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Leaving the Crow's Nest: How Creative Co-Creation Transcends "Us-Versus-Them" Experiences of Dutch Refugee Students

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Abstract

This article is based on five years of longitudinal participatory action research on how former pre-bachelor programme students with a refugee background experience finding their way into Dutch higher education and society. The four-member research team and authors (two of which were former refugees), found that refugee students face a significant barrier of "us-versus-them," especially in an educational context. We explored how creative co-creation contributed to rethinking difference and sameness in higher education by breaking through or transcending this divide. Creative co-creation through play, storytelling, or constructing artefacts enables "alterity," approaching the other from the other's position. Movement and action help to shape the world around us: Connecting and shifting positions creates sameness while leaving space for difference. Creative co-creation during our research process included making co-creation artefacts and activities, thus involving outreach to broader audiences for engagement. In the research process, it became clear that successful participation matters to all students and provides more opportunities for all, not just refugee students. A new notion of "we" in Dutch higher education and society that does not perpetuate the divide between "us" and "them" requires a shared responsibility. Higher education needs the university authorities and the teachers to make room for student stories and should provide spaces for dialogue and community development.

Keywords

agency; social justice; community development; creative co-creation; higher education; refugee students; us-versus-them divide

1. Introduction

Our longitudinal research from 2018 to 2023 was inspired by refugee students' experiences when switching from the Utrecht University of Applied Science (UUAS) tailor-made, pre-bachelor programme for refugees to a regular study programme. The pre-bachelor programme was a preparation year for Dutch higher education consisting of Dutch language mastery, understanding the Dutch study climate, support to choose a future study programme, and an introduction to Dutch society. The programme included creative co-creation, an embodied pedagogical-didactic approach that fosters both community development and students "becoming persons" through play, storytelling, dance, and making artefacts (Macrine & Fugate, 2022). For this part of the programme, regular social work students were also invited to participate. These creative co-creation lessons offered not only opportunities for joy and sharing, but also for developing more responsivity and improvisation to get a better grip on the world around them.

The pre-bachelor programme was designed mainly based on the teaching experiences of the teachers involved, who had been working with (forced) migrant students in regular bachelor and master programmes for years. Within the pre-bachelor programme the teaching staff had tried to partially remove some of the possible barriers of regular study programmes, which seem to harm refugee students more than regular students: such as the predominantly cognitive approach, a lack of attention to the teacher–student relationship and to students' past and present experiences, participatory student initiatives during classes, community building, and the value of difference. These efforts to make the pre-bachelor study programme more inclusive than regular study programmes had at the same time inadvertently raised false expectations. The former pre-bachelor programme students experienced the first year of their regular higher education study programme as very difficult. They were excluded from collaborative groups and felt isolated and "othered," as Ghorashi (2018) identifies this phenomenon. Suddenly they became aware of an "us-versus-them" divide and most continued to feel excluded during their entire higher educational careers. In part, this had to do with the educational didactic approaches (such as competence-based education), and suddenly having to relate as a minority to the majority of regular students. In the pre-bachelor programme, these students had been in a majority and attention was paid to their stories and experiences, thus they had gained the confidence to speak up more freely and slowly chart a new path for their studies and lives. Although standing out and speaking out can be complicated for people who have grown up in a dictatorship, the pre-bachelor programme students felt motivated to identify and seize chances to do so and ask for help when necessary. Their peer community, built during the pre-bachelor programme, remained intact over the years.

The refugee students' experiences of exclusion during their regular study careers sparked the idea to start a participatory, creative co-creation research project with a group of 14 former pre-bachelor programme students over five years. After all, while former pre-bachelor programme students' experiential knowledge had been lacking in the pre-bachelor programme's design process, these emic insights could be important for teachers, fellow students, and the authorities in regular higher education. The project research team—referred to here as "we"—included the four authors of this article. Two researchers were former pre-bachelor programme students with a refugee background and two were involved as teachers in the pre-bachelor's programme at the same time. Over the research project's five-year timeline, the two researchers with a refugee background finished their regular study programmes in social work and French language teacher education, respectively. The two non-refugee researchers have a background in social work (PhD) and

