



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL DOWNGRADING

AMONG HIGH-SKILLED
REFUGEES IN THE
NETHERLANDS

INTERNAL RESEARCH REPORT

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ABSTRACT



Occupational downgrading occurs when individuals find themselves in jobs that do not align with their skills, qualifications, or professional experience. This often arises from barriers such as the limited recognition of foreign credentials and inadequate access to suitable job opportunities.

This study investigates the psychological effects of occupational downgrading among high-skilled refugees in the Netherlands, specifically focusing on how job misalignment correlates with stress levels.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. This allowed for a comprehensive examination of the relationship between employment mismatch and mental health outcomes, testing the hypothesis that employment misalignment significantly correlates with increased stress.

The results show a moderate negative correlation between job alignment and psychological distress, indicating that refugees in misaligned jobs report higher stress levels. Qualitative interviews reveal a strong sense of loss and frustration regarding professional identity, with refugees expressing significant dissatisfaction with the disparity between their qualifications and current roles.

These findings support the hypothesis that occupational downgrading significantly contributes to psychological distress. The study emphasizes the need for policy interventions aimed at improving recognition of foreign credentials, enhancing job matching processes, and providing robust mental health support.

Keywords:

Occupational downgrading, High-Skilled Refugees, Stress, Anxiety, Underemployment, Refugee Integration, the Netherlands.

This research provides valuable insights that can guide strategies to better integrate refugees into the labor market, improve their mental well-being, and enable them to contribute more meaningfully to the host society.

Addressing occupational downgrading is crucial not only for the individual refugees but also for the overall health of the community.

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INTRODUCTION



The integration of refugees into the labor market is a significant challenge in the Netherlands. Despite their educational credentials and professional experience, many face occupational downgrading, where they work in roles below their qualifications. This issue is compounded by structural barriers like credential non-recognition and discriminatory practices, as noted by scholars Bauder (2005) and Suto (2009).

The mental health effects of underemployment are well-documented, linking it to increased stress and anxiety due to disrupted professional identity. However, the psychological impact of occupational downgrading among refugees is less studied.

Previous studies suggest that underemployment can lead to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem, worsening mental health issues (Creed & Macintyre, 2001; Friedland & Price, 2003). Understanding these dynamics is vital for creating targeted interventions to support the mental health of refugees facing underemployment challenges.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the link between occupational downgrading and stress levels among high-skilled refugees in the Netherlands. It seeks to understand how working in a job that does not match their skills or qualifications can increase psychological distress. Three research questions will be addressed:

Research questions

- To what extent do refugees in the Netherlands experience occupational downgrading, working in jobs below their qualifications?
- How does employment misalignment with qualifications correlate with stress levels among refugees in the Netherlands?



PREVIOUS STUDIES



Occupational downgrading among refugees

Many immigrants, particularly refugees, experience job downgrading when they arrive in a new country, often being placed in roles that do not match their skills or qualifications (Nikolov, Salarpour, & Titus, 2021). Refugees, defined as individuals who flee their home countries due to persecution, conflict or human rights violations, often face unique challenges in the labor market. This phenomenon, known as downward occupational mobility, occurs when immigrants' first jobs in the host country are significantly below their previous positions in their home countries (Chiswick, 197; Friedberg, 2000; Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2005; Akresh, 2006, 2008; Chiswick & Miller, 2009).

Highly skilled refugees, in particular, often find themselves overqualified for the jobs they are given, a situation that may stem from unrecognized foreign qualifications, language barriers, and policies focused on securing immediate employment rather than considering long-term career development.

Studies in countries with high immigration rates show that occupational downgrading is a common experience. For example, Akresh (2006) found that around half of immigrants in the U.S. faced downgrading, irrespective of their country of origin.

In Sweden, about 45% of immigrants experienced job downgrading upon arrival (Rooth & Eckberg, 2006), while in Israel, downgrading ranged from 32% to 64%, depending on the period of immigration (Friedberg, 2000; Raijman & Semyonov, 1998).

In Australia, Chiswick et al. (2005) documented a decline in occupational prestige among immigrants compared to their jobs in their home countries.

While this issue can also affect native-born workers who face job loss or career setbacks, the prevalence and causes of such downgrading among immigrants have been more extensively researched (Jacobs, 1999; Lene, 2011).

Overeducation among immigrants and refugees

Overeducation, where individuals hold higher qualifications than their jobs require, is another form of misalignment observed among immigrants. For instance, in Australia, 15% to 27% of English-speaking immigrants and 32% to 49% of non-native English speakers were found to be overeducated, compared to 7% to 22% of native Australians (Green, Kler, & Leeves, 2007).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, 27% of immigrant men were overeducated for their jobs, compared to 23% of native-born workers (Lindley, 2009). In the U.S., Chiswick and Miller (2009) found that 27% of foreign-born men were overeducated for their jobs, compared to 32% of U.S.-born men.

The extent of overeducation among immigrants often correlates with the length of time spent in the receiving country, with recent immigrants more likely to experience overqualification than those who have been in the country for a longer period.

