'There is the added trauma of having to go back and restart life when I have already created a life here. That is kind of I do not want to go back, I mean, it is my home country but right now, like I have made my young life here and technically these are like the best years of your life, but not really anymore. So, I decided to buy a ticket back home [to Sri Lanka], I am no longer applying to the Netherlands, I am applying to Austria…. here the opportunity is so limited and it is so selective for some people.' (Noah, Orientation Year visa holder)

His recalibrated choice demonstrates that migration trajectories are not always linear as graduates may need to adjust their plans to match with both their aspirations (e.g., to live and work in Europe) and their capabilities, which are limited by legal procedures and job possibilities. Similarly, Isabella who moved to the Netherlands for her master's degree two years ago, reflects on possible onward migration if staying in the Netherlands proves unviable by saying:

> 'So, if I do not get a job in the Netherlands then I do kind of have a backup option which is to go to Germany and look for jobs there and then navigate that whole space because yeah, because my husband is applying for a residence permit in Germany. And he will be expecting it soon. So, once he gets that, and if I do not get a job in the Netherlands within the next three months, then I will be making the move to Germany.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

Isabella's strategy exemplifies adaptive preferences given that when her chosen aim of remaining in the Netherlands becomes uncertain, she proactively modifies her expectations to look into alternate migration paths. Other participants also talked about alternatives, for instance James and Iris touched upon the partnership route for residency, mentioning that cohabitating with their EU partners was a possible pathway for them to stay. Iris brought up this topic herself, highlighting the perceived advantages of a partner visa:

> 'I am applying for my partner visa. I feel like after getting the partner visa, I am not sure how it would compare to the HSM visa, but I feel like it is maybe may feel more stable since it is a three-year visa instead of like a yearly visa that needs to be renewed along with your contract at work.' (Iris, Highly Skilled Migrant).

James was also inclined to apply for this permit with his partner if his job search did not result in sponsored employment. An interesting case was that of Sophia, a graduate originally from the United States and have been raised in Botswana, who talked about making use of the bilateral treaty between the United States and the Netherlands known as the Dutch-American Friendship Treaty (DAFT), which is a permit designed for entrepreneurs from the US. She delved into how she could stay in the Netherlands because of this treaty but mentioned some of its setbacks:

> 'I was surprised actually even to learn that as an American citizen, there is a friendship treaty between the US and the Netherlands. So that is kind of what I am hoping I can apply for if I cannot find a job. Like the ideal is a sponsored visa, but I am trying to do the friendship treaty. But that means I am an entrepreneur or I have to only work in whatever is my business that I set up and that severely limits me.' (Sophia, Orientation Year visa Holder)

The above comments confirm that migration decisions are a function of both aspirations and capabilities. Scholars such as Niraula and Triandafyllidou (2022) contend that migration outcomes result from the interaction of what migrants desire to achieve and what they are really able to pursue under certain policy and labor market contexts, emphasizing the interplay between agency and structure. While the goal is to stay in the Netherlands for these graduates, the result of this is determined by their ability to achieve this objective. Nevertheless, when their preferred outcome is unattainable, their aspirations manifest themselves through alternate channels such as returning home

temporarily, onward migration to other countries, or by securing residency through other means. This dynamic resonates with the concept of adaptive preferences, whereby individuals adjust their goals in response to structural constraints.

4.3. The Uneven Terrain of Highly Skilled Migration in the Netherlands

Across all of the interviews, the biggest difficulty in the job search period lay in obtaining employer sponsorship. Although the HSM pathway is framed as a route for talent to remain in the Netherlands, in practice it is governed by salary requirements, time limits, and employers' reluctance to take on the administration of sponsoring non-EU talent. Many of the interviewees shared their accounts dealing with this process.

> 'The problem is that most companies do not want to provide sponsorship visa. So, this is another challenge. It is like on one hand my visa situation is very tight. And on another side, even if I get a job, the company is not going to provide sponsorship visa for me.' (Lily, Orientation Year visa holder)

> 'It is surprising because I go through all the recognized sponsors on the and website, so every application I apply to I look at whether this company is an IND, recognized sponsor and they are. And then I get through to the interview round and then they tell me sorry we do not sponsor for this particular role. We are a sponsor, but we just do not sponsor for this role and 'I think that is also a challenge. So it is more of a lack of willingness to sponsor the visa.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

> 'They want me, but they do not want to sponsor my visa, although they are a recognized sponsor.' (Emma, Highly Skilled Migrant)

These accounts highlight that, although a company may officially be recognized as a sponsor by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), this recognition does not guarantee sponsorship for all positions. This closely affects graduates who meet the legal criteria for the HSM scheme yet remain excluded from labor market entry, causing further uncertainty and frustration. In

this way, the recognized sponsor system demonstrates the tension between the discourse of retaining talent and the lived realities of selective openness and restricted access as it is up to the employers to decide if they want to hire non-EU talent. Labor market access is constrained not just by employer preferences but also by biases between different sectors. Graduates had something to say about these sectoral biases namely the STEM/Non-STEM distinction that they viewed as being very clear in the Dutch labor market. Sophia reflected on the disadvantages she experienced in the Dutch labor market as a social sciences graduate:

> 'Nobody cares about Sociology. Nobody is hiring. No one cares what you did really. It is like if I had done like a hard science, or engineering, I feel like it would be much easier to find a job. It is like if you are Dutch, sure, you could probably find a job because you could go work with the Dutch government. You could work with like more Dutch language focused things. But I feel like I chose unemployable degrees.'