Arabic studies (MA). The student–teacher relationship within the research team naturally impacted the power dynamics in the team and the research process viz à viz differences in ethnicity, colour, age, and experiential knowledge related to forced migration. We consistently made these differences an explicit topic during reflections on our experiences during the research project and our investigations into how these differences may have affected our perceptions, decisions, and writing. For example, we chose to do all the in-depth interviews with our respondents (from now "students") in mixed pairs, one professional male researcher without a refugee background and one female researcher with a refugee background and vice versa. The research took place in the context of the Social Innovation Knowledge Institute (KSI) at the UUAS and was based on the Institute's set of core values we also used as the departure point for our research. The KSI Research Centre for Social Innovation aims to strengthen better living together with a focus on promoting social equity. The quality of living together is seen as the result of social innovations in practice and is defined by three mission values: inclusion, equity, and security.

We chose participatory research since this research methodology facilitates listening, learning, and reflexivity in collaborative ways (Lenette, 2022). In this thoughtful and meaningful qualitative research methodology, process and research findings are intertwined and not hierarchically related to one another, which was of great importance to our team. Creative co-creation fits seamlessly into this research methodology, although the creative co-creation artefacts and activities that emerged from the research process (see Table 1) differed in material terms from those the students had been working on in the pre-bachelor programme. However, the essence of creative co-creation as a way of giving shape to the world around us and developing one's agency is the same.

Our participatory research on how former pre-bachelor programme students experienced finding their way into Dutch higher education and Dutch society, showed that they experienced several educational barriers and the main barrier was the "us-versus-them" divide. Our article describes how creative co-creation contributes to rethinking difference and sameness in Dutch higher education by breaking through or transcending this divide by fostering the students to reshape their world.

The first section of our article examines the critical literature on refugee students in higher education, the "us-versus-them" divide, social inclusion, and research as a participatory process with creative co-creation. We then describe how creative co-creation can contribute to rethinking difference and sameness based on highlighting the process from data collection to creative output and dialogue with multiple, public audiences. Finally, we draw conclusions and identify future research possibilities.

2. Resources

2.1. Becoming a Person

Refugee students often have complex life experiences and confront unexpected changes in their life plans. These students are frequently required to reshape their lives scarred by loss and reconstruct their identities (Morrice, 2012). The reshaping and reconstructing of learning processes are part of revising their world, and this does not always have a positive outcome. The situation nuances the general view that learning is a positive process bringing benefits to individual students, and stimulating personal growth (Morrice, 2012). We argue that education as a whole is not a positive (or a negative) process, or necessarily focused on

stimulating personal growth (Biesta, 2010). Of the three (ideally integrated) educational orientations of qualification, socialisation, and becoming a person (what Biesta, 2010, calls "subjectification"), it is becoming a person that is pedagogically speaking the main goal of education (Biesta, 2022). By pointing at the world, a teacher can invite students to become persons. In the pedagogical sense, becoming a person takes place between isolated self-destruction and world destruction. Like Hannah Arendt wrote:

> Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. (Arendt, 1954/2006, p. 196)

Teachers' invitations and solicitations can make students aware of both their freedom to answer the teacher's appeal to contribute to the world, or not, including the consequences of their choice. Becoming a person is a delicate, sometimes rather frictional matter for both teachers and students. For refugee students, becoming a person might include complexities and frictions related to their unusual life experiences often intertwined with negotiating confusing and adopted refugee identities (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). The magnitude of these students' identity crisis is more pronounced in comparison with other students, given their spatial, demographic, temporal, economic, and cultural relocation after being uprooted (Hack-Polay et al., 2021).

