

Challenging the ‘Youth Gaze’: Building Diversity into Refugee and Asylum Reception and Integration Programmes

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Reception and integration programmes have often a dominant socio-economic focus that supports refugees’ swift movement into the labour market. This article examines the assumptions that such programmes make about their core target group and how this corresponds with participants’ diverse needs, drawing on conceptual work around the intersectionalities of age, relationalities, and migrant capital to do so. It employs data from interviews with, and observations of residents of an asylum seeker centre in Utrecht, the Netherlands, participating in an innovative programme that aimed to help them ‘integrate from day one’ through co-education and co-housing. We examine the assumptions of the programme, including its inclusive orientation, but show how it appealed implicitly to younger participants. By exploring experiences of participation for a more marginal group of participants in the mid and later phases of professional lives, we show how the programme worked better for a core, younger group, but in doing so, inevitably supported those already advantaged. We argue that programmes need to be adaptive and responsive to the heterogeneity of participants, who vary by age, relationalities and possession of resources among other intersectionalities, to support all the populations they serve.

Keywords: ageing, asylum seekers and refugees, diversity, heterogeneity, integration programmes, reception

Introduction

Many European integration programmes have a socio-economic focus on labour market integration, where migrants are encouraged to quickly join and make contributions to the labour market (Dekker *et al.* 2015; Kraff and Jernsand 2021). This addresses challenges faced by refugees in this domain (Connor 2010; Bakker *et al.* 2017) but also upholds an economically instrumentalist discourse where migrants are valued chiefly through their labour market contribution (Devine 2013). In this article, we consider how this focus may inadvertently support certain refugees over others: those young, well-educated, with fewer caring responsibilities and starting out in their working lives.

The implicit gaze of programming that we identify reflects the predominantly younger age profile of refugees; according to the [Pew Research Centre \(2016\)](#) in 2015, only 18 per cent of asylum seekers were over 35 years old (6 per cent women and 12 per cent men), while in 2020, only 6 per cent were 60 and above ([UNHCR 2020](#)). In the Netherlands, the country in which this research is situated, over three-quarters of all asylum seekers are under 35 at arrival, and a majority of those are men ([Centraal Bureau Voor Statistiek 2021](#)). Nevertheless, as [Newbold and Mckearney \(2017: 152\)](#) point out, ‘refugees are [...] a diverse group that is often lost in the “refugee” label’ and more consideration is needed of how reception and integration programmes respond to diversity. While refugees share common challenges, such as downward mobility, delays to labour market participation while awaiting legal outcomes, some refugees have specific needs and additional challenges that may be overlooked in generalized programmes (see [Sathiyamoorthy 2017](#) for older refugees). This article probes how refugee heterogeneity is responded to, by asking ‘what implicit assumptions about participants are embedded in integration programmes focused on socio-economic integration and entrepreneurship?’

Data are drawn from research into an innovation in asylum seeker reception in Utrecht, the Netherlands, called the ‘Utrecht Refugee Launchpad’ to respond to this question. Colloquially known as ‘Plan Einstein’, it had an explicit socio-economic focus where participants were taught entrepreneurship and business English to ‘launch’ them to better lives. It aimed to generate more social connections and higher mental wellbeing through co-education and co-housing with people from its immediate neighbourhood. We employ data from evaluation and research conducted as the programme developed, especially qualitative research with 62 participants from an asylum seeker centre (ASC) and ethnographic research conducted throughout. In focusing on refugee heterogeneity broadly, and age specifically, we prioritize data from a subset of 12 participants aged 40–60 years in the mid and latter stages of their professional lives, in comparison to a broader group of participants, to consider three themes. First, we ask what assumptions about the appropriate characteristics of a programme beneficiary are implicit in a project set-up and how did these correspond to refugees participating? Second, how did the participants aged 40–60 experience the initiative in

relation to others' experiences? Finally, we reflect on what lessons can be learned from these experiences to inform future programmes.

Our analysis draws attention to how, when considering heterogeneity, age is a significant, but often overlooked vector of difference. However, our findings demonstrate that age must also be considered within a broader framework of intersectionality, which recognizes difference *within* categories, and the multiple positionalities, inequalities, and relationalities that affect refugees' futures differently. Thus, while we find that younger participants largely experienced the programme corresponding better with their needs, youth itself was not a passport to success. Some of the younger people were also disadvantaged in participation, for example through possessing fewer relevant skills following disrupted educational trajectories or having to juggle family responsibilities, and this diversity needs attention too. These findings are significant for both academic knowledge and policy, since it shows how the diversity of refugee experiences (including older people, but also those with family obligations and those with fewer capitals or difficulty exercising those capitals) needs to be better understood in integration and reception programmes. The research adds to an emerging body of research on the heterogeneity and relationality of refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016), which recognizes that understanding more about difference will help formulate genuinely inclusive approaches that maximize success for all.

