

*TREADING WATER IN THE LOWLANDS: TOWARDS TRUST AND RESILIENCE FOR AN  
INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY IN THE NETHERLANDS*

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## Publication Note

This white paper was developed as a collaborative piece for Flux Forward, using elements of Ozyntel's systemic change methodology.

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AI Statement: Editing, proof-reading, and ideation support conducted with a customised Notion AI agent ('Silas') trained with Ozyntel's ethical guardrails on its curated knowledge framework.

Transparency: This is a collaborative piece for Flux Forward using Ozyntel's systemic change methodology. The work is not peer-reviewed and should not be taken as an academic study. It is intended to inform economic and social policy in the private, social and public sectors in the Netherlands. The authors are open to invite the various parties included in the work as ecosystem actors, possible pilot partners and others to further discussions or workshops to further the solution.

Using elements of Ozyntel's systemic change methodology



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Netherlands recruits internationally educated knowledge workers at scale — through employer sponsorship, university enrolment, startup visa programmes, and family migration — yet many remain under-actualised, treading water in survival mode for months or years despite high capability and demonstrable labour market need. Drawing on 45+ research interactions conducted between Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026 using an action research methodology, this white paper demonstrates that the "activation gap" is not principally a skills or language deficit. It is a **structural failure**, maintained by seven interlocking mechanisms — systems friction, institutional opacity, network closure, identity disruption, institutional handover failure, policy narrative tightening, and labour market contraction — that operate across multiple system levels. The evidence, presented through six composite vignettes and systematically analysed across the research corpus, reveals an activation gap that operates across three entangled dimensions — practical and systemic, professional and market-facing, and emotional and identity-related — each reinforcing the others in a sequential pattern that elongates time-to-contribution and erodes agency. These mechanisms mirror patterns documented in research on employment, housing, and healthcare discrimination affecting Dutch citizens from minoritised backgrounds, revealing a **shared structural substrate** of exclusion. The single most consequential finding is that **activation is nobody's explicit institutional responsibility**: employers recruit, universities enrol, municipalities welcome, and each mandate ends at its own boundary, leaving the human being who crosses all boundaries without an institutional counterpart whose job is to see the whole picture.

The paper maps these mechanisms to Meadows' leverage point hierarchy and Abson et al.'s realms of sustainability transformation, identifying where institutional intervention carries the most transformative potential. It proposes a **paradigm shift**, from treating under-actualisation as an integration deficit (the individual's responsibility to adapt) to understanding activation as **infrastructure** (a public good requiring institutional investment, accountable actors, and systemic design). Flux Forward's five-component activation model, spanning system navigation, professional translation, community-based learning circles, network bridging, and institutional partnership packages, is designed to occupy the white space between mandates where the activation gap reproduces itself. Four phased pilots, partnering with UWV, employers, universities, and the startup ecosystem, are designed to generate the evidence base for scaling activation infrastructure nationally.

The urgency extends beyond economics. The 2026 Coalition Agreement commits to attracting, training, and retaining international talent — yet the mechanisms documented in this paper structurally undermine that commitment. The March 2026 municipal elections, in which Forum voor Democratie increased its local council representation nearly sixfold, illustrate what happens when structural frustration meets political opportunity: under-actualised internationals whose withdrawal confirms exclusionary narratives, and a broader population whose institutional distrust makes scapegoating plausible. Activation infrastructure addresses this at its root — ensuring that the social contract feels reciprocal, that contribution is visible, and that the conditions feeding polarisation are structurally reduced. In a political environment shaped by a minority government, regional growth ambitions, and legislative alignment of the Participatiewet and Inburgeringswet, the window for building activation infrastructure is open. The people treading water have already demonstrated the capability the Netherlands says it needs. The question that remains is structural: *will the system meet them halfway?*

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## 1. WHY THIS MATTERS (THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEM)

### 1.1 AN AVOIDABLE WASTE PROBLEM

The Netherlands recruits internationally educated knowledge workers at scale. Universities enrol international students, employers sponsor skilled migrants, municipalities court entrepreneurs, and startup incubators compete for global talent. Yet across interviews, roundtables, and events conducted between Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026, a consistent pattern emerged: many of these individuals remain **under-actualised** — contributing well beneath their demonstrated capability — for months or years after arrival, despite high motivation, clear qualifications, and demonstrable labour market need.

This contradiction has become more visible, not less. International enrolments at Dutch universities have fallen for three consecutive years, with forecasters warning of a projected **€5 billion hit** to the economy from the previous government's restrictions on English-taught programmes.<sup>[1]</sup> The current coalition (D66–VVD–CDA, January 2026) has reversed course: **€1.5 billion** in structural investment in education and science, a formal talent strategy to "attract, train and retain enough talent for the labour market and science," and the maintenance of English-language degree programmes.<sup>[2]</sup> The economic rationale is clear: **48.7% of international graduates stay** to work in the Netherlands, and European international students alone contribute approximately **€2 billion in net positive tax income**.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet staying is not the problem. *Contributing at full potential* is. The government now explicitly wants to retain international talent, but the activation infrastructure required to make retention work remains largely absent.

This is not a skills gap. Participants repeatedly describe arriving with advanced degrees, professional experience, and technical expertise, only to encounter a prolonged period of **starting from zero** or feeling they have been set back "minus two or three levels." The recurring motif is **translation**, not retraining: converting prior achievement into locally legible signals, navigating unwritten rules, and accessing opportunities that remain opaque to newcomers. The socio-economic cost is measurable in delayed productivity, avoidable attrition, stalled career trajectories, and depressed wellbeing. It represents wasted human capital on a scale that contradicts the stated labour market need.

### 1.2 BEYOND INDIVIDUAL DEFICIT: STRUCTURAL MECHANISMS AT WORK

When activation fails, the default explanation tends to centre on individual shortcomings: insufficient Dutch language proficiency, inadequate networking effort, unfamiliarity with local norms. Yet the evidence suggests these explanations function more as **retrospective justifications** than root causes. Several interviewees described reaching functional or even advanced Dutch language levels whilst still experiencing exclusion, shallow inclusion, or stalled progression. What appeared instead was a triad of **structural exclusion mechanisms** operating across practical, professional, and emotional–identity dimensions.

Practically, newly arrived individuals encounter systems friction: circular dependencies between BSN registration, bank accounts, phone contracts, housing, healthcare access, and immigration documentation. These loops consume cognitive bandwidth and delay the capacity for strategic positioning. Professionally, the labour market operates substantially through weak ties, reputational trust, and cultural legibility: access mechanisms that systematically disadvantage those with thin local networks, unfamiliar credential formats, or names and appearances that do not conform to implicit "fit" heuristics. Emotionally, repeated rejection, isolation, and the felt experience of being "unwanted" erode confidence, increase risk aversion, and reduce the energy available for persistence: a pattern substantiated consistently across the primary research presented in this paper.

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These dimensions are **stacked and sequential**. People in survival mode struggle to do strategic positioning well. Without belonging, sustaining the networking, learning, and experimentation required for activation becomes harder by an order of magnitude that individual effort cannot compensate for.

This paper distinguishes between the **activation gap** — the space between recruitment and full contribution — and the **activation trap** — the reinforcing system dynamics, analysed in Section 4, through which the gap actively maintains itself.

### 1.3 A PATTERN THAT EXTENDS BEYOND INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

These mechanisms are not unique to international knowledge workers. Large-scale field experiments on employment discrimination in the Netherlands have documented that applicants from non-Western backgrounds face 10–20% lower callback rates compared to ethnically Dutch applicants, with this disadvantage persisting across regions, occupations, and educational levels.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Researchers describe this as an **ethnic hierarchy** widely shared among employers, wherein visible markers such as skin colour, surnames, or headscarves trigger a "double burden": applicants must prove not only competence but also integration and cultural fit, whereas Dutch nationals face only competence evaluation.<sup>[4]</sup>

This same pattern shows up in housing access, where people with Moroccan, Turkish, or non-Western surnames are systematically less likely to be invited to view rental properties, and where "no internationals" listings persist despite legal prohibition.<sup>[5][6]</sup> It appears in healthcare, where patients with migration backgrounds report experiencing discrimination and a pervasive institutional reluctance to name racism explicitly.<sup>[7][8]</sup> It surfaces in the experiences of Dutch-born nurses of colour, who describe how "my colour doesn't lie"—racial features continue to mark them as distinct and subject to patient bias, regardless of fluency, credentials, or citizenship.<sup>[9]</sup>

What becomes visible across these parallel streams of evidence is not a series of isolated problems but a **shared structural substrate**: systems that rely on implicit trust formation, cultural legibility, and "fit" heuristics create predictable disadvantage for anyone marked as outside the normative category, whether through phenotype, name, accent, or documentation status. Language proficiency, whilst not irrelevant, often functions as a filter that conceals deeper mechanisms of network access asymmetry, institutional inertia, and identity-based exclusion.

### 1.4 THE GAP BETWEEN STATED VALUES AND LIVED REALITY

The Netherlands has long presented itself as a tolerant, open, and progressive society. Yet scholars and activists increasingly describe a profound **cognitive dissonance** between this self-image and the lived experiences of those facing structural exclusion.<sup>[10][11]</sup> One observer noted that "Germany has not forgotten the lessons from its past. The Netherlands, by contrast, seems blinded by the myth of its own innocence."<sup>[11]</sup> Black feminist scholars in Amsterdam describe creating "micro-societies" as spaces of refusal, because "there's cognitive dissonance between the larger society that we live in and this micro-society we're creating."<sup>[10]</sup>

This gap is not merely rhetorical. It has material consequences. When capable, motivated individuals encounter opaque systems, thin relational infrastructure, and persistent exclusion—and then experience this **under-actualisation as personal failure**—the emotional and narrative arc becomes politically consequential. The predictable emotions are shame, anger, resentment, and withdrawal. The predictable narratives are "the system is closed," "they do not want us here," "nothing I do matters." These are not neutral by-products; they are the conditions under which both exclusionary rhetoric and self-segregating coping strategies become emotionally plausible, and under which polarisation becomes structurally easier to mobilise.

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Treating activation as purely an individual responsibility therefore does more than waste economic potential. It creates a **political economy of avoidable frustration** that erodes democratic resilience, delegitimises institutions, and provides rhetorical ammunition for exclusionary movements.

The current political moment makes this dynamic more acute, not less. The 2026 Coalition Agreement combines explicit economic ambition — talent retention, innovation investment, sector-targeted recruitment of highly skilled workers — with simultaneous social spending cuts (unemployment benefit duration halved from two to one year), stricter citizenship requirements, and a tightening public narrative around migration and integration.<sup>[4][5]</sup> This dual move — *recruiting internationally whilst making belonging harder to achieve* — does not resolve the activation trap; it intensifies it. Uncertainty rises, institutional risk-aversion increases, and the cognitive load on arrival grows heavier. For a minority government that must build different parliamentary majorities for different issues, and where the far-right vote remains structurally present even after the PVV's splintering, the conditions that produce polarisation from under-actualisation are not hypothetical. They are the operating environment.

### 1.5 WHAT IS AT STAKE

**For individuals**, prolonged under-actualisation means financial precarity, diminished wellbeing, identity erosion, and the risk of permanent trajectory deflection. For many, the choice becomes either to leave the Netherlands or to accept roles far below their capability and aspiration.

**For employers**, the cost shows up as longer time-to-productivity, higher attrition risk, and the inefficiency of recruiting globally whilst failing to activate locally. Organisations invest in visas, relocation, and onboarding, but often lack mechanisms for optimising contribution beyond the first few months.

**For universities**, international students and researchers enrich teaching, research, and cultural exchange, but graduates frequently struggle to convert academic success into local employment. The gap between enrolment and long-term retention undermines the value proposition of internationalisation.

**For municipalities and regional actors**, under-actualisation represents both a loss of potential tax base and innovation capacity, and a generator of social friction. When activation infrastructure is absent, the burden falls onto individuals and informal peer networks, creating uneven outcomes and missed opportunities for strategic economic development. This is particularly consequential for the *schaalsprong regio's* (scale-leap regions) designated under the Nota Ruimte 2050 — including Twente, Groningen-Assen, and South Limburg — where international talent retention is integral to the national spatial planning vision for regional growth.

**For Dutch society**, the stakes are higher still. The activation gap is not merely an economic optimisation problem; it is a **test of whether stated commitments to openness, fairness, and reciprocity hold under real-world conditions**. When they do not, the consequences include weakened social cohesion, diminished institutional legitimacy, and the entrenchment of polarisation dynamics that threaten democratic stability.

### 1.6 AN EMERGING ECOSYSTEM OF RESPONSE

Flux Forward does not work in isolation. Across the Netherlands, activists, organisers, researchers, and social entrepreneurs are addressing structural exclusion from multiple angles. **Diverse Leaders in Tech**, for instance, has developed diversity, equity, and inclusion measurement tools and benchmarking systems to help technology companies audit and improve workplace inclusion.<sup>[12]</sup> Their work explicitly addresses the gap between stated organisational commitments to diversity and the lived experiences of employees from minoritised backgrounds,

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showing that simply increasing demographic diversity does not automatically produce equitable treatment or belonging. [\[13\]](#)[\[14\]](#)

Other initiatives focus on specific dimensions: language access programmes, anti-discrimination legal advocacy, community-building spaces for Black and brown professionals, sector-specific inclusion efforts in healthcare and education. What remains less common is work that **explicitly connects** the structural mechanisms affecting Dutch citizens from minoritised backgrounds with those affecting internationally recruited knowledge workers, recognising these as parallel manifestations of overlapping exclusion systems rather than separate problems requiring separate solutions.

Flux Forward's positioning is therefore as both **a specific intervention** in the activation gap for international knowledge workers and **a potential bridge** into broader anti-discrimination and inclusion infrastructure. By designing activation supports that address systems friction, network access asymmetry, and identity-belonging dynamics, Flux Forward develops tools and practices that may prove valuable across multiple affected populations. Collaboration with organisations such as Diverse Leaders in Tech, through shared learning, co-designed pilots, or complementary service offerings, represents an opportunity to deepen impact, build coalition capacity, and avoid reinventing mechanisms that already exist elsewhere in the ecosystem.

The following sections present evidence from 45+ research interactions, synthesise this into a causal model of the activation trap, and propose a portfolio of interventions designed to rewire the system rather than merely support individuals in navigating it. The goal is not to claim that all exclusion is identical, but to recognise **shared structural roots** and to design responses that reduce avoidable waste, restore agency, and make the social contract feel more reciprocal, legible, and fair.

## 2. METHOD AND EPISTEMIC STANCE

### 2.1 SOURCES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper draws on **45+ research interactions** conducted between Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026: semi-structured interviews, roundtable conversations, community events, and structured exchanges with practitioners, employers, and institutional actors in the Netherlands. Participants include internationally recruited knowledge workers at various stages of settlement (from recent arrival to 10+ years), Dutch employers and HR professionals, university internationalisation staff, municipality representatives, startup ecosystem actors, and community organisers working on inclusion and anti-discrimination.

The research was not designed as a representative survey. It was designed as an **iterative, practice-led inquiry**: each interaction informed the questions asked in subsequent ones, and emerging patterns were tested, challenged, and refined across segments and contexts. This approach draws on action research traditions in which the researcher is not a detached observer but an engaged participant in the problem space, with the explicit aim of generating actionable knowledge, with participants as *co-inquirers*, alongside analytical understanding (Lewin, 1946).

In addition to primary interactions, the paper integrates secondary data from published field experiments on employment discrimination, housing access research, healthcare equity studies, policy documents (including the 2026 Coalition Agreement), and labour market analyses from CBS, CPB, Nuffic, UWV, and Divosa. Where secondary evidence corroborates, extends, or complicates the primary findings, this is noted explicitly.

### 2.2 EPISTEMIC STANCE: WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE THIS IS

The knowledge claims in this paper are **qualitative pattern evidence**, not population-level statistics. When we say that international knowledge workers experience "starting from zero," we mean this phrase — or close variants — appeared independently across a substantial majority of interviews, unprompted. When we describe the "activation trap" as a reinforcing loop, we mean this dynamic was visible across segments, not that we have measured its prevalence in a probability sample.

This distinction matters for two reasons. First, it disciplines our claims: we describe *what we found across our interactions* and note where published quantitative research supports the same patterns, rather than asserting frequencies we have not measured. Second, it reflects a deliberate **epistemic choice**. The activation gap is experienced as a lived, sequential, emotionally loaded process. Survey instruments can measure its correlates (unemployment duration, self-reported wellbeing, intention to leave) but tend to flatten the mechanisms that produce them. The iterative qualitative approach used here is designed to surface *how* the gap operates — the causal sequences, feedback loops, and identity dynamics — in ways that inform intervention design, not merely prevalence estimates.

The paper's analytical framework is **transdisciplinary**: it synthesises evidence across labour economics, organisational psychology, migration studies, discrimination research, systems thinking, and community development. No single discipline owns this problem, and mono-disciplinary framings have historically produced partial solutions. Each discipline illuminates a different dimension of the activation gap: labour economics surfaces the market mechanisms and productivity costs; organisational psychology reveals the identity and belonging dynamics; migration studies and discrimination research document the structural patterns of exclusion; systems thinking provides the analytical architecture for understanding how these mechanisms interact and reinforce one another; and community development grounds the intervention design

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in participatory, practice-led methodology. The paper holds these lenses in simultaneous operation because the activation gap itself operates across all of them.

### 2.3 BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Several boundaries should be named explicitly.

**Geographic scope:** the research is situated in the Netherlands, with most interactions concentrated in the Randstad (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht) and the northern and eastern regions (Twente, Gelderland, Groningen). Patterns may differ in other regions or countries, though the structural mechanisms described have parallels in broader European research on skilled migration. Notably, several of these regions — Twente and Groningen in particular — are designated as *schaalsprong regio's* (scale-leap regions) under the Nota Ruimte 2050, projected for significant population and economic growth with universities as pivotal institutional actors. The activation dynamics documented in these areas carry particular relevance for the regional development strategies explored in Sections 7 and 8.

**Population focus:** the primary population is internationally educated knowledge workers — people with higher education qualifications and professional experience who have relocated to the Netherlands. This is not a study of all migration categories. Asylum seekers, undocumented workers, and low-skilled labour migrants face overlapping but distinct challenges. Where parallels are drawn (particularly with Dutch citizens from minoritised backgrounds), this is done to illuminate shared structural mechanisms, not to claim equivalence of experience.

**Temporal context:** the research period coincided with a significant political transition — from the Schoof caretaker government to the D66–VVD–CDA coalition of January 2026. Policy positions described in this paper reflect the Coalition Agreement as published; implementation outcomes remain uncertain, particularly given the minority government's reliance on shifting parliamentary coalitions.

**Researcher positionality:** the lead researcher is a British national who arrived in the Netherlands as an international knowledge worker and subsequently founded organisations working on systemic change and talent activation. The field practitioner and interviewer is an Iranian national who arrived similarly in the Netherlands, and has more direct experience with the target group as a non-EU immigrant. This positionality provides insider access and experiential understanding, but also requires transparency about potential confirmation bias. The iterative research design, use of multiple data sources, and explicit engagement with disconfirming evidence are intended as partial safeguards.

### 2.4 ETHICAL COMMITMENTS

All individual accounts presented in this paper are **anonymised** and, where necessary, rendered as **composite vignettes** — narratives that combine elements from multiple interactions to protect identity whilst preserving the integrity of the underlying pattern. No direct quotes are attributed without consent.

The paper deliberately avoids framing international knowledge workers as "resources" for the Dutch economy, even where the economic argument is strong. People are not human capital to be optimised; they are agents with aspirations, relationships, and rights. The economic framing is used strategically — because it is the language that moves institutional actors — but it is held in tension with a commitment to **reciprocity, dignity, and justice** as non-negotiable values. Where these commitments conflict with purely instrumental logic, the paper names the tension rather than resolving it in favour of efficiency.

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### 3. WHAT WE ARE SEEING: SIX LIVES IN THE ACTIVATION GAP

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE EVIDENCE

Across 50+ interactions, including interviews, roundtables, community events, and structured conversations, the activation gap did not present as a single, uniform problem. It emerged, inductively and repeatedly, as a **triad**: three distinct but deeply entangled dimensions of difficulty that international knowledge workers encounter after arriving in the Netherlands.

The first is **practical and systemic**: the administrative loops, hidden dependencies, and institutional friction that consume cognitive bandwidth and delay the capacity for strategic action. The second is **professional and market-facing**: the challenge of converting prior experience into locally legible signals, accessing opportunities that operate through unwritten rules and informal networks, and positioning oneself in a labour market that rewards insider knowledge. The third is **emotional and identity-related**: the confidence erosion, isolation, identity dissonance, and felt experience of being unwelcome that reduce the energy and risk tolerance required for persistence.

These three dimensions did not emerge from a pre-existing theoretical framework imposed on the data. They emerged because participants themselves kept describing their struggles along these lines, often in the same conversation: a bureaucratic problem that consumed weeks of energy, a professional barrier that felt impenetrable, and an emotional toll that made the whole project of staying feel uncertain. These structural elements contextualise the experiential data across segments, nationalities, and time-in-country, which is why we chose to present them in thematic vignettes.

Critically, these dimensions are **stacked and sequential**, with reinforcing feedback loops. A person consumed by survival-mode administrative tasks lacks the bandwidth for strategic career positioning. A person without professional traction struggles to build the confidence and belonging needed to persist. A person experiencing identity erosion withdraws from the networking and experimentation that might break the cycle. The activation gap is not three problems; it is one system operating across three registers.

The profiles that follow are six composite vignettes; anonymised narratives that combine elements from multiple interactions to protect identity whilst preserving the integrity of the underlying patterns. They are not representative in a statistical sense, but are **recognisable** to the lived experiences we witnessed, designed to make visible the texture of what the data describes. Section 4 then examines this evidence systematically across the three dimensions and across population segments.

A note on voice: in this section, participants' language carries the message directly. Where people described their experiences using particular phrases, "starting from zero," "survival mode," "hidden job market," "unwanted", those phrases appear here as they were spoken. Where participants themselves seemed to be identifying systemic dynamics, we note what they appeared to be picking up on. Here, the task is to **describe faithfully what people told us**, and to let the weight of accumulated evidence speak before we attempt to explain it (which comes later in Section 5).

