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# POLICY BRIEF

## *Fostering equal treatment of Third Country Nationals in the Netherlands;*

*Improving the practises of skill and diploma recognition of migrants and diversity management practises within organisations.*



**DIVERSE**  
Diversity Improvement as a  
Viable Enrichment Resource  
for Society and Economy

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## Introduction

Knowledge obtained today has increasingly shorter expiration dates while qualifications and successes obtained in the past are less seen as 'reference-points for life'. Lifelong Learning, adaptability and employability (readiness to switch jobs) are new key assets (Duvekot et al. 2014). This poses challenges but also opportunities to employees, particularly for newcomers and migrants.

But to what extent does the Dutch labour market accommodate newcomers? How committed are employers to workers who 'do things differently' (Van den Broek, 2009). Particularly in times of a tight labour market and a high pressure on social security, a key challenge is to commit to solidarity and equal treatment

## Key recommendations:

- To help **migrants and employers** find the relevant organisations, methods and tools for **recognizing formal credentials and non-formal learning**, an online interactive tool could be developed;
- **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL, in Dutch EVC) by migrants** could be improved by increasing the use of autobiographical screening and by developing competence profiles for sectors that find intercultural learning and cultural diversity important;
- **Organisations** could be made more aware of the **benefits of diversity management**, particularly its 'business case';
- It's important to improve possibilities for **voluntary work among refugees**, as a low-cost alternative to gain work experience.



for all, without creating more social friction. How do we maintain our desire for 'quality control' of labour while also expressing a desire to attract highly skilled workers from abroad?

DIVERSE, an international comparative research programme implemented in ten European countries, sets out to find out how the systems of Skill, Knowledge and Competence (SKC) recognition are adapted to migrants from outside the EU (Third Country Nationals, TCNs). Also, the project presents a collection of best practises of diversity management and participation of TCNs in voluntary organisations. This policy brief presents the outcomes for the Dutch context, taking the region Arnhem-Nijmegen as empirical focus. In four working-group sessions, around 30 local and national stakeholders were involved from the public, private, profit and non-profit sectors.

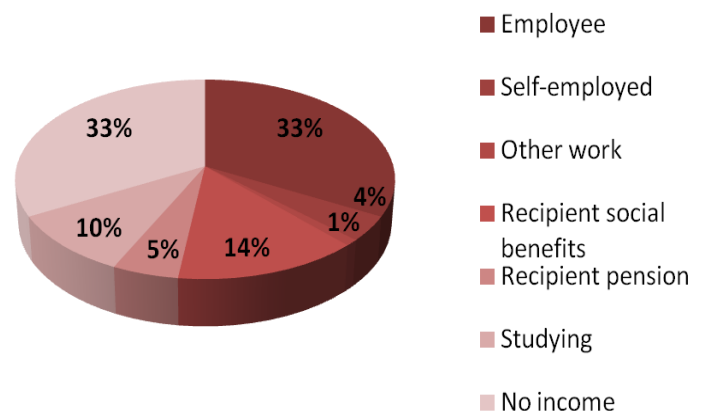
A major outcome of the DIVERSE project is that despite the fact that the Netherlands has a well developed infrastructure in foreign credential recognition and recognition of prior learning (RPL), TCNs of all education levels experience various barriers to find or keep work (Van der Welle, 2013). These barriers are underpinned by (often unintended) forms of exclusion, such as the tendency to view the 'Dutch' way of working as the ideal way of working. It shows that the government, employers and education institutes are yet to fully embrace and make use of cultural diversity.

