

Summary

Foreigners need not apply

A study of discrimination on the labour market in The Hague

The Hague is committed to becoming a city in which everyone feels at home and where everyone participates. Creating a level playing field for all citizens and actively tackling labour discrimination is part of the municipal policy (Gemeente Den Haag 2015a; 2015b). From this perspective, The Hague is interested to know how prevalent discrimination on the labour market is. Gaining an insight into the mechanisms that underlie discrimination is also relevant for policy development. Two central research questions are accordingly addressed in this study:

- 1 How common is ethnic discrimination against people of Moroccan and Hindustani origin when applying for low and middle-ranking jobs in The Hague region ('Haaglanden')?
- 2 What are the mechanisms underlying discrimination? Attention here focuses on characteristics of the selection process and of selectors that are associated with discrimination, as well as on the association with group perceptions.

Extent of discrimination

The research was carried out using correspondence tests to establish the extent of discrimination. In these tests, equivalent (fictitious) candidates, who differed only in terms of ethnic background, applied for the same (genuine) vacancy. Since the only variable was ethnic background, any difference in outcome can be ascribed to the ethnic background of the applicants – discrimination, in other words.

Correspondence tests are the best way of identifying discrimination, but are also labour-intensive. This means choices had to be made – regarding the job levels studied (low and middle-ranking), the ethnic groups (Hindustani and Moroccan background) and the region (Haaglanden).

In this study, three equivalent candidates applied for the same vacancies. In each case, the applicants comprised a Dutch native, a person of Moroccan background and a person of Hindustani origin. The applicants sent standardised application letters and CVs. Three equivalent CVs and letters were composed for each application. All candidates applied using the same cv with approximately the same frequency. The ethnic background of the applicants was indicated using common Dutch, Hindustani and Moroccan names. The names were the only indicator by which selectors could recognise the ethnic background of the applicants. No other information was included in the letters or CVs which could provide any indication of ethnic origin (e.g. country of birth or language proficiency).

Each cv contained an email address and telephone number on which the applicant could be contacted. The email accounts and telephone numbers were checked daily to see whether there were any responses from selectors. Responses were coded and recorded. Where a

candidate was invited for an interview, a message was sent to the employer as quickly as possible in which the fictitious applicant withdrew from the application procedure. Between late of August and early November 2014, 504 applications were submitted for 176 different vacancies in the Haaglanden region. The responses from employers were categorised as 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' for the applicant. 'Successful' meant that the applicant was invited for interview or that the employer showed an interest in the applicant in some other way. 'Unsuccessful' meant the applicant was rejected or did not receive a response to their application.

Discrimination against equivalent candidates

The study revealed that there is discrimination on the Haaglanden labour market: applicants with different ethnic backgrounds who applied with the same, equivalent cv had different chances of success: native Dutch applicants had a 34% chance of success, applicants with a Hindustani background 23% and applicants with a Moroccan background 19%. In other words, native Dutch candidates had a 1.5 times better chance of a successful application than candidates with Hindustani background with the same qualifications, and 1.8 times better than equally qualified candidates with a Moroccan background.

There was no difference in the success rates of male and female applicants. We also found no difference in the degree of discrimination for positions with and without customer contact, low and middle-ranking positions, or by sector. The degree of discrimination did vary depending on whether the vacancy was in The Hague itself or elsewhere in the Haaglanden region: discrimination was higher in The Hague. It was not possible to determine the reason for this on the basis of this study.

No relationship with characteristics of the selection process or the selector

To investigate whether the degree of discrimination is related to characteristics of the selection process or the selector themselves, telephone contact was sought with all 176 potential employers after completion of the correspondence tests. 105 selectors were willing to complete a short telephone interview. During this interview, they were asked about:

- The number of selectors involved in the first selection decision;
- The gender of the selector with primary responsibility for the first selection decision;
- The number of employees at the company;
- The total number of applications received for the vacancy concerned;
- Whether a standardised selection procedure was used;
- Whether the company had in place a diversity policy.

No significant relationship was found between these characteristics and the degree of discrimination. This conclusion should be treated with some caution, however, given the relatively small number of employers interviewed.