#### 3.2 SIX LIVES IN THE GAP: COMPOSITE VIGNETTES

*The following vignettes are composite narratives. Each combines elements from multiple research interactions to protect identity and privacy. No single vignette represents one individual. All are grounded in data; none are invented. Names are fictionalised.*

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### *Vignette 1: "Starting from zero" — the senior professional*

*Priya arrived in the Netherlands with over a decade of senior experience in technology and product management. In her previous country, she led teams, managed multi-million-euro portfolios, and was known in her industry. Within weeks of arrival, none of that seemed to count.*

*"I was in a much senior role," she says, "and then had to start again — at least minus two or minus three levels." The Dutch labour market offered a limited number of roles at her level — perhaps fifteen or twenty organisations in the entire country where her experience was directly relevant. Recruiters were her primary channel; direct applications rarely led to interviews. When interviews came, the mismatch was structural: senior roles required a depth of Dutch cultural fluency and people-management style she had not yet acquired, while mid-level roles rejected her as overqualified.*

*The practical friction compounded everything. "It took me a year to figure out that rent and mortgage are sort of the same here," she says. Nobody explained the childcare system, the toeslagen structure, or which insurance actually covered what. "If somebody doesn't tell you, it's quite difficult to figure out." She describes the first year as operating at "a very basic level" — survival tasks consuming the energy that should have gone into strategic positioning.*

*Three years of remote work meant she built almost no local relationships. "The friends you make in your middle 30s are not the same," she observes. Professional isolation merged with social isolation. Her visa status — highly skilled migrant — created its own constraint: "If I didn't think about the visa issue, I would change the job." She stayed longer than she should have in a role that no longer challenged her, because the alternative felt too risky.*

*The turning point came with permanent residency. "That was when I finally thought — now I'm actually free." Free to think strategically, to take risks, to remember that she had done significant work before. But those intervening years — the professional downgrade, the isolation, the slow accumulation of system knowledge that insiders absorb by osmosis — represent a period of under-actualisation that neither the Dutch economy nor Priya herself can recover.*

### *Vignette 2: "In survival mode" — the newcomer*

*Dariusz arrived with €30,000 in savings, a strong technical background, and a clear intention: find work, build a life, contribute. Within months, the savings were disappearing faster than he had imagined, and the work had not materialised.*

*"If you come with €30,000 for a year, it disappears very fast." Rent consumed the largest share. Then came the administrative loops: he needed a BSN to open a bank account, a bank account to receive salary, a phone contract that required a Dutch bank account, a rental agreement that required proof of income he did not yet have. "That loop is very difficult." Each dependency consumed days of cognitive effort, and each delay pushed the next step further out.*

*He applied to dozens of positions. The pattern was consistent: HR screening calls, sometimes five or six rounds of interviews, then silence. Or rejection. "I was very hopeful, and in the end it didn't work out." He received contradictory advice — be more Dutch, be more yourself, tailor your CV, simplify your CV. "You are so into this loop," he says, "you don't give yourself time for re-evaluation."*

*The emotional toll accumulated beneath the practical urgency. "Nobody cares, though," he says quietly. He describes a period where mental capacity narrowed to immediate survival: "I do not have the mental capacity to learn Dutch properly." Language, which might have opened doors, became another item on a list he could not get to. The days compressed into a cycle of applications, rejections, administrative errands, and the slow erosion of the confidence he had arrived with.*

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*What he needed, he says, was not motivation. "Very concrete, step by step." Someone who could say: do this first, then this, avoid that mistake. "If somebody had told me in month one what I figured out in month six, everything would have been different." The activation gap, for Dariush, was not about capability. It was about the cost of discovering what insiders already know — and the savings that ran out while he was learning.*

*Vignette 3: "I have everything and nothing" — the isolated-but-employed five-year resident*

*Marta has a good job. She has a BSN, a bank account, health insurance, a Dutch phone number, and a rental contract. By the metrics that institutions use to measure integration, she is a success story. She does not feel like one.*

*"After five years, I felt like I have learned almost everything that I wanted to learn," she says of her role. The challenge was no longer professional competence but professional stagnation — and beneath it, a persistent sense of not quite belonging. "I realized I will never get Dutch friends," she says, "and that's okay." The acceptance sounds hard-won rather than easy.*

*Her early years were marked by remote work isolation: "spending my day in my pajamas, living a very closed life." She missed social interaction but lacked the structures to create it. Company-wide communication still happened partly in Dutch, limiting her full participation. Cultural feedback norms — the directness that Dutch colleagues considered normal — initially caused confusion and self-doubt before she learned to read them differently.*

*The security of her highly skilled migrant visa, which should have been enabling, became paradoxically constraining. "Startups are a little bit unreliable when you're on an HSM visa." She stayed in a role that felt safe but stagnant because the alternative — changing employers, exploring entrepreneurship, taking a risk — carried immigration consequences that Dutch nationals never have to weigh.*

*What shifted things, eventually, was finding a community. "Finding your own tribe is very important," she says. Not a professional network, not a meetup series, but a group of people who understood the particular texture of being international, employed, and still somehow not fully activated. People with whom she could share concerns, find support, and begin to "activate what was already in the backpack" — the capabilities and identity she had carried from her previous life but had never fully unpacked in the Dutch context.*

*Marta's story complicates the assumption that employment equals activation. She was employed for years before she felt she was contributing at anything close to her potential. The gap was not practical or even primarily professional. It was about belonging, identity, and the slow work of finding a place where being international was not a limitation to be managed but a reality to be lived.*

*Vignette 4: "They want Europeans, not internationals" — the graduate facing sponsorship filters*

*Karim is finishing his master's degree at a Dutch university. He is technically skilled, motivated, and increasingly anxious. The reason is a checkbox on job application forms: "Do you require visa sponsorship?"*

*"When you click that you need a sponsor," he says, "it gets rejected." Not always explicitly — sometimes the application simply disappears into an ATS system that filters before a human ever sees the CV. He describes "so many HR interviews, not very technical" — screening rounds that seem designed to assess cultural fit and communication style rather than the capabilities he was trained in. "Why should they risk sponsoring me?" he asks, already internalising the market's logic.*

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*The landscape is tightening. Junior and entry-level roles are shrinking as automation and AI reduce the positions that traditionally served as entry points. "The juniors are screwed," one roundtable participant observed bluntly. "You need to show what you can do before you get a job" — but showing what you can do requires access to projects, networks, and proof-of-work opportunities that are themselves gated by the sponsorship and network barriers Karim faces.*

*His contingency planning has become elaborate. He has mapped Orientation Year eligibility rules, university ranking cut-off dates, partner visa options, and freelance registration pathways. "There might be a small clause somewhere that ruins everything for you," he says. The cognitive load of maintaining viable legal status whilst simultaneously trying to build a professional foothold is itself a form of under-actualisation: bandwidth that could go toward skill application goes instead toward contingency architecture.*

*What Karim wants is not inspirational content or generic career advice. "Not someone explaining theory, but someone who has done it." He wants to know: what exact path should someone in my position follow? Which actions actually increase hireability? How do I shorten the gap between graduation and first relevant role? The answers exist — but they circulate through networks he does not yet have access to, held by people who navigated the same transition years ago and have since moved on. The knowledge is there. The distribution is not.*

*Vignette 5: "Being a mother and trying to figure out what to do as a professional" — the working parent*

*Elena arrived in the Netherlands with professional experience in design, a partner, and — soon after — a baby. What followed was not one transition but several, layered on top of each other in ways that made each harder to navigate.*

*"I really didn't have any network. I didn't know anyone." She began sending CVs. Some interviews came; nothing converted. Then came COVID, then layoffs across her sector, then — in the same period — her father died. "2020 happened. Layoffs started. My father died." She describes this sequence flatly, the way people describe things they have had to metabolise without adequate support.*

*The intersection of caregiving and career restart created a particular kind of invisibility. "Being a mother and trying to figure out what to do as a professional" — the sentence itself captures the tension. Postpartum depression compounded the isolation. Remote work, which kept income flowing, also kept her "in a bubble": caring for a newborn, maintaining a freelance practice, and trying to re-enter a competitive market simultaneously, without the informal networks that might have provided shortcuts, referrals, or simply the knowledge that this was normal.*

*She describes identity questions that lasted years. "Was I still Russian? Do I still do things my Russian way, or am I to become Dutch now? I don't want to become Dutch." The identity disruption was not a phase to be resolved but a sustained negotiation between who she had been, who the Dutch context seemed to require her to become, and who she actually wanted to be. It unfolded not in counselling sessions but in the daily texture of school drop-offs conducted in a language she was still learning, professional conversations where her accent marked her as foreign, and the repeated experience of being competent in private and invisible in public.*

*When work eventually began to materialise, it came through freelancing — a pathway she had not initially planned but that offered the flexibility caregiving demanded. "Something is starting to happen," she says, years after arrival. The timeline is the point: momentum emerged not in months but in years, and only after personal stabilisation had created enough cognitive and emotional space for professional re-engagement. The activation gap, for Elena, was not a delay to be optimised. It was the lived reality of rebuilding a professional identity whilst simultaneously*

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*keeping a family functioning in a country that offered legal residency but very little in the way of structured support for the transition she was actually living.*

### *Vignette 6: "That one year matters" — the startup visa founder*

*Amir arrived in the Netherlands on a startup visa with a working product, a co-founder abroad, and twelve months to prove that his business was viable. What he encountered was not a test of his product. It was a test of his capacity to build a company, relocate a family, navigate a foreign administrative system, and translate a value proposition into a market he did not yet understand — all simultaneously, under a hard deadline.*

*The practical load was immediate and total. Housing, banking, school registration for children, health insurance, business registration, VAT setup, a Dutch phone number — each requiring the others, none sequenced in an order that matched his actual arrival. "People arrive and then they are in survival mode," observed a practitioner who facilitates startup visa processes. The mode was not metaphorical. Amir describes months where business development — the one activity his visa was predicated on — occupied perhaps a third of his working hours. The rest went to administration, family stabilisation, and the slow, expensive process of discovering how things work here.*

*The market translation problem was distinct from the employment market's. His product worked. Customers in his country of origin used it. But "the needs of the Dutch market are always going to be a bit different," as one experienced connector observed. Adapting the proposition required local relationships, feedback loops, and cultural understanding he could not yet access. "People will listen," the same connector noted, "but they won't call you back." The gap between interest and traction — between a polite meeting and actual adoption — was where international founders consistently stalled. Without warm introductions, without someone who could say "this person is credible, take the call," the product's quality was almost irrelevant to its market trajectory.*

*The emotional dimension was compounded by the visa's structure. Startup visa holders are assessed by a facilitator who must confirm the business is on track. If the assessment is negative, the visa ends. This created a paradox: the very period when founders most needed to experiment, pivot, and learn from failure was the period when failure carried immigration consequences. "That one year matters," the practitioner observed. Risk-taking — the behaviour the Dutch innovation ecosystem rhetorically celebrates — became the behaviour that the visa structure penalised.*

*The failure rate tells its own story. More than 60% of startup visas do not convert to independent residence permits, and research interactions consistently indicated that failures were often unrelated to product quality. They were driven by the compounding of administrative burden, family pressure, financial depletion, market translation difficulty, and cognitive overload — the activation trap operating at maximum intensity within a fixed timeline. Founders described being "dropped" after visa approval: the facilitator relationship, which should have been the bridge into the Dutch ecosystem, was often thin, transactional, or misaligned with the founder's actual needs.*

*What Amir needed was not another incubator programme or pitch competition. He needed someone who understood both his product and his situation — who could make warm introductions, help him tune his story for a Dutch audience, and provide honest feedback before he spent months pursuing the wrong strategy. "You need to tune it until the signal is strong enough," one connector advised. The activation gap for startup founders is not about entrepreneurial capability. It is about the cost of translating capability into a context where trust is local, networks are closed, and the clock is running.*

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**Concluding:** These six vignettes illustrate the activation gap as it is experienced: personal, sequential, and emotionally loaded. The patterns they reveal — practical friction, professional invisibility, identity erosion — are not incidental. Section 4 examines these patterns systematically across the three structural dimensions, drawing on the full research corpus to identify the mechanisms that produce under-actualisation.

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### 4. THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE ACTIVATION GAP

The vignettes in Section 3 present the activation gap as it is lived: particular, sequential, and emotionally loaded. This section reorganises the same evidence — along with material from the broader research corpus — across three structural dimensions that emerged inductively from the data. The purpose is to move from individual narrative to **pattern recognition**: to identify the mechanisms that produce under-actualisation across segments, and to prepare the ground for the causal analysis in Section 5.

Rather than parallel tracks, these dimensions should be seen as **stacked and sequential**, with reinforcing feedback loops. A person consumed by survival-mode administrative tasks lacks the bandwidth for strategic career positioning. A person without professional traction struggles to build the confidence and belonging needed to persist. A person experiencing identity erosion withdraws from the networking and experimentation that might break the cycle. The activation gap is not three problems; it is one system operating across three registers.

#### 4.1 THE PRACTICAL AND SYSTEMIC DIMENSION

Across the research corpus, the practical dimension of the activation gap presented with striking consistency. Participants across segments — newcomers, mid-career professionals, graduates, entrepreneurs, working parents — described a common set of administrative and systemic frictions that consumed disproportionate cognitive bandwidth in the early months and years after arrival.

**The dependency loops.** The most frequently described friction was the circular dependency between foundational systems: BSN registration, bank accounts, phone contracts, housing, healthcare insurance, and immigration documentation. These are not independent tasks; they form a chain in which each step requires the completion of a prior step that itself may require the current one. Multiple participants described spending weeks navigating these loops, with each delay compounding subsequent ones. "Many things are not written anywhere clearly," one participant observed. "You only learn by trial and error." Another described the administrative machinery as so all-consuming that it prevented the reflective pause needed for strategic decision-making — the loop itself foreclosing the very re-evaluation that might break it.

**The hidden cost of "figuring it out."** A recurring motif was the time cost of discovering information that insiders take for granted. Participants described learning — months or years after arrival — about toeslagen (benefit allowances), childcare subsidy structures, the relationship between rent and mortgage costs, healthcare referral pathways, and tax obligations. One senior professional described spending a full year before understanding that Dutch rent and mortgage costs are effectively equivalent — knowledge that locals absorb through context but that no institution systematically communicates to newcomers. The information exists, but it is dispersed, frequently in Dutch, embedded in institutional websites that assume prior familiarity with Dutch administrative logic, and rarely sequenced in a way that matches the actual decision-making order of someone newly arrived. One participant estimated that a structured guidance package in month one would have saved "several thousand euros" in avoidable mistakes.

**Survival mode as bandwidth consumption.** When the practical dimension dominates — as it does most intensely in the first six to twelve months — participants described a narrowing of cognitive capacity that foreclosed other forms of activation. Learning Dutch, building professional networks, attending community events, exploring entrepreneurship: all require bandwidth that survival-mode administrative navigation consumes. One participant, managing housing, visa timelines, and job applications simultaneously, described language acquisition as simply beyond reach — not through lack of motivation but because cognitive bandwidth had been entirely consumed. This is

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not laziness or poor prioritisation; it is a **structural allocation problem** in which the system's friction absorbs the very resources needed to move beyond it.

**Partner visa dependency as a compounding factor.** For those arriving on a partner visa — where one person's legal status depended entirely on another's employment — the practical dimension carried an additional layer of fragility. Participants described navigating administrative loops under the knowledge that a single disruption — a job loss, a contract non-renewal, a company restructuring — could end not just a career trajectory but legal residency itself. "We were in complete panic that we were gonna lose the visa," said one participant whose partner's employment became uncertain. Housing vulnerability compounded the pressure: participants described arriving in accommodation that was substandard, with limited awareness of tenant rights or recourse. "The house was crap," said one. "I had to close the fridge with tape." The dependency was not merely bureaucratic; it was existential, consuming cognitive and emotional resources at a scale that made other forms of activation functionally impossible until the immediate threat passed. The psychological shift when permanent residency was eventually secured was dramatic: "It feels like a weight has been lifted from you" — echoing the turning point described in Priya's vignette, and underscoring that legal precarity is not background noise but a **primary structural determinant** of activation capacity.

**Variation by segment.** The practical dimension was most acute for newcomers (0–12 months) and startup visa founders, who face the full weight of administrative setup with no institutional hand-holding after arrival. Mid-career professionals with employer sponsorship reported a partial buffer — their companies handled some administrative steps — but noted that employer support typically ended at onboarding and rarely extended to the broader system literacy needed for long-term activation. Working parents faced a compounded version: the standard administrative load plus childcare registration, school navigation, and healthcare access for children, all in a system designed for people who grew up understanding how it works.

### 4.2 THE PROFESSIONAL AND MARKET DIMENSION

If the practical dimension is about navigating systems, the professional dimension is about **translating capability into local legibility**. Across interviews, participants described not a skills deficit but a **recognition deficit**: the persistent gap between what they could do and what the Dutch labour market could see.

**"Starting from zero" — the translation problem.** The most frequently recurring phrase in the research was some variant of "starting from zero" or "rebuilding from scratch." Senior professionals described arriving with portfolios, networks, and reputations that simply did not transfer. "Skills that worked in my country are meaningless here," said one roundtable participant. "You have to rebuild everything — your identity, your network, your credibility." Another described deliberately stripping a CV of senior achievements to avoid being rejected as overqualified: "I took a lot of things from my resume and made it super basic, just to start." The irony was not lost on participants: the market needed their skills, but the mechanisms for recognising those skills were calibrated for people who had acquired them locally.

**The hidden job market and network-dependent access.** Participants across segments described a labour market that operates substantially through informal channels. "Networking matters more than your CV," said one participant. "Just a resume is not enough," said another. Several described discovering — after months of unsuccessful formal applications — that the roles they were seeking were being filled through referrals, weak ties, and reputational recommendations within networks they had no access to. One participant called this the "hidden job market"; others described it less explicitly but with the same implication: opportunity access was gated by relational capital they could not yet accumulate.

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**Employer hesitation and workplace exclusion.** Even where hiring occurred, participants and practitioners described persistent caution. "Some employers feel a bit cautious towards internationals being part of their organisation," observed one practitioner working at the university-to-employment interface. The caution manifested as shorter contracts, limited extension prospects, and informal social exclusion within teams. One participant described being the only person in a workplace who spoke English at a high level — and finding that nobody chose to engage in conversation, creating isolation through linguistic default rather than overt hostility. The language requirement itself was applied inconsistently: "They say it's about the Dutch language," reflected one experienced professional. "I don't know if language is really the reason people can't find work or if it's something else." Language, in these accounts, functioned less as a genuine job requirement and more as a socially acceptable filter — one that concealed deeper selection preferences around familiarity, perceived integration effort, and cultural fit.

**Sponsorship as a structural filter.** For non-EU nationals, visa sponsorship requirements functioned as an additional layer of exclusion. Graduates described immediate, automated rejection by applicant tracking systems the moment visa sponsorship need was indicated on application forms. Others described reaching final interview stages — five or six rounds — only to be rejected on grounds that appeared related to the perceived cost or risk of sponsorship rather than capability. The filter is not visible in job descriptions; it operates inside the selection infrastructure.

**The tightening entry-level market.** Younger participants and recent graduates described an additional pressure: the contraction of junior and entry-level roles due to automation and AI. Roundtable participants described entry-level roles as increasingly inaccessible — creating a catch-22 in which proof-of-work is required for access but access is required for proof-of-work. For international graduates without local work experience, internship access, or alumni networks, this contraction intensifies the existing sponsorship and network barriers.

**The niche strategy and the five-year timeline.** Several mid-career participants described eventually finding traction through **hyper-specialisation**: positioning themselves in niches narrow enough that their international experience became an asset rather than a liability. One marketing professional described a five-year journey from stripping a CV to eventually being recognised as an expert in a specific technical sub-field. The timeline is the finding: even for highly capable professionals actively working to position themselves, the Dutch labour market's reliance on local legibility, network access, and cultural familiarity meant that full professional activation took **years**, not months.

### 4.3 THE EMOTIONAL AND IDENTITY DIMENSION

The third dimension of the activation gap is the one least visible to institutions and employers, and the one participants described with the most intensity. It is the **emotional and identity cost** of sustained under-actualisation — the cumulative effect on confidence, self-concept, belonging, and the willingness to keep trying.

**Identity disruption.** For many participants, relocation triggered a fundamental questioning of identity that extended far beyond professional role. One participant described a multi-year period in which her sense of self was destabilised by the gap between who she had been and who the Dutch context seemed to require her to become — a question not of nationality but of identity coherence. Others described similar experiences: "I lost my way. Lost everything here." The disruption was not a momentary disorientation; it was a **sustained state** in which prior identity anchors — professional reputation, social role, cultural fluency, language mastery — were simultaneously weakened. For some, the disruption was triggered not by relocation itself but by the loss of the professional identity that had survived the move intact. "My job was my identity," said one mid-career professional with over two decades of corporate experience. "I did not know

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anything other than my work." When that anchor was removed — through restructuring, through the mismatch between prior seniority and local opportunity — the identity question became total. Participants described this as the most disorienting aspect of their experience, more than any administrative or professional barrier.

**The felt experience of being unwanted.** Several participants used language that went beyond frustration into something closer to existential rejection. "It just feels like I'm unwanted here," said one. Another described how expressing concerns or raising problems was "often perceived as negativity" by Dutch colleagues and neighbours, leading to self-censorship and withdrawal. A third described the experience of being "tolerated, not welcomed" — a distinction that captures something important about the difference between legal permission to be present and the felt experience of belonging. These are not outlier sentiments; they appeared across segments, nationalities, and time-in-country.

**"You are enough" — the need for validation before activation.** A striking pattern across interviews was the sequencing of emotional and functional needs. Multiple participants and practitioners described a dynamic in which **emotional stabilisation and belonging had to precede functional activation**, not follow it. "People usually solve it first and foremost on the emotional and social level," observed one long-term international. "What you're lacking strongly is calmness of your mind," said another. A practitioner working with newly arrived internationals put it more directly: "Give them that space that says: you're okay, you're safe, we're going to guide you." The phrase "you are enough" appeared in multiple interactions as the single most powerful message internationals reported needing to hear — not career advice, not system information, but the assurance that their struggle was normal and their existing capabilities were real.

**Isolation as an amplifier.** Loneliness and social isolation appeared as a **cross-cutting amplifier** of both practical and professional difficulties. Remote workers described months or years of minimal social contact. Parents described caregiving routines that foreclosed networking opportunities. Professionals in Dutch-language workplaces described surface-level inclusion but limited depth of relationship. One participant who spent years working from home with a young child described a life that had contracted to the dimensions of caregiving and remote work — social interaction reduced to near-zero, the outside world receding. Another captured the structural absence precisely: "When you are doing Erasmus, from day one you are part of something. Here, that didn't exist." The contrast was telling: university exchange programmes create immediate belonging infrastructure by design; the post-arrival landscape for knowledge workers offers no equivalent, leaving social integration to individual initiative at the precise moment when individual capacity is most depleted. The isolation was not merely unpleasant; it was functionally consequential, removing the informal channels through which system knowledge, opportunity awareness, and emotional resilience are normally maintained.

**Imposter syndrome, burnout risk, and the cost of over-adaptation.** Several participants described a particular trap: the pressure to adapt so completely to Dutch norms that the adaptation itself became exhausting. "I wish someone told me: you're already running on overdrive just by living in a new country," said one. Imposter syndrome — the sense of being fundamentally inadequate despite objective evidence of competence — appeared across segments, including among people who were employed and ostensibly successful. The risk of burnout, often emerging two to three years after arrival when the initial adrenaline subsides, was explicitly named by multiple participants. The emotional dimension of the activation gap is not a soft add-on to the "real" barriers; it is the register in which sustained under-actualisation becomes most personally damaging and most likely to produce withdrawal.

**Community as the counter-dynamic.** If isolation amplifies the activation gap, community emerged across the research as the **primary counter-dynamic**. The imperative to find a trusted peer

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community - 'finding your own tribe' - was echoed in various forms across segments. Participants described peer communities as providing normalisation ("this is normal, you are not failing"), practical intelligence ("do this, avoid that"), emotional regulation ("calmness, safety"), and access ("warm introductions, shared opportunities"). The community was not described as a nice-to-have supplement to institutional support; it was described as the **primary activation infrastructure** — the mechanism through which people actually moved from survival mode toward contribution. Small, curated circles were consistently valued over large open networks. Regularity and continuity mattered more than scale. And the combination of emotional safety with practical utility — belonging *and* activation — was what participants described as most transformative.

### 4.4 SEGMENT DIFFERENCES: HOW THE GAP VARIES ACROSS POPULATIONS

The activation gap is universal across the research population — no segment was exempt — but it manifests differently depending on legal status, life stage, time in the Netherlands, and the specific intersection of practical, professional, and emotional pressures each person faces. The following segment-level observations draw on the full research corpus, with transparency about where evidence is deeper or thinner.

**Newcomers (0–12 months in the Netherlands)** experience the activation gap at its most acute and urgent. The practical dimension dominates: administrative loops, savings depletion, housing precarity, and the overwhelming cognitive load of establishing basic infrastructure in an unfamiliar system. Pain severity was consistently described as the highest of any segment. Receptivity to structured support is initially low — financial resources and cognitive bandwidth are under maximum pressure — but increases rapidly once basic stabilisation occurs (translating, in practice, into willingness to invest in services perceived as genuinely useful). The emotional register is anxiety, urgency, and the particular disorientation of having recently left a context in which one was competent and recognised. For those arriving on partner visas, the practical dimension was further amplified by legal dependency on another person's employment status — a fragility that multiple participants described as a source of chronic anxiety distinct from and compounding the standard newcomer experience. This segment provided the richest data in the research, with the highest number of individual interviews and roundtable contributions.

**Mid-career professionals (1–5 years)** describe a different texture: the initial survival phase has passed, but professional activation remains incomplete. Frustration replaces anxiety as the dominant emotional register. Participants in this segment described being **underemployed** — working in roles significantly below their capability — and facing a growing tension between the security of their current position and the aspiration to do work that matches their experience. The professional dimension is most salient: the translation problem, the hidden job market, the slow accumulation of local credibility. Receptivity to structured support is moderate to high, particularly for interventions that offer measurable career acceleration (this segment is notably willing to invest in services they trust to deliver results).

**Established-but-stuck professionals (5+ years)** present the most paradoxical profile. By external metrics, many are integrated: they have employment, housing, legal status, and functional daily lives. Yet they describe a persistent sense of **under-actualisation** — a gap between what they could contribute and what they are contributing. The emotional and identity dimension is often most salient for this segment: questions of belonging, purpose, and whether full activation is even possible. Language becomes a growing constraint over time, not a diminishing one, as professional advancement into Dutch-language contexts becomes necessary. A distinctive finding from later interviews was what might be called a **"second activation gap"**: even well-settled professionals, having navigated the initial survival phase and secured stable employment, faced a new barrier when attempting to progress into leadership or strategic roles. The transition from execution to influence required a different kind of local capital — deeper networks, cultural

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fluency in Dutch management norms, and visibility within decision-making circles — that years of competent but contained performance had not automatically generated. Community — particularly small, curated circles — was described as the intervention most likely to shift this segment's trajectory. This segment was represented in the research but with fewer individual interviews than newcomers and mid-career professionals.