Factors contributing to occupational downgrading

Various factors contribute to occupational downgrading, overeducation, and overqualification. For example, immigrants often struggle with transferring their skills and qualifications from their home country to the labor market in the new country, a phenomenon known as the imperfect transferability of human capital (Chiswick, 1978; Akresh, 2006; Chiswick & Miller, 2009).

Language barriers and differences in labor market expectations can also hinder immigrants' ability to secure positions that align with their qualifications. However, over time, as immigrants gain local experience, skills, and education, they may experience upward mobility in the labor market (Chiswick, 1978).



The impact of employment misalignment on psychological well-being

From a psychological standpoint, theories of occupational stress and identity disruption suggest that underemployment can erode professional identity and lead to significant mental health challenges.

Stress can arise when individuals perceive a misalignment between their skills and their job roles, exacerbating feelings of frustration, low self-worth, and social exclusion. This study situates itself within these theoretical discussions to empirically examine the nexus between occupational downgrading and mental health outcomes.

Studies have shown that overeducation and overqualification can lead to poor mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and general distress, in the broader workforce.

For instance, workers who are overeducated or overqualified often report lower self-rated health and higher levels of psychological distress (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, 1997, 1999; Friedland & Price, 2003; Lundeberg et al., 2009).

Some studies also suggest that overqualified workers are at a greater risk for physical health issues, such as ischemic heart disease (Peter et al., 2007) and complications during pregnancy (Meyer, Warren, & Reisine, 2010).

These health challenges are often linked to the stress caused by the mismatch between individuals' qualifications and their job roles.

This stress can arise from feelings of injustice, social exclusion, and conflicting societal expectations (House & Harkins, 1975; Jackson, 1962; Wegener, 1991).

Prolonged stress from such employment misalignments may contribute to various mental and physical health problems, including depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular diseases (Adler et al., 2007).



RESEARCH METHOD

This study investigates the patterns of employment, occupational downgrading, and psychological well-being (stress) among high-skilled refugees in the Netherlands. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide both measurable data and in-depth insights into the participants' experiences.

Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was distributed to 128 high-skilled refugees currently residing in the Netherlands. The survey assessed perceived occupational downgrading, stress, and anxiety levels using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 10. The data was collected from September 2023 to September 2024.

Participants were selected through random sampling from refugee support organizations, local networks, and online platforms, ensuring a representative sample and reducing selection bias.

The questionnaire also gathered data on demographics, employment status, stress metrics, and recognition of qualifications to create a detailed profile of participants.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis primarily focused on descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and percentages, to outline trends and distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine relationships between job alignment and stress levels.

The study emphasized descriptive analysis rather than predictive modeling or regression analysis to identify associations and patterns. This approach was chosen to focus on understanding the relationships between variables as they naturally occur, without attempting to predict future outcomes or establish causal relationships. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limitations of the data, regression analysis was not deemed necessary for addressing the research questions.

The key research hypotheses were:

- Hypothesis 1: High-skilled refugees in the Netherlands experience significant occupational downgrading.
- Hypothesis 2: Misalignment between employment and qualifications is significantly correlated with increased stress levels among refugees in the Netherlands.

Qualitative Data Collection

In addition to the surveys, unstructured interviews were conducted with 15 skilled refugees to gain deeper insights into their experiences with occupational downgrading and its effects on professional identity, psychological well-being, and coping mechanisms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in professional backgrounds, education levels, and lengths of stay in the Netherlands.

To address ethical concerns, interviews were conducted without formal recording, respecting participants' privacy and legal vulnerabilities. Instead, detailed notes were taken and verified with participants immediately after each interview to ensure accuracy and reliability.



Qualitative Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

- Familiarization: Repeated reading of notes to identify key patterns.
- Generating Initial Codes: Highlighting recurring themes and concepts through open coding.
- Searching for Themes: Grouping related codes into broader themes.
- Reviewing Themes: Cross-checking and refining themes for consistency and relevance.
- Defining and Naming Themes: Finalizing themes and aligning them with research questions.
- Producing the Report: Synthesizing findings with illustrative examples from the data.

This thematic analysis emphasized patterns related to job misalignment, stress, professional identity, and coping mechanisms, providing a richer contextual understanding to complement the quantitative findings.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic and Employment Data

This section will provide a summary of the sample’s demographic and employment-related characteristics.

Residence Status

Figure 1 below illustrates the residence status of refugees in the sample. All respondents (100%) reported having a residence permit in the Netherlands, confirming their legal status as residents.