Literature and Theoretical Resources

Refugee reception and integration policies in both the Global North and South focus especially on labour market inclusion, for example by developing the entrepreneurship capacities of refugees (Skran and Easton-Calabria 2020) or using social enterprises to assist with work integration (Kraff and Jernsand 2021). Programmes equipping refugees with work-related skills and knowledge aim to improve their future productivity and earnings, while recognizing too how labour market inclusion can enhance social and cultural integration (Dekker *et al.* 2015). Such initiatives seek to improve problematic lower participation rates of refugees in comparison to other migrants, especially during their first years after arrival, whereby there is a 'refugee entry effect', so that even once legal status is granted, it takes many years for refugees to gain parity in labour market achievements (Connor 2010; Bakker *et al.* 2017). For example, after 9 years of living in the Netherlands, 30 per cent of refugees between the ages of 18 and 65 still live on social benefits, in comparison to the total population where 2.6 per cent do so (Bakker *et al.* 2017; Centraal Bureau Voor Statistiek 2018).

Recent studies draw attention, however, to how integration programmes and services, which already face resource and time constraints, are under pressure because of the increasing heterogeneity of participants (Bucken-Knapp *et al.* 2019; Kraff and Jernsand 2021). In contrast to a homogenizing policy-vision of refugees, participants vary in terms of country of origin, route taken, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, legal status, levels of education and capitals, professional histories, and family commitments (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). Research

that uses an analytical framework of intersectionality demonstrates how these multiple and intersecting vectors of difference can differentially affect outcomes (Erel 2015). Migrants and refugees are differentially positioned in their abilities to transfer prior experience and former professional statuses from one country to another. In this analysis, we draw attention to three intersecting dimensions of refugees' identities that affect this endeavour, with attention to: refugees' age, their relationalities, and their possession of capitals and show how these may be overlooked in programmes that assert implicitly standardized and normative age-based expectations for refugees.

First, age as a vector of difference remains overlooked in much migration policy and research (Ciobanu and Hunter 2017). An emerging body of research on older migrants focuses on labour migrants ageing in place, return labour migrants, international retirement migrants (IRM), and family-oriented retirement migrants (Warnes *et al.* 2004; Ciobanu and Hunter 2017). Recent attention has also explored new migration drivers and destinations for these groups (see King *et al.* 2021 for IRM). However, in general, refugee policy and scholarship neglects older refugees, including both those newly arrived and the significant populations ageing in exile (Bolzman 2014). Older refugees are numerically small but dynamic; for example in the UK, between 2008 and 2014, the number of older asylum seekers aged 60 years and above increased by over 70 per cent (CPA 2016). They are often the most disadvantaged too, as Sathiyamoorthy (2017: 76) notes, 'older refugees are widely recognized as one of the most at-risk populations living with multiple intersecting barriers of political insecurity, financial insolvency, and poor health'.

Second, recognition of ageing invites a broader consideration of intergenerational and relational aspects of refugees' lives and integration processes (Bolzman 2014; Lulle 2018). Relational perspectives recognize selves as existing only through concrete relationships to other selves (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016). This perspective helps contextualize how seeking refuge is a process that occurs within broader relationships, takes time, and occurs simultaneously with other life course transitions (demonstrating the 'linked lives' aspect of life course research, see Elder 1994; Weiß 2018). Rather than integration processes occurring in an individualistic manner, refugees are affected by caring roles and intergenerational responsibilities (see Bloch 2018 for how these influence younger generations). Shifting family dynamics in post-migration contexts can yield pressures on refugees, for example for younger people who face pressures to care for family members while negotiating educational trajectories (Morrice *et al.* 2020) or for older people who may seek to reaffirm their identities as central within the family unit (Bolzman 2014).

Third, refugees' age and relationalities also interact with their differential possession of capitals (or resources). Drawing on the work of social theorist Bourdieu, scholars have recently shown that migrants' differential possession of capitals including educational credentials and know-how, social networks, and experience plays an important role in influencing their experience of inequalities following migration (Cederberg 2012). Expanding attention to capitals (cultural, social, and

economic) beyond 'social networks' in migration research, [Cederberg \(2012\)](#) highlights the nature of capitals as convertible and accumulative. In other words, capital functions only if it can transform into other resources and improve one's position (for example if social connections lead to economic benefits in labour market experience). This perspective builds in power dimensions, by showing how capital accumulation may be blocked or inhibited by implicit 'othering' practices ([Cederberg 2012](#)). Cederberg emphasizes too the context-dependent nature of capitals, recognizing how social and cultural capital, such as professional networks and status, valued in one place (e.g. the country of origin) may not hold the same value in another ([Cederberg 2012](#)).

Attention to these three factors of age, relationalities, and capitals in combination is helpful, since it highlights how older refugees entering integration programmes may possess significant economic, social, and cultural capitals in their countries of origin but, following refugee displacement, find that the value of these capitals is diminished. In seeking to convert capitals however into useful resources in the new contexts, they are also disadvantaged by shorter temporal horizons for reigniting former professions due to their age, and this is compounded by having to learn a second language to function in the labour market, which can be more difficult for older migrants ([Bolzman 2014](#); [Bethune 2020](#)). Social capital disruption is also experienced differently; older refugees can find adapting to new situations following the 'radical severance' with home countries or regions of origin more difficult ([Bolzman 2014](#)). They may show less flexibility in being able to adapt, especially in the face of realization they may never return to origin countries, and experience more mental distress and loneliness than younger people following separation from their former familial and social networks ([Bolzman 2014](#)). Within age categories, however, there is also variation in experiences; for example, while [Nguyen and Goel \(2015\)](#) found a higher risk of depression facing older Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, [Ciobanu and Fokkema \(2021\)](#) found a low incidence of loneliness among older Romanian migrants in Switzerland.