This comment reflects the reproduction of hierarchies of employability whereby STEM degrees are valued more in terms of aligning with the discourse of 'talent' in the Dutch labor market and migration governance system as well as the need for the Dutch language for securing employment with others similarly commenting:

> 'If you are from the tech sector, there are more opportunities for you.' (Amelie, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'Especially this year, I think it has become much harder, or maybe it has been getting harder and harder, I am not sure. It is terrible, right now the market is terrible, and as far as I understand, if you are not an engineer, you will struggle. I met people who had studied different fields, and especially in the social sciences, if you are non-EU or if you graduated in a social field, you really have to work twice as hard compared to an engineer, because there is also the language barrier.' (Mina, Highly Skilled Migrant)

Mina's comment highlights that while for tech jobs Dutch language proficiency is not considered as essential, it is increasingly more necessary for social sciences and humanities graduates due to the nature of the work that they carry out. This dynamic reinforces disparities inherent to the HSM route

whereby STEM graduates face relatively lower barriers to employment whereas non-STEM graduates have to overcome additional barriers, highlighting differential outcomes across different majors.

In conclusion, this chapter illustrated how non-EU graduates experience temporal and structural pressures during their study-to-work transition in the Netherlands. While the Orientation Year and HSM schemes offer opportunities for staying in the host country beyond one's studies, they also generate uncertainty and emotional distress for graduates navigating their post-study trajectories. Graduates frequently found themselves adjusting their aspirations to match these limitations through adaptive preferences, demonstrating that labor market entry in the Netherlands remains uneven and conditional.

Chapter 5: Future-Making Under Uncertainty

This chapter addresses the sub-question: "How do non-EU graduates respond to the uncertainty experienced during their post-study transition?" focusing on future-making projects under uncertainty. While Chapter 4 examined how graduates adjust their goals in response to structural and temporal restrictions, this chapter focuses on how individuals actively create meaningful futures for themselves while pursuing a sense of belonging and personal fulfillment.

5.1. (Conditional) Inclusion Through the HSM Transition

For the interviewees who made the transition, the move from the Orientation Year visa to the Highly Skilled Migrant permit was viewed a steppingstone toward stability and belonging. Graduates frequently expressed relief after obtaining the HSM status which allowed them to remain in the Netherlands through a professional career. This relief emphasizes emotional and psychological aspects whereby the HSM status provided a level of certainty and stability that was previously unattainable on student or search year permits. However, the interviewees accounts show that this initial stability is on a conditional basis, highlighting how the HSM permit functions as yet another intermediate stage as it provides legal residency for a set amount of time while tying graduates' mobility rights strictly to the employee. Participants expressed the continued stress of this transition by saying:

> 'Every year is a question of whether they will extend my contract, whether I will be able to stay, and then each year that passes by you build more life, right? So, there are also bigger things to lose.' (Amelie, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'I think in the beginning I felt more stable when I transitioned. It was very much towards the end of my orientation year actually when I switched to the highly migrant visa. But most of the contracts, like especially when you first starting is always like one-year contracts and then you renew it every year until it has been 3 years and then you get a permanent contract offer. So, I think even though it was like a more stable residence status, I still had like this uncertainty of whether my contract would be renewed. But also, whether I would like this job enough to stay like a longer period.' (Iris, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'I think I did not experience that much of a difference, to be honest. The biggest shift obviously was from highly skilled migrant to citizen, but from student to highly skilled migrant,

it was pretty much the same because you have to meet certain criteria in order to stay and your life basically depends on it.' (Polina, Naturalized citizen)

While it is seen that the HSM permit minimizes immediate worries, it does not completely erase the uncertainty inherent in non-EU graduates' migration journey, raising questions about whether it represents true stability or is another form of managed and controlled inclusion. As Polina described, 'your life basically depends on it,' capturing the sense of dependency that continues to shape their journey in the Netherlands. In this context, inclusion is conditional and never fully secure which exacerbate fears of having to leave. To this, those working as Highly Skilled Migrants reflected on the need to keep their job and feeling gratefulness for their company by saying:

> 'I think also I feel a sense of loyalty and gratitude to the company that I work for now just because if they did not do this for me, if it all did not work out, then my life would have been very different.' (James, Permanent resident)

> 'I was quite lucky I found a job that was able to sponsor my highly skilled migrant visa. And then, I did everything in my power to stay at that job for as long as possible so that I could…I was acting a bit more like, just give me whatever job you have because I need this job. I need to last as long as I can here so that I can get my citizenship. I was thinking now if I lose this job, I don't have to scramble…. I feel a lot freer. I feel a lot more mobile, and it is an unbelievable feeling, honestly.' (Polina, Naturalized citizen)

While James reflects on the feeling of loyalty to the company for hiring him, Polina's comments reflect the contingent dependence inherent to the HSM scheme. Together, their narratives highlight how the HSM scheme can transform employment into a space of conditional belonging. In contrast to these views, Amelie, an Indonesian graduate who will soon become a permanent resident while completing her PhD, described a growing sense of belonging to the Netherlands, now that she feels like she does not need to 'pack up her whole life and leave'.

> 'Now, I definitely way feel more committed, feeling more like I really want to learn Dutch and I really I care more about the Dutch politics compared to when I just arrived. I feel like talking

to or making Dutch friends feels a bit more natural. Because before there was a sense of like I might leave anytime soon. So, I think more connected, definitely to the country'.

Her comment demonstrates how long-term residency, and the potential of permanency builds greater emotional and social ties over time, emphasizing the changing nature of migrants' connections to their host nation as they go from temporary to more stable types of residency.

