

The background image shows two medical professionals, a woman in the foreground and a man behind her, both wearing white scrubs, surgical masks, and caps. They are looking down at a clipboard held by the woman. The image has a pinkish-red tint.

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**RATIONALE FOR ACTION: MIGRANT
OVERQUALIFICATION AS A STRUCTURAL NETWORK
PROBLEM**

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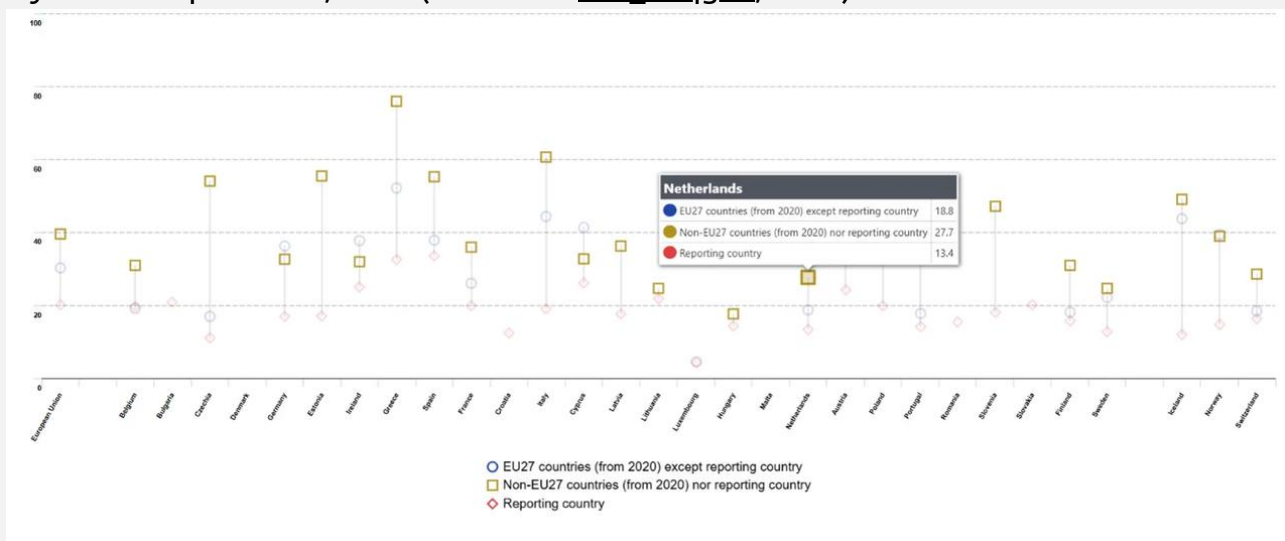
Executive Summary

We illustrate in the following policy brief that the Netherlands faces a clear contradiction: high-skilled sectors such as engineering and healthcare face persistent shortages, alongside 27.7% of non-EU professionals working below their qualification level—almost twice the rate of natives. This brief argues that the issue is not primarily a skills gap, but rather a structural network failure. Migrants are often confined to bonding networks that steer them into low-skilled jobs, while lacking the bridging ties that open access to high-skilled jobs. We propose **three interventions**: a national Mentoring to Work program, workplace-specific language and skills training, and sectoral bridging programs. Together, these measures foster weak-tie connections, accelerate host-country human capital acquisition, and improve matching between migrant skills and Dutch labor market needs.

The Problem: Wasted Potential

The Dutch labor market is not failing to attract talent; it is failing to use it well. Eurostat data show non-EU residents across the EU are consistently more overqualified than nationals; in the Netherlands in 2024, 13.4% of nationals, 18.8% of EU citizens, and 27.7% of non-EU citizens were overqualified, with even larger gaps for women. This persistent mismatch can be viewed not only a social concern but also as an economic inefficiency (McGuinness et al., 2018; OECD, 2017). The Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) figures show higher unemployment among people born abroad (around 5.5%) than among Dutch-born with Dutch parents (2.1%), with particularly high rates for some origin groups. For the Dutch Ministry of Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid (Social Affairs and Employment) (SZW) this represents a labor-market matching failure: valuable skills remain underused while shortages persist.