This article shows how such diversity however can be overlooked within refugee programmes, especially as they operate with standard expectations and social constructions of age deeply embedded within them. Sociological research shows that ageing is far from a 'natural' and universal biological process but interpreted within social and cultural contexts ([Hockey and James 2003](#)), thereby yielding particular expectations around 'appropriate' behaviours for different age cohorts ([Torres 2006](#)). For example, in countries in the Global North, childhood is understood as a period of vulnerability and protection, but the period of youth is more ambivalently understood, where youth can be viewed as a 'social threat' and there are expectations for individuals to make a healthy, temporally limited, and linear transition to adulthood ([Morrice et al. 2020](#)). Increasingly middle and older age has become laden with expectations for later life activity, associated with notions of 'lifelong learning' and 'healthy' or 'successful' ageing ([Morrice et al. 2020](#); [Bennett and Hodkinson 2012](#)). How such age and experience-based assumptions, values, and expectations are implicit within expectations for reception and

integration has rarely been considered, despite how within the contexts of refugees' lives, they may be less appropriate.

Attention to this within refugee programmes exposes how often normative age-based expectations are embedded through their attention to activity and rapid labour market inclusion (Kraff and Jernsand 2021). Such a focus may feel less relevant for older refugees approaching statutory retirement age (Bolzman 2014). A narrative of older refugees 'at risk' due to this, can exacerbate pressures for them to avoid 'inactive futures'; yet, such culturally embedded expectations for 'active ageing' may jar with refugees' own desires, especially if coming from contexts where old age is venerated, and older people expect younger generations to care for them (Torres 2006; CPA 2016). Dubus' (2014) research with Cambodian refugees' shows, for example that they assumed that old age 'begins' much earlier in life than the American standard state-defined 'retirement age'. Old age is rather tied to their relationships with, and life course transitions of, family members, namely the birth of a first grandchild. These different assumptions affect older refugees' engagement with integration programmes, influencing their views about work longevity and appropriate social roles (Dubus 2014). By contrast, younger refugees' are also under pressure in refugee programmes to meet normative expectations of linear transitions to adulthood and, yet, are vulnerable due to their positionality at the intersection of 'youth' and 'refugee', which complicates their ability to do so (Morrice *et al.* 2020: 389). Expectations for linear pathways are disrupted by factors such as experiences of the migration journey, having to learn a new language, address information deficits in a new country, overcome poverty, access insecure work, and navigate caring responsibilities to family members among others. This means that their ability to progress in education is disrupted and their transitions become 'elongated and delayed' (Morrice *et al.* 2020: 400). As this review shows, it is vital to understand more about both the age-based assumptions embedded in programmes and how refugees, through their multiple positionalities, relationalities, and differential possession of capitals, may deviate from those expected norms.

Context and Methodology

National and local contexts affect reception and settlement policies and influence the opportunity structures that newcomers face. As such, before explaining our methodology, a note on the national context of refugee reception in the Dutch context is needed.

In the Netherlands, asylum seekers are accommodated in reception centres. There are over a hundred asylum seeker centres (ASCs) nationwide, housing a minimum of 300 inhabitants. Residents live in shared rooms, with access to facilities such as bathrooms and kitchens. Asylum seekers are moved around several reception centres at various phases of their legal application, for reasons of logistics and efficiency. Even if granted refugee status, they may also remain in a centre for up to a year while waiting for housing, especially since there has been a national housing shortage. Asylum seekers are entitled to emergency health care and

receive a weekly allowance at a similar rate to the minimum social security allowance for Dutch citizens. They are not permitted to work during the first 6 months after launching a legal procedure, which itself can be delayed by some months after arrival. Even then, with a work permit, they can only work for 24 weeks a year and can keep only 25 per cent of their earnings. They are not allowed to take Dutch language courses or access education, to discourage them from integrating into Dutch society while awaiting a decision. After receiving a positive status decision, refugees are obliged to learn the Dutch language as well as to pass a so-called 'integration exam' (*inburgeringsexamen*) on Dutch society, culture, and labour market participation. They are entitled to social security but are expected to get a job as soon as possible.

In 2016, a new ASC was expected to open in the city of Utrecht. As researchers, we conducted a formal evaluation of a reception and integration programme, which operated from 2016 to late 2019 on the same site, named 'Plan Einstein'. The independent evaluation employed a 'living lab' methodology that enabled our emerging findings to feed into the programme's development (Dekker *et al.* 2021b). We employed mixed methods to investigate experiences on, and generate evidence of, project outcomes with refugees, young tenants living on-site, residents living nearby, employees, and stakeholders. This article draws on qualitative data generated with residents of the ASC through interviews and observations carried out between July 2017 and July 2019. We carried out 83 interviews with 62 residents of the ASC, including 21 repeat interviews held during the programme and up to nine months beyond. Of those total individuals interviewed, 42 were male and 20 were female. They were of varied family composition, from single people to families of seven people, coming from the following countries: Syria (33 individuals), Yemen (6), Iran (6), Eritrea (5), Pakistan (3), Ethiopia (2), Afghanistan (2), Singapore (1), Burundi (1), Iraq (1), Turkey (1), and Turkmenistan (1). In this article, we focus on a subset of 12 people from that sample aged 40–60 years (see Table 1) reflecting the age profile within the ASC population, where of 927 people, 12 per cent were over 45. The project's 'inclusive' ethos meant that staff working on the project, apart from those at the Refugee Council, were not expected to know the legal status of participants, so we do not report on that information.

Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants, and although we sought out people disinclined to join the programme, we were hindered in recruiting non-participants by not being allowed by the ASC's responsible agency (COA) to enter the ASC housing unit. We acknowledge, therefore, that the experiences discussed are somewhat partial, since the sample and subset are both biased towards participants.

We used a semi-structured interview schedule, piloted before use, to explore individuals' experiences of life at the ASC and in the programme, as well as their future aspirations. Interviews took between 45 min and 3 h, and were held at Plan Einstein, or, once the initiative closed in 2018, at meeting locations of participants' choice, including their homes or public places, like a café or library. Two female researchers conducted most interviews in English, Dutch, or using professional

Table 1

Interviewees Aged 40–60 Years					
Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Age	Former employment	Family situation
Fadwa	F	Syria	40s	Hairdresser and makeup artist	Lone mother; living with five children
Samir	M	Iraq	45	Company director	Married; wife and son in refugee camp at time of interview; arrived later
Wondimu	M	Ethiopia	40s	NGO worker	Married; wife and children arrived between interviews
Bahar	F	Iran	40s	Various: artist painting miniatures, pastry chef, secretary	Married; arrived with two daughters, father arrived later
Maahir	M	Pakistan	40s	Doctor	Married; wife and children in country of origin
Aban	M	Syria	40s	Businessman	Single
Nishtman	F	Syria	50s	Hairdresser	Married; living with four children
Akram	M	Syria	54	Lawyer	Married; son living with him; daughter in Germany; wife with two children in Jordan
Omar	M	Syria	58	Salesman and supervisor	Married; living with wife and five children
Wasim	M	Syria	50s	Teacher (technical)	Married; living with wife and three sons
Zahir	M	Syria	57	Lawyer	Married; wife and three children not yet in Netherlands at time of interview
Jamileh	F	Iran	60	GP	Living with son and daughter

translation over the telephone in Arabic, Tygrinya, Kurmanji, Oromo, and Farsi. Twenty-five interviews were also conducted in Arabic: 6 by a student assistant and 19 by a Syrian Master's student, Raneem Salama, under supervision, using the same structure, clear instructions, and regular team check-ins to ensure

consistency. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, apart from a few occasions where interviewees asked not to be recorded and we took detailed notes instead (including verbatim quotations). The two qualitative researchers coded interview data initially in NVivo, to quickly generate evidence on programme outcomes, followed by hand-coding using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2012). In frequent dialogue with each other and with access to a shared file, we charted regularities in the themes present in the data, as well as exceptions, inspired by the research questions and literature, and refined analysis through further engagement with, and scrutiny of, data.

Cognizant of the ethical challenges of conducting research with refugees, we followed a strict ethics procedure and took care to ensure participants understood informed consent. The two researchers also conducted ethnographic research, spending time with participants and employees over intermittent occasions in 2017–18 in the social spaces and attending classes, activities, and meetings. Consequently, we got to know participants during repeated encounters in ways that sharpened our sense of responsibility to accurately report details of their lives. As we were independent of the project partnership but had frequent communication through project meetings, we were able to raise concerns affecting participants quickly, enabling them to benefit in a small way, from our conversations (in line with Mackenzie *et al.* 2007).

Findings

In the findings, we first examine the implicit assumptions about the target population in the programme's design. Second, we focus on experiences of participants aged 40–60 years to explore how a marginal group experienced the programme.

Assumptions in Programme Design

Plan Einstein was established in a converted office block, on the *Einsteindreef*, a busy road in the socially and economically deprived neighbourhood of Overvecht in Utrecht. It housed a new ASC for 400 asylum seekers, which was opened after increased numbers arrived in the city in 2015 and 2016 and was run by COA (central agency for the reception of asylum seekers). Plan Einstein, the reception and integration programme, was led by an alliance of the municipality, Non-governmental organizations, local education institutions, and social enterprises. The initiative was funded by the European Commission's *Urban Innovative Actions* programme.

The programme was designed inclusively for ASC residents and local people, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, etc. However, the programme premise belied an implicit target group and vision of a refugee inherent in its set-up: as young, educated, entrepreneurially minded and computer literate. This is revealed by several of the choices in project design, as well as the selection of organizations delivering services, who were mainly already experienced with working exclusively with young participants:

First, Plan Einstein operated using co-housing, inviting local people to rent rooms in the site, to encourage social contact and offer benefits to neighbourhood residents. However, it assumed that *young* people were the most appropriate to live alongside the ASC. The co-housing was run by Socius, a company that worked to provide ‘affordable and fun housing for young people and special target groups’ (<https://www.sociuswonen.nl/concept/>). They recruited students or those just entering the labour market, aged from 18 years old to their mid-20s to, according to the project’s website, live in ‘trendy living quarters’ adjacent to the ASC. In return for a subsidized rent, the tenants were responsible for organizing social activities with refugees, such as games evenings, movie nights, bowling, or sports activities. Young people were expected to have time to devote to the project and have lower expectations for housing.