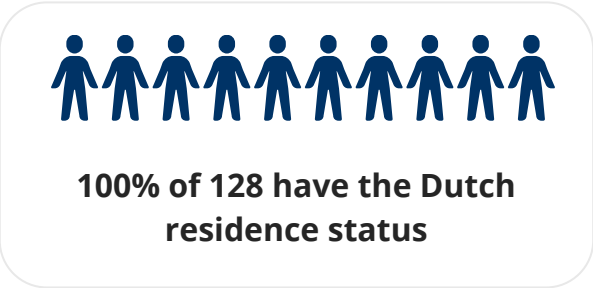


Figure 1: Residence Status of Refugees in the Sample (N = 128)

Based on the data, most respondents are likely located in Noord-Holland (28%), Zuid-Holland (20%), and Noord-Brabant (16%), as these provinces have the highest percentages of refugees. In contrast, fewer respondents are expected from Zeeland (1%), Flevoland (2%), and Friesland (2%), where refugee populations are minimal. This distribution reflects a concentration of refugees in urbanized areas with more resources and fewer in rural regions.



Figure 2. Distribution of Refugees Across Dutch Provinces

This information is crucial for understanding how legal status affects refugees' access to qualifications-aligned jobs and the psychological impact of occupational downgrading examined in the study.

Dutch Language Proficiency

Figure 3 below shows the distribution of Dutch language proficiency levels among the refugees in the sample, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Most respondents reported their language proficiency as A2 level (36%), which is considered elementary, followed by B1 level (28.8%), which is considered intermediate.

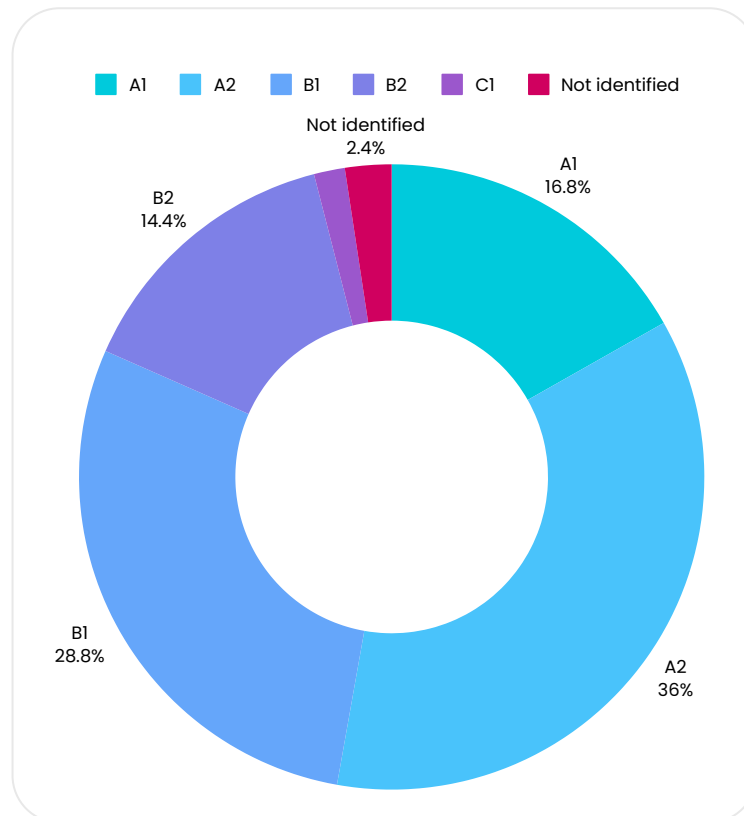


Figure 3: Distribution of Dutch language proficiency levels (CEFR) among refugees in the sample (N = 128)

Additionally, 14.4% of respondents reported B2 level proficiency, which is classified as upper intermediate. A smaller portion of participants (16.8%) reported proficiency at the A1 level, which is considered beginner, while a few reported proficiency at the C1 level (advanced), and none reported proficiency higher than C1.

This information is relevant as language proficiency can significantly affect refugees' ability to access skill-aligned employment opportunities and may be associated with their psychological well-being and occupational downgrading.

Work Experience

The work experience of the respondents ranges from 0 to 25 years, with the majority of respondents having between 1 and 15 years of experience. A significant portion (around 27%) have 0–5 years of experience, reflecting early-career professionals, fresh graduates, or individuals just starting in the field.

The largest group (47%) falls within the 6–15 years range, indicating that most respondents are mid-career professionals with a solid amount of experience. A smaller group (23%) has 16–25 years of experience, while only a few individuals (3%) have more than 20 years of experience, showcasing a smaller proportion of highly experienced professionals.

Additionally, there are respondents with no work experience or minimal experience (0 to 0.5 years). This distribution shows a diverse range of career stages, with a clear concentration of respondents in mid-career positions (see Figure 4).