5.2. The Search for a Better Way of Life and Self-Realization

Migration through higher education, particularly the pursuit of master's degrees, was considered a viable pathway for gaining international experience, achieving aspirations, and securing a footing in the international labor market for many of the interviewees. These factors were complemented by the desire for an improved standard of living, including higher income and better quality of life with graduates reflecting:

'I was thinking if I am going to do a master's abroad, it has to be also a way for me to open up an international career, so maybe not the Netherlands per se, but I was a bit more open minded back then of also moving to other countries. But I intentionally chose a scholarship that did not require me to go back to Indonesia, so that was intentional already. But I was more like, OK, let's just see where the opportunities are.' (Amelie, Highly Skilled Migrant)

'I think what persuaded me to study abroad is a lot of links to kind of like the cultural context or like back in India. It is kind of like this expectation that if you go abroad, it is always like you are guaranteed to be successful in your life with a lot of wealth, maybe. And so, it was more to also look at better opportunities for myself.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

Kennedy (2010) contends that job or educational goals are vital for a move abroad, however, the desire to travel and/or escape from home in order to reach a greater level of self-realization is also important. This insight complements the current study's findings, which illustrate that participants' decisions to pursue international education and navigate the Dutch labor market were motivated by a broader desire to explore new environments, gain independence, and shape their life trajectories. This understanding is further complemented by Rutten and Verstappen's (2014) analysis which puts forth that economic explanations cannot adequately encapsulate the experiences and decision-making

processes of migrants. The centrality of migration as a project of self-realization (Yanaşmayan, 2019) emphasizes that participants' decisions are not solely about obtaining a job or meeting visa criteria; rather, they are about pursuing a better way of life and is connected to self-fulfillment. This is illustrated through graduates' comments such as:

> 'The kind of consequence of this Orientation Year visa is that people are just feeling like they are running against the clock, especially when it comes down to, you know, when you push the six-month limit then you are like, oh my gosh, what do I do? And then you are scrambling, thinking should I look for another master's course or should I do something else? How can I stay in the country? And it is also because people like the country so much. I mean, it offers a lot of freedom to live life on your terms. Once you have that individual freedom, it is hard to go back.' (Isabella, Orientation Year visa holder)

Isabella's comments reveal the strong personal attachment she developed to the Netherlands, a place she describes as offering 'freedom to live life on your terms.' Similarly, James commented:

> 'Now, this is home, I feel like every year now, when I try to go back to Malaysia on a yearly basis, it always feels like, oh, I am there to visit. I am not there to live.' (James, Permanent resident)

James' reflection illustrates a process of self-realization that is common among long-term migrants' experiences. Over time, his sense of belonging has shifted to the place where he now lives and builds a life. His annual visits to his home country, Malaysia, no longer evoke home, instead, he now frames them as temporary visits. Here, it is evident that staying in the host country is not only strategic but deeply tied to self-realization. Mobility reflects both economic considerations as well as encapsulating ideals of identity and personal flourishing. This also closely relates to the phenomenon of student non-return which suggests that when international education is followed by job experience in the host country, the likelihood of returning to the home country decreases even further as employment in the home country is often perceived as financially less rewarding (Güngör and Tansel, 2014). This was also reflected in the fieldwork data as the participants have earned their highest degree in the foreign country they are currently working in or are seeking employment and are therefore part of the phenomenon of student non-return. After finishing their education and acquiring job experience in the Netherlands, some participants acknowledged a decreased chance of returning to their home

countries due to fewer professional options and lower financial benefits. For instance, Mina, a Turkish graduate with an international law degree from the Netherlands, indicated that she would not return to Turkey because she expected her academic and professional advancement to be limited by saying:

> 'My goal was clear from the beginning: I wanted to stay here. Well, the Netherlands was not necessarily the country I was 100% certain about, but I did not want to return to Turkey, that was more my motivation. I thought that if I studied law there, considering my math scores were very bad, I would not be able to get into a good program if I tried to study law in Turkey. I felt like I would be wasted because I had no network at all. I did not know anyone. My family is in a completely different field too. That is why I decided I should stay abroad.' (Mina, Highly Skilled Migrant).

Additionally, graduates put forth that professional growth opportunities and work-life balance are appealing in the host country, making it a reason for them to want to stay and explore job prospects.

> 'I also really knew that my life quality would be much better in the Netherlands. And I can continue to work as a researcher or at least have more opportunities for that instead of going back home. I feel like it is a big loss for the country home countries, but at the same time, there is also not many opportunities there to absorb the talent' (Amelie, Highly Skilled Migrant)

> 'I see that there is more opportunity for me to grow professionally here.' (Emma, Highly Skilled Migrant)

These findings are consistent with earlier research that emphasize professional opportunities, financial considerations, and personal goals as motivating factors for the movement of highly qualified individuals with international student mobility being considered part of highly skilled migration (She and Wotherspoon, 2013).