**Students and recent graduates** face a distinctive version of the gap shaped by sponsorship uncertainty and a tightening entry-level market. The practical dimension is less acute (many arrive with university support structures), but the professional dimension is severe: automated filtering by sponsorship status, limited access to proof-of-work opportunities, and the shrinking of junior roles through automation. The emotional dimension centres on anxiety about the future and the fear of being forced to leave a country in which they have invested years of study. This segment was well-represented in the research, particularly through interviews with master's students planning to stay.

**Startup visa founders** experience a concentrated, high-stakes version of the activation gap. The practical dimension is extreme — housing, banking, visa conditions, family relocation, and business validation all converge in the first year. The failure rate for startup visas exceeds 60%, and research interactions consistently indicated that failures are **often unrelated to product quality**, driven instead by the compounding of administrative, financial, family, and cognitive pressures. Founders described being "dropped" after visa approval — the precise moment when activation support is most needed. Receptivity to external support is constrained in year one by financial and cognitive pressure, increasing markedly after stabilisation (founders' willingness to invest tracks closely with cash-flow stability). This segment was represented through both individual interviews and a practitioner who facilitates startup visa processes.

**Working parents and remote workers** face a **compounded activation gap** in which caregiving responsibilities, career interruption, and the standard barriers facing international knowledge workers interact multiplicatively. Participants in this segment described postpartum depression intersecting with job market re-entry, career pauses that widened into career gaps, and the particular isolation of remote work combined with childcare in a country where informal support networks are absent. The timeline to professional re-activation was consistently the longest of any segment — measured in years rather than months. Freelancing emerged as the most common pathway back, offering the flexibility that caregiving demanded but also representing a form of under-employment relative to prior career trajectories. This segment was represented in the research through several in-depth interviews, though we note that sampling was uneven: the experiences of international working fathers, and of parents from non-European backgrounds, are less fully captured and warrant further investigation.



*A note on segment depth:* The research interactions were not designed as a stratified sample. Segments with more acute need (newcomers, mid-career professionals) tended to engage more readily and produce more data. The working parents segment, whilst producing some of the most emotionally resonant material in the entire corpus, is based on fewer individual interactions. The established-but-stuck segment, by its nature, is harder to reach - people who have adapted are less likely to seek out research conversations about the struggles of adaptation. These

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differences in segment depth are limitations but are also **features of the phenomenon itself**. The activation gap is most visible and most urgently expressed at its most acute, and becomes progressively harder to articulate as people develop coping mechanisms rooted in past and present trauma; precisely what makes the established-but-stuck and working parent experiences so important to include, even with the acknowledgement that further research would deepen the picture.

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### 5. ROOT CAUSES: HOW THE SYSTEM MAINTAINS THE ACTIVATION TRAP

Sections 3 and 4 described what international knowledge workers experience in the activation gap. This section asks a different question: **why does it persist?**

The activation gap is not new, and its constituent frictions are not undocumented. Administrative complexity, labour market opacity, social isolation, identity disruption — these have appeared in integration reports, academic studies, and policy briefs for years. Recommendations have been made. Pilot programmes have been launched. Yet the pattern reproduces itself with striking consistency, across cohorts, across segments, across political cycles. The question that matters is therefore not *what barriers exist* but **what actively sustains the dysfunction** — what keeps the system producing the same outcomes even when individual actors within it have good intentions and, in many cases, explicit mandates to do better.

This relabelling from passive barriers to **active maintenance mechanisms** helps us explain the lived experiences documented in the preceding sections, and is more in keeping with how complex-adaptive systems behave, distinguishing diagnosis from mere description. A barrier is something that happens to be in the way; remove it, and the path clears. A maintenance mechanism is a recurring pattern that **reproduces** a condition, often through distributed, locally rational actions that aggregate into systemic dysfunction. The activation trap is maintained not by a single malicious actor or a single broken process, but by the interaction of multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously across different registers: administrative, informational, relational, emotional, institutional, and political.

The seven mechanisms described below are ordered from the more visible and institutional toward the more paradigmatic (see **Table 1**). The first three, systems friction, opacity, network closure, operate primarily through the structural design of Dutch institutions and labour markets. The next two, identity disruption and institutional handover failure, reach into the interaction between structural conditions and the lived experience and institutional mandates of those navigating them. The final two, policy narrative tightening and labour market contraction, describe how the broader environment amplifies the trap rather than resolving it. This escalation reflects an insight from systems thinking that the visible, mechanistic features of a system are shaped and constrained by deeper invisible characteristics: the design of institutions, the goals they serve, and the assumptions from which those goals arise (Meadows, 1999; Abson et al., 2017). Most responses to the activation gap target the shallowest layer. The following analysis examines each layer in turn.

**Table 1.** Maintenance mechanisms mapped to Meadows' leverage points and Abson et al.'s realms of transformation

Maintenance mechanism	Primary Meadows level(s)	Abson realm
<i>5.1 Systems friction as cognitive load engineering</i>	10 (stock-and-flow structure), 9 (delays)	Parameters / Feedbacks
<i>5.2 Opacity as gatekeeping — sequence knowledge as insider capital</i>	6 (information flows)	Design
<i>5.3 Network closure as trust-based exclusion</i>	7 (positive feedback: "success to the successful"), 6 (information flows)	Feedbacks / Design

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<i>5.4 Identity disruption as a belonging test</i>	8 (weakened negative feedback — no corrective loops for identity erosion), 2 (paradigm: who "belongs")	Feedbacks / Intent
<i>5.5 Institutional handover failure as structural indifference</i>	5 (rules of the system), 3 (system goals — activation is nobody's goal)	Design / Intent
<i>5.6 Policy narrative tightening as structural amplifier</i>	5 (rules), 3 (goals), 2 (paradigm shift on migration)	Design / Intent
<i>5.7 Labour market contraction + AI as emerging accelerant</i>	7 (positive feedback: automation replacing junior roles), 12 (parameters: WW cut)	Parameters / Feedbacks

**Analytical note:** the framing of root causes as *active maintenance mechanisms* rather than passive barriers draws on Ozyntel systems thinking and organisational transformation research, including the concept of *active immutability* — the tendency of complex systems to resist deep change through defence mechanisms that preserve the status quo even under pressure to reform. The theoretical backbone (including Donella Meadows' leverage points framework and its application to the activation trap) is developed in **Appendix B**. In the main text, the emphasis remains on the evidence.

*For the curious, a preview*

### 5.1 SYSTEMS FRICTION AS COGNITIVE LOAD ENGINEERING

The administrative dependency loops described in Section 3 (BSN → bank account → phone contract → housing → healthcare → IND registration) are not design flaws awaiting correction. They are **structurally reproduced features** of a system built by and for people who already understand how it works.

This distinction matters. A design flaw implies that the system would function well if the error were fixed. But the Dutch administrative landscape was not designed with the internationally mobile person as its primary user. It was designed around the *rijksburger*: the citizen who acquires a

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BSN at birth, inherits system knowledge through family and schooling, and navigates institutional sequences through accumulated cultural literacy. For this user, the dependencies are invisible; each step follows from prior knowledge so deeply embedded that it does not register as knowledge at all. For the person arriving from outside, those same dependencies become a **cognitive load tax**; a bandwidth cost levied on every administrative transaction, paid in time, money, and the depleted capacity that might otherwise go toward language acquisition, professional positioning, or community building.

The mechanism is self-reinforcing. High cognitive load in the first months narrows the aperture of attention to immediate survival. Survival-mode cognition is necessarily short-term, reactive, and risk-averse. Strategic decisions, such as which Dutch language course to invest in, how to position for the labour market, whether to attend a networking event or use that evening to finally sort health insurance, are deferred or made poorly under pressure. The deferral compounds: decisions not made in month two become more expensive in month six, and the accumulating cost of delayed or suboptimal choices widens the activation gap further.

What makes this a maintenance mechanism rather than a one-time barrier is its **repeatability across cohorts**. Each new arrival encounters the same dependency loops. The system does not learn from the confusion of previous users because no institutional actor is incentivised to redesign the sequence for non-default users. Municipal websites are updated, IND procedures are occasionally simplified, but the fundamental architecture, the assumption that the user already possesses Dutch administrative literacy, remains intact. The friction the system's default behaviour when confronted with a user it was not designed for.

### 5.2 OPACITY AS GATEKEEPING: SEQUENCE KNOWLEDGE AS INSIDER CAPITAL

If systems friction taxes cognitive bandwidth, opacity taxes **navigational intelligence**: the capacity to know what to do, in what order, and through which channel. Across the research, participants consistently described not a lack of available information but a **distribution failure**: the knowledge existed, but it circulated through channels to which they had no access.

"If somebody had told me in month one what I figured out in month six, everything would have been different." This sentiment, expressed in various forms across segments, captures the mechanism precisely. The information that accelerates activation is not secret; it is **implicit**. It lives in the assumptions of institutional websites ("you will of course have already registered your child for childcare before starting work"), in the unwritten rules of the labour market ("the real job market operates through referrals; formal applications are often a formality"), and in the cultural scripts that govern how things are done ("directness is normal here; it is not personal"). Insiders possess this knowledge so naturally that they rarely recognise it as knowledge. Outsiders discover it through costly trial and error, each error consuming resources that insiders never had to spend.

This information asymmetry functions as **gatekeeping without a gatekeeper**. Nobody is deliberately withholding the sequence knowledge needed for activation. Yet the effect is structural exclusion: those who lack it are filtered out not by explicit rejection but by the **accumulated cost of discovery**. A participant who spends three months discovering the toeslagen system has paid a price - in money lost, in stress endured, in bandwidth consumed - that a Dutch-born person of equivalent capability never incurred. Multiply this across dozens of such discoveries, and the aggregate cost becomes a structural disadvantage indistinguishable in its effects from active discrimination, even in the absence of discriminatory intent.

The mechanism is further reinforced by language. Critical institutional information, such as tax guidance, healthcare referral pathways, municipality services, and legal rights, is frequently available only in Dutch, or in English translations that assume familiarity with Dutch institutional

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categories. The information exists in a form that requires the very system knowledge it is meant to convey. For participants still learning Dutch, or for those who possess conversational Dutch but not the specialised administrative register, the opacity is compounded: you need to understand the system to understand the instructions that explain the system.

What sustains this mechanism is the absence of what might be called **sequenced navigational infrastructure**: a structured, maintained, and segment-sensitive guide to the critical decisions and dependencies that shape the first months and years. Several participants described this as the single most valuable intervention they could imagine. It is also, notably, one of the least expensive to provide. Yet it does not exist at institutional scale, because the system's information architecture is designed for people who do not need it.

### 5.3 NETWORK CLOSURE AS TRUST-BASED EXCLUSION

The Dutch labour market operates, to a significant degree, through **trust-mediated access**. Roles are filled through referrals. Opportunities circulate through professional and social networks before they reach formal channels. Hiring decisions are influenced by reputational signals (e.g. someone vouching for a candidate's reliability, competence, or "fit") that are inherently network-dependent. This is not unique to the Netherlands; most advanced economies have a substantial informal labour market. But for international knowledge workers with thin local networks, the effect is **systematic exclusion from the primary channel through which professional activation occurs**.

The mechanism operates as a positive feedback loop, what systems thinkers describe as a success to the successful dynamic. Those who already have Dutch professional networks gain access to opportunities, which generate more relationships, which generate more access. Those who arrive without such networks face a cold start: formal applications into automated systems that filter on sponsorship status, cultural markers, and network-free CVs. Each unsuccessful cycle reduces confidence, narrows the range of roles attempted, and delays the relationship-building that might eventually break the loop. The system rewards existing insiders and penalises newcomers, not through malice but through the ordinary operation of trust-based selection.

Several features amplify this closure for internationals specifically. First, the "hidden job market", the substantial proportion of roles that never appear on public platforms, is navigable only through the weak ties that newcomers lack. Second, the cultural norms around networking in the Netherlands tend toward existing circles rather than open access: professional associations, alumni networks, and sector events often operate in Dutch and assume shared cultural reference points. Third, the hiring heuristics that employers use (fit, communication style, cultural fluency) are calibrated to Dutch norms in ways that may not be explicit or even conscious but that nonetheless produce predictable filtering effects.

This is not a gap to be filled by telling internationals to "network more." The mechanism is structural. Individual effort can partially compensate, and some participants described eventually building sufficient local networks to access the hidden market, typically over a timeline of three to five years. But the activation gap during that period represents a **systemic waste of capability**: people who could be contributing at a high level are instead expending energy on the slow, often demoralising work of building trust from zero in a system designed around pre-existing trust.

The intervention implication, which later sections will develop, is that network closure cannot be addressed by individual adaptation alone. It requires **deliberate bridging mechanisms**: structured introductions, mixed cohorts, and intermediary actors who can translate credibility across network boundaries. The hidden job market is not going to become public; the question is whether its access mechanisms can be made less exclusively dependent on inherited social capital.

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### 5.4 IDENTITY DISRUPTION AS A BELONGING TEST: EMOTIONAL COST AS FILTERING FUNCTION

The emotional and identity dimension of the activation gap, described in Sections 3 and 4, is the mechanism most often dismissed as "soft" or secondary: a personal adjustment challenge rather than a structural concern. The evidence suggests the opposite. Identity disruption functions as a **filtering mechanism** that determines who persists in the activation process and who withdraws, and its effects are as structurally consequential as any administrative barrier.

The mechanism operates through a specific sequence. Arrival in the Netherlands strips most identity anchors simultaneously: professional reputation, social role, cultural competence, linguistic fluency, and the network of people who knew you as a competent, contributing person. What remains is the raw self, confronting a context that is indifferent to prior achievements and that requires, implicitly, a degree of identity reconstruction that goes far beyond professional adaptation. "Was I still Russian?" asked one participant, describing a multi-year negotiation that was not about nationality but about selfhood. "My job was my identity," said another, a mid-career professional with over two decades of corporate experience. "I did not know anything other than my work." When that anchor was removed, the identity question became total.

The system offers no structured support for this process. There is no institutional actor whose mandate includes helping international knowledge workers navigate identity disruption. The process is left entirely to individual resilience, and the predictable outcome is a filtering effect: those with sufficient internal resources, supportive partners, prior cross-cultural experience, or the sheer stubbornness to persist eventually find a new equilibrium. Those without these resources, or those for whom the disruption is compounded by other pressures (caregiving, financial precarity, visa anxiety, bereavement, adversity and traumatic backgrounds), are more likely to withdraw, leave, or accept a permanently diminished trajectory.

This is where a concept from the research becomes analytically important. Several practitioners and participants described what might be called **identity intelligence**, a quality distinct from cultural adaptation or language proficiency. One DEI professional used the term *transcultural intelligence* to describe the capacity to hold multiple cultural frames simultaneously without collapsing into either assimilation or withdrawal. This is not a skill that can be taught in a workshop; it is a **developmental capacity** that emerges through supported experience, through environments that combine emotional safety with genuine challenge, that affirm existing identity whilst creating space for its evolution. The absence of such environments is not a gap in service provision; it is a structural condition that determines which internationals activate and which do not. The question of how to design for the development of this capacity (and what it means for activation support that takes identity seriously) is one that the intervention portfolio in Section 7 and the policy recommendations in Section 9 will try to address directly.

The emotional cost of the activation gap also has a temporal signature that the system does not recognise. Burnout risk peaks not at arrival but two to three years later, when the initial adrenaline of relocation subsides and the accumulated weight of under-actualisation becomes fully felt. Imposter syndrome (the persistent sense of inadequacy despite objective evidence of competence) was reported across segments, including among people who were employed and ostensibly successful. The system reads these individuals as "integrated" because they hold jobs and pay taxes; the identity disruption that continues beneath the surface is invisible to institutional metrics and unaddressed by institutional mandates.

What makes identity disruption a maintenance mechanism is precisely this invisibility. Administrative barriers can at least be seen and measured. Network closure can be mapped. But the emotional filtering function operates silently: people who withdraw do not file complaints or appear in attrition statistics as "excluded by identity disruption." They simply stop trying, or leave, or accept less. The system does not register what it has lost, and so the mechanism persists.

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### 5.5 INSTITUTIONAL HANDOVER FAILURE AS STRUCTURAL INDIFFERENCE

Across the research, a consistent pattern emerged: the institutions that invest in bringing international knowledge workers to the Netherlands - employers, universities, startup facilitators, municipalities - tend to **end their involvement at or shortly after arrival**. The result is a structural gap between recruitment and activation that no actor owns, no mandate covers, and no budget addresses.

Employers provide visa sponsorship, relocation support, and onboarding. But onboarding, as multiple participants and practitioners observed, is **not activation**. Onboarding is orientation to a role; activation is orientation to a life. An employer can ensure that a new hire has a desk, a laptop, and a contract. What no employer currently provides, and what the activation gap demands, is structured support for the broader transition: system literacy, network access, identity work, family stabilisation, and the dozens of micro-decisions (housing, schooling, healthcare, tax structure) that shape whether someone can actually function at their potential. "Activation is not onboarding," as one practitioner put it directly. "Onboarding assumes the person is ready to perform. Activation recognises that the conditions for performance have not yet been created."

Universities face a parallel version. International offices invest substantially in recruitment, admissions, housing, and first-semester orientation. But the transition from student to professional (the critical period where activation support would have the highest return) falls outside the university's mandate. Career services exist, but they are typically designed for Dutch students navigating a familiar labour market, not for international graduates facing sponsorship filters, network-dependent access, and the specific cultural translation challenges described in Sections 3 and 4. The result is a **cliff edge**: the institution that held your hand through enrolment releases you into a labour market it has not prepared you for, at the precise moment when the activation gap becomes most consequential.

Startup visa facilitators present perhaps the starkest example. The facilitator relationship, which is legally required and which ostensibly exists to guide founders through their first year, was described by multiple research participants as thin, transactional, or misaligned with actual needs. The facilitator assesses whether the business is on track; what founders need is someone who can make warm introductions, provide market feedback, and help translate a value proposition for a Dutch audience. The gap between the facilitator's mandate (assessment) and the founder's need (activation) is the institutional handover failure in concentrated form.

Municipalities recruit international companies and workers as part of economic development strategies, but activation support after arrival is fragmented, often limited to a single "welcome" event or an information website. The municipality's institutional interest, such as a growing tax base and a vibrant economy, is served by people who are fully activated and contributing; yet the mechanisms to produce that activation are not part of the municipal service offering. The gap is structural: recruitment is someone's job; *activation is nobody's job*.

What sustains this pattern is not malice or even negligence in most cases. It is a **goal misalignment problem**. Each institution optimises for its own mandate: employer for role-filling, university for enrolment, facilitator for compliance, municipality for economic development. The spaces between mandates are where activation falls. Nobody is measured on time-to-contribution. Nobody is evaluated on whether an international knowledge worker reaches full potential. Nobody is responsible for the person; only for the function they serve within a specific institutional frame. *The human being who crosses all these frames, who is simultaneously an employee, a resident, a parent, a professional, a newcomer, a person, has no institutional counterpart whose job is to see the whole picture.*

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This mechanism is particularly resistant to correction because it does not appear as a failure from within any single institution's perspective. The employer successfully hired someone. The university graduated a student. The facilitator filed the assessment. From each vantage point, the job was done. The activation gap persists in the **white space between completed mandates**, and will continue to do so until activation itself becomes an explicit institutional goal, with accountable actors, measurable outcomes, and funded mechanisms.

### 5.6 POLICY NARRATIVE TIGHTENING AS STRUCTURAL AMPLIFIER: THE COALITION AGREEMENT'S DUAL MOVE

The first five mechanisms operate within the existing structure. The sixth describes how the **broader policy environment** actively amplifies them.

The 2026 Coalition Agreement, as analysed in Section 1, performs a characteristic dual move: it commits to attracting and retaining international talent (€1.5 billion in education and science investment, a formal talent retention strategy, a three-year skilled worker pilot) whilst simultaneously tightening the conditions under which that talent can belong (unemployment benefit duration halved, stricter citizenship requirements, increased employer liability for migrant housing, and a public narrative that frames migration as a problem requiring management rather than a resource requiring activation).

This duality is not a contradiction in the coalition's logic; it reflects a **specific political settlement** in which economic pragmatism and social conservatism coexist in uneasy tension, held together by a minority government that must assemble different parliamentary majorities for different issues. But for the individuals navigating the activation gap, the effect is a **structural intensification** of every mechanism described above.

Systems friction increases because policy complexity grows: new employer obligations, new visa conditions, new citizenship requirements each add administrative layers that consume cognitive bandwidth. Opacity deepens because the rules are changing and the lag between policy announcement and practical implementation creates a period of heightened uncertainty in which even institutional actors cannot confidently advise. Network closure becomes more consequential because tightened conditions raise the stakes of each professional transition: changing jobs, starting a business, or accepting a short-term contract becomes riskier when the safety nets are thinner. Identity disruption intensifies because the public narrative signals that belonging is conditional and can be revoked: an ambient message that participants described as contributing to the felt experience of being "tolerated, not welcomed."<sup>1</sup>

The halving of WW (unemployment benefit) duration from two years to one year deserves specific attention as an amplifier. For international knowledge workers who lose employment, the time available to find a new role that matches their capability has been structurally halved. Given the evidence from Sections 3 and 4 that professional activation in the Dutch market typically takes years rather than months, a one-year unemployment buffer is acutely insufficient for people who face sponsorship constraints, network-dependent access, and the cultural translation challenges that compound job search difficulty. The policy assumes a labour market in which capable people can find appropriate work within twelve months; the evidence from this research suggests that this assumption does not hold for the population in question.

The *startbaan* concept and *Ervaringscertificaten* promotion within the Coalition Agreement offer genuine entry points as they signal a policy interest in activation-adjacent mechanisms. Nonetheless, without operational infrastructure to deliver on these concepts, they risk remaining aspirational. The gap between policy announcement and practical implementation is itself a

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<sup>1</sup> This struck the British author of this report and co-founder as resembling the outcome of the UK Conservative Party's internal narrative of creating a 'hostile environment' to deter and dissuade migrants from considering a fraught attempt at integration.

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maintenance mechanism: it generates hope that the system is improving, whilst the lived reality of navigating it remains largely unchanged.

What makes policy narrative tightening a maintenance mechanism rather than a contextual factor is its **feedback effect on institutional behaviour**. When the political narrative emphasises restriction, institutions become more cautious. Employers hesitate to sponsor. Universities hedge their internationalisation commitments. Municipalities deprioritise welcome infrastructure. The caution is locally rational, as institutions are responding to perceived political risk, but its aggregate effect is to widen the activation gap for the individuals these same institutions have recruited. The policy environment does not merely fail to solve the problem; it actively increases the friction that produces it.

### 5.7 LABOUR MARKET CONTRACTION AND AI-DRIVEN SHIFTS AS AN EMERGING ACCELERANT

The final mechanism is the most recent and the least fully documented in the research, but it appeared with sufficient consistency to warrant inclusion as an **emerging accelerant** rather than a fully evidenced maintenance mechanism.

Multiple participants and practitioners described a contraction of the entry-level and junior labour market driven by automation and AI adoption. "The juniors are screwed," observed one roundtable participant. The dynamic operates as follows: as AI tools assume tasks previously allocated to junior professionals (data analysis, content production, basic coding, administrative processing), the entry-level roles that historically served as on-ramps into the Dutch labour market are shrinking. The remaining junior roles face increased competition, and the selection criteria shift toward cultural fit, communication style, and existing network connections; precisely the dimensions where international candidates are most disadvantaged.

For international graduates and early-career professionals, this contraction compounds the sponsorship filter. Employers considering whether to sponsor a visa for a junior hire now face a market in which the role itself may be less necessary, the pool of Dutch and EU candidates for remaining roles has grown, and the cost-benefit calculation of sponsorship tips further toward caution. The catch-22 described in Sections 3 and 4 - needing proof-of-work to get access, but needing access to generate proof-of-work - intensifies as the total number of access points shrinks.

At the mid-career level, AI-driven shifts produce a different pressure. Professionals whose expertise was in domains now partially automatable face a dual translation challenge: converting their experience into Dutch market legibility *and* into relevance within a changing skill landscape. The second activation gap described in Section 4 - the barrier at the transition from execution to leadership - is amplified if the execution-level work that established credibility is being automated.

This mechanism is classified as an *emerging accelerant* because the evidence is still accumulating. The research captured it through practitioner observations and participant anxieties rather than through documented labour market outcomes specific to internationals. What is clear is the **direction of the effect**: labour market contraction and AI-driven shifts do not cause the activation gap, but they amplify every mechanism that sustains it: friction becomes more costly when opportunities are fewer, opacity becomes more consequential when margins are thinner, network closure becomes more excluding when competition for remaining roles intensifies.