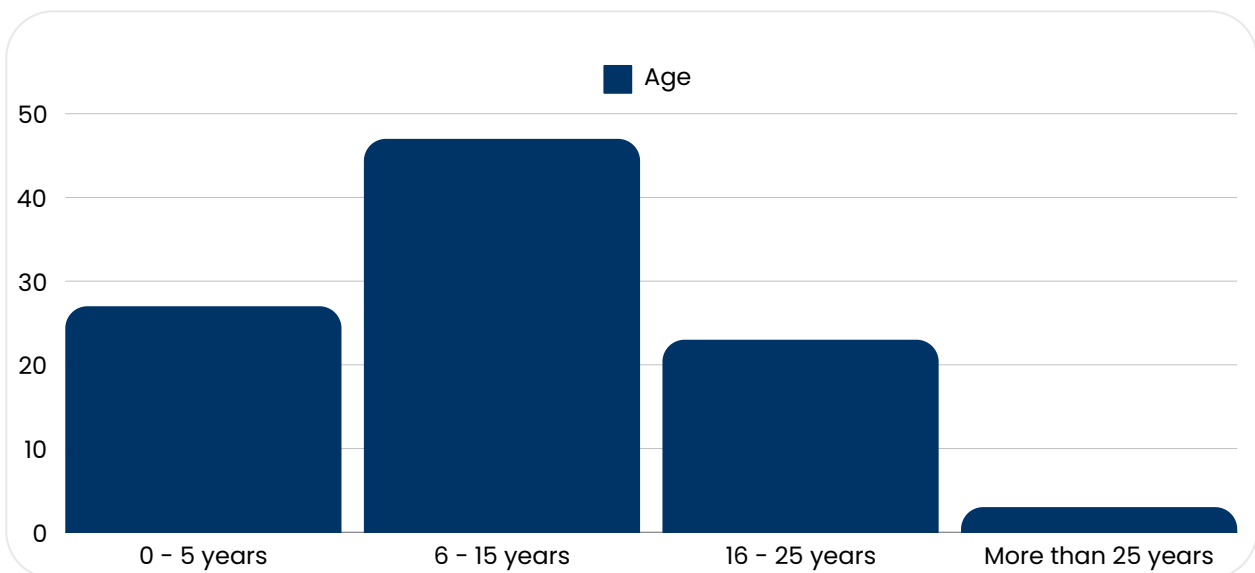


Figure 4. Distribution of Respondents by Years of Work Experience (N= 128)

Education Levels

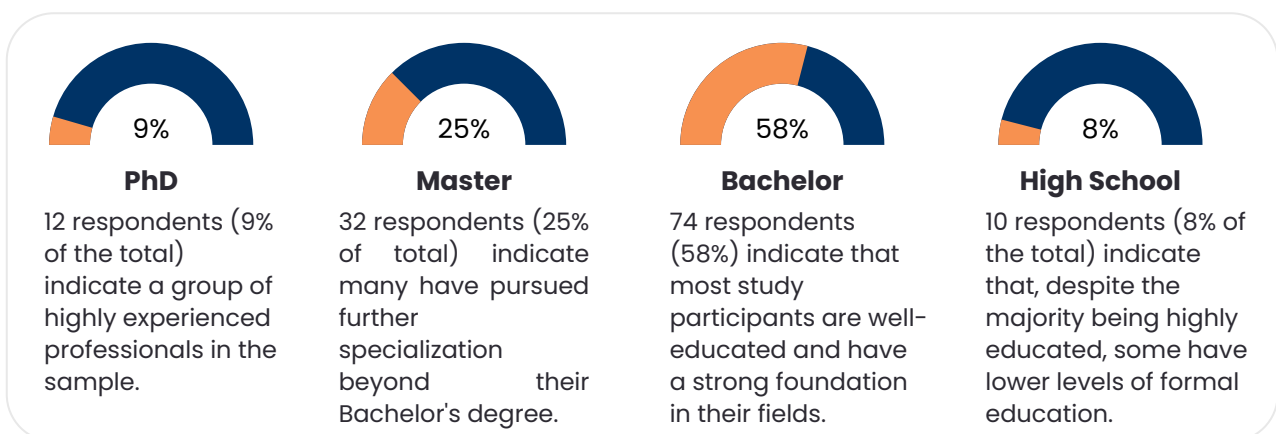


Figure 5. Distribution of Respondents by Highest Level of Education (N = 128)