Second, the youth focus was implicit in a co-education pillar. The project application set out an expectation that 20 per cent of class participants would be local young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Local further education and higher education institutions, the latter used to teach highly educated young people, gave classes on ‘business English’, from beginner to advanced levels, as well as entrepreneurship, teaching principles of the ‘Lean Launchpad’ method, design thinking, and marketing. The logic was that such subjects would have ‘futureproof’ value for refugees, whereby even if an asylum application was refused, the investment was not wasted but helped people prepare for a future in the country of origin or of forward travel (Roelfsema and Schouten 2019). Entrepreneurship was also understood as enabling continuity for refugees coming from countries with an entrepreneurial tradition. Instructors did not expect participants to necessarily become entrepreneurs, but classes were rather aimed at ‘empowering an entrepreneurial attitude and mindset’ (Roelfsema and Schouten 2019: 5).

A follow-on professional business incubation programme was offered by a social enterprise with a track record of working with students and young starters. This strand included events and workshops on topics like networking, CVs, LinkedIn, and powerful pitching. Coaching partnerships also helped make participants overcome challenges in finding jobs, while workplace ‘matching’ also sought to give them access to networks and overcome the lack of local knowledge. A *Start Your Own Business Course* was supplemented by ad hoc ‘Challenges’, which involved participants meeting to collectively solve a problem, such as organizing a pop-up restaurant. The regional office of the Dutch Refugee Council (*VluchtelingenWerk*) helped refugees access the programme by inviting them to take an extensive online intake assessment on laptops, indicating an expectation that most would be computer literate (although oral intake conversations were also available). Another NGO, *Welkom in Utrecht*, joined the project later and helped with newcomers’ orientation and volunteering.

Third, programme managers hoped Plan Einstein would become a vibrant centre and hub of activity within the disadvantaged neighbourhood in which it was located. As such, the project was designed with a young, urban, artsy aesthetic to inject a little bit of ‘cool’ there. It included a large ‘incubator space’, kitchen,



Figure 1.
The Incubator Space (Features Disguised).

and classrooms beneath the tenants' rooms as well as an outside space with artificial grass, planters, and picnic tables. The walls of the incubator space were painted bright orange, with a layout designed for work, study, and networking,

as evidenced by the clusters of chairs and tables, two large Chesterfield sofas, and a piano (see [Figure 1](#)). The incubator space was so named in line with the programme's emphasis on business, innovation, and entrepreneurship, as a space for developing start-ups or making the right connections. Its language and themes are reminiscent of the features identified in cities' innovation complexes ([Zukin 2020](#)) indicating a creative, young vibe.

However, the profile of both refugee and neighbourhood participants was somewhat at odds with the expected core target group. First, although initially a small group of younger refugees were placed at the site and this social mix with tenants was successful ([Oliver et al. 2020](#)) by the time the ASC operated at full capacity, ASC residents had become a more heterogeneous mix. In early 2016, the 'emergency' facing Northern states of high numbers of asylum seeker arrivals abated, following the EU–Turkey deal. Rather than housing new, single arrivals, ASC residents came from other Dutch ASCs, where they had been for months or even years. Their countries of origin were diverse, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Eritrea, and residents were more likely to be older and some in family units (54.9 per cent of total ASC population of $N=904$ were seeking Family Reunification, compared to the average in other ASCs of 25.5 per cent). As such, the demographic profile of residents was different than expected: they were more mature and arriving knowing they had, or were likely to get, a permit to stay. We have written elsewhere about the ramifications of this for building social contact between tenants and ASC residents, where creating relationships across different generations became harder, but even in the earlier phase, the few older refugees like Maahir (Pakistani, 40s) and Samir (Iraqi, 40s) experienced little contact with the young tenants ([Oliver et al. 2020](#)).

Not only were the ASC participants more heterogeneous, but also neighbourhood participants were also different to the young NEETs expected. Youth tenants living on-site were mostly students, and yet the courses attracted more middle-aged or older neighbourhood residents, such as Frans, an unemployed ethnically Dutch man in his fifties, who wished to set up a business in painting and decorating; Irene, an Aruban woman in her 50s seeking a change of career; Imran, a 56-year-old unemployed Somalian; Mohammed, 68, from Iran; and Ghulam, in his 40s from Morocco, who wanted to develop plans for a water-transfer printing business. Teachers quickly adapted to this unexpected demand and welcomed the fact that the programme was able to meet unanticipated needs in the neighbourhood. Classes gave opportunities for mature neighbours and participants to connect, which was important given that some of the older ASC residents had little in common with the younger tenants and did not come to the organized events like bowling and games nights ([Oliver et al. 2020](#)). For instance, Omar (Syrian, 57) was invited to a local resident's house to watch an Utrecht-Ajax football match and Jamileh (Iran, 60) experienced support with depression from a fellow classmate from the neighbourhood.

Participant Experiences

Next, we explore motivations and experiences of participants of the programme, with special attention to 12 ASC residents aged 40–60 years, of which all but one took part in the programme. Overall, we show that the programme foci—on entrepreneurship and English language—worked well but ultimately worked best for some of the younger, educated refugees with good command of language, flexible outlooks, and high motivation to pursue education and work.

First, we saw that some of the older participants saw Plan Einstein as a programme that appealed more to younger people. Nishtman (Syrian, 50s, with a daughter aged 19) told us, 'Most of the activities, most of the meetings were for young people'. She explained how 'my daughter goes to Plan Einstein, I don't', and said she felt out of place at activities:

there were all young people of my daughter's age. Nobody my age. The people my age, were all outside and I went [outside] with them.