### 5.8 THE NESTED SYSTEM: WHY SHALLOW INTERVENTIONS FAIL

The seven mechanisms described above do not operate in isolation. They form a **nested, mutually reinforcing system** in which each mechanism amplifies the others and in which the deeper, less visible mechanisms constrain what can be achieved by addressing the shallower ones.

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Systems friction (5.1) consumes the bandwidth needed to overcome opacity (5.2). Opacity prevents the relationship-building needed to break network closure (5.3). Network closure intensifies identity disruption (5.4) by removing the informal belonging infrastructure that might buffer it. Identity disruption reduces the persistence and agency needed to compensate for institutional handover failure (5.5). Institutional handover failure means there is no actor positioned to interrupt the cascade. Policy narrative tightening (5.6) amplifies every mechanism simultaneously. Labour market contraction (5.7) raises the stakes of each.

This nested quality explains a persistent puzzle: why do interventions that seem well-designed keep producing limited results? The answer, consistently, is that most interventions target the shallowest and most visible layer (parameters and immediate feedback structures) whilst leaving the deeper dynamics intact. A better information website does not address network closure. A networking event does not address identity disruption. A streamlined visa process does not address the fact that nobody owns the activation mandate. Each intervention addresses one mechanism at one level, whilst the system regenerates the dysfunction through the mechanisms it leaves untouched.

The implication is not that shallow interventions are worthless. Information provision, administrative simplification, and networking opportunities all provide incremental relief. But they cannot, by themselves, resolve the activation trap, because the trap is sustained by interactions across levels, not by any single mechanism in isolation. What the analysis points toward is *the need for interventions that operate across multiple levels simultaneously*: addressing practical friction *and* information architecture *and* network access *and* belonging infrastructure *and* institutional accountability, in coordinated combination rather than in separate, disconnected programme silos.

This is not a call for a single grand solution. It is a recognition that the problem is systemic and that systemic problems require **portfolios of intervention** designed with awareness of how the mechanisms interact. Section 6 maps which actors hold which levers. Section 7 examines what an Activation Model Protocol - a proactive, structured approach designed for this specific system - might look like.

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### 6. THE ECOSYSTEM MAP: WHO HOLDS WHICH LEVERS

Section 5 identified seven mechanisms that actively maintain the activation trap. This section asks **who could intervene, and what are the limitations to positive intervention?**

The answer is not that nobody cares. Many actors in the Dutch ecosystem have both institutional interest and stated commitments to international talent. Employers invest in recruitment. Universities invest in internationalisation. Municipalities invest in economic development. The problem is that each actor optimises for its own mandate, and the activation gap lives in the **spaces between mandates**: in the handovers that don't happen, the responsibilities that aren't assigned, and the outcomes that nobody is measured on.

This section maps each actor to the maintenance mechanisms they hold leverage over, and examines why that leverage remains largely unexercised. The table below extends the Meadows/Abson mapping from Section 5, adding two columns: which actors currently hold the lever for each mechanism, and the constraint or mandate gap that explains why the lever isn't pulled. The actor-by-actor analysis that follows expands on these dynamics in prose.

#### Who Could Intervene, and why don't they?

##### Ecosystem map: who holds which levers (Section 5)

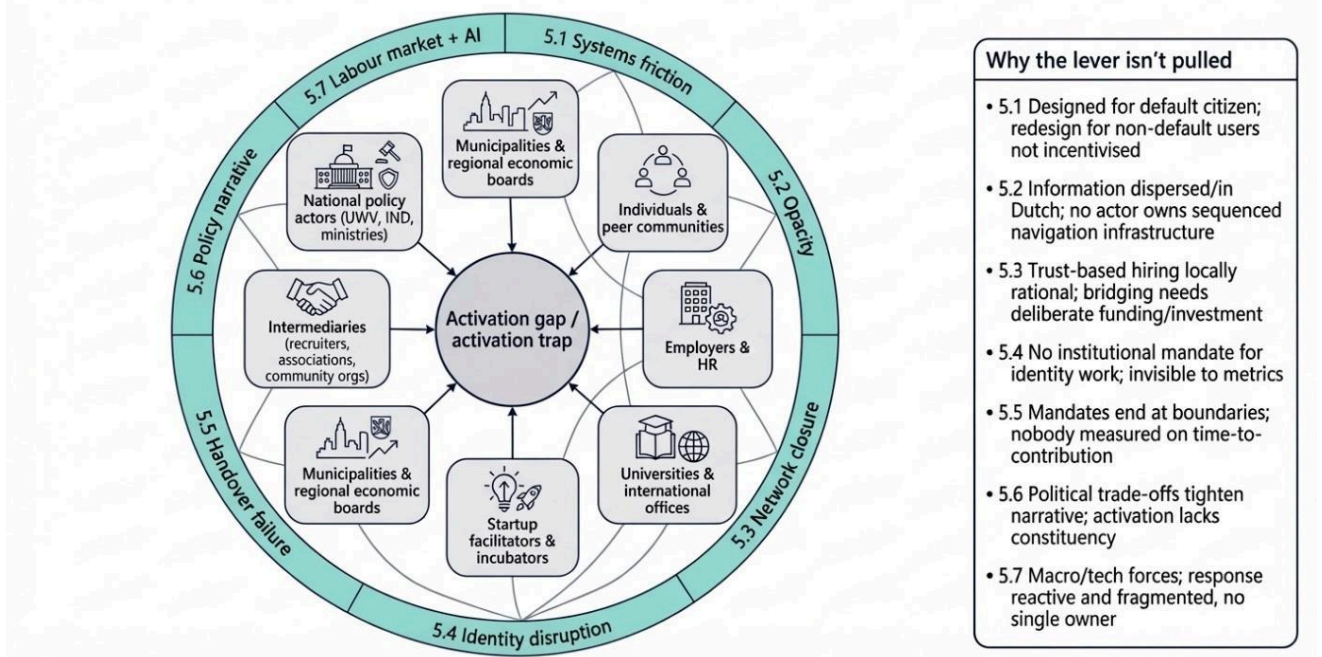


Figure 1: Ecosystem map<sup>2</sup>

#### 6.1 The lever map: mechanisms, actors, and constraints

<sup>2</sup> Produced with a customised Notion AI agent ('Silas') trained with Ozyntel's ethical guardrails on its curated knowledge framework.

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**Table 2.** Lever distribution: maintenance mechanisms, actors, and constraints

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Meadows level(s)</i>	<i>Abson realm</i>	<i>Actor(s) with leverage</i>	<i>Why the lever isn't pulled</i>
<i>5.1 Systems friction</i>	10 (stock-and-flow), 9 (delays)	Parameters / Feedbacks	Municipalities, IND, national ministries	System designed for <i>rijksburger</i> ; no institutional actor incentivised to redesign for non-default users
<i>5.2 Opacity as gatekeeping</i>	6 (information flows)	Design	Municipalities, employers, universities, community orgs	Information exists but is dispersed, in Dutch, and assumes prior system knowledge; no actor owns sequenced navigational infrastructure
<i>5.3 Network closure</i>	7 (positive feedback), 6 (information flows)	Feedbacks / Design	Employers, recruiters, professional associations, peer communities	Trust-based hiring is locally rational; bridging mechanisms require deliberate investment that no actor currently funds
<i>5.4 Identity disruption</i>	8 (weakened negative feedback), 2 (paradigm)	Feedbacks / Intent	Peer communities, (potentially) employers and mental health services	No institutional mandate covers identity work; dismissed as "soft" or personal; invisible to metrics
<i>5.5 Institutional handover failure</i>	5 (rules), 3 (goals)	Design / Intent	Employers, universities, facilitators, municipalities, UWV	Each actor's mandate ends at their boundary; nobody is measured on time-to-contribution or whole-person activation
<i>5.6 Policy narrative tightening</i>	5 (rules), 3 (goals), 2 (paradigm)	Design / Intent	National government, ministries, political parties	Minority coalition must balance economic pragmatism with social conservatism; activation is not a political constituency
<i>5.7 Labour market contraction + AI</i>	7 (positive feedback), 12 (parameters)	Parameters / Feedbacks	Employers, sector bodies, education institutions	Macro-economic and technological forces; no single actor controls the shift; response is reactive, not anticipatory

The pattern the table reveals is consistent: the shallowest mechanisms (systems friction, opacity) have identifiable actors who *could* intervene but lack the incentive or mandate to do so. The mid-level mechanisms (network closure, identity disruption, institutional handover) fall between mandates; multiple actors hold partial leverage, but none owns the whole problem. The deepest mechanisms (policy narrative, paradigmatic assumptions about who "belongs") sit at levels where

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no operational actor is currently positioned to intervene. This is why shallow interventions keep failing: they target the levels where actors exist, but the system regenerates dysfunction through the levels where actors don't.

With the lever distribution visible in **Figure 1**, the sections below unpack each actor's constraints in turn.

### 6.2 INDIVIDUALS AND PEER COMMUNITIES

The actor with the most lived knowledge of the activation gap has the least structural power to change the system that produces it.

Individual international knowledge workers hold the daily, embodied intelligence of what the gap feels like and what navigating it requires. They know which administrative loops waste time, which job search strategies don't work, which emotional supports matter, and which advice is useless. Peer communities, such as informal networks, WhatsApp groups, community organisations, the small curated circles described in Section 3, aggregate and distribute this intelligence in ways that institutional actors cannot match.

The leverage peer communities possess is significant but intangible to the actors themselves. They provide **emotional regulation** (normalisation, safety, belonging), **practical intelligence** (sequenced guidance, warnings, shortcuts), and **weak-tie generation** (introductions, shared opportunities). Rather than supplementary functions, in Sections 3 and 4 identified community as the **primary activation infrastructure**: the mechanism through which people actually move from survival mode toward contribution.

But the limitations are more solid from a lived experience perspective of those navigating the system. Peer communities cannot redesign administrative systems, change sponsorship rules, restructure labour market access, or shift policy narratives. They operate within the system, not on it. They buffer individual experience without altering the structural conditions that produce it. And they are resource-constrained: community organisers working on inclusion and activation typically operate on minimal funding, volunteer energy, and personal networks. The emotional labour falls on the people least resourced to sustain it, often internationals themselves, doing unpaid community work on top of their own activation struggles.

The asymmetry is the finding: **the actor closest to the problem is the furthest from the levers that could resolve it**. This is why individual resilience narratives ("network more," "be more proactive," "learn Dutch faster") are not merely unhelpful but structurally misleading. They locate the solution at the level with the least leverage, whilst the mechanisms that maintain the gap operate at levels individuals cannot reach.

### 6.3 EMPLOYERS AND HR

Employers hold some of the most consequential levers in the activation system. They exercise them the least.

The levers are substantial. Employers control **hiring decisions**, including whether to sponsor visas, whether to accept non-Dutch CVs, and which selection criteria to weight. They shape **onboarding design**: the extent to which a new international hire receives structured support beyond the laptop and the contract. They influence **workplace inclusion culture**: whether team communication defaults to Dutch, whether social events assume shared cultural reference points, whether performance evaluation accounts for the additional cognitive load international employees carry. And they command **budgets**: the cost of a structured activation package is a fraction of the recruitment, relocation, and visa sponsorship investment already made.

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The constraints are instructive. Employers overwhelmingly frame international talent as a **hiring problem**, not an **activation problem**. HR departments are measured on time-to-fill, cost-per-hire, and initial retention. Nobody is measured on time-to-contribution, and almost nobody tracks whether an international hire reaches full professional potential or merely remains in a contained, underperforming role. The institutional feedback loop is broken: the cost of under-activation shows up as "poor fit" or "cultural mismatch" in exit interviews, attributed to the individual rather than to the absence of activation support.

The research surfaced a specific employer hesitation that reinforces the gap. "Some employers feel a bit cautious towards internationals being part of their organisation," observed one practitioner. This caution is not always overt; it manifests as shorter contracts, limited extension prospects, and a preference for candidates who require less perceived adjustment. The language filter described in Sections 3 and 4 (where Dutch language requirements are applied inconsistently and sometimes function as a proxy for cultural familiarity) is an employer-level mechanism that maintains network closure and opacity simultaneously.

The untapped opportunity is significant. Employers who invest in post-arrival activation (structured system literacy, network bridging, identity-sensitive management) would reduce attrition, accelerate productivity, and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market for international talent. The Coalition Agreement's increased employer responsibilities for labour migrant conditions create an additional incentive: organisations investing more in international workers have a direct interest in ensuring those investments yield returns. Yet the activation package remains almost entirely absent from Dutch employer practice. The lever exists; the hand on it does not.

### 6.4 UNIVERSITIES AND INTERNATIONAL OFFICES

Universities are the institution with the clearest line of sight to the activation gap, and the most structurally defined cliff edge.

Dutch universities invest substantially in international recruitment, admissions infrastructure, housing support, and first-year orientation. International offices are often well-resourced and professionally staffed. For the duration of enrolment, the institution holds the student's hand through a managed experience that provides structure, community, and administrative support.

Then graduation happens, and the hand lets go.

The lever universities hold is the **student-to-professional transition**; the period between final exams and first relevant employment. This is the moment where university relationships, employer networks, alumni connections, and career services could provide the bridging infrastructure that Section 5 identified as missing. The university knows which employers hire in which fields. It has relationships with regional economic actors. It maintains alumni databases. It could, in principle, extend its mandate from "graduating students" to "activating graduates", measuring success not only by degree completion rates but by employment outcomes and time-to-contribution.

The constraint is mandate definition. Career services exist, but they are typically designed for Dutch students navigating a familiar labour market. International graduates facing sponsorship filters, network-dependent access, and cultural translation challenges encounter a service that was not built for them. The Orientation Year (*zoekjaar*) provides legal permission to stay and search for work, but no structured activation support during that year. The result is the cliff edge described in Section 5.5: the institution that provided comprehensive support during enrolment releases graduates into precisely the conditions that produce under-actualisation, at the moment when a relatively small additional investment could have the highest return.

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The political context adds pressure. Internationalisation has become politically contentious, and universities are navigating between economic incentive (international students contribute revenue and research capacity) and political caution (appearing too enthusiastic about internationalisation carries reputational risk in the current climate). This tension can produce institutional hedging: maintaining recruitment whilst quietly deprioritising the post-graduation support that would complete the activation pathway. The university's interest and the graduate's need are aligned; the political environment makes it harder to act on that alignment.

### 6.5 STARTUP FACILITATORS AND INCUBATORS

The startup visa ecosystem provides the most concentrated example of the activation gap, and the starkest illustration of a lever that exists in name but not in function.

Startup visa holders are legally required to work with a recognised facilitator who assesses whether the business is progressing. This relationship is, in principle, the bridge between arrival and activation: the facilitator is positioned to provide introductions, market feedback, strategic guidance, and ecosystem navigation. In practice, as Sections 3 and 4 documented, the relationship is frequently thin, transactional, or focused on compliance rather than development.

The lever facilitators hold is **ecosystem access**: the ability to translate a founder's capability into the Dutch market through warm introductions, feedback loops, and credibility signalling. "You need to tune it until the signal is strong enough," one connector observed. Facilitators are positioned to do exactly this tuning. The constraint is a goal misalignment that mirrors the broader institutional handover failure: the facilitator's mandate is assessment (is the business on track?), not activation (is the founder being set up to succeed?). The 60%+ failure rate for startup visas (with failures driven substantially by compounding activation barriers rather than product quality) is the measurable cost of this misalignment.

Incubators and accelerators hold adjacent levers: structured programmes, mentor networks, investor access, and cohort-based learning. But these programmes are overwhelmingly designed for founders who already possess local networks, cultural fluency, and administrative stability. International founders in survival mode (managing housing, family, visa conditions, and business validation simultaneously) encounter programme structures that assume the very foundations the activation gap has prevented them from building.

### 6.6 MUNICIPALITIES AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC BOARDS

Municipalities sit at a unique intersection: they have both the local presence to deliver activation support and the economic development mandate that activation would serve. Yet their response to international talent remains largely limited to the welcome phase; a single event, an information website, a registration appointment; after which the institutional relationship effectively ends.

The levers municipalities hold are significant. They control **local service delivery**: housing support, childcare registration, healthcare navigation, social services. They commission **integration programmes** under the Participatiewet and Inburgeringswet, which the Coalition Agreement is aligning. They maintain relationships with **local employers** through economic development boards. And they hold **convening power**: the ability to bring together employers, universities, community organisations, and service providers around a shared activation agenda.

The constraint is fragmentation. Activation touches housing, employment, education, healthcare, social cohesion, and economic development; these domains sit in different municipal departments with different budgets, different managers, and different performance metrics. No department owns "activation" as an outcome. The international knowledge worker who needs coordinated support across these domains encounters a municipality that is structured to deliver siloed services, not integrated pathways.

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Regional economic boards (such as LIOF in Limburg, or the various *Economic Boards* across provinces) hold a complementary lever: they think in terms of talent attraction, innovation ecosystems, and competitive advantage. But their instruments are typically aimed at companies and sectors, not at the individuals whose under-actualisation undermines the strategies these boards promote. The gap between the economic development narrative ("we need international talent") and the activation reality ("nobody supports that talent after arrival") is visible at the regional level but rarely addressed with operational mechanisms.

The Divosa signal from the Coalition Agreement analysis, "*het kabinet zoekt bondgenoot in het sociaal domein*", is directly relevant here. Municipalities are being positioned as delivery partners for integration and participation. If that mandate is taken seriously, it creates an institutional window for activation-oriented partnerships. But without external partners who understand the specific dynamics of the international knowledge worker population (as distinct from stathouders or low-skilled labour migrants) municipalities are likely to apply generic integration frameworks to a population whose needs are structurally different.

### 6.7 INTERMEDIARIES: RECRUITERS, PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Between institutions and individuals sits a layer of intermediary actors who hold bridging levers — the capacity to translate, connect, and facilitate across the boundaries that the activation gap exploits.

**Recruiters** hold direct access to the labour market, including the hidden job market that Section 5 identified as a primary exclusion mechanism. They serve as trust translators: a recruiter's recommendation signals credibility in ways that a cold application cannot. But their incentive structure is commercial and short-term, filling roles, earning fees, moving on. International candidates who require longer search timelines, more intensive positioning support, or sponsorship navigation are commercially less attractive than Dutch or EU candidates who can be placed faster and without visa complexity. The lever exists; the incentive points away from exercising it for the population that needs it most.

**Professional associations** hold network access and sector knowledge. But they overwhelmingly operate in Dutch, assume shared professional reference points, and serve existing members rather than newcomers seeking entry. For an international knowledge worker attempting to break into a Dutch professional community, the association that should be the door is often another wall; not through hostility, but through the same default-user design that characterises the broader system.

**Community organisations**, including international community groups, expat networks, diversity and inclusion organisations like Diverse Leaders in Tech, and grassroots peer support initiatives, hold the levers closest to the lived experience: belonging, normalisation, practical intelligence, and emotional support. Their constraint is resource scarcity. These organisations typically operate on minimal funding, depend on volunteer energy, and lack the institutional standing to influence the policy and employer actors whose behaviour shapes the activation gap. They carry disproportionate responsibility for a problem they did not create and cannot structurally resolve.

The intermediary layer reveals an important structural feature: the actors best positioned to bridge the activation gap (community organisations, culturally fluent recruiters, mixed professional networks) are the least resourced and least institutionally supported, whilst the actors with resources and institutional standing (large employers, universities, municipalities) lack the granular understanding and relational infrastructure to bridge effectively. This mismatch is not accidental; it is a feature of the same system that produces the gap.

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### 6.8 NATIONAL POLICY ACTORS: UWV, IND, AND MINISTRIES

At the national level, policy actors hold the levers that shape the architecture within which all other actors operate — the rules, goals, and paradigmatic assumptions that Meadows' framework identifies as the deepest and most consequential intervention points.



**UWV** (the national Employee Insurance Agency) works at the junction where the activation trap becomes materially consequential. UWV manages unemployment benefits, job-search infrastructure, re-entry pathways after redundancy, and the governance routines through which "employability" is implicitly defined. For international knowledge workers who lose employment (now facing a one-year WW window instead of two) UWV is the institutional actor whose infrastructure determines whether re-activation is structured or chaotic. The lever is operational: UWV could commission activation programmes tailored to the specific dynamics of international knowledge workers (survival-mode-sensitive sequencing, network bridging, identity-informed support), rather than applying generic re-employment frameworks designed for a Dutch-born population navigating a familiar system. As Section 9 develops in detail, UWV represents the most pragmatic first entry point for a systemic intervention; an actor with both the mandate and the operational reach to pilot activation infrastructure at scale.



**IND** (Immigration and Naturalisation Service) holds levers over visa conditions, processing timelines, and the regulatory complexity that directly produces the systems friction described in Section 5.1. IND's operational priorities (compliance, security, processing volume) are not aligned with activation outcomes. Simplifying visa processes, reducing processing delays, and designing regulations that account for the cognitive load they impose on applicants would directly reduce the bandwidth tax that keeps people in survival mode. But IND's institutional culture and mandate are oriented toward control, not facilitation; a tension that mirrors the broader policy duality of the Coalition Agreement.



**Ministries** (Social Affairs and Employment, Education, Economic Affairs) hold the paradigmatic levers: the ability to redefine what "integration" means, to make activation an explicit policy goal, to fund infrastructure rather than merely programmes, and to create accountability mechanisms that measure whole-person outcomes rather than siloed compliance metrics. The Coalition Agreement signals interest in some of these directions (*startbaan*, *Ervaringscertificaten*, talent retention strategy), but (as Section 5.6 analysed) the gap between policy aspiration and operational delivery is itself a maintenance mechanism. Ministries can set goals; without funded delivery infrastructure and accountable intermediaries, goals remain aspirational.

### 6.9 THE WHITE SPACE: WHAT THE MAP REVEALS

The actor-by-actor analysis confirms what the extended table made visible at a glance: **every mechanism in the activation trap has actors who hold relevant levers, and every actor has structural reasons for not pulling them.**

The pattern is not random. It follows the Meadows/Abson logic precisely:

- At the **parameter and feedback levels** (systems friction, opacity, labour market contraction), identifiable actors exist and could intervene with relatively low-cost changes: better information architecture, streamlined processes, structured onboarding. These are the levels where most current interventions operate. They provide incremental relief but do not resolve the trap, because the deeper mechanisms regenerate the dysfunction.

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- At the **design level** (network closure, institutional handover failure), leverage is distributed across multiple actors, none of whom owns the problem. Employers, universities, municipalities, and intermediaries each hold a piece; the whole-person activation that the gap demands falls between their mandates. This is the level where **coordination** becomes necessary — and where coordination is hardest to achieve, because no convening actor currently exists with the mandate, legitimacy, and operational capacity to bring these actors together around shared activation outcomes.
- At the **intent and paradigm levels** (identity disruption, policy narrative, assumptions about who "belongs"), the leverage is deepest but the actors are fewest. No operational institution currently owns identity work as a mandate. No policy actor has made activation (as distinct from integration or employment) an explicit goal. The paradigmatic assumption that under-actualisation is an individual problem rather than a structural failure remains the default, even among actors who would intellectually reject it if asked.

This is the white space the map reveals: **the activation gap persists because nobody holds all the levers, and the spaces between actors' mandates are where the dysfunction reproduces itself.**

The human being navigating the gap — who is simultaneously an employee, a resident, a parent, a professional, a newcomer, a person — has no institutional counterpart whose job is to see the whole picture.

Section 7 examines what it means to design an intervention portfolio that operates in this white space, occupying the coordination and activation function that currently does not exist.

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### 7. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION SPACE: A PORTFOLIO OF STRUCTURAL INTERVENTIONS

#### UNIQUE SOLUTION POSITIONING

##### What We Have Uniquely Positioned Ourselves to do

Whereas the previous two sections mapped the eco-system that the problem for many internationals is structured around: seven maintenance mechanisms that actively reproduce under-actualisation (Section 5), sustained by actors who hold levers they do not pull (Section 6), this section focusses on the Flux Forward proposal to operate a portfolio of interventions in the white space between institutional mandates (where nobody owns activation, nobody measures time-to-contribution, and nobody sees the whole person) where the trap regenerates itself.

Flux Forward has designed a structured series of actions with proposed partners: a **portfolio of five intervention components**, each targeting specific maintenance mechanisms at specific system levels, and designed to compound, creating positive feedback loops that counteract the negative ones diagnosed in Section 5.

The components are:

1. a First 90 Days activation architecture addressing systems friction and opacity;
2. translation and positioning supports addressing the recognition deficit and network-dependent access;
3. community as activation infrastructure addressing identity disruption and belonging;
4. access mechanisms addressing network closure through deliberate bridging; and
5. institutional activation packages addressing the handover failure through B2B2C delivery.