## Non-EU migrants in the Dutch labour market – 'What do we know'?

The Netherlands has a long tradition of immigration. What is new is that immigration patterns have become more diverse and complex. Currently there are 249,045 TCNs (aged 15-65) legally residing in the Netherlands. We also know that:

- Slightly more than half of the population of TCNs are women and are aged between 15 and 34 years. Among the native Dutch the share of older people 50-65 is significantly higher compared to TCNs;
- The majority of TCNs (59%) has only completed lower education. In comparison, native Dutch are more often higher educated, with 29% having completed tertiary education (18% for TCNs);
- TCNs who are older have a lower education level than TCNs who are younger;
- For the majority of TCNs, family migration is the motive to come to the Netherlands (48% for non-OECD and 68% for OECD), compared to asylum (10% and 2%), work (12% and 12%) or study (25% and 12%);
- Slightly more than half of TCNs work less than 35 hours a week;
- Although the large majority of working TCNs have a regular job or stand-by work (88%, which is only slightly less compared to Dutch), 50% of TCNs work on a temporary basis, compared to a quarter among Dutch workers;
- While almost one out of two TCNs work or study (respectively 38% and 10%), a large group has no income at all (33%) or is recipient of welfare benefits.

**Figure 1: Socio-economic position of TCNs aged 15-65 in the Netherlands**



Source: Statistics Netherlands (2014), own calculations.

(14%) (see Figure 1).

The before points document the often precarious employment situation of TCNs in the Netherlands. Although the group of TCNs only constitutes a small share of the total number of first and second generation migrants in the Netherlands (which is 1.9 million), it's important to mention that in addition to unique challenges, such as getting the diploma's or experience recognized or adapting to a Dutch workplace, TCNs face challenges that are exemplary for a far larger group of migrants. For example implicit forms of discrimination or difficulties to obtain permanent job contracts.

**The Netherlands has a strongly developed national infrastructure for recognition of credentials (degrees, work experience) that are obtained abroad, but it does not function optimally yet.**

To find suitable employment in the Dutch labour market, it can be beneficial for TCNs to have their professional qualifications obtained abroad recognized in the Netherlands. Several professions in the Netherlands are regulated, e.g. doctors, nurses, lawyers, meaning that permission by the competent authority is required to be legally entitled to practise them. TCNs can contact the Evaluation of Foreign Credentials (IcDW), which is operated by the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB) concerning recognition of vocational diplomas and by Nuffic concerning the recognition of higher education diplomas. They operate on the basis that diplomas can be recognized if 'no substantial differences' are found and from the idea that 'differences are accepted rather than neglected'. In reality, taking the example of regulated professions in the healthcare sector, the figures show that a majority of TCNs who start a procedure to obtain a Declaration of Professional Competence issued by the Commission for Foreign Healthcare Graduates (CBGV), learn that their qualifications are not considered as equivalent to the relevant Dutch qualifications. As Table 1 shows, more than half of TCN doctors and dentists who apply for accreditation (which in the Netherlands happens by registration in the BIG-register), fail to obtain accreditation or a placement for an individual programme for obtaining missing qualifications.

**Table 1: Proportion of TCNs which is admitted to a complementary training programme or obtain direct BIG-registration (accreditation)**

	% that continues with the procedure	
	Doctors	Dentists
Applications to the CBGV	100	100
Takes General Knowledge and Skills test	63	63
Takes Professional Knowledge test	45	49
Admission to complementary education trajectory or direct BIG-registration	43	43

Source: CBGV (2011), translation from Table 15, p. 33.

Notwithstanding, this has been a source of frustration among TCNs who find it hard to accept if their degrees are devaluated, even if they have sometimes already worked in their profession after graduation. Other challenges TCNs face connected to finding work are:

- Lacking SKC, most notably Dutch language proficiency. At the same time, migrants now have to pay for language courses as the government no longer finances integration courses (in Dutch: 'Inburgeringscursussen'), while the exams have become more 'linguistic' and focus less on interaction;
- Lacking tacit knowledge about the Dutch labour market, what steps to take and how to present yourself;
- Lacking a relevant professional network;
- Negative perception of TCNs by natives;
- Lacking recognition of competences learned as a direct result of TCNs' migration experience or those obtained before. By extension, lacking recognition of talent and ambition apart from having 'the right' formal degrees (exceptions include procedures developed by the University Assistance Fund for refugees (UAF), Central Organ for the Reception of refugees (COA) or Refugee Council Netherlands (in Dutch: Vrijwilligerswerk Nederland).