The pre-bachelor programme teachers were aware that becoming a person should therefore take place in the context of attempting to navigate new experiences with fellow Dutch students and regular higher education teachers. Embracing, rejecting, or juggling new identities is part of this transition (Hack-Polay, 2020). For fellow students and regular higher education teachers, it is important to understand and recognise refugee students' motives for shifting identities and positions (Chu et al., 2020). For this reason, the creative co-creation lessons in the pre-bachelor programme used to take place in mixed groups with fellow students from the regular social work study programme and sometimes regular higher education teachers. An artist-teacher invited students, and occasionally teachers, to co-create by telling stories, dancing, playing, and making community arts using embodied pedagogy and didactics (Drop & Mesker, 2024). This embodied approach can improve individual and peer learning practices for all students (Macrine & Fugate, 2022). Students are approached as whole persons situated in an environment instead of individuals with independent bodies and brains to be addressed separately. Students and teachers bring their own lived bodies into the room including their past and present experiences. Experience, movement, and action underlying creative co-creation forms like dancing and playing help shape the world around us (Alibali & Nathan, 2018; Drop & Mesker, 2024). In addition, creative co-creation enables "alterity," which involves approaching the other from the other's position (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, as cited in Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013, p. 83). By connecting and shifting positions, sameness is created while leaving space for difference. Ghorashi and Sabelis (2013) call this "juggling with difference and sameness." The body and embodiment also have a critical role in the development of social-emotional learning since motion and emotion are connected through expressions (Flach et al., 2010). Emotions include embodied interaction with the environment (Drop & Mesker, 2024). Through co-creation, the refugee and regular students and teachers started to better understand the moods, drives, backgrounds, talents, and enjoyment happening in the classroom. They developed insights into each other's often invisible sociocultural codes. For the teachers, creative co-creation enabled a recognition of the material conditions and struggles in refugee students' lives. Mojab and Carpenter (2011) stress the importance of social recognition processes in

education based on mutuality for refugees. They draw on the concept of "learning by dispossession" when education is restricted to an abstract cognitive experience. This concept entails the understanding that learning involves a complex mediation of social experiences (war, occupation, poverty, becoming an asylum seeker and then a refugee, and social exclusion) and meaning-making in dealing with the new sociocultural context from which refugee students should not be "dispossessed." As mentioned in the introduction, former UUAS pre-bachelor programme students reported such bad, what we could call "dispossessing" experiences in the regular study programmes they had joined after completing the pre-bachelor programme. This sparked our idea to start a participatory, creative co-creation longitudinal research project with a group of these former pre-bachelor programme students.

2.2. Stop Stealing Our Stories

Our research was influenced by the "stop stealing our stories" critical movement (Pittaway et al., 2010), originating from refugee interviewees and other vulnerable groups involved in research. This movement considers the challenges and opportunities of integrating participatory methods into human rights-based research. Power imbalances between researchers and participants raise complex ethical issues and a new approach to research ethics is proposed "moving beyond the dominant principles of harm minimization to an emphasis on negotiated reciprocal benefit that challenges researchers to justify their projects with reference to the benefits delivered to the vulnerable group themselves" (Pittaway et al., 2010, p. 248). The ethical challenge for researchers is to add value to the lives of the people they are researching, thus recognising them as subjects in the process and not simply as sources of data (Hugman, 2005). The departure point of our research was to recognise that refugees have agency, as well as the right to determine if, how, and when they share their stories. Agency refers to the human capacity to act, shaped by (non)available possibilities and resources within the world and attendant discourses and practices (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). Empowering refugees does not have to come through emphasising their heart-breaking stories. The pressure of storytelling can leave refugees feeling tokenised and disempowered (Tammas, 2019). In addition, asking for stories as a one-sided research question can easily lead to othering and dividing refugees as "them" when bringing themselves in while telling their stories, and researchers as "us" when listening to the poignant stories of these poor victims and simultaneously holding ourselves back. Victimising refugees is problematic because it reproduces social hierarchies (Ghorashi, 2018). In other words, victimising, or focusing on vulnerabilities, reproduces and reinforces hegemonic perceptions of refugees as dependent, unimaginative, deviant, and deficient.

Central in this article is the "us-versus-them" divide and this refers to various dimensions, such as thinking of otherness and (the participative dimension of) social inclusion. Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("us," self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("them," other) by stigmatising a difference—real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination (Staszak, 2009). "The normalising power of othering is present in the prominence of hegemonic norms constituted of gender, racial, and cultural hierarchies of difference that reproduce structures of inequality in everyday practices" (Young, 2007, p. 104). The binary classification "us-versus-them" accepts a classified reality and imposed differences while also implying a position of power and feeling of moral superiority.