Before describing each component, the section opens with the design principles that govern the portfolio as a whole — including the action research methodology that serves as Flux Forward's operating logic, and the multi-level intervention reasoning that the Meadows/Abson framework demands (see **Table 2, 6.2**).

#### 7.1 DESIGN PRINCIPLES: WHAT AN ACTIVATION INTERVENTION MUST DO

Section 5.8 established why shallow interventions fail: they target one mechanism at one level whilst the system regenerates dysfunction through the mechanisms left untouched. An effective activation intervention must therefore meet several design requirements simultaneously.

**It must operate across multiple system levels.** The Meadows/Abson mapping showed that the activation trap spans from parameters (systems friction, labour market contraction) through feedbacks and design (opacity, network closure, institutional handover) to intent (identity disruption, paradigmatic assumptions about belonging). An intervention that addresses only the parameter level (a better information website, a streamlined visa process) provides incremental relief but leaves the deeper dynamics intact. The portfolio must include components that reach into design-level mechanisms (restructuring information flows, creating bridging infrastructure) and intent-level mechanisms (supporting identity work, shifting institutional goals toward activation).

**It must be survival-mode-sensitive.** Sections 3 and 4 documented that the activation gap is sequential: practical stabilisation must precede professional positioning, and emotional stabilisation must precede — or at minimum accompany — functional activation. An intervention that assumes its participants are ready for strategic career work will miss the people most in need, who are still navigating administrative dependency loops, depleting savings, and operating in cognitive survival mode. The sequencing of components matters as much as their content.

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**It must be iterative, not linear.** The activation trap is a reinforcing loop — a system that reproduces itself through feedback dynamics. A one-shot programme (a workshop, a welcome event, a six-week course with a fixed curriculum) cannot resolve a reinforcing loop because it does not adapt to what it discovers. The intervention must be structured as a cycle: act, observe what happens, reflect on what the evidence shows, adapt, act again. This is not a pedagogical preference; it is a methodological requirement dictated by the nature of the system being addressed.

This is where **action research** becomes explicit as Flux Forward's operating logic. The AR cycle — reconnaissance, plan, act, observe and evaluate, reflect, adapt — is not an academic framework bolted onto a service offering. It is the architecture within which each intervention component operates. In practice, this means:

- Each cohort cycle begins with a **reconnaissance phase**: understanding where participants actually are — which mechanisms are most active for them, which dimensions of the gap dominate, what resources and constraints they carry. This is not intake; it is diagnostic work that shapes what the cycle prioritises.
- Each cycle includes **structured action** — concrete steps participants take in the real system (applying for roles, navigating administrative processes, attending networking events, experimenting with positioning strategies) — followed by **structured reflection** within a facilitated group setting.
- Each cycle produces **evidence**: what worked, what didn't, what the system did in response. This evidence feeds back into the design of the next cycle, the refinement of the model, and — critically — the data that institutional partners (employers, universities, UWV) need to see in order to invest in activation as an outcome.
- The facilitator role is not instruction delivery; it is **cycle stewardship**: maintaining the rhythm of action and reflection, holding the psychosocial container that Sections 3 and 4 identified as prerequisite to functional activation, and adapting the programme to what the evidence reveals.

This iterative architecture is what distinguishes the activation model from the static programmes that Section 5.8 showed to be insufficient. A better information website is a parameter-level intervention that does not learn. An AR-based activation cycle is a design-level intervention that generates intelligence about the system it is trying to change — and that intelligence improves both the intervention and the evidence base on which institutional partnerships depend.

**It must hold the whole person.** The institutional handover failure described in Section 5.5 exists because each actor sees only its own slice: the employer sees the employee, the university sees the student, the municipality sees the resident. Nobody sees the person. An activation model that reproduces this fragmentation — offering career support in one silo, emotional support in another, administrative guidance in a third — would replicate the very dysfunction it claims to address. The portfolio is designed so that each component reinforces the others, and so that the person moving through them experiences coherence rather than fragmentation.

**It must generate positive feedback loops.** The maintenance mechanisms in Section 5 operate through negative feedback loops and positive-feedback traps ("success to the successful" for insiders; compounding disadvantage for outsiders). The intervention portfolio is designed to create **counter-loops**: belonging generates confidence, which enables professional risk-taking, which generates proof-of-work, which improves market legibility, which generates opportunities, which deepens belonging. Each component feeds the others. The compounding is the design, not a side effect.

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### 7.2 THE FIRST 90 DAYS: ACTIVATION ARCHITECTURE FOR THE ARRIVAL PHASE

<b>Targets</b>	Mechanisms 5.1 (systems friction) and 5.2 (opacity)
<b>Meadows levels</b>	10 (stock-and-flow structure), 9 (delays), 6 (information flows)
<b>Abson realm</b>	Parameters → Design

The most frequently requested intervention across the research was also the simplest: **sequenced navigational infrastructure** — a structured, maintained guide to the critical decisions and dependencies that shape the first months after arrival. "If somebody had told me in month one what I figured out in month six, everything would have been different."

The First 90 Days component translates this into operational form. It provides segment-sensitive guidance that maps the actual decision-making sequence a newly arrived international knowledge worker faces — not as a generic information portal, but as a structured pathway that accounts for the dependencies the system creates:

- **Administrative sequencing:** the BSN–bank–phone–housing–healthcare–IND dependency chain, laid out in the order that minimises friction, with explicit warnings about common costly mistakes (toeslagen timing, healthcare insurance selection, tax implications of housing choices). The goal is to reduce the cognitive load tax described in Section 5.1 by providing the sequence knowledge that insiders possess implicitly.
- **Financial navigation:** the hidden costs that deplete savings unnecessarily — childcare subsidy timing, the rent-versus-mortgage calculation, insurance structures, tax return deadlines. One participant estimated that a structured guidance package in month one would have saved "several thousand euros." The First 90 Days component treats financial literacy as activation infrastructure, not as optional supplementary information.
- **System literacy:** how Dutch institutions actually work — not the formal description on a municipal website, but the practical intelligence that determines whether interactions with bureaucracy are efficient or catastrophic. This includes the implicit cultural scripts (directness norms, communication expectations, what "we'll get back to you" actually means) that Section 5.2 identified as insider capital.

The component is designed to be **survival-mode-compatible**: delivered in formats that do not assume the cognitive bandwidth survival mode has already consumed. Short, sequenced, actionable. Not a handbook to be read cover-to-cover, but a decision-support system that meets people where they are: in the dependency loop, in the housing search, in the moment of discovering that a deadline passed because nobody mentioned it existed.

Within the AR framework, the First 90 Days is not a static product. Each cohort of participants generates evidence about which sequences are most problematic, which information gaps are most costly, and where the system has changed since the last cycle. The navigational infrastructure is updated iteratively, becoming more precise and more current with each cycle — a learning system rather than a fixed resource.

This component alone cannot resolve the activation trap. It targets the shallowest mechanisms (parameters and feedback structures) and provides the incremental relief that Section 5.8 acknowledged as real but insufficient. Its strategic function within the portfolio is **bandwidth liberation**: by reducing the cognitive load of the practical dimension, it creates the capacity for participants to engage with the professional and emotional dimensions that the deeper components address.

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### 7.3 TRANSLATION AND POSITIONING SUPPORTS

<b>Targets</b>	Mechanisms 5.2 (opacity) and 5.3 (network closure)
<b>Meadows levels</b>	6 (information flows), 7 (feedback loops)
<b>Abson realm</b>	Design

The professional dimension of the activation gap is not a skills problem; it is a **recognition problem**. Section 4 documented a consistent pattern: participants arrive with substantial capability that the Dutch labour market cannot see. The translation problem — converting prior achievement into locally legible signals — takes years to solve through individual effort, because the mechanisms that govern recognition (network-dependent access, cultural legibility heuristics, sponsorship filters) operate structurally, not individually.

The translation and positioning component addresses this through three interconnected mechanisms:

**Narrative conversion.** The "starting from zero" experience is partly a story problem: participants' professional narratives are calibrated for their country of origin, and the Dutch market reads different signals. CV formats, LinkedIn positioning, interview presentation, and the implicit "how you talk about what you've done" conventions all require translation — not dumbing down, but recalibration. The component provides structured support for this narrative work: translating experience into Dutch-market terms, identifying which aspects of a portfolio carry local weight, and developing a positioning strategy that accounts for the specific niche dynamics described in Section 4.

**Proof-of-work pathways.** The catch-22 identified in Sections 3 and 4 — needing to show what you can do before you get access, but needing access to show what you can do — requires structured short-cycle projects that generate locally legible evidence of capability. These are not internships (which carry their own exploitation risks and status implications for experienced professionals) but **portfolio-building opportunities**: projects, collaborations, or sprint engagements designed to produce artefacts that function as credibility signals in the Dutch market. Within the AR cycle, each cohort's proof-of-work experiments generate data about which signal types carry most weight with which employer segments — intelligence that improves positioning support for subsequent cohorts.

**Compressing the five-year timeline.** Sections 3 and 4 documented that even highly capable professionals typically take three to five years to reach full professional activation in the Dutch market. Much of this timeline is consumed by slow, individual discovery of how the system works. The translation component aims to compress this — not by shortening the learning, but by structuring it: providing the positioning intelligence, market feedback, and iterative strategy refinement that the system currently forces people to discover alone. The AR cycle is directly relevant here: each participant's positioning experiment generates evidence that accelerates the next participant's journey. The model learns; the timeline shortens.

### 7.4 COMMUNITY AS ACTIVATION INFRASTRUCTURE

<b>Targets</b>	Mechanisms 5.3 (network closure) and 5.4 (identity disruption)
<b>Meadows levels</b>	8 (negative feedback: restoring corrective loops for identity erosion), 7 (positive feedback: building "success to the successful" dynamics for outsiders), 2 (paradigm: who belongs)
<b>Abson realm</b>	Feedbacks → Intent

Sections 3 and 4 established a finding that most institutional actors have not absorbed: **emotional stabilisation and belonging precede functional activation**. "You are enough" (the single most

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powerful message participants reported needing to hear) is not a motivational platitude. It is the precondition without which career positioning, networking, and professional risk-taking cannot effectively occur. Community is not a nice-to-have supplement to "real" activation support; it is the primary activation infrastructure.

The community component operationalises this through **structured activation circles** — small, curated cohorts organised by transition type (newcomers, mid-career professionals, established-but-stuck, graduates, startup founders, working parents) that run in recurring six-week cycles. The design draws on Professional Learning Community methodology: each cycle integrates practical action with structured reflection within a facilitated psychosocial container.

The six-week cycle operates as follows:

- **Weeks 1–2: Orientation and reconnaissance.** Participants share their current situation, identify which dimensions of the gap are most active, and define a concrete action they will take during the cycle. The facilitator holds the emotional space — normalising struggle, affirming existing capability, creating the safety that Sections 3 and 4 identified as prerequisite. The AR reconnaissance phase is embedded here: the facilitator uses what emerges to adapt the cycle's emphasis.
- **Weeks 3–4: Action and peer support.** Participants execute their planned actions — applying for specific roles, attending particular events, initiating conversations, navigating administrative processes — and bring their experiences back to the circle. The group provides practical intelligence, emotional support, and the normalisation that counters isolation. Participants discover that their struggles are shared, structural, and navigable — not evidence of personal failure.
- **Weeks 5–6: Reflection and adaptation.** What worked? What didn't? What did the system do in response? What will the next cycle focus on? The reflection phase generates both individual learning (what I now understand about my positioning) and collective intelligence (what we now understand about how this system operates). This evidence feeds forward into subsequent cycles and upward into the model's iterative development.

The design is **segment-sensitive**. What newcomers in survival mode need from a circle (practical sequencing, emotional regulation, administrative intelligence) differs from what established-but-stuck professionals need (identity work, network expansion, strategic repositioning). What startup founders need (market translation, warm introductions, visa-sensitive business strategy) differs from what working parents need (flexibility-compatible pathways, identity renegotiation beyond caregiving). The circles are curated accordingly — small enough for trust (8–12 participants), homogeneous enough for recognition ("these people understand my situation"), and facilitated with awareness of the specific mechanism profile each segment faces.

The community component addresses mechanism 5.4 (identity disruption) directly — the mechanism most often dismissed as "soft" and most structurally consequential. The circles create environments that combine emotional safety with genuine challenge: spaces where participants can hold multiple identity frames simultaneously without collapsing into either assimilation or withdrawal. The developmental capacity that Section 5.4 called "identity intelligence" — the ability to navigate between cultural frames whilst maintaining coherent selfhood — does not emerge from workshops. It emerges from **repeated, supported experience** within communities that affirm existing identity whilst creating space for its evolution. The six-week cycle, recurring across multiple iterations, provides exactly this supported experience.

Within the AR framework, the community component is also the model's primary intelligence-gathering mechanism. What participants report from the field — which employers

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responded, which administrative processes have changed, which networking strategies worked, which emotional patterns recurred — constitutes real-time evidence about how the activation system is operating. This evidence informs every other component: the First 90 Days content is updated, the translation strategies are refined, the access mechanisms are targeted, and the institutional packages are calibrated. The community is not merely a support group; it is the model's **sensory system** — the mechanism through which Flux Forward maintains current, granular intelligence about the system it is intervening in.

### 7.5 ACCESS MECHANISMS: WARM INTRODUCTIONS AND NETWORK BRIDGING

<b>Targets</b>	Mechanisms 5.3 (network closure)
<b>Meadows levels</b>	7 (positive feedback: building "success to the successful" dynamics for outsiders),
<b>Abson realm</b>	Feedbacks → Design

Section 5.3 established that the "hidden job market" — the substantial proportion of roles filled through referrals, weak ties, and reputational trust — is not going to become public. The question is whether its access mechanisms can be made less exclusively dependent on inherited social capital. The access component answers this by **operationalising weak ties** — creating the bridging mechanisms that network closure prevents from forming organically.

The mechanisms include:

**Structured introductions.** Participants who have identified target sectors, organisations, or roles through the translation component are connected (through facilitated introductions, not cold outreach) to professionals in those domains. The facilitator role here is trust translation: signalling to the Dutch professional that this person has been through a structured process, has been vetted by a credible intermediary, and is worth a conversation. This is precisely the function that recruiters could serve but — as Section 6.7 documented — have insufficient commercial incentive to perform for international candidates. Flux Forward occupies this function not as a recruitment agency but as a **credibility bridge**: translating the trust that participants have built within the activation model into the trust-mediated access that the Dutch labour market requires.

**Mixed cohorts.** Where feasible, activation circles include Dutch professionals — not as mentors or helpers, but as peers navigating their own professional transitions. The mixed-cohort design serves a dual function: it provides internationals with organic access to Dutch professional networks (the weak ties that Section 5.3 identified as the critical missing resource), and it provides Dutch professionals with direct exposure to the capability and experience that international knowledge workers carry — exposure that challenges the implicit "fit" heuristics that sustain network closure. The mixed cohort does not lecture anyone about inclusion; it creates the conditions under which inclusion happens through shared experience.

**Employer-facing capability translation.** The access component includes mechanisms for translating participants' capability into forms that employers can recognise and act on. This is not job placement; it is **signal strengthening** — helping employers see what the standard selection infrastructure (ATS filters, CV conventions, interview heuristics) systematically obscures. Proof-of-work artefacts from the translation component, facilitator-provided context about a participant's trajectory, and structured introductions all serve this function: making visible what the system has made invisible.

The bootcamp and labs models that Flux Forward has developed — structured, intensive programmes that combine skill application with employer exposure — represent the B2B expression of this access mechanism. Employers who participate in bootcamp cohorts gain direct exposure to international talent in a context that demonstrates capability more reliably than a CV screen. Participants gain the proof-of-work, the network contact, and the credibility signal that the hidden job market demands. The bootcamp functions as a **controlled network-bridging event**: a

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structured context in which the trust that normally takes years to build can be accelerated through shared, observed work.

### 7.6 INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVATION PACKAGES: THE B2B2C MODEL

<b>Targets</b>	Mechanism 5.5 (institutional handover failure)
<b>Meadows levels</b>	5 (rules of the system), 3 (system goals)
<b>Abson realm</b>	Design → Intent

Section 5.5 identified the core structural failure: recruitment is someone's job; activation is nobody's job. The institutional handover gap — between employer onboarding and life activation, between university enrolment and graduate employment, between startup visa approval and founder success, between municipal welcome and long-term contribution — is where the activation trap reproduces itself most reliably.

The institutional activation package addresses this by making activation **someone's job**: specifically, by providing the structured activation support that institutions need but cannot build internally, delivered through a B2B2C model in which the institution commissions, Flux Forward delivers, and the individual experiences a coherent activation pathway rather than a gap between mandates.

**Employer activation packages.** For employers who invest in recruiting international talent, the package extends onboarding into activation: structured system literacy for the employee and partner/family, network bridging within and beyond the organisation, identity-sensitive management guidance for team leads, and recurring check-in cycles aligned with the AR methodology. The business case is direct: the cost of a structured activation package is a fraction of the recruitment, relocation, and visa sponsorship investment already made, and the return shows up as reduced attrition, faster time-to-contribution, and higher engagement. Section 6.3 documented that employers hold some of the most consequential levers and exercise them the least; the activation package puts a hand on the lever.

**University transition packages.** For universities navigating the cliff edge described in Section 6.4, the package provides the student-to-professional bridge that career services were not designed to deliver: activation circles for final-year and recently graduated international students, positioning support calibrated to sponsorship-constrained job search, network bridging with regional employers, and structured support during the Orientation Year that currently provides legal permission to stay but no operational activation infrastructure. The university's institutional interest (graduate employment outcomes, alumni engagement, internationalisation metrics) and the student's need (a pathway that does not end at graduation) are aligned; the activation package is the operational mechanism that acts on that alignment.

**Startup ecosystem packages.** For startup facilitators and incubators, the package addresses the gap between the facilitator's mandate (assessment) and the founder's need (activation): warm introductions to the Dutch market, proposition translation support, cohort-based peer learning with other international founders, and family stabilisation guidance that recognises the compounding pressures documented in Section 3 (Amir's vignette). The 60%+ startup visa failure rate — driven substantially by activation barriers rather than product quality — is the measurable cost of the current approach. A structured activation package could reduce that failure rate not by improving products but by reducing the compounding friction that prevents founders from demonstrating what their products can do.

**Municipal and regional packages.** For municipalities positioned as delivery partners under the Participatiewet/Inburgeringswet alignment — and responding to the Divosa signal that *"het kabinet zoekt bondgenoot in het sociaal domein"* — the package provides the activation-specific expertise that generic integration frameworks lack. International knowledge workers are not statushouders; their needs, trajectories, and potential contributions are structurally different. A

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municipality that applies the same integration framework to both populations will underserve both. The activation package brings segment-specific intelligence, delivery capacity, and measurable outcomes that municipalities need to demonstrate to national partners.

The B2B2C model is the structural response to the institutional handover failure. It does not ask institutions to fundamentally change their mandates — employers will still optimise for role-filling, universities for graduation, municipalities for service delivery. Instead, it creates an **activation function that operates in the spaces between mandates**, commissioned by institutions but focused on the whole person those institutions cannot individually see. The model aligns institutional self-interest (reduced attrition, better outcomes, political legitimacy) with individual need (coherent, survival-mode-sensitive, identity-aware activation support) through a delivery mechanism that neither the institution nor the individual could create alone.

### 7.7 The portfolio logic: why it has to be all of this

The five intervention components described above are not a menu from which actors select individual items. They are a **portfolio designed to compound** — and the compounding is the point.

The table below maps each component against the maintenance mechanisms it targets and the Abscon realm it reaches, making the portfolio logic visible at a glance.

**Table 3.** Portfolio logic: intervention components mapped to maintenance mechanisms and counter-loops

Component	Mechanisms directly targeted	Abscon realm reached	Counter-loop created
<b>7.2 First 90 Days</b>	5.1 Systems friction, 5.2 Opacity	Parameters → Design	Bandwidth liberation → capacity for deeper engagement
<b>7.3 Translation &amp; positioning</b>	5.2 Opacity, 5.3 Network closure	Design	Legibility → recognition → opportunities → confidence
<b>7.4 Community circles</b>	5.3 Network closure, 5.4 Identity disruption	Feedbacks → Intent	Belonging → emotional stabilisation → agency → risk-taking
<b>7.5 Access mechanisms</b>	5.3 Network closure	Feedbacks / Design	Bridged trust → access → proof-of-work → more trust
<b>7.6 B2B2C packages</b>	5.5 Institutional handover failure	Design → Intent	Institutional accountability → funded activation → systemic change

Table 3 shows the portfolio logic. No single component addresses all seven mechanisms. The First 90 Days (7.2) targets the shallowest mechanisms but creates the bandwidth for deeper engagement. Translation support (7.3) targets the design level but depends on the community intelligence and access mechanisms to be effective. Community (7.4) reaches into the intent level — identity, belonging, paradigmatic assumptions — but cannot generate professional outcomes without the translation and access infrastructure. Access mechanisms (7.5) interrupt network closure but require participants who have been stabilised, positioned, and supported through the preceding components. Institutional packages (7.6) address the design and intent levels where structural change is needed, but depend on the other components for delivery content.

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The portfolio also creates **indirect pressure on the mechanisms it does not directly target**. Policy narrative tightening (5.6) and labour market contraction (5.7) are structural conditions that no single organisation can reverse. But a functioning activation model generates counter-evidence: data showing that activation infrastructure reduces attrition, accelerates contribution, and produces measurable economic returns. This evidence is the resource that policy advocates, progressive employers, and institutional reformers need to push back against restrictive narratives. The model does not change policy directly; it generates the proof that makes policy change rational.

The AR methodology holds the portfolio together. Each component operates through the same cycle — reconnaissance, plan, act, reflect, adapt — and each cycle generates evidence that feeds into every other component. What the community circles discover about administrative friction updates the First 90 Days content. What the translation experiments reveal about employer responses calibrates the access mechanisms. What the institutional packages learn about which actors are receptive shapes the B2B development strategy. The model is not five parallel programmes; it is **one system operating across five registers**, with the AR cycle as its connective tissue.

### *AR cycle in action across the portfolio*

A newcomer enters through the First 90 Days component and joins an activation circle.

In the reconnaissance phase, she identifies that her primary barrier is professional rather than administrative; her senior experience is invisible to the Dutch market. The circle provides emotional grounding; the translation component helps her reposition. Through the access mechanism, she receives a structured introduction to a sector contact. The introduction leads to a project; the project generates proof-of-work; the proof-of-work strengthens her next application. Meanwhile, her employer (who commissioned an activation package) receives feedback on what the process revealed about their onboarding gaps. Each step generates evidence. The next cohort benefits from what she discovered. The cycle continues.

This portfolio design is a direct response to Section 5.8's central finding: **systemic problems require portfolios of intervention designed with awareness of how the mechanisms interact**. The activation trap persists because existing interventions target one mechanism at one level. The Flux Forward model targets multiple mechanisms at multiple levels, connected by an iterative methodology that allows the portfolio to learn from the system it is changing.

The thread from diagnosis to intervention should now be clear. Sections 3 and 4 described what people experience. Section 5 explained why it persists: seven maintenance mechanisms operating across three Abson realms. Section 6 mapped which actors hold which levers and why those levers remain unpulled. Section 7 has described what an intervention portfolio looks like when it is designed *in response to* this specific system as a coordinated set of components engineered to create positive feedback loops across the levels where the trap operates. The following sections examine what this looks like in practice: Section 8 proposes pilot designs and success metrics for testing the portfolio, and Section 9 develops the policy and institutional recommendations, including the UWV partnership, that would allow the model to operate at the scale the problem demands.

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### 8. PILOT DESIGNS AND VISUALISING IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS

#### 8.1 DESIGN PRINCIPLES: FROM PROGRAMME LOGIC TO INFRASTRUCTURE LOGIC

The pilot designs that follow are not standalone programmes. They are **infrastructure tests**: structured experiments designed to establish whether the activation architecture described in Section 7 can operate at institutional scale, produce measurable outcomes, and generate the evidence base required for policy adoption and scaling.

This distinction matters. Programmes are time-limited, funder-dependent, and tend to serve the individuals who happen to participate. Infrastructure is sustained, institutionally embedded, and designed to serve entire populations by changing the default conditions they encounter. The pilots described here are designed as programmes but evaluated as infrastructure prototypes: the question is not only "did participants benefit?" but "does this demonstrate a viable model for systemic change?"