Education Fields

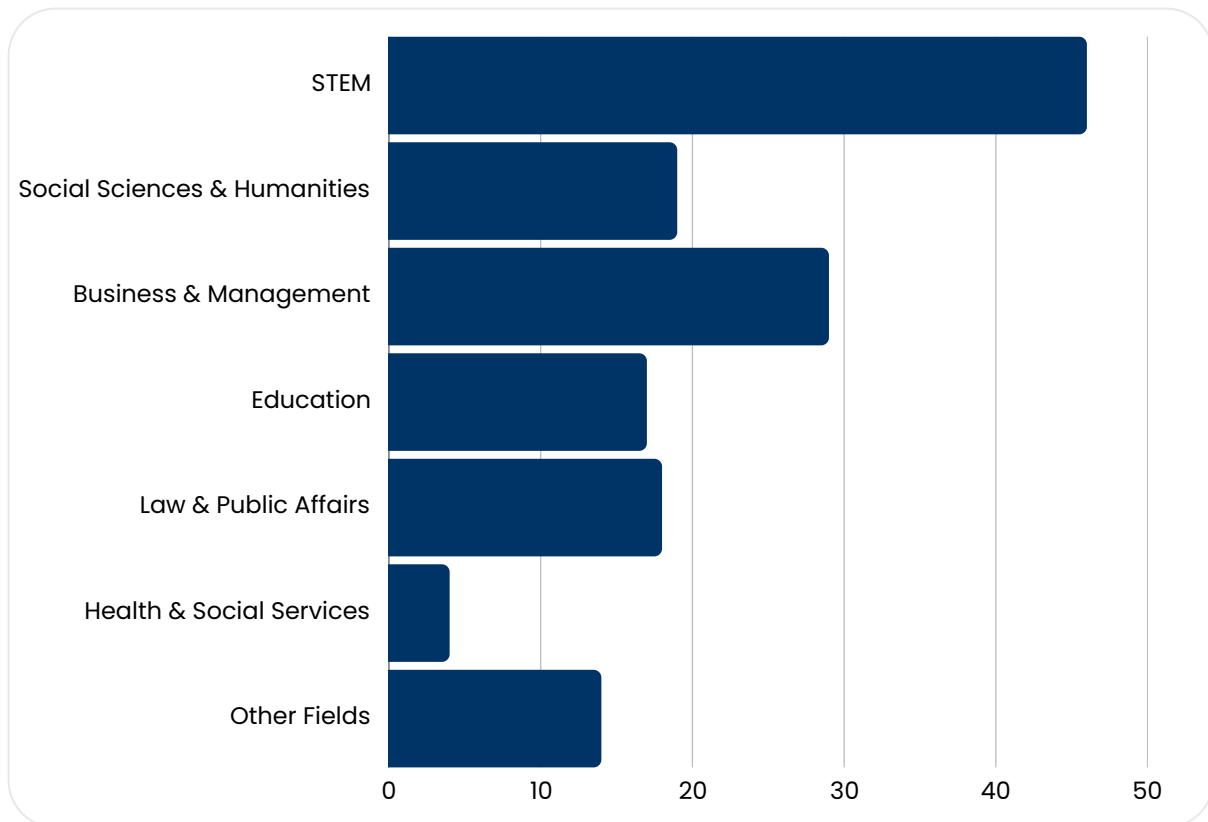


Figure 6. Distribution of Respondents' Fields of Study (N= 128)

The respondents' highest level of education spans a wide range of fields, categorized into broader groups. The largest category is STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), which includes 46 respondents with backgrounds in fields such as computer science, engineering, mathematics, and various sciences.

The second largest category is Business and Management, comprising 29 respondents, many of whom have degrees in business administration, economics, and management. Social Sciences and Humanities follows with 19 respondents, covering areas such as sociology, psychology, political science, and history.

A significant portion, 17 respondents, come from the Education field, including early childhood education, English language teaching, and education management. Law and Public Affairs includes 18 respondents with degrees in law, criminal justice, and security sciences. Health and Social Services is represented by 4 respondents, mostly in psychological counseling and veterinary medicine.

Lastly, Other Fields accounts for 14 respondents in areas such as finance, logistics, human rights, and arts-related disciplines. This distribution shows a diverse range of academic backgrounds among the respondents.

Employment Status and Guidance for Employment

The data from Figure 7 and Figure 8 reveal that 25% of the respondents are currently employed in the Netherlands, while the majority (75%) are not employed.

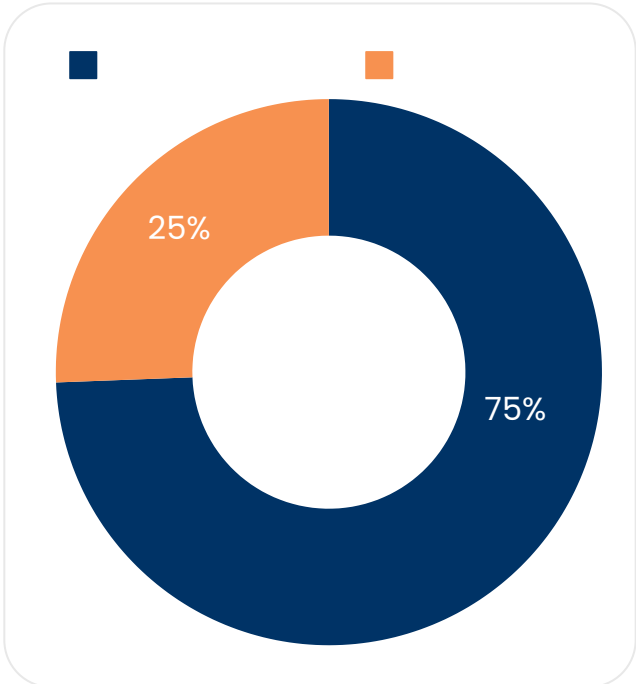


Figure 7. Employment Status of Respondents in the Netherlands (N = 128)

Among those who are not employed, 44% have been directed or encouraged by municipal authorities to seek employment in specific fields or industries, while 62% have not received such guidance.

These findings suggest that many respondents, although not currently employed, have had prior work experience in the Netherlands or were employed at some point.