2.3. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion can be defined as breaking down the barriers that prevent full participation (Caidi & Allard, 2005). Gidley et al. (2010) discern three dimensions of social inclusion: access, participation, and empowerment. Access refers to groups that require deficit-based interventions (e.g., scholarships or income support, additional teaching assistance, or translation). Participation is a more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion embedded in social justice principles, such as human dignity. Nunan et al. (2000, p. 65) argue that this type of inclusion is concerned with "successful participation which generates greater options for all." Empowerment includes "strength-based and value difference and diversity as an important resource or source of social transformation" (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014, p. 30). Providing opportunities for multiple voices to be heard at various levels of decision-making, facilitating dialogue between competing interests, prioritising underrepresented groups at an institutional level, designing pathways to facilitate hope for target groups, and organising cultural festivals for people to express their values in their own ways are examples of intervention goals for empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010).

2.4. Participatory Process

A source of inspiration for us was thinking about action research as a participatory process for developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). This approach seeks to bring together action and reflection, and practice and theory in participation with others. Practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people can be reached, and more generally, allow individual persons and their communities to flourish (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In action research, it is important to involve the participants, organisations, and other stakeholders in the research processes through co-creation. The development of shared opinions then forms the basis of the results (Kemmis, 2009). Lenette (2022) speaks of "meaningful" participation in the context of participatory action research and gives examples of research practices that can create rich relationships experienced as a learning experience wherein researchers have a sense of humility and genuine willingness to listen, even when things are hurtful to hear. The researchers come with a genuine interest in their co-researchers and really want to see change; they are not just conducting the research to add a project to their CVs, what characterises colonial research, according to Lenette (2022). Actively engaging students in decisions and participatory and democratic processes is suggested as an important step towards change to promote social justice in inclusive educational practices (Kraus, 2008; Liasidou, 2014). Co-creation entails collaborative processes and active involvement of communities and citizens as stakeholders in decisions affecting their lives (Brandsen et al., 2018). We consciously opted for co-creation and participatory research "that [both] typically seek to balance interests, benefits and responsibilities between the relevant stakeholders, focus attention on user needs, and make the whole process—from planning to implementation—transparent and inclusive" (World Health Organisation, 2011). Next, we explain how we perceive our participatory research approach as an especially *creative* co-creation.

2.5. Creative Co-Creation

Space and time matter significantly in relation to co-creation, which is expressed through concepts such as in-betweenness, liminality, unfolding over time, unpredictability, uncertainty, temporal suspension of norms and behaviours, and simultaneous awareness of self and collaborators. Most of these notions are explicit in the

context of *creative* co-creation. The adjective "creative" could point to an open indeterminacy in a collaborative process with only an underlying orientation. Both collaborator actions and the substance of the work are open for spontaneous improvisation and emerging interaction. The space where this open creative co-creation takes place is referred to by various terms, indicating the dynamic power relations: "in-betweenness" (Benjamin, 2017), "a space in-between" (Arendt, 1951/1994), "a liminal space" (Holle et al., 2021), "a third space/third area" (Bhabha, 2006, as cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; see also Meloni et al., 2015), or "a place for what we cannot envision to emerge" (Carteret, 2008). In-betweenness is characterised by what Benjamin (2017) calls "where both can live," instead of "where only one can live" due to power imbalances.

In the creativity of the co-creation process, (community) artistic expression is at stake, e.g., theatre, dance, visual arts, creative writing, playing with ideas and thoughts, or poetry. We argue with Holle (2020) that even though there may be feelings of isolation and anxiety in the state of in-betweenness (Beech, 2011), it can be a space for transformations (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). Such transformative processes relate to Paulo Freire's term "conscientization," describing the awakening and empowering processes occurring in groups working together (Freire, 2020). Zimmerman (2000) distinguishes between empowering processes and empowering outcomes. Collaborating with others, sharing responsibilities, decision-making, and leadership are empowering processes, while experiencing control and obtaining critical awareness are empowerment outcomes. As such, this study views co-creation as including both empowering processes and empowering outcomes.