**The Netherlands has a well developed system of recognition of non-formal, formal and informal learning.**

**Where compliance to the Dutch detailed legal system for formal diploma and qualification recognition is challenging for TCNs, RPL becomes a relevant alternative route to work.**

Whereas the Dutch labour market and the education system are manifestations of a heavily formally regulated society (described by some as a 'diploma-society'), RPL can be a means for TCNs to have their current (work) experience, knowledge and competences recognized and certified. An RPL-procedure enables job searchers to obtain an Experience Certificate which shows the assessment and recognition by one or more accredited practitioners and compares this to a nationally recognized competence standard (Table 2). This standard shows what knowledge and skills a person should possess after finishing a vocational education (MBO) or higher education (HBO) or if s/he wishes to work in a specific sector. In the context of migration, the standard can serve to highlight unique experiences connected to their migratory background. It enables employees to get a stronger grip on their career by increasing awareness of their career goals, their learning ambitions, skill set and confidence (Kaemingk, 2012). RPL has also proven its effectiveness in regulated sectors where the minimum accreditation standards are increased from for example vocational degrees to higher education (HE) degrees. An RPL-procedure can in this case be a fast way to obtain the needed higher qualification, without having to enrol in education. RPL procedures, resulting in a RPL-certificate, can be done in a number of nationally recognized providers (more information: KenniscentrumEVC.nl).

**Recognition of formal qualifications and prior learned non-formal and informal experiences can only be effective if employers and education institutes are willing to commit to diversity and diversity management.**

The research explored best practises for making diversity management work within organisations in the Arnhem-Nijmegen region. This is relevant for organisations to better equip themselves to deal with the growing diversity of the regional population, hence an organisation's potential labour pool, as well as the need to attract particular research, professional, language or cultural skills. Such practises can prevent 'othering' of TCNs by internal stakeholders (Van den Broek, 2009). The practises include:

- The board of executives of an organisation should be fully committed to diversity management initiatives. Without board commitment, cultural



**Table 2: Steps of an RPL-procedure**

Steps done by candidate	Recognizer
0. Precondition: identification of career goals and finding the right RPL-provider	Candidate (self-assessment)
1. Prior Learning Profile: documenting experiences and comparing to relevant national competence standard (in the Netherlands: CREBO and CROHO)	Candidate together with coach (offered by recognized RPL-provider)
2. Experience Certificate: assessment and recognition by experts	Field expert /assessor (offered by RPL-provider)
3. Accreditation (capitalizing on Experience Certificate)	Employer or exam committee

diversity is often not prioritized due to time pressure, particularly in times of economic decline;

- Establishment of a 'diversity team' responsible for the creation and dissemination of knowledge about cultural diversity;
- Use of so-called 'cultural mediators': employees who are committed to spreading intercultural awareness within the organization in an organic, bottom-up way;
- Organization of in-house days for students with an immigration background;
- Develop a sense of community by organizing social events such as parties and day outings. These activities can involve the families of staff members;
- Training HR staff to avoid negative and stereotypical perceptions of diversity;
- Training TCNs to deal with Dutch organizational cultures. Knowing the basics of Dutch language can help them not to feel excluded from informal talks and chats;
- Buddy programs;
- Regular meetings between team managers and team members to keep each other up to date of achievements and emerging issues/problems;
- Hiring TCNs through the social networks of employees;
- Performance appraisals and training programs of work teams and team managers. Some of these trainings are specially designed to enhance intercultural awareness, in other trainings, diversity can be (made) an issue.