To conclude, this chapter investigated how non-EU graduates manage uncertainty by proactively defining their futures in the Netherlands. While the move to the Highly Skilled Migrant permit provides some initial relief and stability, it remains conditional as it depends on employer

sponsorship. Despite this ongoing uncertainty, graduates pursue future-making initiatives motivated by a desire for belonging and self-realization.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on a qualitative research approach, this study inductively analyzed the narratives of 10 non-EU international graduates who have either recently navigated or are currently navigating the transition from study to work in the Netherlands through the Orientation Year and Highly Skilled Migrant schemes. The participants' narratives revealed that migration emerges as a project of self-realization as staying in the Netherlands is about more than just finding work; it is also about ensuring a high quality of life, independence, and possibilities for personal development. While the Orientation Year and HSM schemes are promoted as avenues of opportunity, they, in fact, work to reinforce selective openness and institutionalized uncertainty, causing non-EU international graduates to feel emotional distress in their study-to-work transitions. Both policies allow graduates to stay in the Netherlands, but their experiences are increasingly shaped by what is understood as temporal governance. In response to these barriers, graduates often find themselves recalibrating their aspirations; changing personal goals and career plans to accommodate for permit regulations. This demonstrates graduates' resilience and agency through adaptive preferences. The present study contributes to development studies by conceptualizing international student migration as a process of aspirations and capabilities affected by selective migration regimes and temporal governance. It emphasizes self-realization and belonging as development is linked to human flourishing and the actual freedoms that people may enjoy in line with Sen's (1999) conceptualization.

If the Netherlands seeks to retain its highly skilled migrants in the long term, an ambition that reflects economic and political priorities but is marked by a selective and conditional mechanism, greater attention must be directed to the sources of uncertainty closely shape migrants' lived experiences and influence their decision to stay or leave. These include the Dutch language as a prerequisite for securing many forms of employment, the bounded timeframe of the Orientation Year, and the limited availability of pathways to maintain legal status outside employer sponsorship. Alternative mechanisms could be established that enable these migrants to secure and maintain their legal status. Without such options, restrictive conditions often push individuals to either return to their home countries or pursue opportunities elsewhere through driving onward migration rather than talent retention. Additionally, although extending the period of the Orientation Year permit was not widely favored by graduates, as it would require sustaining oneself for even longer without guaranteed employment, greater clarity on when the 'clock begins ticking' would help alleviate unnecessary temporal pressures. Each policy move can have an impact on the elements influencing migrants' decisions, potentially moving them away

from returning to their home countries or moving elsewhere, allowing the Netherlands to retain its domestically trained talent pool. While this paper has looked into the way in which migration regimes either promote or constrain the likelihood of graduates to remain, the recommendations that have been made cannot happen without the appropriate policy research. Thus, future research should focus on the framing of migration in the Dutch context to understand what conditions need to be in place for these recommendations to be realized.

The stories presented here highlight the value of resilience and adaptability in face of uncertainty. The agency demonstrated by these graduates attests to their ability to adapt aspirations and forge identities even amid restrictive conditions. Some recalibrated their career goals and accepted steppingstone jobs to secure a footing in the Dutch labour market. Others mentioned backup plans, for instance, the partnership route or onward migration if their job search in the Netherlands did not meet the desired results. Their varied strategies illustrate that, rather than being mere subjects of policy frameworks, graduates take an active role through ongoing negotiation and self-positioning within the constraints of selective migration regimes.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Call for Participants

Call for Interview Participants:
The Post-Graduation Transitions of Non-EU International Graduates in the Netherlands

I am currently conducting research as part of my master's thesis at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam on the topic of the 'Post-Graduation Transitions of International Graduates in the Netherlands.'

The study aims to explore how non-EU international graduates experience the transition from study to employment through the **Orientation Year (zoekjaar)** and/or the **Highly Skilled Migrant** route in the Netherlands. Your participation will provide valuable insights and contribute to improving the understanding of international graduates' lived experiences in the Netherlands.

For this, I am looking for participants who:

- Hold a non-EU nationality.
- Have completed a bachelor's or master's degree at a Dutch higher education institution.
- Have used the Orientation Year (zoekjaar) **and/or** transitioned to a Highly Skilled Migrant permit in the Netherlands (regardless of current visa, employment status, or change in country of residence).

What your participation involves:

- A voluntary interview (online or in-person based on your preference and at a location of your choice).
- Full anonymity and confidentiality: you may use a pseudonym from the start and are not required to share your full name.
- The interview may be audio-recorded with your consent. The recording will be securely stored on a password-protected device. All audio files will be deleted after transcription and anonymization.
- You may withdraw at any time.
- Participants who are interested will be provided with an overview of the study's key results once the research is complete.

If you're interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to private message me, or send me an email at 600932ct@eur.nl

Appendix B: Interview Guide

<u>**Greetings and Consent**</u>

- o Brief introduction of myself and my institution
- o Explain the purpose of the research and my positionality
- o Obtain oral consent from the respondent to proceed with the interview and to record the conversation.

<u>**Background Information and Migration Aspirations**</u>

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself — where you're from, your field of study, the university you attended, and your graduation year?
2. How long have you been living in the Netherlands? How has your perception of the country evolved since you arrived?
3. What drew you to study abroad and why did you choose the Netherlands specifically?
4. What were your long-term goals and aspirations in deciding to study in the Netherlands?
5. During your studies, were you already thinking about staying in the Netherlands afterward?

<u>**Orientation Year**</u>

6. What influenced your decision to remain in the Netherlands after graduation?
7. How did you first learn about the Orientation Year permit? Do you think it was clearly communicated to you during your studies?
8. Why did you choose to apply for the Orientation Year permit?
9. Was the process of applying for the Orientation Year clear and accessible to you? Were there any unexpected administrative or legal hurdles?
10. When you first received the Orientation Year permit, what were your expectations in terms of finding work?
11. In your opinion, does the one-year duration adequately reflect the realities of job searching for non-EU graduates in the Dutch context?
12. How has the limited duration of the Orientation Year shaped your personal experience?