Figure 1: Over-qualification rate (%) for employed people aged 20 - 64 years by citizenship and sex, 2024 (Eurostat - [lfsa_eoqgan](#), 2025)



Limited Transferability of Foreign Human Capital

Human capital is not perfectly portable: education and experience acquired abroad are often discounted because employers are unfamiliar with foreign systems or doubt their equivalence (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). As a result, migrants are pushed into jobs below their skill level and receive lower

returns on their education than people with Dutch degrees (Bratsberg & Ragan, 2002; Friedberg, 2000). Recent estimates indicate immigrants earn 15–20% less than comparable Dutch nationals, reflecting unequal access to better-paid jobs rather than a lack of ability (OECD, 2022; Dustmann & Frattini, 2014).

Host-Country Specific Human Capital Matters More

What matters the most in the Dutch labor market is often not the education migrants already have, but the host-country-specific capital they have not yet had the chance to build (Duleep & Regets, 1999; Dustmann & Gritz, 2011). De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2010) show that Dutch education, language proficiency, and work experience have stronger positive effects on employment and occupational status than foreign human capital. Prolonged stays in reception centers delay these investments and harm later labor-market outcomes. Chiswick and Miller (2009) find that overeducation declines with duration of residence, but only slowly and incompletely. Without targeted support to build Dutch credentials and experience early, temporary underemployment risks becoming a long-term structural disadvantage.

Figure 2: Job Search Method Used to Find Current Job: Five Refugee Groups in the Netherlands, 2003 (Van Tubergen, 2011).

Group	Employment agency (%)	Friends and family (%)	Advert (%)	Direct application (%)	Other (%)	Total (%)	N
Afghanistan	44	24	7	24	1	100	286
Iraq	47	21	8	21	3	100	224
Iran	38	16	15	28	2	100	339
Ex-Yugoslavia	36	26	11	25	2	100	379
Somalia	62	8	9	18	3	100	193
Total	43	20	10	24	2	100	1421

The Network Trap: Bonding vs. Bridging Capital

The problem lies not only in recognizing qualifications, but also labour market access. Many migrants rely on bonding ties within their own communities, which provide support but often channel them into low-skilled “employment niches” (De Vroome and Van Tubergen, 2010; Kalfa

land Piracha, 2018; Lancee, 2015; Kracke and Klug, 2021), and show that migrants without weak ties to natives have poorer access to the “hidden” job market in which many high-skilled vacancies are filled. Van Tubergen (2011) finds that while 43% of immigrants obtain jobs through agencies and 24% via direct applications, 20% rely on friends and family, and those with low Dutch language skills and no local education depend more on informal channels, ending up in lower-status jobs. Network inequality, therefore, reinforces overqualification and underemployment.

Why This Requires Policy Action

This persistent mismatch has economic and social costs. Highly skilled migrants who cannot use their qualifications experience reduced well-being and loss of professional identity, and their isolation from mainstream networks delays Dutch language practice and work experience acquisition. Over time, this can entrench intergenerational inequality if children grow up without professional role models. Addressing migrant overqualification is thus essential not only for efficiency but also to uphold the principle that the Dutch labor market functions as a meritocracy (OECD, 2017; Borjas, 2014).

Proposed policy options

Mentoring to Work

One reason highly skilled migrants remain relegated to low-skilled work is that they lack access to the professional networks that make foreign qualifications legible in the Dutch labor market. A nationally coordinated Mentoring to Work program, inspired by the Belgian model, would match

overqualified migrants with established Dutch professionals in their sector (Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper, 2019). While the Netherlands invests in credential recognition and language training, these do not fully resolve the limited transferability of foreign human capital (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Mentors can help migrants translate foreign qualifications into Dutch standards, adapt CVs, understand sector norms, and navigate recruitment procedures, thereby building host-country-specific human capital (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010). At the same time, structured mentoring creates bridging ties beyond co-ethnic networks, opening access to informal recruitment channels where many skilled jobs are filled (Lancee, 2015; Granovetter, 1973). Evidence from Belgium indicates that the mentoring program provided added value in terms of sector-specific advice, application support, understanding of local norms, language practice, and confidence.

Matching should be based on sector, years of experience, preferred region, and language level, with a clear minimum commitment from mentors (for instance, six meetings over six months plus support with at least one application or networking event). To reduce administrative burden, monitoring could rely on light-touch indicators such as retention of the match, number of contacts, and self-reported progress on job search and confidence. Incentives for mentors might include formal recognition (e.g. certificates, Continuing Professional Development points for regulated professions), visibility in sector communications, and the opportunity for employers to screen motivated candidates. Over time, SZW could concentrate resources on sectors with severe shortages, using Mentoring to Work as a targeted instrument to connect overqualified migrants to hard-to-fill vacancies.