The lack of current employment may be influenced by factors such as barriers to re-entry into the labor market, limited access to opportunities, or challenges in adapting to the Dutch job market as refugees.

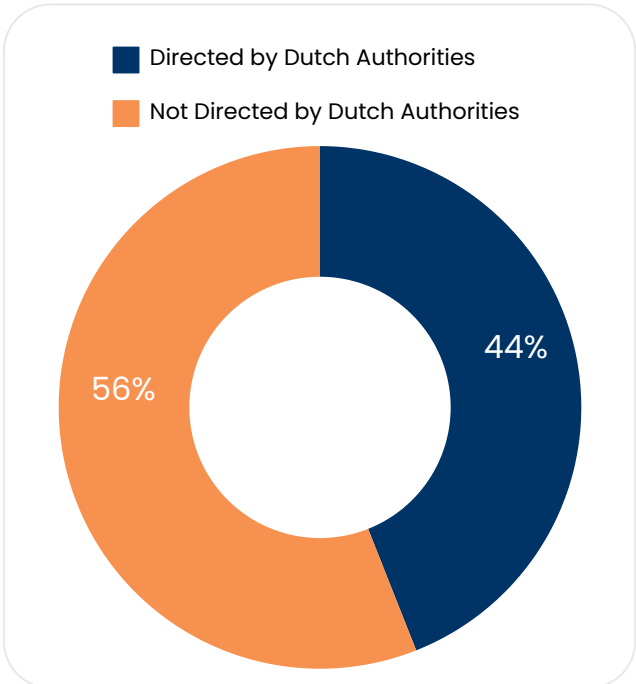


Figure 8. Guidance Received by Non-Employed Respondents (N=128)



NOTES

Figures 4, 5, and 6 depict the educational backgrounds and work experiences of respondents acquired in their home countries before becoming refugees in the Netherlands.

Figures 7 and 8 highlight their current employment status and the guidance received from municipal authorities in the Netherlands.

Job Categories for Refugees in the Netherlands

Figure 9 shows job categories assigned to refugees in the Netherlands, illustrating the employment opportunities available based on skills, qualifications, and language proficiency. Categories include low-skilled, unskilled, skilled, semi-skilled, and unspecified roles, highlighting the diverse guidance provided to refugees as they adapt to the Dutch job market and society.

Job Type/Category	# of Respondents	% of Total (N= 128)
Low-Skilled and Unskilled Jobs		
A. Factory/Packaging Work	A. 18	A. 14.06%
B. Warehouse, Logistic, and Sales Jobs	B. 15	B. 11.72%
C. Supermarket/Retail Jobs	C. 13	C. 10.16%
D. Cleaning Services (e.g., schools, hotels)	D. 12	D. 9.38%
E. Catering/Waiter	E. 10	E. 7.81%
F. Driver (e.g., delivery, chauffeur)	F. 8	F. 6.25%
Skilled and Semi-Skilled Jobs		
A. IT/Technology (e.g., developer, support)	A. 15	A. 11.72%
B. Medical and Care (e.g., elderly care, lab tech)	B. 8	B. 6.25%
C. Administrative/Project Management	C. 5	C. 3.91%
D. Teaching/Academia (e.g., computer science teacher, lecturer)	D. 4	D. 3.13%
Other/Not Specified		
A. Other/Not Specified	A. 19	A. 14.84%

Figure 9. Distribution of Respondents' Job Categories Based on Municipal Guidance and Employment Direction



Low-Skilled and Unskilled Jobs make up the largest category, with 59.38% of the respondents being directed to these types of jobs. This includes roles in factories, warehouses, retail, cleaning, catering, and driving.

Skilled and Semi-Skilled Jobs represent 25% of the total respondents. These jobs include IT/technology, healthcare, administration, and teaching positions, indicating that a smaller portion of respondents are being directed to jobs matching their skills or education.

Other/Not Specified accounts for 14.84% of respondents, showing that some individuals either haven't received specific guidance or their roles are not clearly defined.

This categorization emphasizes that a significant portion of respondents is being directed to low-skilled or unskilled jobs despite their higher education and work experience. There's a noticeable gap between the types of jobs refugees are qualified for and those they are actually being encouraged to pursue.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

Correlation and Descriptive Analysis

Occupational Downgrading

The finding that 77% of respondents reported working in positions significantly below their qualifications aligns with the concept of employment misalignment or downgrading, which is central to Hypothesis 1.

The results emphasize that a large proportion of refugees in this study are experiencing a considerable mismatch between their skills, education, and the jobs they hold, supporting the notion of occupational downgrading as a widespread phenomenon (Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2005; Akresh, 2006).

Correlation Between Job Alignment and Stress Among Refugees

The average job alignment score was 3.45 (SD = 2.8), while the average stress score was 7.43 (SD = 2.75).

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate negative correlation between job alignment and stress ($r = -0.42, p < 0.01$).