Labor Market Entry

13. How did your educational background and field of study impact your opportunities in the Dutch labor market?

14. What challenges did you face when searching for work in the Netherlands?

15. What surprised you most about trying to enter the Dutch job market as an international graduate?

16. How have you structured your job search strategy during the Orientation Year? Are (or were) you focusing on specific sectors, job types, or companies?

17. When applying to jobs, did employers show awareness or understanding of the Orientation Year and your legal status?

18. Did you encounter employers who were unwilling to hire non-EU graduates because of paperwork, legal uncertainty, or cost?

19. Did you receive any additional support from your university for instance career services, or from other institutions in your job search?

20. What kinds of professional, academic, or peer networks have helped you navigate the Dutch job market, if any?

HSM transition (to those who are HSMs)

21. Can you describe how you got your current job?

22. How did it feel to move from the Orientation Year into a more stable status?

23. How did the HSM salary threshold and recognized sponsor requirement shape your job search strategy?

24. Did the HSM permit change your perception of your future in the Netherlands?

25. What do you think helped you most in succeeding during the Orientation Year?

26. Do you think the HSM pathway is equally accessible to all non-EU graduates, or do certain fields, skillsets, or backgrounds have an (dis)advantage?

Reflections

27. How do you view your future now — are you planning to stay longer or move elsewhere?

28. Are there any alternatives you are considering such as other visa options, leaving the Netherlands, or further study in the Netherlands? *(If still on OY visa)*

29. Is there any advice you would give to international students hoping to stay in the NL post-graduation?

30. **Do you have anyone in mind who I can interview?**

Appendix C: Information and Consent Form

Post-Graduation Transitions: Non-EU International Student Mobility in the Netherlands

You are invited to participate in an interview as part of a master's research project conducted by Ceren Tuncer from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This interview aims to better understand the lived experiences of non-EU international talent in how they navigate their Orientation Year and labor market entry as well as their perspective about staying or leaving the Netherlands. During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: educational institution, visa status in the Netherlands, and your experiences being a non-EU international graduate in the Netherlands.

At Erasmus University, we conduct scientific research. We do this to learn, help people, and contribute to society. Since we are an academic institution conducting scientific research, we process your personal data exclusively for research on the basis of public interest.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. All information will be kept anonymous and confidential. There will be no reference made in oral or written reports which could link you to this study. You do not need to share your real names or the names of other people.

This interview will be conducted in-person or online based on your preference and comfort. Please note that you can withdraw your participation at any time during the process. You are not expected to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.

The interviews will be conducted by Ceren Tuncer. If you agree, it will be helpful to take audio-record of the interview without personal details for analysis. Your data will be stored securely and confidentially. Any identifiable personal data will be deleted. All data will be stored for 1 year before they are disposed of safely and securely.

Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered. I know that I am allowed to stop at any time. By signing this form, I
1.   consent to participate in this research.
2.   consent to the use of my personal data;
3.   confirm that I am at least 18 years old;
4.   understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time; and
5.   understand that my data will be pseudonymous for publication, education and further research.

Check the boxes below if you consent to this.

Data
I consent to the researcher's collection, use and retention of the following data:

Audio recording
I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

Use for educational purposes and further research
I hereby consent to having my personal data under a pseudonym stored and used for educational purposes and for future research, also in other areas of research than this research. I consent to the sharing of my data with Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Name or pseudonym of the participant:	**Name of the researcher:**
Signature:	**Signature:**
Date:	**Date:**

Appendix D: Codebook graduate transcripts

Codes	Exact Quote
Migration Decisions & Intentions: *Student non-return*	'My goal was clear from the beginning: I wanted to stay here. Well, the Netherlands wasn't necessarily the country I was 100% certain about, but I didn't want to return to Turkey, that was more my motivation.' (Mina)
	'So, the only reason is for survival, why I don't want to go back.' (Emma)
	'Now, this is home, I feel like every year now when I try to go back to Malaysia on a yearly basis, it always feels like, oh, I'm there to visit. I'm not there to live.' (James)
	'Increasingly, it [return] just didn't feel like an option then. And right now, it doesn't feel like an option, maybe when I retire.' (James)
	'So, I thought, I'm just going to go where the opportunities are, but at that point, I also really knew, I think like my life quality would be much better in the Netherlands. And I can continue to work as a researcher or at least have more opportunities for that instead of going back home.' (Amelie)
	'I feel like it is a big loss for the country home countries, but at the same time, there's also not many opportunities there to absorb the talent.' (Amelie).
	'I think during my first semester maybe I've been like, OK, I'm gonna go back to Indonesia doing something good for my country. But then after that, I think like the government was so messy there. And then I keep thinking like, no, this is not going to be my future (Emma)
	'I think "how can I stay in the country?"And it's also because people like the country so much. I mean, it offers a lot of freedom to live life on your terms. Maybe not having it really dictated by also family and other friends who keep pushing their own sort of ideas. Once you have that individual freedom, it's hard to go back.' (Isabella)
	'It [staying] was always the plan. Like, even when I left India like the logical next step was to apply for the orientation year visa and look for a job in the Netherlands.'
	'I was thinking like if I'm going to be a masters of abroad, it has to be also a way for me to open up an international career, so maybe not the Netherlands per se, but I was a bit more open minded back then of also moving to other countries. But I intentionally chose a scholarship that didn't require me to go back to Indonesia, so that was intentional already. But I was more like, OK, let's just see where the opportunities are but I also found that it's super difficult to be immigrant again anywhere else and start over the whole process so when I decided like, OK, I'm just going to focus here in the Netherlands.'
Onward migration	'The other options were if I don't get a visa here, I was also looking at like au pair of visas Just so that I can have some kind of extension to my stay and then maybe from the au pair that I could go back into the