Many of the already well-educated young people were highly motivated to participate, to get access and knowledge about higher education or explore new career ideas, and often to help out other family members elsewhere, and this was appropriate to their stage of life. However, some of the older participants, particularly those in their 50s or above, were not necessarily so oriented to their own individual success in the labour market but intergenerational and familial success, where the experience of dependents or their children's futures was prioritized above their own. Omar (Syrian, 50s) participated in the programme but expressed gratitude for the programme supporting his children's futures in the Netherlands. Jamileh, an Iranian woman, in her late 50s arrived in a depressed state after being in 10 different ASCs over the previous years; yet, her concern was overwhelmingly for her son in his late teens, who was displaying difficult behaviours. Her satisfaction with the programme drew much from the turnaround in *his* educational and professional prospects.

Many participants of all ages were appreciative of Plan Einstein and desired to give something back. For some of the older group, being involved in the programme, however, meant that they were able to simultaneously maintain social roles as senior members of their communities (Bolzman 2014). Omar (58, Syrian) for instance followed entrepreneurship and English classes but also took up a strong civic role in the project, motivating other Syrians to take part, giving speeches about the Syrian conflict at events to educate Dutch folk, hosting suppers at Ramadan, and contributing to *Radio Einstein*, a radio show operating from the site. The younger people who showed similar desires to 'pay society back' was done more often through economic channels, by seeking further education and employment (even if below their capacity).

Second, when considering the programme fit—which focused on refugees' human capital and developing entrepreneurial aptitudes and skills to set up a business and find work or further education—this appeared to work better for some of the younger, already well-educated participants who already arrived with

significant capitals, including linguistic and educational credentials (including some who already had postgraduate qualifications). Employability was seen as something an individual could address through mindset or making connections, but older participants could do little in sometimes quite short timescales to adapt their capitals, for example through retraining before statutory retirement. They faced barriers to employment by not yet having residency, not speaking the local language and difficulties in converting qualifications and while younger people also faced these, and some might have been ill-resourced by limited education, the older group also had the additional challenge of having less time to try to convert their capitals. Many of the older participants had possessed significant capital in their home countries via established professional identities, but these became redundant given the more limited temporal horizons they operated within. For example, Jamileh in her late 50s knew that she would never be able to resume her former career as a GP. She had worked in Iran for 22 years in a job she 'loved' but recognized that 'because of my age, I can't continue my job [...] and that was a source of sadness and regret. Older participants were also disadvantaged by the diminished value of prior resources, losing the advantages that maturity in the labour market normally yields over youth, such as labour market experience and access to a network, which meant much less in the new country. For example, Aban (40s, Syrian businessman) had built up significant social capital through an extensive business network in China, but its value was diminished in the Dutch context.

Older participants were therefore more oriented to understand how to convert their existing resources, in transferring their prior experience and professional status from one country to another. By contrast, some of the younger people experienced more freedom from pursuing a set path and were therefore more able to engage with some of the creative aspects of the programme, such as the entrepreneurship course. Habib (30s, Yemen) reflected on his 'previous experience and education, which I would like to continue', in comparison to Leilani (Iranian, early 20s) who he described as 'younger, fresher,' and 'still hav[ing] the choices to select'. Likewise, Fadwa, a Syrian professional hairdresser and makeup artist in her 40s, wanted to exploit her existing experience to set up her own business. This meant that she desired more practical opportunities such working as a hairdresser within the ASC, which would have enabled her to capitalize on her existing cultural capital more than she felt was possible in the taught courses. She felt the programme worked better for younger students on the cusp, since 'I already have a lot of work experience. It helps [those] people who do not have a career anyway'. Some of the highly educated and experienced older refugees therefore experienced a disjuncture between the educational offer and their real-life experiences (Cooke 2006). For example, Maahir (Pakistan, 40s) found the introductory courses too basic, while Samir (Iraq, 45) had formerly been a company director and had little time for the courses, since he felt they needed to be better customized to the existing capital refugees possessed and, 'in line with what someone really can do, for example, plumbing, drawing, medicine'.

Due to their considerable experience, some of the older participants were psychologically welded to former professional identities and less willing to revise and rethink what would be possible in the new context. Akram (Syrian, 54) expressed a desire to become a lawyer again, but despite having received legal status and been given housing, he had barely begun to learn Dutch and struggled with psychological difficulties after still not knowing where one of his daughters was. The entrepreneurship strand of the programme had allowed him to think of alternative plans to establish a small shop making pizzas, but these ideas were not developed into a realistic plan, or of concrete steps this would take. Other younger participants, like Leilani, had to revisit her desired career pathway to work in film, but she was more reflexive about this and admitted that she was less committed to a path of action as, 'my path has changed; the thing I want here wasn't the thing I wanted one year ago'.