In recent publications, creative co-creation has been proposed to be "distributed between audiences, materials, embodied actions, and the historico-socio-cultural affordances of the creative activity and environment, thus expanding the potentialities of creative collaboration beyond instances of direct human interaction and engagement" (Barrett et al., 2021). Here we see both processes and outcomes of creativity included, as well as a highlighted public involvement and engagement through what de Jaegher (2015) calls "the creative embodied actions of the collaborators." Turner (1979) argues that arts are a form of plural reflexivity, affecting and informing the viewer. Thus, the public becomes involved in the creative co-creation, resulting in knowledge and reflexivity. Public engagement is crucial since according to various authors the underlying orientation of creative co-creation can be conceived as transformative change (Holle, 2020, pp. 56–57), collaborative learning (Barrett et al., 2021, p. 2), and/or (more politically contextualised) as the deconstruction of social hegemonies (Holle et al., 2021, pp. 13–14). At this point, creative co-creation can become rather influential in a political, socio-cultural sense.

2.6. Involving Audiences

Researchers who seek to attract audiences involved in exploring complex issues, where awareness can be developed and social hegemonies unsettled, may choose creative co-creation research methods. This kind of participatory research is inextricable from the process. Renold and Ivinson (2022) speak of "entangled research." Creative co-creation participatory research with forced migrants is a good example of entangled research. Both the creative collaborative process between the researchers and forced migrants (as co-researchers), as well as the process with public involvement, are the goal. The researchers' activism lies in promoting equitable research forms of mutuality and thereby challenging systems of discrimination and exclusion. Creative co-creation research seeks to provide a context-specific, bottom-up understanding from the forced migrants' perspectives (Tracy, 2013), and thus attempts to foster the agency of all involved.

Agency has transformative qualities because it challenges and resists existing oppressive structures in a creative and (sometimes) even unintentional way (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). This research approach is emancipatory since the objectification of forced migrants is reduced, agency development is central, and situated knowledge based on lived experience is valued (Mahn et al., 2019). This contrasts with more "standard" research approaches that usually create methodological crows' nests from which to look down from a distance on the research objects (MacLure, 2006), and are often based on hierarchies between researchers and participants in favour of the first. The latter are often seen as informants instead of collaborative sensemaking co-intellectuals. Thus, standard research methods can reproduce existing harmful insights about forced migrants and the frequent framing of who "we" and "they" are.

In our research project, the methods, research process, and outcomes are not always well distinguished. How our participatory action research approach and our creative co-creation came into being was part of the research process and outcomes at the same time.

3. Illustration

The research team included two former pre-bachelor programme students and two researchers of the UUAS. The research was subsidised by a private foundation with co-financing from the UUAS; all researchers were paid. There were two rounds of in-depth interviews (approximately two hours per interview and all recorded) with 14 former pre-bachelor programme students. Participants in both rounds were asked for informed consent. The research received ethical approval from the UUAS.

The students' former home countries were Syria, Iran and Somalia. The first interview round took place in the academic year 2019–2020. The second round was postponed due to the ensuing global pandemic. During the pandemic, we as researchers phoned all the students involved in the research and met with those who were willing to speak in person. We did not record these conversations. In the second interview round (academic year 2022–2023), many students referred to the pandemic. The in-depth interviews were conducted by two pairs of researchers mixed as follows: one male and one female, including one researcher with a refugee background and one without. Within the research team we had ten long reflection meetings of approximately three hours each.

3.1. Creative Co-Creation Validation During the Research Process

At specific moments throughout the research process, we shared outcomes from the in-depth interviews (see Table 1). Our research data informed the process of creative co-creation artefacts-making. Two fictional films were made by one of the interviewed former pre-bachelor programme students who in the meantime had studied audio-visual media. The first film premiere was accompanied by a well-attended (online due to the pandemic) round table conducted by former pre-bachelor programme students. Approximately 70 UUAS teachers and stakeholders attended. The second film premiere was an even larger event with 120 participants (see Table 1, step 9). This film was made in collaboration with Utrecht University of the Arts. Our research team and three performing artists from Utrecht University of the Arts (two had a refugee background) had developed a theatrical form together, *Playing With Identities*, which was informed by our research as well. A book, *Niet meer (slechts) een vluchteling* (*Not (just) a refugee anymore*), was also published (Abdulsattar et al., 2023). After the book's publication, a podcast about it was released (see Table 1, step 10). With this validation

Table 1. Step-by-step process from data collection to creative output and dialogue.