**Voluntary work activities can be highly beneficial for TCNs who lack competences in order to qualify for certain jobs (particularly active knowledge of the Dutch language), wish to get more connected with Dutch attitudes, behaviour, norms and values, or maintain their links with their homeland (ethnic organisations, multiple identities).**

The findings for the region Arnhem-Nijmegen show that TCNs are underrepresented in formalised volunteer work

The most important reasons for this are cultural and language barriers, as well as TCNs' appeal to engage in informal volunteer work for the own ethnic, cultural or religious community (in Dutch called 'mantelzorg'). Dutch law enables TCNs to do volunteer work. Exceptions concern individuals who are in the first stage of the procedure for a residence permit and who are not asylum seekers (usually newcomers because of family reunion). There are however regulations that add to the thresholds for TCN volunteer activities.

- UWV, the agency for Implementing Employee Insurances, applies the principle that volunteer work should not displace paid work. Since the level of unemployment is higher compared to native Dutch and EU citizens, this rule disadvantages TCNs who wish to gain practical experience through volunteer work.
- TCNs who do not have free access to the labour market are only allowed to volunteer work if the employer possesses a volunteer statement. However, to obtain permission for a volunteer statement, an employer needs to go through a substantial bureaucracy. For example, the organisation has to sign for 'liability (in case of injury or theft). Also, this volunteer statement is only relevant for one specific function. Should the task description of the position change, a new statement should be issued by UWV. This makes organisations hesitant to employ TCNs.

## Policy implications – What needs to happen next?

### Recognition of formal qualifications

It can be stated that the current system functions well, though more so for higher educated than for lower educated TCNs. A good practise is the so-called 'job-seeking year'-programme,



*The Dutch government has implemented several policies that have facilitated the settlement and work of highly qualified migrants in the country. These policies do not strive to compare specific foreign and Dutch educational and professional qualifications relevant for specific occupations, but rather set crude minimum standards to define the group of highly qualified migrants that is then granted favourable treatment in settlement permissions and labour market access.*



which gives recent graduates more flexibility with regard to the high income criteria for obtaining a work permit that normally apply to highly skilled migrants. Another good practise is the opportunity for organisations who have experience with attracting TCN personnel to receive the status of 'recognized referent' from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), which eases the recruitment procedure. However, it can be pointed out that both procedures are complex to understand and that both TCNs and employers mention they find it difficult to obtain accessible information about recognition options, pathways and alternatives. Yet, the research found that the migrant's first contact point is crucial in the pathway to recognition, it is recommended that an on-line tool is developed that is designed to help migrants and employers shift information about the various institutions, methods and tools available to them in the Netherlands that can help recognize TCN's SKC. Due to sheer heterogeneity of the group TCNs living in the Netherlands, in terms of nationality, skills (language, information finding, ICT, independence), education, migration motive, years spent in the Netherlands, etc., it is recommended that this tool takes the career ambitions of migrants as a starting point, as well the needs of employers.

### Recognition of Prior Learning

RPL is only effective if employers or exam committees of education institutes (university, HBO, MBO) take up RPL-certificates and accept this as relevant starting-qualifications. Despite the advances that have been made, as exemplified in a number of successful experiences of workers obtaining full degrees in vocational education (MBO) or higher education (HBO) through RPL, the current problem lies in long-term commitment by education institutes, employers and the government:

- Inflexibility of formal education institutes and lack of urgency among employers in terms of long-term commitment (time, energy, financial, flexibility, ownership) to use experience certificates, prevents actors to take full benefit of the potential of RPL;
- RPL is mostly affordable for those already employed. The unemployed have to pay themselves;
- Dealing with 'disadvantaged groups' is not the same as dealing with those with a different cultural background. Migrants bring a different set of challenges (one-size-fits-all approaches do not work).
- TCNs who cannot fall back on services provided by the UAF might benefit from RPL-procedures specifically targeting TCNs. Migrant organisations could assist in this;
- The debate seems primarily focussed on ways to align migrants' SKC to the SKC that is required in the Dutch formal system. This leaves little attention to "*intrinsic motivation (e.g., self generated willingness to learn and work), and the extrinsic motivation (e.g., responsiveness to external pressures from others, the reward of a diploma or mandatory requirements) of third country migrants, ... including the key competences that people need in fast developing societies*" (Frouws and Buiskool, 2010, p. 135). This can be achieved, for example, by a more autobiographical screening in which the learning trajectories and careers of TCNs are emphasised. These key competences could be: adaptability (to a new economic, working, social, cultural and language environment), ambition, overcoming social resistance,

information finding efficiency, pro-activeness, independence, stress-resistance, persistence, intercultural competence, international experience, etc.;

- Furthermore, recognized RPL providers that are specialized in RPL for TCNs could develop expertise in including this kind of competences in the experience certificates. These providers could also work together in developing competence profiles for sectors that have intercultural learning and diversity management high on their agenda.