Workplace-Specific Language & Skills Trainings

Even when migrants have strong qualifications, many cannot access skilled work because they lack the Dutch language and workplace-specific skills that employers value the most. Research shows that higher-host language

proficiency is associated with higher earnings and occupations that are more skilled. Work-focused language programs in Europe and North America demonstrate that contextualized, workplace-oriented training improves access to skilled jobs and supports upward mobility (Boyd & Cao, 2009; Chiswick & Miller, 2007). Portugal, Sweden, and Canada combine language instruction with vocational courses, job placements, and mentoring in sectors with shortages, such as hospitality and health care (McHugh & Challinor, 2011; Lemaître, 2007). Germany's "Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz" program illustrates how employer partnerships can deliver professional language training tailored to workplace needs. For the Netherlands, promoting employer-linked, sector-specific language and skills courses—co-funded by public actors, employers, unions, and civil-society organizations—would directly build the host-country human capital most valued in hiring decisions, while accommodating nontraditional students' schedules and family responsibilities.

For workplace-specific language and skills training, SZW can build on the existing adult education infrastructure (ROC's in the Netherlands, private providers) and sectoral training funds, rather than creating new institutions. Eligibility could focus on tertiary-educated migrants who currently work below their qualification level in sectors with proven shortages, identified through labor market intelligence. Courses would be co-designed with employers and unions to ensure the curriculum reflects real workplace tasks, communication demands, and digital tools used on the job. A co-financing model—such as 50% public funding and 50% employer or sector-fund contribution for approved programs in shortage sectors—would align incentives while safeguarding access for smaller firms. Combining this on a municipal level ensures that participants are referred at the right moment and that language and skills training are sequenced with mentoring and job searching. Simple evaluation metrics, such as completion rates, exam scores, and progression into higher-skilled roles or internal promotions after 6–12 months, would allow the SZW to scale the most effective program types.

Bridging Programs

For some migrants, the problem is not only language or networks, but the absence of a clear pathway from foreign qualifications to recognised skilled work in the Netherlands. Bridging programs could reduce “brain waste” by offering short, structured pathways into skilled employment that lead to Dutch recognition of foreign qualifications. Functioning as traineeships, they would place migrants directly in Dutch workplaces under the supervision of experienced professionals, addressing concrete skills gaps, building sector-specific knowledge, and allowing employers to assess competence in a low-risk setting (Sumption, 2013). International examples include Quebec’s supervised practice period for foreign-trained nurses, after which successful participants gain full registration, and Canadian bridging schemes for doctors and engineers that combine tailored training, exam preparation, and supervised work experience (Mercier, 2012). Dutch bridging programs could focus on shortage sectors such as health care, engineering, and ICT; offer time-limited paid placements with clear assessment criteria; and culminate in full or conditional recognition that opens a pathway to permanent skilled employment.

Bridging programs could initially be piloted in 2 to 3 sectors with clear labor shortages and strong regulatory frameworks, such as health care, engineering, and ICT. SZW would convene sector regulators, professional associations, large employers, and education providers to define common intake criteria (e.g., recognized foreign degree, minimum language level), learning outcomes, and assessment standards for supervised practice. Participants would enter paid traineeships of 6–12 months at participating employers, with a reduced trainee salary partly compensated by a wage subsidy or training grant, conditional on successful completion. During the placement, migrants receive structured supervision, complementary coursework (e.g., Dutch professional norms, regulations, and sector-specific terminology), and support in preparing for any required licensing exams. At the end of the program, regulators and employers jointly assess whether learning objectives are met and can grant full or conditional recognition accordingly. By embedding recognition decisions in a transparent, time-limited trajectory, bridging programs provide clarity for migrants, reduce uncertainty for employers, and allow SZW to tie public funding to demonstrable progress toward skilled, sustainable employment.

Policy Recommendation

These three policy options combined directly target the causes of “wasted potential” identified above. Mentoring to Work addresses the limited transferability of foreign human capital and the network trap by pairing overqualified migrants with Dutch professionals who can translate credentials, open weak-tie networks, and move them from bonding-based job searches into formal and hidden vacancy channels. Workplace-specific language and skills training tackles the premium on host-country human capital by accelerating the acquisition of Dutch qualifications, sectoral skills, and professional Dutch. Bridging programs respond to persistent overqualification and wage penalties by creating short, supervised traineeships in shortage sectors that reduce employers’ perceived risk and convert foreign credentials into Dutch-recognized experience. Together, these measures reframe migrant overqualification from an intractable integration problem into a solvable market-matching issue and support a more meritocratic and efficient Dutch labor market.

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