Step 1	Researcher interviews with each other
Step 2	In-depth interviews with former pre-bachelor programme students
Step 3	Labelling transcribed interviews
Step 4	Research team reflection on outcomes
Step 5	Meetings with the filmmaker and first film premiere
Step 6	Round table with a broader audience
Step 7	Second round of in-depth interviews with former pre-bachelor programme students
Step 8	Transforming outcomes into artefacts (second film, theatrical form)
Step 9	Public discussion after the premiere of the second film
Step 10	(Public) dissemination of theatrical form and podcast

of our work in the form of various artefacts during the research process, we reached and engaged in a dialogue with broader audiences. By regularly inviting teachers, other students, and stakeholders to our activities, we intended to raise awareness about the significantly increasing Dutch societal "us-versus-them" divide.

3.2. Intertwined Team Collaboration, Data Collection, and Creative Output and Dialogue

In this section, we show that the process from data collection to creative output and dialogue was strongly intertwined with the collaboration within the research team. Two examples are highlighted. First, we elucidate how the "us-versus-them" divide was eloquently expressed both in our reflective sessions within the research team as well as in a round table discussion following the first film. Secondly, we show how the recurring theme of identity led to the work form of "Playing with identities" for the benefit of higher education.

3.3. "Us-Versus-Them" in team Collaboration, First Film, and Round Table

In our research team, we started by interviewing one another (see Table 1, step 1). We experienced how vulnerable it could feel to be interviewed, then read transcribed interviews and discussed these among ourselves. By doing this, reciprocity came to the fore and proved to be a dominant theme. One of us (a non-refugee researcher) put it as follows:

> The first in-depth interviews we had were conversations with each other. Everyone carries their own story with them, their own "backpack." By sharing this with each other, mutual appreciation and safety emerged. It is in my opinion important to expose yourself when exploring such a topic, in order to acknowledge your own prejudices, weaknesses and other human traits.

In our researcher collaboration, we tried to minimise but not deny the differences among us:

> We work together, but we don't, for example, write reports. Yet I never feel you are better, or above me, and there are other things you can do but I cannot. Surely that is normal! (Quote from one of the researchers with a refugee past)

On the one hand, we realised that our lives as researchers are completely dissimilar. On the other hand, all the important questions about searches in life are pertinent to all of us even as "us-versus-them" differences exist in society as a whole. Exemplary questions here were as follows. Could someone without a refugee history empathise with a refugee's story at all? How far can you go in probing the other's life story? One researcher thought probing in this situation was connected to a superior role and thus to a power imbalance.

Based on our research question and the first researcher interviews with each other, we developed a topic list and started a series of open in-depth interviews with the former pre-bachelor programme students (see Table 1, step 2). We then analysed the transcribed interviews by labelling quotes and eventually grouping them into several main themes, using "content analysis" (see Table 1, step 3). In doing so, we explicitly decided that each research pair would only analyse the other pair's interviews. We presented and discussed the (more than 175) labels with corresponding quotations and our interpretations to each other within the team (see Table 1, step 4), and eventually nine umbrella themes remained. The nine are as follows: "the past as a paradox," "changing identities," "being different and discrimination," "language skills and meaningfulness," "barriers in education," "culture, religion and values," "the us-versus-them divide," "the big changes during the first years," and "playing with identities." Within our research team we further reflected on these nine themes. We did this by each alternately preparing relevant questions for the other three researchers, thus seeking more understanding and confirmation of the themes from our own cultural, biographical, and linguistic perspectives. We also wanted to understand if and how we thought the themes were (at least partly) interrelated. In addition, one could also state that these themes are universal life themes of young people starting their studies and going into a new, uncertain future. Thus, the potential interrelations and the major differences between the lives of the refugee students and their non-refugee peers, were important to explore thoroughly.