Five principles guide the design:

1. **Test the causal model, not just the intervention.** Each pilot is designed to generate evidence about specific mechanisms identified in Section 5. If systems friction is a maintenance mechanism, does structured navigational support measurably reduce time-to-activation? If network closure is a trust-based exclusion mechanism, do deliberate bridging cohorts produce measurable network effects? The measurement architecture (Section 8.6) is calibrated to these causal questions.
2. **Design for the stacked sequence.** The activation gap is not three parallel problems but one system operating across practical, professional, and emotional registers (Sections 3 & 4). Pilots that address only one register will underperform. Each pilot therefore includes components across all three dimensions, sequenced to match the evidence on what comes first (emotional stabilisation → practical orientation → professional positioning).
3. **Build institutional accountability, not individual resilience.** The maintenance mechanisms in Section 5 persist because activation is nobody's explicit responsibility. Each pilot assigns activation accountability to a named institutional partner, not as charity but as aligned interest. The design makes the institutional partner's existing goals (reduced attrition, improved time-to-productivity, regional economic development) dependent on activation outcomes.
4. **Generate transferable evidence.** The measurement architecture is designed to produce data that speaks to institutional decision-makers: cost-per-activation, time-to-contribution reduction, retention lift, network density change. Qualitative depth (identity development, belonging trajectory) is maintained alongside quantitative metrics, but the evidence format is calibrated for the audiences who control scaling decisions.
5. **Complement existing ecosystem actors rather than duplicate them.** Welcome to NL and the NL Talent Coalition (commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy in collaboration with international centres, Brainport, InnovationQuarter, Nuffic, Techleap, and the Universities of the Netherlands) provide the national attraction platform: sector information, career narratives, and pre-arrival orientation for highly skilled migrants and startup founders. Their mandate ends where the activation gap begins. The pilots described here occupy the complementary space: **post-arrival activation infrastructure** that converts attraction into contribution. Where Welcome to NL and the NL Talent Coalition answer "why come to the Netherlands?", Flux Forward's pilots answer "how do you actually activate once you're here?"

### 8.2 PILOT 1: UWV–FLUX FORWARD ACTIVATION PATHWAY

<b>Institutional anchor:</b>	<b>UWV (Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen)</b>
<b>Partnership tier:</b>	Tier 1, strategic delivery partner
<b>Target population:</b>	Internationally educated knowledge workers registered with UWV, including those on WW benefits and those approaching the end of the zoekjaar (orientation year)
<b>Duration:</b>	12 months (two six-month cohorts)
<b>Location:</b>	Initial deployment in the Randstad, with explicit design for regional expansion (see Section 8.7)

**Rationale.** UWV is the institutional actor closest to the activation gap's most acute expression. It registers internationally educated professionals who are unemployed or underemployed; it has a mandate to support labour market re-entry; and its existing service model (designed for people who already understand the Dutch labour market) systematically underserves the international population. The 2026 Coalition Agreement's halving of WW duration from two to one year makes this pilot urgently relevant: internationally educated professionals now have less time to navigate a labour market that typically requires years of adaptation, and UWV's existing tools are not calibrated for the compounding frictions these individuals face (Sections 3 and 4).

The *startbaan* (launchpad) concept and *Ervaringscertificaten* (experience certificates) promotion within the Coalition Agreement provide policy hooks for this partnership. The pilot operationalises what the policy describes but has not yet built infrastructure for: structured activation pathways that recognise international credentials, provide navigational support, and accelerate time-to-contribution.

#### Design.

*Cohort structure:* 25–30 participants per cohort, selected through UWV referral based on educational background (HBO+ equivalent), time in the Netherlands (0–36 months), and current activation status (unemployed, underemployed, or in orientation year). Selection criteria include segment diversity: newcomers, mid-career professionals, graduates, and (where applicable) startup visa holders in transition.

*Programme architecture:*

- **Weeks 1–3: Stabilisation and orientation.** Emotional grounding (the "you are enough" foundation established in Section 7.2), practical system literacy (sequenced navigational guidance addressing the dependency loops described in Section 5.1), and initial assessment of each participant's activation position across practical, professional, and emotional dimensions.
- **Weeks 4–10: Translation and positioning.** Professional translation workshops (CV conversion, LinkedIn optimisation for Dutch market, interview preparation for cultural norms), sector-specific positioning support, and the beginning of network bridging activities.
- **Weeks 4–10 (parallel): PLC circles.** Professional Learning Community cycles running alongside the translation work, providing the psychosocial container described in Section 7.4: action → reflection → iteration over six-week cycles, with facilitated peer learning and identity development.

**Service design call:** We developed the Mindridge bootcamp as a specific branded service within the larger Flux Forward methodology to resolve the two-sided mismatch; on the one hand, an activation pathway for internationals to actualise their potential in practice, on the other, this meets an equally developed talent attraction and retention pathway from businesses open to diversity in the workforce.

We will pilot this as a structured intensive within this translation and positioning phase:

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- **Weeks 11–24: Activation and network bridging.** Structured introductions to employers through UWV's existing employer network, supported by the bridging mechanisms described in Section 7.5. Continued PLC participation. Progressive reduction of programme intensity as participants move toward autonomous activation.

*UWV integration:* The pilot does not replace UWV services; it augments them. UWV werkcoaches refer participants, co-facilitate employer connections, and receive structured feedback on international client needs. The design generates data on what UWV's service model would need to change to serve this population effectively at scale, making the pilot simultaneously a service intervention and a **policy R&D mechanism**.

**Key success metrics** (detailed in Section 8.6):

- 1.1 Time-to-employment or meaningful professional engagement (vs. UWV baseline for comparable population)
- 1.2 Employment quality: role-education match, contract type, salary level relative to prior experience
- 1.3 Retention at 6 and 12 months post-placement
- 1.4 Network density change (measured via participant-reported professional connections at intake and exit)
- 1.5 Emotional wellbeing trajectory (validated instrument, pre/post)UWV werkcoach assessment of service model learning

### 8.3 PILOT 2: EMPLOYER-PARTNERED B2B2C ACTIVATION PROGRAMME

**Institutional anchor:** 3–5 employer partners (target: mix of multinational, Dutch SME, and tech/startup)

<b>Partnership tier:</b>	Tier 1, co-design and co-delivery
<b>Target population:</b>	Internationally recruited employees in the first 24 months of employment, plus their partners where applicable
<b>Duration:</b>	12 months (rolling cohorts)
<b>Location:</b>	Employer sites + Flux Forward community spaces; hybrid delivery

**Rationale.** Section 5.5 documented institutional handover failure: employers invest in recruitment and onboarding but lack mechanisms for activation: the broader transition from arrival to full contribution that extends far beyond role orientation. This pilot tests whether employer-embedded activation support, co-designed with HR and delivered through Flux Forward's methodology, can measurably reduce time-to-contribution, improve retention, and generate sufficient ROI to justify employer investment at scale.

The B2B2C model (employer pays, employee and their ecosystem benefit) aligns employer interest (reduced attrition, faster productivity) with individual need (practical orientation, professional translation, emotional stabilisation, network access). It also addresses the partner dimension that emerged strongly in the research: partners arriving on dependent visas face their own activation gap, often more severe because they lack the institutional anchor of employment.

**Design.** *Employer co-design phase (months 1–2):* Collaborative needs assessment with each employer partner. Audit of current onboarding vs. activation provision. Co-design of activation pathway tailored to company culture, sector, and international employee demographics.

*Programme architecture:*

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- **First 90 Days activation track** (Section 7.2): Structured practical orientation, delivered in cohorts of 8–12 international employees (cross-company where feasible). Covers system literacy, financial orientation, healthcare navigation, housing, childcare, and the sequenced decision-making framework that addresses the opacity mechanism (Section 5.2).
- **Professional translation and positioning:** Sector-specific workshops, cultural communication coaching, Dutch workplace navigation. The Mindridge/Flux Forward bootcamp is offered as an intensive option within this track for participants seeking accelerated development, combining futures literacy and systems thinking with practical professional positioning. Alongside the bootcamp, participants receive individual coaching, peer mentoring from previously activated internationals within the same company or sector, and access to cross-company networking events.
- **PLC circles for international employees:** Ongoing peer learning communities (Section 7.4), company-specific or cross-company depending on critical mass.
- **Partner activation track:** Parallel programming for partners/spouses, addressing the partner-specific activation gap (no institutional anchor, no employer support, often no structured access to labour market or community).
- **Employer capacity building:** Training for managers and HR teams on international employee activation, not diversity awareness workshops but practical, operational support: how to recognise and respond to the activation gap's dimensions in daily management, how to facilitate network bridging within teams, how to distinguish between performance issues and activation issues.

*Measurement and reporting:* Quarterly activation reports to employer partners, measuring time-to-contribution (employer-assessed), retention, employee wellbeing, and partner activation outcomes. Reports are designed to build the business case for continued and expanded investment.

### Key success metrics:

- 2.1 Time-to-full-productivity (employer-assessed, vs. baseline for international hires without programme)
- 2.2 Retention at 12 and 24 months (vs. company baseline for international hires)
- 2.3 Employee wellbeing and belonging (validated instruments)
- 2.4 Partner activation rate (employment, study, entrepreneurship, or structured community engagement within 12 months)
- 2.5 Employer NPS / willingness to continue investment
- 2.6 Cross-company network density

### 8.4 PILOT 3: UNIVERSITY TRANSITION BRIDGE (FUTURE PHASE)

**Institutional anchor:** 1–2 Dutch universities: significant international student populations

<b>Partnership tier:</b>	Tier 1 (proposed, requires institutional development)
<b>Target population:</b>	International students in final year of study + recent graduates in orientation year
<b>Duration:</b>	18 months (spanning final study year through orientation year)
<b>Status:</b>	<i>Future phase.</i> Design outlined here for completeness; implementation contingent on university partnership development and resourcing

**Rationale.** Section 5.5 identified the university-to-labour-market cliff edge: international students are supported through enrolment and study, then released into a labour market the university has

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not prepared them for. The orientation year (*zoekjaar*) provides legal permission to stay but no activation infrastructure. The result is a critical 12–18 month period during which international graduates face the full weight of the activation gap (sponsorship filters, network-dependent access, cultural translation) with rapidly depleting resources and a hard deadline.

This pilot tests whether a structured transition bridge, beginning in the final year of study and extending through the orientation year, can measurably improve graduate retention and time-to-employment. The design leverages the university's existing relationship with students (trust, access, data) whilst extending its mandate into the activation space it currently abandons.

### **Design (indicative, subject to co-design with university partner):**

- **Final year activation preparation:** Integration into existing curriculum or extra-curricular programming. Labour market orientation specific to international students (not generic career services). Sector mapping, employer connection events, CV and LinkedIn preparation for Dutch market. Early network bridging through alumni-to-student mentoring and employer engagement.
- **Graduation transition cohort:** Intensive programme at graduation, addressing the emotional and practical dimensions of the transition. The "cliff edge" is explicitly named and structurally supported: participants do not simply "graduate"; they transition into a supported activation pathway.
- **Orientation year activation track:** 12-month structured programme covering professional translation, PLC circles, employer connections, and progressive independence. Integration with UWV services where applicable (Pilot 1 infrastructure).
- **Alumni network activation:** Building sustained connections between activated graduates and incoming cohorts, creating a self-reinforcing bridge that reduces institutional delivery cost over time.

**Regional dimension.** The Nota Ruimte 2050, the Draft Spatial Policy Document that designates Twente, Groningen-Assen, and South Limburg as *schaalsprong regio's* (scale-leap regions), provides a strategic context for this pilot. These three regions are projected for significant population and economic growth over the coming decades, with universities explicitly recognised as pivotal actors in regional spatial-economic development. The University of Twente's president, Vinod Subramaniam, has noted that "there is a clear role for the universities in these regions". These are regions currently experiencing demographic shrinkage and that stand to benefit disproportionately from retaining international graduates who might otherwise leave for the Randstad or leave the Netherlands entirely.

Flux Forward's existing connections to Twente, Groningen, and Limburg (through team members, research relationships, and community networks) position the University Transition Bridge as a natural complement to the Nota Ruimte's growth ambitions. International graduate retention is not merely an internationalisation metric; in these growth regions, it is a **regional economic development strategy**. The pilot can be designed to demonstrate this alignment explicitly, framing activation infrastructure as a mechanism for realising the spatial planning goals the national government has set.

This regional framing does not exclude potential deployment in the Randstad, where the largest concentrations of international students reside. But the growth regions offer a distinctive advantage: the scale is manageable, the university-region relationship is tighter, and the alignment between international graduate activation and regional development goals is more visible and more politically legible.

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### Key success metrics:

- 3.1 Graduate stay-rate (vs. university baseline)
- 3.2 Time-to-first-relevant-employment
- 3.3 Employment quality (role-education match, contract type)
- 3.4 Regional retention (proportion remaining in the university's region vs. relocating to Randstad)
- 3.5 Alumni network engagement and peer-bridge participation

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### 8.5 PILOT 4: STARTUP FOUNDER ACTIVATION TRACK (FUTURE PHASE)

**Institutional anchor:**

**Startup facilitator(s) + regional startup ecosystem actors**

<b>Partnership tier:</b>	Tier 1 (proposed, requires facilitator and ecosystem development)
<b>Target population:</b>	International founders on startup visas or in early-stage ventures in the Netherlands
<b>Duration:</b>	12 months (aligned with startup visa timeline)
<b>Status:</b>	<i>Future phase</i> . Design outlined here for completeness; implementation contingent on facilitator partnership and ecosystem resourcing

**Status:** *Future phase*. Design outlined here for completeness; implementation contingent on facilitator partnership and ecosystem resourcing

**Rationale.** Section 3 documented the startup visa founder's experience as the activation gap at maximum intensity: the full weight of administrative, financial, family, and cognitive pressures compressed into a 12-month timeline with immigration consequences for failure. The failure rate exceeds 60%, and the research consistently indicated that failures were often unrelated to product quality. This pilot tests whether structured activation support (specifically designed for the compounding pressures founders face) can improve conversion rates, reduce avoidable failures, and generate a model for reforming the facilitation infrastructure.

#### Design (indicative, subject to co-design with facilitator partners):

- **Arrival stabilisation package:** Immediate, structured support for the practical dimension: housing, banking, school registration, healthcare, business registration, VAT. Not information provision but **navigational accompaniment:** a named person who walks founders through the dependency loops in the first weeks.
- **Market translation support:** Intensive, ongoing support for the central founder challenge: translating a product proposition for the Dutch market. Warm introductions, feedback loops with potential customers/partners, and honest market calibration: the *tuning in to systemic signals* function described in Section 3 (Amir's vignette). This goes beyond what current facilitators provide and addresses the gap between assessment (the facilitator's mandate) and activation (the founder's need).
- **Founder peer cohort:** Structured PLC-like community for international founders, providing the normalisation, emotional support, and practical intelligence that the research identified as critical for persistence. Mixed cohorts (startup visa holders + more established international entrepreneurs) to create vertical bridging.
- **Family activation integration:** Explicit support for founder families, particularly partners facing their own activation gap whilst the founder is consumed by business development.

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Recognition that family stabilisation is not separate from business success; it is a precondition for it.

**Regional dimension.** The Nota Ruimte growth regions (Twente, Groningen-Assen, South Limburg) are investing in innovation ecosystems as part of their development strategies. International founders who succeed in these regions contribute directly to the knowledge economy and job creation goals that the spatial planning policy envisions. The Startup Founder Track can be framed as a regional innovation activation mechanism: a complement to the incubator and accelerator infrastructure that already exists in these regions, specifically addressing the activation barriers that existing programmes do not.

### Key success metrics:

- 4.1 Startup visa conversion rate (vs. national baseline of ~40%)
  - 4.2 Time-to-first-revenue or first-customer
  - 4.3 Founder wellbeing and persistence (validated instruments)
  - 4.4 Market network density (connections to potential customers, partners, investors)
  - 4.5 Family activation (partner employment/engagement within 12 months)
  - 4.6 Regional economic contribution (jobs created, investment attracted)
- 

### 8.6 MEASUREMENT ARCHITECTURE: WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The measurement architecture is designed to serve three audiences simultaneously: **participants** (who need to see their own progress), **institutional partners** (who need evidence of return on investment), and **policymakers** (who need population-level indicators to justify scaling). The architecture operates across four tiers:

#### *Tier 1: Individual activation trajectory.*

Each participant is assessed at intake and at regular intervals across the three dimensions of the activation gap:

- **Practical activation:** System literacy score (knowledge of key administrative processes, financial structures, rights), housing stability, healthcare access, legal status security. Measured via structured checklist at intake, 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months.
- **Professional activation:** Employment status, role-education match, income relative to prior experience, professional network density (number and quality of locally relevant professional connections), labour market engagement (applications, interviews, offers). Measured via self-report and employment verification.
- **Emotional and identity activation:** Validated wellbeing instrument (e.g. WHO-5 or WEMWBS), belonging scale, confidence/self-efficacy measure, identity integration indicator. Measured via survey at intake and regular intervals.

The three-dimensional assessment is not merely a measurement convenience; it operationalises the causal model from Section 5. If the activation gap is produced by the interaction of practical, professional, and emotional mechanisms, then measuring only employment outcomes misses two-thirds of the picture, and risks declaring success when someone has a job but remains isolated, under-actualised, and at risk of attrition.

#### *Tier 2: Cohort-level outcomes.*

Aggregated data across cohorts provides the evidence base for institutional partners:

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- Time-to-activation benchmarks (compared to baseline populations without programme support)
- Retention rates at 6, 12, and 24 months
- Cost-per-activation (total programme cost divided by number of participants reaching defined activation thresholds)
- Network bridging metrics (cross-community connections generated, employer introductions converted to opportunities)
- Partner/family activation rates (where applicable)

### *Tier 3: System-level indicators.*

For policymakers and scaling decisions, the measurement architecture tracks:

- Aggregate time-to-contribution reduction across cohorts
- Tax contribution trajectory of activated participants vs. matched comparison groups
- Welfare system interaction (UWV registration duration, benefit usage)
- Regional distribution of activated participants (relevant to Nota Ruimte growth region goals)
- Employer satisfaction and willingness to invest in activation infrastructure

### *Tier 4: Qualitative depth.*

Quantitative metrics capture *what* changes; qualitative methods capture *how* and *why*. The measurement architecture includes:

- Narrative interviews at intake, mid-point, and exit (a minimum of 20% of participants per cohort)
- PLC circle facilitator reflections (documenting group dynamics, identity development, breakthrough moments)
- Participant journals or structured reflection prompts (optional, consent-based)
- Employer/institutional partner interviews (capturing learning about service model adaptation)

The qualitative tier serves two functions: it provides the rich, human-scale evidence that makes the quantitative data meaningful (for reports, publications, and advocacy), and it generates the **formative intelligence** needed to adapt and improve the programme design between cohorts.

### **Ecosystem validation: Diverse Leaders in Tech as a proposed Tier 2 partner.**

The measurement architecture would benefit from external validation by organisations with established expertise in equity measurement and inclusion assessment. Diverse Leaders in Tech (DLIT), which has developed DEI benchmarking tools for the Dutch technology sector and has documented the gap between stated diversity commitments and lived inclusion experiences, represents a logical validation partner. DLIT's existing frameworks for measuring workplace inclusion could inform the development of Flux Forward's employer-side metrics, and reciprocal learning between DLIT's focus on workplace equity and Flux Forward's focus on activation infrastructure could strengthen both organisations' evidence bases.

This partnership is proposed rather than assumed. Flux Forward's current relationship with DLIT is nascent and exploratory with one key founder (the lead interviewer for this work) involved as an active member and mentor. The white paper's analysis provides a standalone argument for collaboration: DLIT's work demonstrates that demographic diversity does not automatically produce equitable treatment or belonging; Flux Forward's research demonstrates that arrival and employment do not automatically produce activation. The shared structural logic (that systemic conditions, not individual deficits, explain persistent under-outcomes) is the basis for potential partnership, to be explored once this paper generates traction and credibility in the field.

### 8.7 From pilots to infrastructure: scaling logic

The four pilots are designed as a **phased portfolio**, not a simultaneous launch. The sequencing reflects both practical constraints (partner readiness, resourcing, organisational capacity) and strategic logic (each pilot generates evidence and relationships that enable the next).

#### Phase 1 (immediate, 12–18 months): Pilots 1 and 2.

The UWV Activation Pathway and the Employer-Partnered B2B2C programme are the priority. Both have the clearest institutional logic, the most direct alignment with Flux Forward's current capabilities, and the strongest evidence base from the research. They test the core activation methodology at two critical points: the public employment system and the employer system. Success in Phase 1 generates:

- Quantitative evidence of activation impact (time-to-employment, retention, wellbeing)
- Institutional learning about serving international populations (UWV service model development, employer activation capacity)
- Operational experience with cohort delivery, PLC facilitation, and measurement architecture
- Credibility and visibility for partnership development with university and startup ecosystem actors

#### Phase 2 (medium-term, 18–36 months): Pilots 3 and 4.

The University Transition Bridge and Startup Founder Track are future phases that depend on:

- Partnership development with specific university and startup facilitator partners
- Evidence from Phase 1 demonstrating the methodology's effectiveness
- Resourcing (institutional co-investment, grant funding, or earned revenue from Phase 1 operations)
- Regional ecosystem readiness, particularly in the Nota Ruimte growth regions

The dependency structure is explicit: Phase 2 pilots are integral to the full activation infrastructure vision described in this paper, but they are not prerequisites for Phase 1 impact. Phase 1 tests whether the activation model works; Phase 2 extends it across the lifecycle and across institutional contexts.

#### Scaling from pilots to infrastructure.

The ultimate goal is not four successful pilot programmes. It is a **shift in how the Dutch system handles international talent activation**: from the current default (nobody's job) to an explicit institutional function (somebody's job, with accountability, funding, and measurable outcomes).

The scaling logic follows a specific sequence:

1. **Pilot evidence** demonstrates that structured activation support produces measurable, cost-effective outcomes.
2. **Institutional learning** from pilot partnerships (UWV, employers, universities) generates internal appetite for service model adaptation.
3. **Policy advocacy**, anchored in the evidence from Pilots 1–4 and framed through the Coalition Agreement's own language (talent strategy, *startbaan*, *Ervaringscertificaten*), makes the case for activation infrastructure as a public value function.
4. **Institutional adoption** embeds activation mechanisms into existing mandates: UWV integrates international-specific pathways, universities extend career services through

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the orientation year, employers adopt activation as standard practice for international hires, municipalities include activation in economic development strategies.

5. **Infrastructure emergence:** What began as Flux Forward pilot programmes becomes embedded institutional practice: no longer dependent on a single organisation but distributed across the actors who hold the levers identified in Section 6.

This trajectory requires sustained evidence generation, relationship building, and the political conditions that make institutional change possible. Given the economic and policy-driven pressures of the current moment, a fresh coalition government explicitly committed to talent retention, Nota Ruimte growth regions investing in knowledge economies, Divosa signalling interest in social domain partnership, and with the costs of under-actualisation becoming more visible, there is now an fleeting window of opportunity in which the trajectory from pilots to infrastructure is plausible, achievable, and politically legible.

The activation gap was not created by the absence of a single programme. It will not be closed by one either. But the pilots described here are designed to prove, in practice, that closing it is possible, and to generate the evidence, relationships, and institutional learning needed to make the proof scalable.

## 9. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sections 7 and 8 described Flux Forward's proposed design for a portfolio of five intervention components and how it proposes to test it through four phased pilots with institutional partners. This section now turns to tangible implications and recommendations: **what needs to change beyond what any single organisation can deliver?**

The maintenance mechanisms identified in Section 5 operate at system levels that require policy and institutional responses: changes in rules, goals, information flows, and accountability structures that only the actors mapped in Section 6 can make. The recommendations that follow are addressed to those actors. They are mapped to specific mechanisms and leverage points, designed to complement the pilot infrastructure described in Section 8, and framed within the current political context, including the 2026 Coalition Agreement's explicit talent retention ambitions and the democratic resilience imperative that the March 2026 municipal elections have made more visible.

### 9.1 THE CENTRAL RECOMMENDATION: MAKE ACTIVATION A NATIONAL FUNCTION FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

The single most consequential finding of this paper is that **activation is nobody's explicit institutional responsibility.**

Section 5.5 documented the mechanism: employers recruit, universities enrol, facilitators assess, municipalities welcome. Each mandate ends at its own boundary. The human being who crosses all these boundaries has no institutional counterpart whose job is to see the whole picture. Section 6.9 confirmed the pattern across the full actor map: every mechanism in the activation trap has actors who hold relevant levers, and every actor has structural reasons for not pulling them. The white space between completed mandates is where the activation gap reproduces itself.