Highly skilled migrant visa. I was considering masters too, but it was. Just I mean. It would be doable, but it would be so much money like the amount of money would put a lot of pressure also. But that was like really last resort. So, I also applied to 3 masters programs at the same time. The other was OK, if this doesn't happen then I cannot go to Russia or like I could, but that would be quite devastating. So, I was exploring like my grandma lived in Korea at the time' (Iris)

'So if I don't get a job in the Netherlands then I do kind of have a backup option which is to go to Germany and look for jobs there and then navigate that whole space because yeah, because my husband is apply for a PR in Germany. And he'll be expecting it soon. So, once he gets that, and if I don't get a job in the Netherlands within the next three months. Then I will be moving, making that move to Germany (Isabella)

'I am no longer applying to the Netherlands, I'm applying to Austria.' (Noah)

'I don't know why it didn't come to my mind to also like be open to getting another job, to getting a job in another EU country. I think it was because I've already stayed so long in the Netherlands now and I was like, well, if I go to another EU country, all progress is lost.' (Polina).

'I think I would love to look at other countries, but I'm just always worried about, maybe it's just like limiting myself, but I'm worried about the visa issue. Can I even bother applying? Will they take me and do the visa process for me?' (Sophia)

| *Long-term settlement* | 'I thought that I would stay for at least five years or so, and if I do like living here, then I would try to settle down here or something like that. So, I think finding a job and creating a stable life.' (Iris) |

'I think for some people, when they come to the Netherlands to study, there is a very clear sort of like motivation to stay beyond that. And for me there was too.' (James)

'People who are willing to put in a lot of work to stay here, they will get to stay here.' (Polina)

'I just want a normal life for a bit, I do not have to worry about job security so much.' (James)

'It was very important for me to have a continuous residence here because I wanted to eventually get a Dutch citizenship as soon as possible for those for those same reasons, like there was so much instability, uncertainty, and limitations to having a Russian passport.'(Polina)

Labor Market Barriers

Restrictions for non-EU graduates

'I think there was a time in when it (Orientation Year) might have been beneficial because I've met lots of non-EU people who did it, but they did it before I think the whole world became a right-wing place. And now it's very evident that it doesn't benefit you honestly, and I think there's a very insulting idea that, even if you do blue collar work and work at a minimum wage, you're still getting paid more than what you get paid in your home country.And I think that's a bit insulting. I think

that the system benefits from it. I think the Netherlands economy benefits from having lots of non-EU workers in the Netherlands. But it doesn't benefit the non-EU students. (Noah)

'If I would have played something differently during my study what I would have done is, I did an internship in Namibia, which was excellent for me to get an understanding of like grassroots level development on like in the global South. But I think if a non-EU person wants to get actual career access Europe, you should do an internship in an in a European institution.'(Noah)

'It's just a constant reminder of how much extra work you to do and how extra barriers existed to look for a job.' (James)

'You have to really explain why this person like who is not an EU national is better than someone who is an EU national. I think that convincing is maybe something that they don't want to do.' (Isabella)

'Just you have in your head like I'm not going to be able to compete with EU students, so I have to be the best of the best.' (Amelie)

'I started with the mindset that I was like, yeah, I had to prove myself, that I was less than an EU student. But then I tried to feel it as I can actually be strategic about my weakness. It can also be strength.' (Amelie)

It's like when I did my masters, during our breaks students, all of us were sitting somewhere together and I thought I used to find that the Dutch and Belgian students they are talking about how many companies call them last week. It's like people see their LinkedIn. Yeah, find that this student is studying somewhere. That student is studying somewhere. Companies actually called them. Hey, are you going to work for me? But for us? It was like we are sending hundreds and thousands applications but there is no scope for us, it is a reality. (Lily)

'For us it was more like we are in dire need, and we need to find something.' (Lily)

'I was both happy to stay, but also a bit afraid, given the circumstances of cuts in funding like in in I think it's almost everywhere like that's what made me realize like even the private sector, sometimes they just don't have enough money to keep you on. Even though even though you're, you're like a really good fit for the organization. Yeah. It is the reality at this point.' (Isabella)

'I do remember my university did offer like a career day for my program, and I did leave specific feedback saying you need to get non-EU perspectives because they were getting like people who just immediately landed jobs and they're all like EU based students, so especially in development where like majority or half of the student body is non-EU that career advice does not apply to them. (Noah)

'I think if it had been between me and another candidate from the EU, but they had no work experience and I had my work experience, the job would still go to the candidate from the EU.' (Noah)

'And I feel like, of course, some students have different conditions where they cannot just focus fully on the study or even an internship like you take very low pay for internship and not everyone is able to afford that and also some universities are more complicated than others. Like I heard stories that university doesn't want to sign the three-party agreement with internships. Internships play a very big role, I think, to get your like foot on the job market. So, if the university is making it difficult, or if you don't have time, or if you cannot afford it, then yeah, that's already a bit of an unfair access for you.' (Amelie)

'I think you need to really want it and if you want it, you need a plan, you need a strategy, and you need to really want it. I mean, I was super desperate and I acted out of acted out of desperation that whole time, but it got me to where I am now.' (Polina)

'And I've noticed that that for some people, it's still possible to get to have mobility in this system. But for other people less so, and I think within this whole non-EU spectrum, there is a difference in how mobile you are based on your nationality. If you're non-EU from Australia, the US, Canada, Britian. I think you are still relatively more mobile. Then, if you're from like Asia, Africa, that background. There's more ability to transition for some and less ability to transition for others.' (Noah)