Next, we started talks with a filmmaker (a former pre-bachelor programme student) about making the first film (see Table 1, step 5) about the gap and the differences our students (former refugees) had reported having to overcome in their education compared to regular students. As researchers, we stepped into a new role and became the filmmaker's client. Together we decided that a film on this topic had to be recognisable, empathetic, and poetic about the former students' educational experiences in the Netherlands. After the first film's premiere ("The Letter"), we as a research team organised an online round table discussion (see Table 1, step 6) between (former pre-bachelor programme) students with a refugee background, participating teachers, and other stakeholders. In this meeting, the "us-versus-them" divide came up most forcefully. In this divide, refugees are dehumanised and human dignity is violated. The isolation of refugee students proved to be particularly concerning. The students were outraged at the lack of solidarity from fellow regular students and regular higher education teachers who had abandoned them to their fate, as well as the shortcomings of the UUAS organisation. Student group formation in general seemed to be left to the students, and this worked out badly for refugee students. Teachers often appealed to the refugee students' adult behaviour and expected they would be able to practise inclusive group formation, or at least learn to do so. This fits the dominant meritocratic Dutch way of passing the baton directly to refugees and other migrants in general to take responsibility for their integration in society. The Dutch idea is that equal opportunities in education are best realised when students are treated equally. We recognised during the round table discussion that refugee students in general try very hard to fit in but are rarely accepted in student groups in higher education in the Netherlands. This is a difficult situation and reinforces their feeling of "being different." One former pre-bachelor programme student said that no one wanted to work with him

until he became a high-performing student. The risks of being excluded in higher education are reinforced for refugee students when education is mainly directed towards individualised, personalised, and flexible learning pathways and not towards community development. The question was raised whether teachers also should not take more responsibility to create inclusive classroom spaces to address student differences and possible transformation (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). This would start with the teachers' efforts to personally relate to all students, and so learn what is going on in the class and among the students, particularly those with a background as a refugee.

The round table was hosted by five former pre-bachelor programme students (three of whom were also our respondents). This exercise served as a meaningful participant validation member check (McKim, 2023). These students provided more structured and public feedback on several of our coded nine themes, e.g., "barriers in education," "the us-versus-them divide," and "being different and discrimination."

3.4. Creating Space for Differences

Identity was a dominant and recurring theme in the former pre-bachelor programme students' in-depth interviews and in our research team's conversations. Being able to deal flexibly with one's identity, or partial identities, seemed to be an important condition when entering a new society. In the team, we discussed the following questions:

1. How does a new situation or your new life here affect your own identity?
2. Is it difficult to form a new identity? What makes it difficult?
3. Do you need to change your mind to live or cope with the new society?
4. Imagine you want to keep your old habits, traditions, and thoughts, how would you cope with a new society?
5. Is it dangerous to play with your identity? Is there any risk of losing your "true" identity?

The final nine coded themes that emerged flowed together. The theme of identity also addressed the "us-versus-them" divide, thus we concluded that bridging differences does not require refugee students to give up their identities. What is relevant is creating space for diversity and recognising and valuing distinct perspectives. We recognised a certain power imbalance among ourselves as researchers with and without a refugee background and felt the urge to not brush away these differences. What mattered most was that we regularly took time to talk to one another thus creating a slow process. This approach also made us experiment with the theatrical work form of "Playing with identities" (see Table 1, step 8). This form opens an interactive narrative in which the players can identify with an introducer's life story scene, thus fostering understanding and even empathising with the introducer's experiences. The introducer can feel recognised due to their re-enacted life scene, and/or can come to new insights about their own life by seeing what the players experience. As part of the research process, we elaborated our theatrical form and offered it to Dutch higher education teachers (see Table 1, step 10):

> It was very moving for me to see how someone with a refugee past, from another generation, from another world, could completely believably empathise with my life story. (Quote from one of the non-refugee researchers)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our original longitudinal research key question was: "How do former pre-bachelor programme students experience finding their way into Dutch higher education and society?" In the in-depth interviews with these refugee students, the feeling of isolation came up frequently and again in a most painful way during the round table discussion.