The central policy recommendation of this paper is therefore structural, not programmatic: **activation must become an explicit institutional goal, with accountable actors, measurable outcomes, and funded delivery mechanisms.**

This means, concretely:

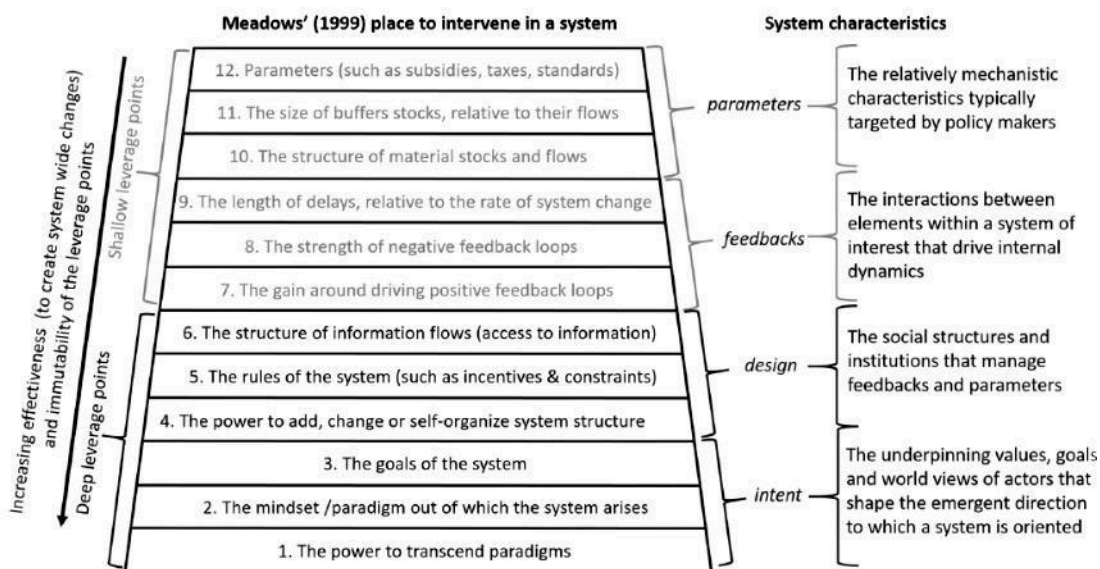
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**Someone must be measured on time-to-contribution.** Currently, no institution tracks whether an internationally recruited knowledge worker reaches full professional potential. Employers measure time-to-fill; universities measure graduation rates; municipalities measure registration numbers. These are input metrics for a system that is failing on outputs. Until activation outcomes (time-to-relevant-employment, role-education match, network density, wellbeing trajectory, retention) become accountable metrics for institutional actors, the gap will persist.

**Someone must own the whole-person transition.** The institutional handover failure is a mandate gap. Closing it does not require every institution to expand its mandate into territory it cannot credibly serve. It requires the creation (or commissioning) of an **activation function** that operates in the spaces between mandates: seeing the whole person, holding the transition across practical, professional, and emotional dimensions, and connecting what employers, universities, municipalities, and policy actors each provide into a coherent pathway. Section 7 described what this function looks like in practice. Section 8 proposed how to test it. This section asks: *what institutional conditions are needed for it to exist at scale?*

**Activation must be funded as infrastructure, not as programmes.** Programmes are time-limited, funder-dependent, and serve the individuals who happen to participate. Infrastructure is sustained, institutionally embedded, and changes the default conditions that entire populations encounter. The distinction matters because the activation gap is structural: it reproduces itself across cohorts, across segments, across political cycles. A funding model that treats activation as a project will produce project-scale results. A funding model that treats it as infrastructure (analogous to roads, education, or healthcare) can produce systemic change.

The following recommendations translate this central principle into actor-specific terms. Each recommendation is mapped to the maintenance mechanisms it addresses and the Meadows/Abson system level at which it intervenes.



**Figure 2:** Leverage points to intervene in the system as a recommendation guide for social innovators, policy-makers and change leaders. Source Abson et al (2016). Provides the meaning for **Table 4** below, which itself acts as a structural guide for each sub-section's focus.

Recommendation domain	Mechanisms addressed	Meadows levels	Abson realm
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9.3 Employers	5.3 Network closure, 5.4 Identity disruption, 5.5 Handover failure	7, 5, 3	Feedbacks → Intent
9.4 Universities	5.2 Opacity, 5.3 Network closure, 5.5 Handover failure	6, 5, 3	Design → Intent
9.5 Municipalities & regions	5.1 Systems friction, 5.2 Opacity, 5.5 Handover failure	10, 9, 6, 5	Parameters → Design
9.6 UWV	5.1 Systems friction, 5.2 Opacity, 5.3 Network closure, 5.5 Handover failure	10, 6, 5, 3	Parameters → Intent
9.7 National policy	5.1 Systems friction, 5.6 Policy narrative tightening	5, 3, 2	Design → Intent
9.8 Ecosystem coordination	5.5 Handover failure (all mechanisms indirectly)	5, 3	Design → Intent

### 9.2 THE DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE ARGUMENT: WHY THIS CANNOT WAIT

The economic case for activation infrastructure is straightforward and has been established throughout this paper: under-actualised international knowledge workers represent wasted human capital, delayed tax contribution, avoidable attrition, and missed innovation, at a moment when the Coalition Agreement explicitly commits to attracting, training, and retaining talent for the labour market and science. But the economic case alone underestimates the urgency. There is a **democratic resilience case** that the current political moment makes impossible to defer.

When capable, motivated individuals encounter opaque systems, thin relational infrastructure, and persistent exclusion (and then experience under-actualisation as personal failure), the emotional and narrative arc becomes politically consequential. The predictable emotions are shame, anger, resentment, and withdrawal. The predictable narratives are "the system is closed," "they do not want us here," "nothing I do matters." These are not neutral byproducts of an inefficient system. They are the conditions under which both exclusionary rhetoric and self-segregating coping strategies become emotionally dysfunctional, and under which polarisation becomes structurally easier to mobilise by actors who stand to gain from stoking fear, division and hatred of the 'other'.

The March 2026 municipal elections provided a concrete illustration. Forum voor Democratie (ironically named) won approximately 300 council seats across the Netherlands, up from 54 in 2022: a nearly sixfold increase and by far the largest gain of any party.<sup>[1][2]</sup> FvD secured seats in every one of the 104 municipalities where it fielded candidates, out of 342 nationwide. The party campaigned substantially on anti-immigration sentiment and resistance to asylum seeker housing, themes that resonated in a political landscape where housing scarcity, cultural anxiety, and institutional distrust intersect.<sup>[3]</sup> NRC's analysis noted the significant far-right gains in a fragmented landscape where housing had become the dominant campaign issue, with asylum centre debates occupying an increasingly prominent place.

More than mere peripheral signal, this evidences the conditions described throughout this paper (institutional indifference, structural exclusion, the felt sense of a system that recruits but does not activate) feed directly into the political dynamics that undermine democratic cohesion.

Under-actualised internationals whose frustration turns to withdrawal and resentment provide anecdotal confirmation for exclusionary narratives ("they don't integrate," "they take but don't contribute"). Meanwhile, Dutch citizens whose own economic precarity and housing anxiety make them receptive to scapegoating narratives encounter a system that appears to import talent it

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cannot use, reinforcing the sense that immigration is a problem to be managed rather than a resource to be activated.

Activation infrastructure interrupts this dynamic at its structural root. When international knowledge workers are visibly contributing (employed at their level, networked into their communities, paying taxes, generating innovation, participating in civic life), the rhetorical basis for exclusionary narratives weakens. Trust is regenerated when the social contract feels reciprocal, legible, and fair, the emotional palpability of polarisation diminishes. This is the policy corollary of the causal model this paper has developed. If under-actualisation produces the conditions for polarisation (Section 5), then reducing under-actualisation reduces those conditions.

The government's own Coalition Agreement frames democratic legitimacy and social cohesion as stated priorities.<sup>[4]</sup> Taking those commitments seriously means addressing the structural conditions that generate distrust, withdrawal, and resentment: conditions that activation infrastructure is designed to prevent. In a political environment where FvD can multiply its local representation sixfold in a single election cycle, and where a minority coalition must assemble different parliamentary majorities for different issues, the activation gap goes beyond an economic inefficiency. It remains a **democratic vulnerability**.

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### 9.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

<i><b>Mechanisms addressed</b></i>	<b>5.3 (network closure), 5.4 (identity disruption), 5.5 (institutional handover failure)</b>
<i><b>Meadows levels</b></i>	<b>7 (feedback loops), 5 (rules), 3 (system goals)</b>
<i><b>Abson realms</b></i>	<b>Feedbacks, Design, Intent</b>

Section 6.3 documented the paradox: employers hold some of the most consequential levers in the activation system and exercise them the least. They control hiring decisions, onboarding design, workplace inclusion culture, and the budgets that could fund activation. Yet they frame international talent as a hiring problem, not an activation problem, and measure time-to-fill rather than time-to-contribution.

The recommendations for employers operate at three levels:

**Extend onboarding into activation.** Onboarding is not activation. Onboarding is orientation to a role; activation is orientation to a life. Employers who recruit internationally should commission or develop structured activation support that extends beyond the first weeks into the first 12–24 months: system literacy for the employee and partner, network bridging within and beyond the organisation, identity-sensitive management guidance for team leads, and recurring check-in cycles. The cost of a structured activation package is a fraction of the recruitment, relocation, and visa sponsorship investment already made. The return shows up as reduced attrition, faster time-to-contribution, and higher engagement. Pilot 2 (Section 8.3) is designed to demonstrate this ROI in partnership with 3–5 employer partners; the evidence it generates will provide the business case for sector-wide adoption.

**Measure what matters.** Until employers track time-to-contribution and international employee activation outcomes alongside standard HR metrics, the cost of under-activation will remain invisible, attributed to "poor fit" or "cultural mismatch" in exit interviews rather than to the absence of activation infrastructure. The recommendation is to adopt activation-aware metrics:

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time-to-full-productivity (employer-assessed), role-education match at 12 and 24 months, international employee retention relative to domestic employee baseline, and network integration indicators. These metrics make the business case self-evident and create the institutional feedback loop that is currently missing.

**Reframe the language requirement.** Sections 3 and 4 documented that Dutch language proficiency is frequently applied as a filter that conceals deeper selection preferences: familiarity, perceived integration effort, cultural "fit." Employers should audit where language requirements are genuinely functional (customer-facing roles, safety-critical communication) and where they function as proxy filters for comfort and familiarity. The Coalition Agreement's emphasis on talent retention is structurally undermined if employers continue to use language as an exclusion mechanism for roles where English-language capability is sufficient. This is not a recommendation to deprioritise Dutch (language matters for belonging and long-term integration), but to distinguish between language as a genuine job requirement and language as a gatekeeping heuristic.

The Coalition Agreement's increased employer responsibilities for labour migrant conditions (including housing) create an additional incentive.<sup>[5]</sup> Organisations investing more in international workers have a direct interest in ensuring those workers actually become productive, retained, and contributive. The policy environment is aligning employer interest with activation outcomes; the missing piece is the operational infrastructure to act on that alignment.

### 9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

**Mechanisms addressed** 5.2 (opacity), 5.3 (network closure), 5.5 (institutional handover failure)

<b>Meadows levels</b>	6 (information flows), 5 (rules), 3 (system goals)
<b>Abson realms</b>	Design, Intent

Section 6.4 identified the university cliff edge: comprehensive support during enrolment, then release into a labour market the university has not prepared the graduate for. The orientation year provides legal permission to stay but no activation infrastructure.

**Extend the institutional mandate through the orientation year.** Career services should be redesigned (or supplemented) to serve international graduates specifically: addressing sponsorship-constrained job search, network-dependent access, and the cultural translation challenges that generic career advice does not cover. The university's relationship with the graduate should not end at graduation but extend through the *zoekjaar*, the period when activation support has the highest return and the cliff edge is most dangerous. Pilot 3 (Section 8.4) proposes a University Transition Bridge that spans the final study year through the orientation year; universities can begin laying the groundwork for this by auditing their current international graduate support against the activation gap dimensions documented in Section 4.

**Build alumni-to-student activation bridges.** Every international graduate who successfully navigates the Dutch labour market holds intelligence that could accelerate the next cohort's transition. Universities should formalise alumni-to-student mentoring specifically for international graduates, creating a self-reinforcing bridge that reduces institutional delivery cost over time and generates the warm introductions that Section 5.3 identified as the critical missing resource. Back when internationalisation was still in vogue, many universities built these networks informally; the recommendation is to make them structural.

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**Align internationalisation strategy with regional development.** The Nota Ruimte 2050 designates Twente, Groningen-Assen, and South Limburg as *schaalsprong regio's*: scale-leap regions projected for significant population and economic growth, with universities explicitly recognised as pivotal actors in regional spatial-economic development. International graduate retention is not merely an internationalisation metric in these regions; it is a **regional economic development strategy**. Universities in growth regions should frame activation infrastructure as a mechanism for realising spatial planning goals, a framing that aligns institutional self-interest with national policy priorities and provides a politically legible rationale for investment in post-graduation activation support.

### 9.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUNICIPALITIES AND REGIONAL ACTORS

**Mechanisms addressed** 5.1 (systems friction), 5.2 (opacity), 5.5 (institutional handover failure)

<b>Meadows levels</b>	10 (stock-and-flow), 9 (delays), 6 (information flows), 5 (rules)
<b>Abson realms</b>	Parameters, Feedbacks, Design

Section 6.6 documented the municipal paradox: municipalities have both the local presence to deliver activation support and the economic development mandate that activation would serve, yet their engagement with international talent typically ends after a welcome event and a registration appointment.

**Commission activation infrastructure, not welcome programmes.** The planned alignment of the Participatiewet and Inburgeringswet, with municipalities retaining a central delivery role, creates an institutional window. Municipalities need external activation partners who can deliver measurable outcomes within simplified frameworks. But the frameworks must be calibrated for the population. International knowledge workers are not statushouders; their needs, trajectories, and potential contributions are structurally different. A municipality that applies the same integration framework to both populations will underserve both. The recommendation is to commission segment-specific activation services, delivered by organisations with granular understanding of the international knowledge worker population, alongside (not instead of) existing integration provision.

Divosa's assessment of the Coalition Agreement, "*het kabinet zoekt bondgenoot in het sociaal domein*" (the government is looking for allies in the social domain), is, in practical terms, an invitation. [6] Municipalities positioned as delivery partners for integration and participation should take it seriously, ensuring that the partners they engage bring the activation-specific expertise the population requires.

**Leverage the Nota Ruimte growth region framework.** For municipalities within the designated *schaalsprong regio's* (Twente, Groningen-Assen, South Limburg), activation infrastructure is not an add-on to economic development strategy; it is a **precondition** for it. These regions are investing in innovation ecosystems, knowledge economies, and population growth. International talent retention is integral to each of these goals. Municipal and regional economic boards should integrate activation support into their talent strategies, commissioning local activation infrastructure that complements university transition bridges (Pilot 3) and startup ecosystem support (Pilot 4) whilst connecting to the national UWV pathway (Pilot 1).

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This regional framing does not exclude the Randstad, where the largest concentrations of international knowledge workers reside. But the growth regions offer a distinctive opportunity: the scale is manageable, the university-region-municipality relationship is tighter, and the alignment between international talent activation and national spatial planning goals is more visible and more politically legible.

**Reduce systems friction through coordinated municipal design.** The dependency loops described in Section 5.1 (BSN, bank account, phone, housing, healthcare, IND) are not accidental but structurally reproduced by a system designed for people who already understand how it works. Municipalities cannot redesign the entire administrative architecture, but they can create **sequenced navigational infrastructure** at the local level: structured, maintained guides to the critical decisions and dependencies of arrival, available in English and calibrated to the actual decision-making order of someone newly arrived. Several research participants described this as the single most valuable intervention they could imagine. It is also one of the least expensive to provide. The First 90 Days component of the activation model (Section 7.2) demonstrates what this looks like in practice; municipalities can commission equivalent navigational support as a standard element of their welcome and integration infrastructure.

### 9.6 UWV AS THE PRAGMATIC NATIONAL ENTRY POINT

**Mechanisms addressed** 5.1 (systems friction), 5.2 (opacity), 5.3 (network closure), 5.5 (institutional handover failure)

<b>Meadows levels</b>	10 (stock-and-flow), 6 (information flows), 5 (rules), 3 (system goals)
<b>Abson realms</b>	Parameters through Intent

UWV registers internationally educated professionals who are unemployed or underemployed; it maintains job-search infrastructure and employer networks; it governs the re-entry pathways through which "employability" is implicitly defined. For international knowledge workers who lose employment (now facing a one-year WW window instead of two), UWV is the institutional actor whose infrastructure determines whether re-activation is structured or chaotic.

UWV's existing service model, however, is designed for people who already understand the Dutch labour market. Werkcoaches trained on standard re-employment pathways are not calibrated for the compounding frictions that international knowledge workers face: sponsorship constraints, network-dependent access, cultural translation challenges, and the identity disruption that Section 5.4 identified as an invisible but consequential filtering mechanism. The result is a service that underserves precisely the population whose activation matters most for the economic and democratic outcomes the government has committed to.

The recommendation is to position UWV as the **national anchor for activation infrastructure**: commissioning structured, segment-specific activation pathways for internationally educated knowledge workers, delivered through partnerships with specialist activation organisations. Pilot 1 (Section 8.2) proposes the operational design (12-month cohort-based programmes combining stabilisation, professional translation, PLC circles, and network bridging) and is calibrated to generate the evidence UWV needs to assess scalability. The pilot simultaneously delivers a service intervention and a **policy R&D mechanism**: generating data on what UWV's service model would need to change to serve this population effectively at scale.

The Coalition Agreement provides direct policy hooks. The *startbaan* concept (combining integration and work from day one), and the promotion of *Ervaringscertificaten* (experience certificates), are precisely the kind of policy aspirations that require operational infrastructure to

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become real.<sup>[6]</sup> Without delivery mechanisms, they risk remaining what Section 5.6 described as a maintenance mechanism in their own right: generating hope that the system is improving whilst the lived reality of navigating it remains unchanged. UWV-partnered activation pathways are the infrastructure that operationalises these aspirations.

The halving of WW duration from two years to one raises the stakes further.<sup>[7]</sup> Given that professional activation in the Dutch market typically takes years rather than months, a one-year unemployment buffer is acutely insufficient for people navigating sponsorship constraints, network-dependent access, and cultural translation simultaneously. Structured activation support within the WW period is not a supplementary service; it is the mechanism that determines whether the shorter benefit window produces faster activation or faster attrition.

### 9.7 NATIONAL POLICY: IND, MINISTRIES, AND THE COALITION AGREEMENT WINDOW

<i>Mechanisms addressed</i>	5.1 (systems friction), 5.6 (policy narrative tightening)
<i>Meadows levels</i>	5 (rules), 3 (goals), 2 (paradigm)
<i>Abson realms</i>	Design, Intent

National policy actors hold the levers that shape the architecture within which all other actors operate. The recommendations here are directed at the system levels that Section 5 identified as deepest and most consequential, and that current policy addresses only partially.

**Simplify visa administration to reduce systems friction.** IND's operational priorities (compliance, security, processing volume) are not aligned with activation outcomes. Every processing delay, every circular dependency between visa status and administrative registration, every regulation that adds complexity without proportionate benefit, imposes the cognitive load tax described in Section 5.1. The recommendation is not to weaken immigration controls but to apply an **activation impact lens** to regulatory design: asking, for each administrative requirement, whether the friction it creates is proportionate to the security or compliance benefit it provides. Simplifying startup visa pathways (where the 60%+ failure rate is driven substantially by activation barriers rather than product quality) would be a high-return starting point.

**Make activation an explicit policy goal.** The Coalition Agreement's talent retention strategy commits to attracting, training, and retaining international talent. "Retaining" is the weakest link, because the mechanisms that determine whether someone stays (and whether they contribute at their potential) are precisely the activation mechanisms this paper has documented. The recommendation is to make activation a **named policy outcome**, with measurable indicators (time-to-contribution, role-education match, retention rates, activation trajectory scores) tracked alongside existing immigration and integration metrics. This is a paradigm-level intervention in Meadows' terms: it changes what the system counts, what it values, and what institutional actors are held accountable for.

**Align the Participatiewet and Inburgeringswet around activation outcomes.** The Coalition Agreement's planned alignment of these frameworks creates a once-in-a-cycle institutional window. If the aligned framework measures only compliance (language test passed, civic integration completed, job obtained), it will reproduce the same gap: people who satisfy formal requirements but remain structurally under-actualised. If it measures activation

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(time-to-relevant-employment, network integration, wellbeing trajectory, contribution quality), it creates institutional accountability for the outcomes that matter. The recommendation is to embed activation metrics into the aligned framework's evaluation architecture, and to fund the delivery infrastructure needed to achieve them.

**Use the three-year skilled worker pilot as an activation testbed.** The Coalition Agreement's three-year skilled worker pilot for specific sectors generates a defined cohort entering the Dutch labour market with explicit government support. This cohort can serve as a natural experiment: structured activation support for pilot participants, measured against comparable populations without such support, would generate the policy-grade evidence needed to justify national-scale activation infrastructure. The pilot's time-limited, sector-specific design makes it a low-risk opportunity to demonstrate what activation infrastructure delivers, and what its absence costs.

**Treat the minority government's coalition-building requirement as a feature, an asset, not a constraint.** The current government holds 66 of 150 seats: every legislative proposal requires opposition support.<sup>[4]</sup> This means implementation timelines remain uncertain by design. But it also means that pragmatic, evidence-based, cross-partisan proposals have an opening. Activation infrastructure is precisely such a proposal: it serves economic goals (talent utilisation, tax contribution, innovation), social goals (cohesion, belonging, reduced polarisation), and institutional goals (more effective public services, better integration outcomes).

No new ideology; merely treating existing human capital with the seriousness the government's own rhetoric implies. If you are serious about taking more control of immigration, then follow that through to the entire problem in society, state and economy; we have comprehensively mapped this out in this paper.

A pilot-based, evidence-generating approach (as described in Section 8) fits a political environment where expensive new programmes are unlikely but where efficient, measurable interventions can build cross-partisan support.

### 9.8 ECOSYSTEM COORDINATION: THE MISSING CONVENING FUNCTION

<b><i>Mechanisms addressed</i></b>	<b>5.5 (institutional handover failure), all mechanisms indirectly</b>
<b><i>Meadows levels</i></b>	5 (rules), 3 (goals)
<b><i>Abson realms</i></b>	Design, Intent

Section 6.9 identified the deepest structural feature of the activation gap: **the absence of a convening actor** with the mandate, legitimacy, and operational capacity to bring institutional actors together around shared activation outcomes. Employers, universities, municipalities, UWV, and community organisations each hold partial levers. Nobody coordinates the pulling.

The ecosystem coordination recommendation has two dimensions:

**Clarify the attraction-activation division of labour.** Welcome to NL and the NL Talent Coalition<sup>3</sup> provide the national attraction platform: sector information, career narratives, and pre-arrival orientation for highly skilled migrants and startup founders. Their mandate answers the question: *why come to the Netherlands?* What does not currently exist at equivalent institutional scale is the

<sup>3</sup> Commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy in collaboration with international centres, Brainport, InnovationQuarter, Nuffic, Techleap, and the Universities of the Netherlands

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activation infrastructure that answers the subsequent question: *how do you actually contribute once you're here?*

This is not a criticism of the existing ecosystem; it is a description of where the gap falls. The attraction end of the pipeline is institutionally supported; the activation end is not. The recommendation is to establish a **complementary national activation function** (positioned alongside Welcome to NL and the NL Talent Coalition, not in competition with them) that provides the post-arrival infrastructure the attraction pipeline currently lacks. Section 7 described what the activation function looks like in practice; the ecosystem coordination challenge is to connect it to the actors who control the institutional levers and equip them with more agency to expand their effective governance of a structural solution.

**Build cross-actor learning infrastructure.** The activation gap is a coordination failure, and coordination failures require shared intelligence. Organisations working on adjacent problems (Diverse Leaders in Tech on workplace equity measurement, Flux Forward on activation infrastructure, community organisations on peer support, universities on graduate retention, UWV on employment pathways) generate knowledge that could inform each other's work. But there is no mechanism for this intelligence to circulate. The recommendation is to create structured learning partnerships (shared measurement frameworks, joint evidence reviews, cross-organisational pilot evaluations) that allow the ecosystem to learn as a system rather than as isolated actors. DLIT's existing DEI benchmarking tools, for instance, could inform the development of employer-side activation metrics, and reciprocal learning between workplace equity measurement and activation infrastructure design could strengthen both evidence bases.

The evidence that these connections are logical and mutually beneficial is a standalone argument for collaboration, one that can be pursued once the pilot evidence described in Section 8 demonstrates the model's credibility and the activation infrastructure concept gains institutional traction.