Deskilling/Underemployment	'I think the chance the opportunity is like, what I face now, now my age is 40 plus and I applied some places and they said hey, like traineeship roles. People say for this job, we're looking for somebody who have maximum two years job experience, whereas I have twelve years experience. So if you get a traineeship job. It's very good for, like you already get like 2 years shield. You can work here. Yeah. And after the traineeship, there is chances that you will earn good and you will get longer stay opportunity and even your contract will be longer.' (Lily)
	'My previous employer, they are not counting it (work experience abroad). They think I'm a baby that was just born and then they count that I have 0 years' experience except for my internship here. But then my current employer thinks I already have, like, 8 years of experience because they counted every sweat I've had.' (Emma)
	'I counted how many years of experience I have recently, I just realized I have four years of professional experience. In addition to a Dutch Masters and bachelors and still it has not been enough, I have experience in the majority world in the field level And it still has not been enough, and it's been a little bit upsetting in the sense.' (Noah)
	'Even if you have experience prior to your studies in the Netherlands, if it's in a different country, they don't count it. There's a lot of cases where they don't actually see that experience as experience.' (Iris)
Challenges with employer sponsorship	'Now the problem is that most companies don't want to provide sponsorship visa. So, this is another challenge. It's like on one hand my visa situation is very tight. And on another side, even if I get a job, the company is not going to provide sponsorship visa for me.' (Lily)

'I think the challenge because there are people who have read the CV have been very excited to do an interview. And then the kicker is that of course after that they say that you have very good skill set. We really like your profile, but unfortunately, we do not sponsor your visas. It is surprising because I go through all the recognized sponsors on the and website, so every application I apply to I look at whether this company is an IND, recognized sponsor and they are. And then I get through to the interview round and then they tell me sorry we don't sponsor for this particular role, we are a sponsor. But we just don't sponsor for this role and I think that is also a challenge. So it's more of a lack of willingness to sponsor the visa and I'm not really sure where it comes from. I don't know if it's the sentiment behind migrants if it's too costly and it's too much of an administrative burden for them to do that you take on the migrant or it could be even of like a conjunction of both. It's really hard to know because I also don't get feedback on what the problem is or why they are unable to sponsor the visa they just they don't let us know about. So we're also left like scrambling in the dark.' (Isabella)

'They want me, but they don't want to sponsor my visa, although they're a recognized sponsor.' (Emma)

'Sometimes it's not really straightforward. Like for example like at that NGO the HR already processed my application. We had multiple interviews and at the end they said ah no we don't want to sponsor for this position, sometimes they waste our time with this kind of thing.' (Emma)

'Definitely finding sponsors, sponsors that fit all the criteria so the biggest criteria I would strike out in was like not knowing Dutch. The salary, being too high or like the yeah, because they have the minimum salary for the higher skilled migrant visa. I was a bachelor, so I was even like in a worse position than you because in order to get a highly skilled migrant job means you need to like to bring quite some value to the company.' (Polina)

'For example, if they hadn't extended my contract, if they didn't want to continue it, or if I wanted to quit the job, I would have had to say goodbye, because my visa is currently tied to the Highly Skilled Migrant scheme, and my employer is directly my sponsor.' (Mina)

'It was like very stressful years and even when I got my sponsorship it didn't end because especially I work for an NGO so they only give a permanent contract after the third one which means like every year is a question of whether they will accept my contract, whether I'll be able to stay, and then each year that passes by you build more life, right? So, there's also bigger things to lose.'(Amelie)

'I used the zoekjaar fully taking the risk that they will sponsor me later on because I didn't use that visa to look for any other job in the end. I was just thinking like, I hope, my current workplace would really sponsor me afterwards because they wanted to hire me only on the basis that the first year they don't want to sponsor me. They're not

obliged to continue my contract and sponsor me. But yeah, I I trusted them. So, I really thought, OK, even if something really goes wrong, I had at least one year of international work experience.' (Amelie)

'I even know people that have to go home because they couldn't find a job that would sponsor their visa. So it's like this mounting like fear of like will you find work or not. Will you stay in the country? Or not.' (Sophia)

'We can't sponsor your visa because of your citizenship.' (Sophia)

Uncertainty and Mental Strain

'It was very important for me to have a continuous residence here because I wanted to eventually get a Dutch citizenship as soon as possible for those for those same reasons, like there was so much instability, uncertainty, and limitations to having a Russian passport.' (Polina)

'I think in the beginning I felt more stable when I transitioned. It was very much towards the end of my orientation year actually when I switched to the highly migrant visa. But most of the contracts, like especially when you first starting is always like one-year contracts and then you renew it every year until it's like 3 years and then you get a permanent contract offer. So, I think even though it was like a more stable visa or residence status I still had like this uncertainty of like whether my contract would be renewed. But also like whether I would like this job enough to stay like a longer period.' (Polina)

'Personally, I would say just more of like how do you sort of deal with it? I mean, a lot of people give a lot of information about. This is what you should do, these are the steps, apply on LinkedIn. Do this do that, but maybe I would like more information on like mentally, like, how do you deal with it like? How do you deal with this uncertainty that comes with it. Because that in a lot ways, I feel it, it determines a lot of what you're going to do next. And even if you know what the steps are, sometimes you just feel stuck. And you don't feel like doing anything, even though you know the logical thing to do. It's more about on an emotional level. How do you sort of navigate it? I think largely that is what I'm missing because I feel a lot of people do fell that, at least, people I've spoken to. And I don't know, maybe having some groups where you can chat about it or I don't know, making it more formalized. So just so that you know that you're not alone.' (Isabella)