A quarter of companies in the study reported that they had some form of diversity policy. In most cases this went no further than expressing a wish to be a diverse employer; no

specific measures or modified selection channels were used to achieve this. In practice, therefore, there is little difference between companies in the Haaglanden region that do and do not pursue a diversity policy, and this is reflected in the absence of any effects on the degree of discrimination.

Perceptions and discrimination

Selectors in the Haaglanden region were found to prefer native Dutch candidates over candidates with a non-Western background, even where they were equally qualified. The reason for this may lie in group perceptions. Perceptions regarding applicants with a different ethnic background are generally more negative than perceptions of applicants with a native Dutch background. Two types of mechanism that may be associated with discrimination are described in the literature:

- Psychological mechanism: perceptions regarding sociocultural differences; the non-Western applicant as the *other*;
- Economic mechanism: perceptions regarding low productivity: the non-Western applicant as *risk*.

Information was added to the applications by candidates with a non-Western background to see whether it was possible to compensate for these perceptions. If these additions cause the discrimination to disappear, this indicates that the initial reason for discrimination needs to be sought in that direction.

In the second phase of the study, two conditions were created in a bid to influence these mechanisms. In the first condition (*integration condition*) we added a paragraph to the letters from the applicants with Moroccan and Hindustani background in which they expressed their commitment to Dutch society (also reflected in volunteering) and identified themselves as Dutch. The chances of success of these applicants were then compared with those of native Dutch applicants who applied for the same vacancies but did not include this information in their applications. Discrimination against applicants of Hindustani background disappeared under this condition: their chances of success did not differ significantly from those of Dutch natives. Discrimination was however still found for the applicants of Moroccan origin. The added information thus had no effect on their chances relative to those of Dutch natives.

In the second condition (*work experience condition*), we added two years' extra work experience to the CVs of candidates with a non-Western background, as well as relevant courses and a passage on commitment and motivation, in order to influence the risk reception of employers with regard to these applicants.

We calculated the chance of success of these applicants compared with native Dutch applicants for the same vacancies who did not have the extra work experience and courses on their CVs. The chances of applicants of Moroccan origin were now the same as those of their native Dutch counterparts (who were now less well qualified), but a difference remained between Dutch natives and applicants of Hindustani origin. Discrimination against the latter group thus did not diminish under this condition.

Our conclusion from these findings is that labour market discrimination against people of Moroccan origin is related to risks that selectors associate with recruiting people from this group (economic mechanism). Applicants from this group can compensate for this risk assessment with extra work experience and relevant courses. The CVs of applicants with Hindustani names evidently evoked perceptions of a wide social and cultural distance (psychological mechanism). Labour market discrimination against this group is associated with this.

The results for the Hindustani applicants, in particular, are surprising: first because the perceptions of people of Hindustani background are generally positive, and second because it is difficult to understand why members of this group are not to compensate for the risk assessments of employers while those of Moroccan origin are. To gain a better understanding of the results, eight selectors from the study were telephoned. This revealed that the Hindustani names were not recognised as such, but were simply seen by employers as 'non-Dutch'. Where employers did know that the names were Hindustani and the applicants demonstrated a pronounced commitment to Dutch society, the discrimination disappeared. The failure to recognise the Hindustani names does not explain why applicants with a Hindustani background are not able to compensate for employers' risk assessments while those of Moroccan origin are able to do so. It could indicate that risk assessments concerning migrants in general do not play a role in ethnic discrimination on the labour market, but that assessments of specific groups do. This is difficult to understand.

In conclusion, both the perceived risk and the perceived social and cultural distance can play a role in ethnic discrimination on the labour market. For antidiscrimination policy, this means that efforts could be made to break the link between group perceptions and individual applicants. If group associations are not taken into account when assessing applications from individuals, they will be assessed on their own merits. This is not as simple as it sounds. Categorising people is a basic psychological process, and going against that requires a great deal of energy and a very aware perspective on one's own selection practices. It makes the selection process more intensive, because unconscious preferences and the connection felt (or not felt) with the other person have to be examined. An important first step is for employers to realise that there are – often subconscious – barriers in their recruitment and selection practices which have the effect of excluding members of migrant groups.