The refugee students reported that they had been excluded from collaborating with other students and felt "othered" by their regular higher education teachers. Barriers to full class participation were sometimes erected rather than broken down. It appeared that the teachers believed that the benefits of the successful participation of refugee students was as an investment in which only the refugee students stood to gain. Moreover, there was a strong teacher perception that extra attention to refugee students would not be fair to the non-refugee students, and like all students, refugee students should stand up for themselves. This fits the dominant meritocratic Dutch way of passing the baton directly to refugees and other migrants in general to take responsibility for their integration in society. The Dutch idea is that equal opportunities in education are best realised when students are treated equally. In the round table discussion, however, it became very clear that successful participation matters to all students, not just refugee students. A new notion of "we" in Dutch higher education and society that does not perpetuate the divide between "us" and "them" requires a shared responsibility. Education needs room for stories and should provide space for dialogue and community development (Drop & Mesker, 2024) from which refugee students may also gain a great deal. This kind of creative co-creation in education does not only offer opportunities for joy and sharing but also for developing more responsivity and improvisation to enable students to shape their world (Alibali & Nathan, 2018; Drop & Mesker, 2024). This is the objective we as researchers tried to realise within our research process with the creative output. We aimed to raise awareness about the importance of community building from which refugee students in particular would benefit. In addition, we promoted an embodied way of teaching (Macrine & Fugate, 2022) in which *all* students are supported to integrate and invited to experience becoming persons who contribute to each other's wellbeing, Dutch society and the world. With the essence of creative co-creation as a way of giving shape to the world around us, students can develop their agency (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). Teachers have a responsibility to create inclusive classroom spaces for student differences and possible transformation (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). This starts with relating to all students and learning about each student's struggles. Teachers, educators, and university authorities need to acknowledge students' backgrounds, which includes being inclusive of differences and addressing the desired social outcomes of education (Nunan et al., 2000).

The process from data collection to creative output and dialogue relied heavily on our collaboration within the research team. Participative research and creative co-creation went hand in hand in our research. As researchers, we tried to listen and learn from the refugee students' experiences. We chose participatory research because this research methodology facilitates listening, learning, and reflexivity in collaborative ways (Lenette, 2022). In this thoughtful and meaningful qualitative research methodology, process and research findings are intertwined and not hierarchically related to one another, which was of great importance to us. The intensive collaboration in our research team gave all opportunities for an emic understanding of the forced migrant perspective. Research with refugees is still a unique practice (Kara & Pickering, 2017). Our effort provided room for transformations and in-betweenness, especially because of the dynamic power relations. During the moments when we as researchers engaged with public audiences,

we saw how creative co-creation can result in a cumulation of knowledge and reflexivity (Turner, 1979). We saw the danger of being too focused on our research team itself, for this could be interpreted as self-praise about doing collaborative research with refugees. In addition, by leaving the crow's nest (MacLure, 2006) our research runs the risk of not being taken seriously, although knowledge co-creation contributing to social inclusion and social justice for refugees is of utmost importance. With our plea for room for stories, participatory student initiatives, and community development in education, we did not want to simply describe the do's and don'ts of education for refugee students. Instead, we hope to foster understanding and recognition of refugee students' search in finding their way into Dutch higher education and Dutch society and give insights to educational authorities, teachers, and fellow students about how refugee students perceive the educational support they need to succeed in their search for integration.

4.1. Further Research

Other longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate whether the benefits of creative co-creation and participatory approaches persist over time and lead to sustained improvements in integration and success for refugee students in higher education. More studies are also needed to understand the educational challenges and opportunities to facilitate inclusive, embodied pedagogical-didactic approaches, such as creative co-creation, and how this can contribute to the full participation of students who are refugees and other students. Ongoing investigation is needed to discover how teachers, educators, and university authorities can acknowledge *all* students' backgrounds, thus creating a diverse yet whole community. Further research into refugee students' change agent role is needed in the Netherlands. Although this is not a new perspective, it has been signalled in the education literature for more than a decade (Hendriks & van Ewijk, 2017), thus, further investigation is needed to determine why the educational praxis proves to be so recalcitrant.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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