'I can't imagine like the level of uncertainty that then other people sort of feel right like that they don't have that back up. I feel fortunate enough to have it.' (Isabella)

'Also, mentally, during the first six months before I got the extension, 'I was quite stressed. It was my first job, very difficult, in a really niche field, almost a legal area that I didn't know much about. It was such a strange and very specific field. So I kept worrying: will they extend my contract or not? Because my first contract was only for six months. Anyway, when I finally got the news about the extension, I really felt

relieved, like, finally, I can move into a more stable, more grown-up life.'(Mina)

'It was like very stressful years and even when I got my sponsorship it didn't end because especially I work for an NGO so they only give a permanent contract after the third one which means like every year is a question of whether they will accept my contract, whether I'll be able to stay, and then each year that passes by you build more life, right? So, there's also bigger things to lose.' (Amelie)

'It's very stressful because like 3 months before your visa expires, you're wondering whether you have to pack your whole life.' (Amelie)

'I didn't think it bothered me until I'm now in a position where next year, hopefully I can get a permanent residence and I feel like I approach my life so differently and I didn't realize how much stress it was giving me.' (Amelie).

'I was at a point where I was applying to every kind of position you can imagine. Honestly, at that time, I had lost most of my hope and motivation. I had no real interest or energy left for anything in life, to be honest, because it was such a difficult period.' (Mina)

'Like after you get the highly skilled, you feel like you finally can live life like you finally can afford proper housing. You finally can afford going out a bit more. So I was really scared of you know if my contract wasn't extended or something because you know the development sector is quite fragile. So for, now I'm just very happy to take this next step. I don't know what this PhD will bring, but at least I can, like, I don't have to lose my whole life.' (Amelie)

'I remember this feeling. OK, I'm gonna wake up this morning. Who's gonna reject me this morning? You know who's gonna reject me today? There was kind of the general vibe, which was very negative, but so yeah, that was how. And so that was my initial, my initial sort of like feeling was that it would take some time. So I mean that's quite normal. You hear about it But then I didn't realize just how draining the process would be.' (James)

| NGO Space | 'I think it's very important to also understand the landscape around us, like the geopolitics involved. And you know how funding is being cut from so many different parts of the sector, so for me, on a personal note, it's kind of dissuaded me from really going towards like the NGO space, for instance.' (Isabella) |

'I won't be surviving if I work at the NGO because the life is very uncertain.' (Emma)

'Development is a field that places a lot of emphasis on, like buzzwords like decolonization, social justice, and stuff like that. And, I feel that right now, these companies and organizations that work in these areas, there's been a lot of budget cuts. And I would have expected them to make a stand, but I think this sort of development, NGO world is sort of fading. It's dying more on a hypocritical stand where it's just collapsing under the pressure without taking a stand.' (Noah)

'It was like very stressful years and even when I got my sponsorship it didn't end because especially I work for an NGO so they only give a permanent contract after the third one which means like every year is a question of whether they will accept my contract, whether I'll be able to stay, and then each year that passes by you build more life, right? So, there's also bigger things to lose.' (Amelie)

'Sometimes it's not really straightforward. Like for example like at that NGO the HR already processed my application. We had multiple interviews and at the end they said ah no we don't want to sponsor for this position, so they always ask, but sometimes they waste our time with this kind of thing. '(Emma)

Employability hierarchies

'Nobody cares about Sociology. Nobody is hiring. No one cares what you did really. It is like if I had done like a hard science, or engineering, I feel like it would be much easier to find a job. It is like if you are Dutch, sure, you could probably find a job because you could go work with the Dutch government. You could work with like more Dutch language focused things. But I feel like I chose unemployable degrees.' (Sophia)

'If you are from the tech sector, there are more opportunities for you.' (Amelie)

'Especially this year, I think it has become much harder, or maybe it has been getting harder and harder, I am not sure. It is terrible, right now the market is terrible, and as far as I understand, if you are not an engineer, you will struggle. I met people who had studied different fields, and especially in the social sciences, if you are non-EU or if you graduated in a social field, you really have to work twice as hard compared to an engineer, because there is also the language barrier.' (Mina)

'I think in terms of background, I don't think they care about our major. But as long as the university, for example, if you've graduated from Erasmus, from Leiden or whatever top university in the Netherlands that give you an advantage.' (Emma)

'Definitely finding sponsors (was the hardest), sponsors that fit all the criteria so the biggest criteria I would strike out in was like not knowing Dutch. The salary, being too high or like the yeah, because they have the minimum salary for the higher skilled migrant visa. I was a bachelor, so I was even like in a worse position than you because in order to get a highly skilled migrant job means you need to like to bring quite some value to the company. But at my level of expertise, which was basically non, I don't think they were willing to hire someone like me. That did put a lot of like extra pressure of like ohh how I am going to be able to do this as a fresh graduate only with a bachelor's degree.'(Polina)

'So, after I graduated straight from my bachelor's and master's, I started looking for a job. Around 80 percent of the rejections I got were because I didn't have experience. What I actually wanted to do from the beginning was a PhD, but I started getting a lot of rejections

there too, again, for not having enough experience. Then I began applying for junior lawyer positions, but even those were asking for someone with three years of experience. Honestly, it felt like all the employers were looking for a 'golden fish' in this market. Whenever I said I didn't have experience, the response was basically, 'Then we can't train you, so we can't hire you.' I heard that a lot. (Mina)