This means that as job alignment increases (i.e., when jobs are better matched to an individual's qualifications), stress and anxiety levels tend to decrease. In other words, refugees who are in jobs that align more closely with their qualifications report lower levels of stress.

This finding supports Hypothesis 2, which posited that employment misalignment with qualifications is significantly correlated with higher stress levels among refugees in the Netherlands.

The moderate strength of the correlation ($r = -0.42$) indicates that while job alignment plays a notable role in reducing stress, other factors may also contribute to these mental health outcomes.





In summary, the descriptive statistics clearly demonstrate a strong connection between perceived occupational mismatch and increased psychological distress, supporting the argument that employment misalignment plays a critical role in exacerbating mental health issues among refugees.

These results underscore the importance of addressing occupational downgrading as a factor that not only affects economic integration but also significantly impacts psychological well-being (Smith & Frank, 2005; Adler et al., 2007).

Interview Insights

The interviews gave us a deeper look into the personal experiences of refugees dealing with occupational downgrading. Several important themes came up during the interviews:

Loss of Professional Identity

One of the most common themes was the loss of professional identity. Many refugees expressed frustration and disappointment because they could not use their skills or qualifications in their new country. Some had advanced degrees or years of experience in their fields, but they were forced into jobs that did not match their skills. This created a feeling that their careers had been erased, and they struggled to understand who they were in their professional life.



"I spent years working as engineer, but here I am driving forklifts. It feels as if my entire career has been erased, and I no longer know who I am professionally."

(Interview 1, Male, engineer by profession)

"I was a judge back home, but now I'm working as a cashier. It's hard to accept that my skills mean nothing here."

(Interview 4, Female, judge by profession)



These stories emphasize the frustration refugees face when their qualifications are unrecognized in a new country, impacting their sense of identity.

Economic Pressures to Take Low-Skilled Work

An important theme is the economic pressure on refugees, forcing them to accept jobs below their qualifications. Despite seeking work that matches their skills, many are compelled to take low-wage, low-skill jobs for survival.

Refugees often prioritize financial needs over career goals due to a lack of support, language skills, and recognition of foreign qualifications, making it difficult to find better jobs and increasing stress.



"I never wanted to work in a supermarket, but I had no other choice. I needed the money to survive."

(Interview 3, Male, former police officer)

"I worked as a teacher, but I am now cleaning and waxing cars. It's hard, but I do it because my family depends on me"

(Interview 2, Male, former teacher)



Decreased Motivation and Losing Career Hope

Many refugees mentioned that after a long time of underemployment, their motivation to find a job in their field decreased. Over time, staying in low-skilled jobs made them lose confidence in their ability to succeed. They felt disengaged from thinking about their future careers.

"Every day I do the same thing..no progress, no future. I was a police officer back in my country. Now I am carrying luggages in airport."

(Interview 5, Male, worked as police officer)

"I once had big dreams of opening my own business, but now I just focus on surviving. I don't even think about my career anymore."

(Interview 6, Female, former small business owner)

The lack of progress in their careers made them lose interest in long-term career goals, affecting their mental well-being and adding to stress.

Psychological impact of occupational downgrading

The main theme from the interviews was the psychological impact of having a job that did not match their skills. Many refugees felt their potential was wasted, which caused emotional distress.

The emotional toll of occupational downgrading was clear, with many refugees expressing feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

"I know I'm capable of so much more, but I can't get anyone to see that here. It makes me feel useless."

(Interview 7, Male, former lawyer)

The feeling of underachievement among refugees contributes to negative thoughts and depression. Beyond financial struggles, they grapple with self-perception and hopelessness regarding future career options. This psychological distress arises when their work does not align with their skills, resulting in feelings of failure and inadequacy.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide compelling evidence for the detrimental psychological impact of occupational downgrading among high-skilled refugees.

The strong correlation between employment mismatch and stress aligns with previous research on occupational stress but introduces new dimensions relevant to refugee integration.

Notably, the erosion of professional identity emerges as a significant factor exacerbating psychological distress.

Current municipal policies that prioritize immediate labor market participation inadvertently perpetuate these challenges.

While such strategies address short-term economic needs, they fail to account for the long-term implications of underemployment, including mental health deterioration and underutilization of human capital.





Policy Implications

The findings from this study highlight the significant psychological and professional challenges refugees face due to occupational downgrading and employment misalignment. To help refugees overcome these challenges and reduce the impact of underemployment, several policy reforms are needed. The following policy recommendations are based on the results from both the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study:

Credential Recognition and Foreign Qualification Recognition

A major issue identified in the study is the lack of recognition of refugees' professional qualifications and experiences, which makes it harder for them to find jobs that match their skills. This issue is connected to the psychological distress and lowered self-esteem that refugees often experience when they are unable to use their skills in their work (Cohen & Wills, 1985). To solve this, policymakers should focus on making the process of recognizing foreign qualifications simpler and more consistent. This would help refugees get their skills and education recognized by employers, leading to better job opportunities.