Even where participants in the mid or latter stages of their professional lives were open-minded about revising plans, converting ideas into reality was often complicated by health issues or interdependencies with younger family members. For example, Nishtman (50s, from Syria) suffered from back and joint pain, and this restricted her working or volunteering. Jamileh expressed optimism that (despite being in her early sixties) she could retrain in a related medical field as a sonographer, but when we met after the programme finished, she was in a mobility scooter following a cycling accident, where even cleaning her house was taking her the whole day. Likewise, Wondimu, an Ethiopian refugee in his 40s who worked for an NGO in Addis Ababa, abandoned the plans he had developed in the programme to start a bike repair shop in Utrecht. He had received donations of equipment and much support through the programme, but he spoke little Dutch and found setting up a business too expensive and time-consuming while also undergoing *inburgering* (mandatory language and settlement requirements that lead to Dutch citizenship). While these challenges are common to all refugees, for Wondimu, they also coincided at a stage of his life associated with additional responsibilities to bring in a regular wage after the arrival of his wife and children. This affected his capacity and willingness to pursue aspirational business ideas, especially as he was only able to access social security to support his family if he could show he was seeking a job.

Finally, the programme's emphasis on equipping participants with English language rather than Dutch language also worked better for younger starters than those in later stages of their working lives. The programme team offered English rather than Dutch, since refugees still in legal procedures are not supposed to be taught Dutch and this was also conceived as more beneficial in the longer run to those who would be refused status. However, many of the younger refugees who came to the programme already possessed high amounts of linguistic capital, and many could speak English well already, since English has become a global, entrepreneurial language (Kubota 2021). For younger people, classes improved their pre-existing capabilities or gave extra advantages, especially when a minority were given an opportunity to convert these skills by studying for a valuable Cambridge English qualification. Fewer of the older refugees, by contrast, spoke English well.

This subject choice meant that older (as well as other less-educated younger) refugees experienced a double burden in having to learn both English and Dutch. This was problematic for the older participants' because they felt already under time pressure and some found learning languages also more difficult with age. For instance, participants like Jamileh felt her progress in learning English was slow and wanted more intensive courses, so she enrolled in multiple classes over a year. For other older participants, learning Dutch was the higher priority to access work locally; Nishtman (50s, Syrian) explained her motivation to avoid English courses as: 'Let me first learn Dutch before English' and Wasim (Syrian, 50s), a former teacher of electrics and air conditioning, referred to how he felt he was 'los[ing] a lot of time'. For some of the young people, learning Dutch as another language was less daunting or urgent; for example Jamileh's son, Salman (Iran, 20s), described the additional task of needing to learn Dutch to go to university as, 'not too difficult over time'. Offering English did not serve older participants so well in assisting with quick labour market integration, although it gave them a low threshold opportunity to connect with the other middle-aged neighbours, as explored previously.

Using English as the working language of Plan Einstein, however, also generated implicit selection to the programme, because if participants did not have linguistic capital to begin with, they were less able to participate in the entrepreneurship classes and work-oriented activities. Habib (Yemen, 30s) reflected, 'if you come to Plan Einstein, if you don't really have a language, it's pretty difficult'. While soon after inception, educators introduced entrepreneurship classes with Arabic translations to partially address the problem, these were, by necessity, much slower paced. By contrast, students who already spoke English slotted in well to the programme and were able to demonstrate their high cultural capital, communicating a cosmopolitan, and modern or western outlook. Participants without these language capacities, which was especially common among the older group, were vulnerable to feeling shame. For example, Samir, 45, had been in the Netherlands for 3 years but spoke limited Dutch and English. He felt embarrassed and discontinued the classes when there was no explanation in Arabic. He wrote to the researcher after the interview that '[those of us] who don't speak English and Dutch here [are] like birds without feathers', in an apt metaphor that describes how participation in a 'launchpad' required participants to already possess certain abilities and characteristics in the first place. Leilani, an Iranian woman in her 20s referred too to how participants were expected to speak up in classes, in an unfamiliar language: 'especially older men who already had children [...] they didn't want to feel unconfident, so they didn't talk'. Speaking up risked exposing the older men as less educated than their children's generation, ultimately threatening their status and authoritative self-image.

The examples reveal the difficulties the programme team faced in adapting its offer to the broader diversities within the whole refugee group. To what extent differences in capitals became significant varied with age, as we found that younger less-educated refugees tried at least to attend classes aspirationally, even when they did not follow what was going on or understand the technical

language. Older, less-educated people were less inclined to take those steps. For example, we observed older Eritrean women who would not even enter into the incubator space since even the very concept of the programme seemed alien to them. As the project developed, we communicated back that the programme might adapt and respond better to the diversity of participants. Particularly by engaging another NGO early on, the programme expanded opportunities for participants that relied less on possessing linguistic capital as a threshold for participation. They included 'beauty meetings' at which women were able to show off skills in hairdressing and cosmetics, or evening music meetings, enjoyed for example by Omar, who was pleased that no language skills were needed to enjoy the event. A *taalcafé* (language café) enabled ASC residents to improve their Dutch language. Finally, near to the project closure, the programme gave participants opportunities to co-design the business incubation space, which was redesigned as a cosy lounge space, or informal café, where 'coffee of the world' was offered from many different traditions (Turkish, Eritrean, etc.). The décor was changed to introduce soft furnishings, dark walls, plants, and low seating (see [Figure 2](#)). Although the activity was still mainly attended by younger participants, following the change as well as a dedicated Eritrean day at the site facilitated by an NGO, we saw several of the older Eritrean women set foot for the first time in the incubator space, attracted more by the lounge environment than a 'trendy' business incubator.