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### 9.9 SPECIFICATION ON OUR RECOMMENDATIONS' PURPOSE

To be precise about the framing: **this is not about loosening migration**. It is about not wasting the people already here, and reducing the polarisation drivers created by under-actualisation.

The recommendations in this section do not propose expanding immigration, relaxing visa requirements, or deprioritising integration. They propose treating the internationally educated knowledge workers whom the Netherlands has already recruited, enrolled, sponsored, and welcomed as people whose full activation serves everyone's interest: economic, social, democratic. The distinction matters in a political environment where any discussion of international talent risks being collapsed into a migration debate.

The Coalition Agreement's dual move (recruiting internationally whilst making belonging harder) does not resolve the activation trap; it intensifies it (Section 5.6). But the same Coalition Agreement contains the policy hooks that make activation infrastructure politically viable: talent retention as an explicit goal, *startbaan* as an operational concept, *Ervaringscertificaten* as a recognition mechanism, Participatiewet/Inburgeringswet alignment as an institutional window, and the stated commitment to democratic legitimacy and social cohesion.<sup>[4][7]</sup> The recommendations in this section take those commitments at face value and propose the operational infrastructure needed to deliver on them.

The urgency is real. In the twelve days between the March 18 municipal elections (in which Forum voor Democratie multiplied its local council representation nearly sixfold) and the writing of this section, several FvD council factions had already splintered before their members were even

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installed.<sup>[8]</sup> The pattern is familiar: far-right parties mobilise frustration more effectively than they govern. But the frustration they mobilise is not manufactured from nothing. It feeds on real conditions that have to be acknowledged: housing scarcity, institutional opacity, the felt experience that the system serves some and excludes others. When under-actualised internationals become visible as people who "take but don't contribute" (a perception the activation gap structurally produces), the rhetorical ammunition is real, even when the underlying cause is structural failure rather than individual deficit.

Activation infrastructure addresses this by **removing the structural conditions that make them plausible**. When international knowledge workers are contributing at their level, networked into their communities, and visibly part of the social fabric, the narrative that "they don't integrate" loses its empirical basis. This regenerates trust in the social contract as one that feels reciprocal and fair; a direct policy outcome of the causal model this paper has developed across eight sections and 50+ research interactions.

The recommendations are designed for the current moment: a minority government that needs pragmatic, evidence-based proposals; a fiscal environment that favours efficient activation of existing resources over expensive new programmes; a regional development framework that explicitly values knowledge economy growth; and a democratic landscape in which the cost of inaction is measured not only in lost economic output but in the conditions that feed political instability. Flux Forward's lean, pilot-based, outcome-measurable model is engineered for this moment. The question is not whether the Netherlands can afford to build activation infrastructure. The question, given what the activation gap costs economically, socially, and democratically, is whether it can afford not to.

## 10. CONCLUSION: FROM UNDER-ACTUALISATION TO REGENERATING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR TRUST & IMPACT

### 10.1 STRUCTURAL ANATOMY OF A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The eight preceding sections developed a structural answer to a deceptively simple question: *how is it that the Netherlands recruits international knowledge workers it then fails to activate?*

The answer, as it emerged across 50+ research interactions and a full-spectrum systems analysis, turned out to be neither simple nor individual. Six composite vignettes revealed an activation gap operating across three dimensions (practical, professional, and emotional/identity) that no single intervention addresses because no single mechanism produces it (Sections 3 and 4). Seven maintenance mechanisms, mapped to Meadows' leverage point hierarchy and Abson et al.'s realms of transformation, showed how the gap reproduces itself through systems friction, opacity, network closure, identity disruption, institutional handover failure, policy narrative tightening, and labour market contraction (Section 5). An ecosystem analysis demonstrated that every relevant institutional actor holds partial levers for change, and that every actor has structural reasons for leaving those levers untouched (Section 6). The white space between completed mandates, where activation should happen and nobody is accountable for it, emerged as the system's deepest feature.

Flux Forward's five-component intervention portfolio (Section 7) was designed to occupy that white space: providing the whole-person, multi-dimensional activation support that the institutional architecture currently lacks. Four phased pilots (Section 8) propose to test whether the model delivers measurable outcomes in partnership with the institutional actors who hold the levers: UWV, employers, universities, and the startup ecosystem. Section 9 translated the analysis into

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actor-specific policy recommendations mapped to the mechanisms and system levels where intervention carries the most transformative potential.

The central finding runs through as a *rode draad*: **under-actualisation is structurally maintained**. The research participants demonstrated individual effort, resilience, and adaptive capability in abundance. These qualities were not sufficient (and cannot be sufficient) because the mechanisms that generate under-actualisation operate at system levels that individual action cannot reach. The problem reproduces itself across cohorts, across segments, across political cycles, because the conditions that generate it are embedded in institutional design, information flows, accountability structures, and the paradigmatic assumptions about whose responsibility activation is.

### 10.2 OMWENTELING: FROM INDIVIDUAL INTEGRATION DEFICIT TO SYSTEMIC ACTIVATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Donella Meadows placed paradigms at the second-deepest leverage point in her hierarchy of system interventions, exceeded only by the capacity to transcend paradigms altogether. She described them as "*the shared ideas in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions... the deepest set of beliefs about how the world works*" (Meadows, 1999). Thomas Kuhn, whose work on the structure of scientific revolutions gave the concept its modern currency, defined a paradigm as the framework of assumptions and methods that a community treats as given: the lens through which evidence is interpreted and problems are defined (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962). Abson et al. (2017) built on both, situating paradigms within the *Intent* realm of their leverage point taxonomy: the deepest layer, where transformative change becomes possible because the system's goals and worldview shift rather than merely its parameters or feedback loops.

In everyday terms, a paradigm is a collective mindset: the set of assumptions so deeply held that they feel like facts rather than choices. Shifting a paradigm means changing what a society sees when it looks at a familiar situation, and therefore what it considers possible, necessary, and worth measuring. The reason paradigm shifts carry such transformative potential, as Meadows argued, is that once the underlying assumptions change, the rules, information flows, and feedback structures built on those assumptions begin to reorganise themselves.

The dominant paradigm framing of international talent in the Netherlands<sup>4</sup> treats under-actualisation as an **integration deficit**. The implicit model runs as follows: the Netherlands provides opportunity; the international provides effort; where effort proves sufficient, integration follows. When integration does not follow, the explanatory default is individual: insufficient language acquisition, insufficient networking initiative, insufficient cultural adaptation. The maintenance mechanisms reveal this model as structurally incomplete and, in its incompleteness, actively harmful. It misattributes system-level failure to individual shortcoming, and in doing so, shields the institutional actors whose mandates collectively produce the gap from accountability for addressing it.

The evidence developed across this paper points toward a fundamentally different paradigm: one in which activation is understood as **infrastructure**, a public good requiring institutional investment, accountable actors, and systemic design. We may make an apt analogy. Roads, education, and healthcare are understood as infrastructure because societies recognised that individuals cannot produce these outcomes for themselves, however capable or motivated. Activation operates by the same logic. The conditions for full professional contribution (system literacy, network access,

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<sup>4</sup> We at Flux Forward propose this could be a common framing in many wealthy western nations dealing with complex im/migration issues, which we would explore with the actors laid out in the ecosystem, an extended pilot phase across the countries willing to participate in doing the inner work.

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identity continuity, institutional coordination) exceed what any individual can build alone, particularly when seven maintenance mechanisms actively work against their doing so.

The shift from integration deficit to activation infrastructure carries specific implications for how institutions understand their role:

Where the **integration paradigm** asks "*has this person adapted?*", the **activation paradigm** asks "*have we built the conditions for contribution?*" Where the integration paradigm measures compliance (language test passed, civic exam completed, job obtained), the activation paradigm measures outcomes: time-to-relevant-employment, network density, wellbeing trajectory, contribution quality. Where the integration paradigm locates responsibility with the arriving individual, the activation paradigm distributes it across the institutional actors whose mandates, taken together, determine whether activation occurs.

The paradigm shift (or, in more immediate terms, the mindset shift) also extends beyond policy design. It offers a different mental model for anyone who encounters international colleagues, neighbours, or community members in the course of daily life. The colleague who seems "not integrated" may be treading water in a system that recruited them but built no infrastructure for their contribution. The neighbour who seems withdrawn may be navigating identity disruption that no institution acknowledges or supports. The professional who "doesn't speak Dutch" may hold capabilities the labour market urgently needs but cannot access through the channels it has constructed. Seeing under-actualisation as structural rather than individual changes what solidarity looks like, what institutional accountability requires, and what the social contract genuinely demands.

These are lenses worth carrying beyond this white paper. The next time a policy document frames international talent as an integration challenge, the question we encourage you instead to pose becomes: *integration into what, and maintained by whom?* The next time an employer attributes international employee attrition to "cultural fit," the question becomes: *whose culture adapted, and whose infrastructure was absent?* The next time a political narrative frames immigration as burden rather than resource, question that: *what would the evidence show if activation were an actual public agency's job - a national function?*

### 10.3 THE INVITATION: RECIPROCITY, RESILIENCE, AND REGENERATION

The paper's title, *Treading Water in the Lowlands*, carries a deliberate double meaning. The people documented in these pages are treading water: sustaining themselves through effort, resilience, and adaptation while the structural conditions for their full contribution remain unbuilt. The system itself is treading water too: expending institutional energy on attraction, recruitment, and welcome without building the activation infrastructure that would convert that investment into sustained value: economic, social, democratic.

Section 2 committed this research to treating participants as agents rather than subjects who fit neatly into boxes: people whose knowledge, capability, nuanced lived experiences and dignity are not diminished by the structural conditions they navigate. That commitment extends to the recommendations. The activation infrastructure proposed throughout this paper serves everyone's interest precisely *because* it takes the capabilities of international knowledge workers seriously. Treating people as contributors to be activated operates in a fundamentally different register from treating them as problems to be managed. This deficit-based mindset recalls the need for the action research tradition of 'appreciative inquiry', where we focus on the assets, competencies and skills of professionals or actors in a system that are inherent and under-actualised, rather than detrimental and a personal failure (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Zandee, 2008). The distinction shapes whether the social contract feels reciprocal, whether it

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generates the mutual investment and belonging that cohesive societies depend on, or whether it generates the resentment, withdrawal, and disengagement that earlier sections documented as politically consequential.

Reciprocity, here, carries a specific meaning. The Netherlands asks international knowledge workers to learn the language, understand the culture, contribute economically, and participate in civic life. These are reasonable expectations. What reciprocity asks in return is that the institutional environment makes these outcomes realistically achievable: that the system literacy, network access, professional recognition, and psycho-social scaffolding required for contribution are treated as shared responsibilities rather than left to individual improvisation. When the expectations flow in only one direction, the social contract feels extractive rather than reciprocal. And extractive social contracts, as the democratic resilience argument in Section 9.2 established, produce the conditions under which exclusionary politics find their structural footing.

The March 2026 municipal elections made this dynamic visible at scale. Forum voor Democratie's sixfold increase in local council seats (from 54 to approximately 300) did not materialise from political vacuum. It fed on conditions that activation infrastructure is designed to address: housing scarcity compounded by institutional opacity, cultural anxiety amplified by visible under-actualisation, democratic distrust deepened by a system that appears to import talent it cannot use for positions some deem to belong inherently to their group alone. The democratic case for activation runs parallel to the economic case, and neither is reducible to the other. Societies that leave their people's potential unrealised (we refer deliberately to both our core beneficiaries, international knowledge workers, as well as Dutch natives from less privileged backgrounds) generate the structural conditions under which exclusionary politics thrive. Societies that activate their people's potential (visibly, measurably, across communities) build the relational and institutional trust on which democratic resilience depends.

The four pilots described in Section 8 represent the immediate next phase: structured, measurable, partnership-based tests of whether activation infrastructure delivers the outcomes this paper's analysis predicts. Phase 1 opens with the UWV partnership and employer B2B2C model; Phase 2 extends to university transition bridges and startup ecosystem support. Each pilot generates evidence at the system level: evidence of what changes when activation becomes somebody's explicit, funded, accountable responsibility.

The policy recommendations in Section 9 describe the institutional conditions under which the pilots succeed and the model scales. The Coalition Agreement provides the political hooks: talent retention as a stated priority, *startbaan* as an operational concept, *Ervaringscertificaten* as a recognition mechanism, Participatiewet/Inburgeringswet alignment as an institutional window. The Nota Ruimte provides the regional framework, positioning international talent activation as integral to the growth strategies of designated *schaalsprong regio's*. The minority government's structural need for pragmatic, evidence-based, cross-partisan proposals provides the political opening. Whether these hooks are grasped depends on whether the actors who hold them (employers, universities, municipalities, UWV, national policymakers) come to recognise the activation gap as their shared problem rather than someone else's mandate. Our attempt in this work, and our belief in the great potential this country we have learned to call home possesses, has been to galvanise the white space between the limits of these actors' reach and mandates.

The Netherlands has built world-class infrastructure for attracting international talent. What remains less developed is the infrastructure for ensuring that talent contributes at its potential, belongs in its communities, and strengthens the democratic and plural cultural fabric rather than straining and fraying it. The distance between attraction and activation is where under-actualisation reproduces itself, where polarisation finds its structural conditions, and where economic and social value is subtly, persistently eroded.

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Bridging that distance (making activation a national function for the public good, measuring what matters, funding infrastructure rather than programmes, shifting the paradigm from individual deficit to structural responsibility) is what we propose with this paper and the work Flux Forward is designed to deliver. We have come to see ourselves as a social enterprise in this sense: an organisation designed to solve a social problem where both the market and government are failing to resolve it (Martin & Osberg, 2015: *Getting Beyond Better*).

If the system does not take responsibility for expanding the institutional mandate to include activation and actualisation in employment, entrepreneurship and the social fabric of Dutch life, then someone else with more cynical intentions will, as we have witnessed in the far-right spurts and jolts of the last few years in the usually pragmatic and sensible politics of this nation. If we act together on this now we pull the rug out from under those seeking to divide, fragment and fan the fire of angst and hate of the 'other'.

The people treading water have already demonstrated the capability, resilience, and commitment that the Netherlands says it needs from its entrepreneurial, innovative and highly trained residents. The question that remains is structural: *will the system meet them halfway?*

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW AND ROUNDTABLE PROMPT STRUCTURE

The 50+ research interactions conducted between Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026 followed a lean action-research methodology anchored in three principles: participants treated as agents rather than subjects; structural patterns surfaced through lived experience; and reflection treated as data. Prompts were adapted across one-to-one interviews, professional learning circle (PLC) sessions, and stakeholder roundtables, but the underlying architecture remained consistent.

#### A.1 Opening orientation

- What brought you to the Netherlands, and what did you imagine your professional life here would look like?
- How would you describe where you are now in relation to that picture?

#### A.2 Practical and systemic dimension

- Walk me through the first six months: which administrative or institutional processes consumed the most time and energy?
- Which sequences of dependencies (BSN, banking, housing, healthcare, IND) caught you off guard?
- Where did you find the information that actually moved you forward, and where did you expect to find it but did not?

#### A.3 Professional and market translation dimension

- How has your prior experience been received by the Dutch labour market?
- Which signals or credentials translate; which do not?
- Where have you encountered the hidden job market, and how did you find your way into or around it?

#### A.4 Emotional and identity dimension

- How would you describe your sense of self professionally now compared with before you arrived?
- Where do you feel seen as the contributor you understand yourself to be; where do you feel unseen?
- What sustains you when momentum stalls?

#### A.5 Systems and reciprocity (closing)

- If a single institution had behaved differently at a critical juncture, which one, and what would that have changed?
- What would a functioning activation infrastructure have offered you that current arrangements do not?
- What would you want a Dutch employer, university, municipality, or policymaker to understand from your experience?

#### A.6 Roundtable adaptations

For B2B and stakeholder roundtables, prompt can pivot from lived experience to institutional accountability: which mandates do you hold, where do those mandates end, and what happens to the people who continue past that boundary? Sessions typically should open with a short composite vignette (drawn from Section 3) to ground conversation in concrete texture before moving to systemic reflection. PLC sessions can use the same architecture across a six-week

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cycle, alternating between practical action and reflective synthesis, with prompts deepening as participants built shared vocabulary and trust.

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### APPENDIX B: THEORETICAL BACKBONE

The analytical scaffolding of this paper draws on three interlocking bodies of work: a topology of where to intervene; an explanation of why deeper interventions are systematically resisted; and a methodology for diagnosing and designing across scales.

#### **B.1 Meadows' leverage points and Abson et al.'s realms of transformation**

Donella Meadows (1999) proposed a hierarchy of twelve places at which to intervene in a system, ranging from shallow parameter adjustments (subsidies, taxes, standards) to the deepest level: the capacity to transcend paradigms. Abson et al. (2017) consolidated the twelve into four realms: *Parameters*, *Feedbacks*, *Design*, and *Intent*. Sustainable transformation, they argue, requires intervention at the deeper realms, yet most policy effort concentrates at the shallow end where leverage is weakest. Throughout this paper, the seven maintenance mechanisms of the activation trap are mapped against this hierarchy: systems friction and information opacity operate at Parameters and Feedbacks; network closure and institutional handover failure operate at Design; policy narrative tightening operates at Intent. The recommendations in Section 9 are deliberately weighted toward the deeper realms, where activation infrastructure is most likely to take hold.

#### **B.2 Active immutability (Pepper, 2025; via Ozyntel)**

Lily Pepper's research describes the defence mechanisms by which complex systems preserve themselves against change that would otherwise be welcomed in principle. Active immutability, rather than passive inertia, is a set of structural responses (diffuse accountability, mandate boundaries, jurisdictional handover, plausible-deniability framing) that allow systems to absorb pressure for change without changing. The activation trap displays this signature: every actor sees part of the problem; no actor is responsible for the whole; and the resulting equilibrium reproduces itself through the very mechanisms that could, in principle, dismantle it. Reading the Dutch knowledge worker activation gap through active immutability clarifies why well-meaning institutional intent has not produced corresponding institutional change.

#### **B.3 Ozyntel's organisational transformation methodology**

The Baker-Shelley/Baker-Friesen multi-scalar, transdisciplinary ID Tool of Organisational Transformation for Sustainability provides the diagnostic framing for assessing systems at the level of *parameters*, *feedbacks*, *design*, and *intent* across micro, meso, and macro scales. This methodology informs both the layered analysis of Sections 5 and 6 and the pilot designs in Section 8: each pilot is constructed to generate evidence not only at the operational level but at the level of institutional design and paradigmatic intent, so that the findings remain legible to actors operating at different scales of decision-making.

#### **B.4 How the three connect**

Meadows offers the topology of where to intervene; active immutability explains why deeper interventions are systematically resisted; the Ozyntel methodology operationalises diagnosis and design across scales. Together they form the conceptual lens through which the activation trap was both surfaced and addressed.

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### APPENDIX C: EVIDENCE TABLE BY THEME

The table below maps the principal themes documented across the research corpus to their evidentiary base and to the sections in which they are developed. *Research interactions* refers to the 50+ one-to-one interviews, PLC sessions, and stakeholder roundtables conducted between Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026.

Theme	Evidence type	Primary sources	Paper sections
<i>Activation gap as multidimensional and stacked</i>	Composite vignettes; cross-segment pattern analysis	Research interactions; Thijssen et al. 2021	3, 4
<i>Systems friction and cognitive load engineering</i>	Sequencing accounts of BSN, banking, housing, IND, healthcare	Research interactions	4.1, 5.1
<i>Network closure and the hidden job market</i>	Hiring trajectory accounts; weak-tie analysis	Research interactions; Thijssen et al. 2021	4.2, 5.3
<i>Identity disruption and belonging dynamics</i>	Reflective accounts in PLC sessions and interviews	Research interactions; Mulder et al. 2020	4.3, 5.4
<i>Institutional handover failure</i>	Cross-mandate accounts (employer, university, municipality)	Research interactions; B2B roundtables	5.5, 6
<i>Policy narrative tightening</i>	Discursive analysis of Coalition Agreement	Coalitieakkoord 2026; Politico 2026; Freiheit 2026	5.6, 8.2
<i>Labour market contraction and AI as accelerant</i>	Cohort comparison; sector signals	NL Times 2025; Flexnieuws 2026	5.7
<i>Shared structural substrate (internationals and Dutch BIPOC)</i>	Parallel evidence across labour, housing, healthcare	Thijssen 2021; Booijink 2024; Mulder 2020; Guardian 2024; DutchReview	1.3, 1.4, 1.6
<i>Democratic resilience and political opportunity</i>	Electoral analysis; far-right mobilisation patterns	NL Times 2026; NRC 2026; BNR 2026; FvD International 2026	8.2, 8.9, 9.2
<i>Activation as infrastructure (paradigm reframe)</i>	Conceptual synthesis	Meadows 1999; Kuhn 1962; Abson et al. 2017	9, 10
<i>Appreciative inquiry as methodological orientation</i>	Theoretical integration	Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987; Zandee 2008	2, 10
<i>Community as activation infrastructure</i>	PLC cycle observations; cohort tracking	Research interactions; Nawa collaboration notes	7, 8.4

### APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY

**Activation gap.** The structural shortfall between the capabilities international knowledge workers bring to the Netherlands and the conditions required for those capabilities to be put to use. Operates across three entangled dimensions: practical and systemic; professional and market-facing; and emotional and identity-related.

**Activation trap.** The reinforcing dynamic by which the activation gap reproduces itself: high cognitive load reduces capacity for positioning; weak positioning produces underemployment; underemployment erodes identity and risk tolerance; reduced risk tolerance narrows opportunity; the loop continues.

Distinct from the activation *gap* (the phenomenon) in that the *trap* names the mechanism of self-perpetuation.

**Activation infrastructure.** The paradigm proposed in Sections 9 and 10. Treats activation as a public good requiring institutional investment, accountable actors, and systemic design (analogous to roads, education, and healthcare), rather than as the responsibility of the arriving individual.

**Active immutability.** Pepper's term, based on Meadows' work, for the structural defence mechanisms (diffuse accountability, mandate boundaries, jurisdictional handover, plausible-deniability framing) by which complex systems absorb pressure for change without changing. Provides the underlying explanation for why institutional good intent has not closed the activation gap.

**Integration paradigm.** The dominant framing the paper critiques, in which under-actualisation is read as an integration deficit and responsibility is located with the arriving individual. Operates by the implicit logic that the Netherlands provides opportunity, the international provides effort, and where effort proves sufficient, integration follows.

**Social capital.** The relational and reputational resources that enable access to opportunity, particularly through weak ties and trust-based introductions. In the Dutch context, where a substantial share of professional opportunity flows through the hidden job market, social capital functions as a structural prerequisite for activation rather than an optional supplement to it.

**Structural disadvantage.** The condition produced when system design, information flows, and accountability structures generate uneven outcomes that no single actor intends but that all parties contribute to maintaining. Distinct from individual disadvantage in that it cannot be remediated by individual effort alone.

**Survival mode.** The cognitive and emotional state described repeatedly in research interactions: foreshortened time horizon, narrowed strategic capacity, and energy concentrated on immediate practical resolution. Survival mode systematically prevents the longer-arc activities (network building, professional positioning, language deepening) on which activation depends.

**Systemic mismatching.** The misalignment between the talent the Netherlands recruits and the institutional architecture available to put that talent to use. Manifests in credential non-translation, mandate gaps between recruiting and integrating institutions, and labour market signalling that does not register international experience.

**Translation gap.** The specific subset of the activation gap concerning the conversion of prior experience and credentials into Dutch-legible signals. Distinguished from a skills gap: the capability is present; what is absent is the institutional infrastructure to render it visible.

**Under-actualisation.** The condition in which an individual's capabilities exceed the structural conditions for their realisation. Used throughout the paper as the human-scale outcome of the activation trap; contrasted with self-actualisation in the Maslowian sense to foreground the structural rather than individual locus of the shortfall.

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**White space (between mandates).** The institutional territory the paper identifies as the activation trap's deepest feature: the space between recruiting, welcoming, and supporting mandates where activation should happen and no actor is accountable for it. Flux Forward's intervention model is designed to occupy this white space.

**Schaalsprong regio's.** Designated growth regions identified in the Ontwerp Nota Ruimte 2050 (Twente, Groningen-Assen, South Limburg). Positioned in Sections 7 and 8 as priority partnership geographies for activation infrastructure pilots.

**Startbaan.** Coalition Agreement 2026 concept (literally *launchpad*): a structured first-job pathway for statushouders. Referenced in the paper as an institutional hook through which activation infrastructure can be operationalised.

**Ervaringscertificaten.** Coalition Agreement 2026 concept (*experience certificates*): a recognition mechanism for prior experience that does not map cleanly onto Dutch credential frameworks. Referenced in Sections 7 and 8 as institutional infrastructure for closing the translation gap.

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