Actionable Recommendations

To improve job opportunities for refugees in the Netherlands, the following strategies are proposed:

- National Framework for Foreign Credential Recognition: Create a consistent system for evaluating foreign qualifications, modeled after NARIC, to help refugees find jobs matching their skills.
- Fast-Track Accreditation Programs: Partner with professional associations to establish accreditation programs that recognize refugees' prior learning and qualifications efficiently.
- Employer Education and Training: Provide workshops and online courses for employers to understand foreign qualifications and promote inclusive hiring practices.
- Refugee Credential Information Portal: Develop a digital platform for refugees to upload and verify their qualifications, aiding employers in credential evaluation.



Targeted Job Matching and Integration Programs

Many refugees in the study reported that the jobs they could get did not match their skills, often forcing them to take low-paying or low-skilled work. This mismatch directly affects their mental health, leading to stress.

To address this, policymakers should focus on creating job-matching services that connect refugees with jobs that match their skills. These services should also consider refugees' long-term career goals and help them fully integrate into the workforce.

Actionable Recommendations

Job matching platforms for refugees

Create a tailored online platform for refugees to enter qualifications and aspirations, matching them with suitable jobs. Incorporate a translation tool to address language barriers, collaborating with organizations like *VluchtelingenWerk Nederland* or UWV.

Sector-specific internship and apprenticeship programs

Partner with employers to establish programs for refugees, providing hands-on experience and local knowledge to enhance their employability in the Dutch job market.

Language and skills training tailored to refugees

Introduce language and vocational training programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of refugees. These programs could focus on both Dutch language skills and sector-specific technical skills, depending on the refugee's field of expertise. For example, an engineering refugee could be provided with a language course that includes technical vocabulary related to engineering.

Job coaches and career counselors

Provide access to job coaches who specialize in helping refugees transition into the workforce. These coaches would guide refugees in setting career goals, improving resumes, preparing for interviews, and adjusting to the Dutch work culture. Programs like these could be offered through local municipalities or NGOs.

Mental Health Support and Counseling Services

The study showed that refugees who experience occupational downgrading often face high levels of stress, feeling disconnected from their professional identities. The psychological impact of underemployment is significant, which means that mental health support is essential.

Policymakers should make sure that counseling and mental health services are included in refugee programs to help them deal with the emotional challenges of underemployment and integration into the workforce.

Actionable recommendations

Integrate mental health services into refugee programs

Offer mental health support as a standard part of refugee resettlement programs. This could include access to counselors who are experienced in working with refugees and familiar with the stressors of occupational downgrading. Refugees should be able to access mental health services through their local refugee centers or via phone or online services for those in more remote areas.

Community-based mental health initiatives

Establish community support groups where refugees can meet regularly to share their experiences, provide peer support, and discuss strategies for coping with occupational challenges. These groups could be run by trained facilitators and may focus on rebuilding professional identities, improving self-esteem, and reducing feelings of isolation.

Stress management and career counseling workshops

Offer regular workshops on stress management and career counseling designed specifically for refugees. These workshops could focus on practical skills for managing stress, building resilience, and setting career goals in the face of underemployment. In addition, workshops should include sessions on how to cope with the emotional impacts of job mismatches and the psychological toll of working in low-skilled jobs.



LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations are recognized in this study. First, the sample of 128 refugees may not fully capture the diversity of refugee experiences, especially for those with limited resources or lower language proficiency. Refugees facing language barriers may encounter additional challenges in finding suitable employment, which could increase stress and mental health issues.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data to measure stress, anxiety, and job misalignment, which can introduce biases such as underreporting due to fear of judgment or recall bias, where participants may not accurately remember past stressful events. Future research could benefit from using more objective measures, such as physical stress indicators (e.g., cortisol levels or heart rate).

Additionally, as a cross-sectional study, this research only captures refugees' experiences at one point in time, limiting the ability to assess long-term effects. Longitudinal studies could provide more insights into how job misalignment affects mental health over time and explore potential cause-and-effect relationships.

Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of the study and data limitations, regression analysis was not included. The focus was on identifying associations and patterns rather than predicting outcomes or establishing causal links. Future studies could incorporate regression analysis to explore deeper relationships between job misalignment and mental health.

Finally, a larger and more diverse sample, including refugees from various socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels, would enhance the generalizability of the findings and offer a more nuanced understanding of how job misalignment impacts mental health across different refugee subgroups.



CONCLUSION

This study makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of research on occupational downgrading, offering empirical evidence of its significant psychological impact on high-skilled refugees in the Netherlands.

The strong correlation between employment mismatch and heightened levels of stress emphasizes the critical need for targeted, skill-aligned integration strategies.

To effectively address these challenges, policymakers must adopt a paradigm shift; one that prioritizes the recognition of refugees' qualifications and places greater emphasis on their well-being as fundamental elements of successful integration.

Looking ahead, future research should explore the long-term effects of occupational downgrading and assess the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to reduce its impact.

Evaluating these interventions will be crucial in identifying sustainable solutions that not only alleviate the mental health burdens associated with underemployment but also facilitate the smoother integration of refugees into the labor market.

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