Conclusion

While refugees over the age of 35 are a minority population ([Pew Research Centre 2016](#)), they are further marginalized by limited attention in research and policy ([Bolzman 2014](#)). This empirical research contributes to filling a gap in knowledge, drawing attention to the ways in which inclusive reception and integration innovation can sustain a 'youth gaze', where implicit assumptions around the age, capitals, and relational status of participants mean that they better met the needs of a core majority of younger, educated refugee participants to access education, training, and employment. By focusing on an experience of one such initiative, by participants in mid to latter stages of professional lives (aged 40–60 years), who had former careers and had already possessed significant economic, social, and cultural capitals, our research highlights how programmes are experienced differently. The findings show that following refugee displacement, the value of the older groups' capitals diminished. Some mourned the loss of their former work identities and experienced a loss of advantages that their age in a job market would normally yield, such as benefits gained through their cultural capital through their experience, and social capital from networks in their former professional lives. Some felt that the project was for younger people rather than for them and many were motivated to participate for more civic purposes, or so that they could support their children's success rather than their own. They faced temporal pressures for converting former resources and carving out alternative professional futures. They, in common with some of the other younger participants, were also affected by practical and emotional responsibilities for dependents, including children,



Figure 2.
The Incubator Space Redesign (*Individual Features Disguised*).

which affected their abilities to take risks such as starting up a new business. By contrast, some of the younger people starting out—though importantly as we also show, not all—were able to capitalize on advantages of their education, digital

literacy, and language competence, which put them in a more advantageous position from which to begin.

Our analysis therefore draws attention to the challenges that reception and integration programmes face in responding to participants of different ages, as well as the inequalities that arise in experiences through the intersecting positionalities and broader diversities of refugees by capitals, educational background, family relationships, and other characteristics not considered here such as gender, ethnicity, and more (Erel 2015). It offers lessons to inform both research and programming, where an 'inclusive' focus requires not only being 'open to all' but also being *adaptive* to the populations arriving, to avoid advantaging only those who already possess certain capitals, abilities, and characteristics in the first place. Assumptions that individual refugees themselves should be adaptive, flexible, and quickly able to learn new skills mean that benefits are more likely achieved those who fit within the standard mould: those who are young, educated, aspirational and with few responsibilities to others. We urge for programmes to be adaptive and flexible as they support other individuals, both older and younger, variously educated, from different backgrounds and with different responsibilities, to adapt to different working lives. Beyond this general principle, we put forward several practical steps that would enrich similar integration programmes to be more inclusive.

First, our findings suggest not assuming that contact initiatives in integration programmes are best led by younger people. In Plan Einstein, younger people were given responsibilities to build social capital through co-housing. However, as the project unfolded, against expectations, local middle-aged people were motivated to join classes and despite different cultural backgrounds and norms, they found some inroads to making contact. Both residents of the ASC and the older neighbourhood participants were able to learn together in the classes and build on common life experiences, such as of migration, having families, overcoming hardships, and seeking to start again professionally.

Second, we suggest that attention is given to programme intensity and length of support. Plan Einstein aimed to support 'integration from day one', and metaphors like the 'launchpad' imply programmes need to work quickly. This approach is in line with treatments such as psychological interventions, which are increasingly developed to run in short time periods (Craib 1994). This approach may align well with older participants' needs in one respect—since they face shorter temporal horizons for carving out alternative futures—yet, older and/or less-educated participants may paradoxically need *more* time and more intensive intervention to overcome slower learning processes and adjustment to having to revisit or shift former professional identities. Adaptability is required to adjust expected timescales not only for older participants but also ultimately for others too and to challenge reliance on interventions expecting quick wins that ultimately divorce human processes from 'natural psychological time' (Craib 1994: 192).

Third, we urge consideration of the appropriateness of programme content in the face of heterogeneity. Plan Einstein's emphasis on English as a world language and entrepreneurship worked best for those who already had linguistic capital. Many refugees (including younger participants) expressed, however, that they

would have benefitted from learning Dutch, the receiving country language, especially given that most had or were getting legal status, but this was forbidden due to the national regulations. However, it meant that older participants, as well as those less educated, faced a double burden to learn both languages, and for these, their limited linguistic capital inhibited full participation.

Fourth, in common with other refugees of lower educational level and at a wider cultural distance to the Netherlands, some older participants would benefit too from a more diverse range of practical as much as academic activities to enable them to demonstrate continuity with former working lives. This might also be met by a further recommendation, that in receiving country employment sectors, there is more willingness to employ refugees because of capital based on their experience, rather than qualifications alone. There are nascent indications that there is a slow shift in requirements from companies and governments to recognize this over diplomas and formal requirements, but this is not yet well-established.

A final way to ensure that programmes meet the needs of heterogenous groups is to provide opportunities for co-production by all participants (Dekker *et al.* 2021a). When the programme facilitated participants to redesign the incubator space, they chose to redesign the business incubator as a relaxation space. This had an effect of older groups experiencing it as more welcoming too, as seen in the case of the Eritrean older women finally entering the project space. How could they also have been facilitated to be involved themselves in communicating their needs and contributing ideas at an earlier stage? Supporting older people's involvement could mean capitalizing on their roles as senior community members and engaging them as mentors as well as participants. Enabling individuals to feel empowered and able to contribute requires critical self-reflection on programmes' assumptions and a willingness to revisit project plans to ensure that they work for all.

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