### Diversity management

At present, in the Arnhem-Nijmegen region, and the Netherlands more widely, a variety of best practises or policies of how diversity should be managed can be found. However, in many organisations various steps still need to be made to start implementing and prioritizing such practises. Organisations could be made more aware of the benefits of diversity management, on the short and longer term. First, the 'business case' of diversity management, holds that in order to tap into the potential of an increasingly multicultural client base, organisations will benefit from a more diverse staff base. In these organisations, a 'matching' takes place between the language and cultural skills of TCNs and clients who voice a demand for these particular skills. Respondents provided ample examples of how the work of TCNs has led to more holistic and creative ways of working (e.g. in patient treatment and research & development). Second, for organisations that are willing to commit to diversity management it could be highly beneficial to co-establishing a network of other diversity management best-practice organisations.

### TCN participation in voluntary organisations: 'humans are not on earth to be idle'

With regards to the benefits of voluntary work performed by TCNs in the region Arnhem-Nijmegen, it can be concluded that there is a lack of more detailed and specific information with regard to TCN associations and TCN voluntary work in the region, and a lack of a local vision and coherent policy on TCN volunteer work.

In the case of refugees it is important to improve possibilities for doing voluntary work. As a result of budget cuts for socio-cultural and self-deployment activities at refugee reception centres (COA) since 2010, doing nothing is for many refugees a daily reality. At the same time, the costs of facilitating self-deployment activities are much lower than the human cost of idleness; the longer the period of inactivity, the harder it is to 're-activate' refugees to actively participate in their asylum-procedure or departure (ACVZ, 2013). Voluntary work can enable a sense of emancipation and give TCNs a grip on their professional life, which is crucial regardless of the outcome of their asylum appeal: refugee status or return migration. A positive example is presented by the pilot project implemented by Pharos, Vrijwilligerscentrale Nijmegen and COA, where asylum seekers have been recently placed at an environmental organisation and at an elderly home to do voluntary work. However, such initiatives are rare, and increased efforts in such mediation projects are meaningful. Projects such as these, but also support by the municipality for TCN associations, are crucial.



## Participating organisations

ABN-AMRO, Actiz (association for health care providers), Association for United Armenians Netherlands (Stichting VAN), CINOP/Knowledge Center for RPL, COA Nijmegen (asylum seeker centre), Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers, Committee for Foreign Accredited Health Workers, Dichterbij (care for people with disabilities), COS Gelderland, Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland), Europass, Goshamadeed (Afghan association), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Hobby work place De Nonnendaal, Kantharos (consultancy for diversity management), Labour Union for health care workers ABVA/KABO, Movisie, Municipality of Arnhem, Municipality of Nijmegen, NXP semiconductors (electronics company), Olympia Employment, Pharos (Dutch centre of expertise on health disparities) ProPersona (mental health care), Radboud University Medical Centre, Rijnstate Hospital, Regioplan Amsterdam, Regional Teaching Centre Nijmegen for secondary vocational education (ROC), Sane Consultancy Services (consultancy in human performance), Scouting Gelderland, SEBA cultuurmanagement, Tandem (welfare organisations), University of Applied Sciences Arnhem-Nijmegen (HAN), UAF (University Assistance Fund), Synthon (pharmaceutical company), UWV (Agency for Implementing Employee Insurances) Waalboog (health care organisation), Wemos Foundation (global health advocates), Zahet (home and day care).

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## Colophon

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