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Computer Vision for Removing Blind Spots in a Migrant Registration System

Hoekstra, F.G.; van Faassen, Marijke

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2 authors:

Rik Hoekstra
Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen
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Computer vision for removing blind spots in a migrant registration system

Rik Hoekstra rik.hoekstra@di.huc.knaw.nl (Huygens ING-KNAW Amsterdam) and Marijke van Faassen
marijke.van.faassen@huygens.knaw.nl (Huygens ING-KNAW Amsterdam)
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Introduction

Nineteenth and especially twentieth-century archives are full of index card registration systems that contain a wealth of partially structured information. If only their size defies reading them all and even leafing through them. It is even more complicated to use the structured information on them. We had to face these problems a few years ago, when we started research using a card index system on Dutch migrants to Australia. The cards are part of a registration system that was formed between 1948 and 1992 by the Dutch migration authorities. These were the years in which the Dutch government together with civil society organizations facilitated emigration to overseas destinations as part of the Dutch labour market policies. Australia was one of the main destinations of Dutch emigrants after 1945, receiving around 160,000 migrants till 1992.

Post World War II Dutch emigration is both understudied and well-documented, as The Netherlands are mainly thought of as an immigration country. Still, there were almost half a million emigrants in mainly the 1950s and 1960s that merit research in their own right but also offer interesting possibilities for comparison with immigrants.

In his 1950 New Year's address, the social democratic Dutch Prime minister Drees spoke about the necessity for emigration. He said that notwithstanding the high Dutch population density the country had 'hitherto succeeded in maintaining sufficient employment rates ... but that task [would] be made easier when part of the population ... [would] dare to seek its future in larger areas [of the world].'[1] This speech expressed the feelings in both Dutch government and bureaucracy that got its expression in the organization and stimulation of emigration in the years to come. It also coincided with the outcome of polls of a year before, in which one third of the Dutch population expressed its wish to emigrate if this would be possible (Van Faassen 2014). With countries like Australia and Canada migration treaties or informal agreements were drafted about quota and subsidizing. Official emigration policies were in force until 1992.

In the public debate in the Netherlands and also in the memories of emigrants themselves this emigration policies are often seen as an anonymous force that almost manipulated parts of the population into migrating from the Netherlands (e.g. Fels 2016, p.69). This raises the question what

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[1] "Ondanks onze grote bevolkingsdichtheid zijn wij er tot nog toe in geslaagd een ruime werkgelegenheid te handhaven en een redelijke voedselvoorziening te waarborgen, maar die taak wordt verlicht wanneer een deel van ons volk, zoals het ook deed in vroeger eeuwen, het aandurft zijn toekomst te zoeken in groter gebieden, waar op den duur ook ruimer armslag te vinden zal zijn." Willem Drees, *Nieuwjaarstoespraak 1950 NA-Archief Drees, 171/2(69?).* Also Elseviers Weekblad 7-1-1950 *NA-Archief Drees, 366*

the balance was between personal decisions and policy, both national and international. This problem was already discussed in 2013, in Schrover's and Moloney's interesting study on *Gender, Migration and Categorization*. They state that " the literature on migration patterns, networks and ties focuses on the choices and deliberations of migrants and less on how states create frameworks in which choices are made" (p.19).

They also observed that scholars tend to follow the categorizations that policy makers use, often as a result of the source material that is available and organized according to these categorizations (p.9). The categories they refer to are the four main categories of migrants used by states: postcolonial, refugee, labour and family migrants (p.7). When we apply these categories to the Dutch emigrants - most of them Dutch nationals - Drees referred to in his speech, they mainly belong to the categories 'labour' or 'family' migrants. When in 2014 we started the project *Migrant, Mobilities and Connection* we took up the challenges of including these official categorizations into our analysis. In recording the migrants, migration authorities did apply a number of categories that partly overlap with the categories in Schrover and Molony's book. They include gender, occupation, religion and ethnicity.

Migrant, Mobilities and Connection has a twofold aim: first digitally connect the cultural heritage of Dutch-Australian migrants that is dispersed over many collections in many institutions in two countries. The core of this effort are the migrant registration cards that were made by the Dutch emigration services and travelled to Australia with the migrants where they were copied to serve as input for the Australian immigration authorities. Subsequently they were repurposed by mainly the social services officers that were positioned at the Dutch consulates in Australia to support the migrants in their new home country (Van Faassen& Oprel 2020). In doing so we hope to have established a new resource that is easily accessible for a larger public (the core business of Huygens ING, see also Arthur et.al, 2018), but also facilitate our second aim: to start answering our main research question: how are policy and migrant agency related with respect to the whole migration experience?

Card index systems and methodology
This paper is meant to research the card files of migrant cards (NL_HaNA, 2.05.159). There are 51,525 cards that correspond to 100,000 images. They represent circa 180,000 migrants, or 80-90 percent of all migrants to Australia, as the cards contained data about migrant units, often but not always families, with personal data about the migrants. The cards contain a number of data about the migrants like personal data such as name, birthdate, occupation, place of origin and the dates and means of migration. These were gathered before migrations. The cards contain additional unstructured data about interactions with the consulates. Because they comprise such a large share of the emigrants and a lot of their context, the cards enable us to connect all sorts of digital heritage (Van Faassen & Hoekstra 2020, in press). They also make it possible to make informed samples.

From a research point of view, it is necessary to assess the cards. We have images of the cards and a very summary index table with core data. In digitizing, the archive lost the connection between the index and the images. Also, the original order was disturbed in many places. We cannot read all cards because there are far too many and the cards contain a mix of typed and handwritten information that made experts in text recognition for the most part shy away. Some typewritten

portions of the cards are readable by ocr, but cards are not evenly distributed and usually only partially typed, so this does not provide us with a reliable overview.[2]

We did make a general assessment of the cards with a 1 percent sample, taking each 100th card (consisting of 2 images and possible follow-up cards as far as they were localizable), structuring and analyzing the information on the cards. The sample confirmed that there is a wealth of information about migrants on the cards about the Dutch-Australian migrant population. However well the sample is taken, this results in a simplification, or a small world representation of a larger world (McElreath, 2020, 19-46). Historians often complement this simplification by taking cases from the collection and studying these in depth to get insight into the variation, an established method in history. For the emigration cards, however, this posed a few different problems, especially the selecting cases. It is very hard to select the largest cards as some historians suggested, as we have no physical or visual access to the cards. Moreover, there may be a reason that files get big that would lead to an unconscious selection bias, also known as cherry-picking, as it is unclear for what reason migrants would get more attention. Notwithstanding the samples, the cards effectively were closed for research and we had to find a solution to complement the sampling. This solution had to be based on digital methods to be able to deal with the size of the registration system. We devised a method with different steps (Hoekstra & Koolen, 2019).[3]

We first manually reconstructed the relation between images and the index table. Then, we devised a way to measure the information density on the cards, using a simple form of computer vision. The mixed script on the cards may be too difficult to transcribe using a combination of OCR and HTR, but it is possible to measure the amount of writing on the cards, using the script edges that can be measured using software (see fig.1). In this way we do not know *what* is written, but *how much* is written, giving a measure of the information density on the cards. The information density can then be related to what we do know about the content of the cards.

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[2] Cards that are completely typed are usually copies for the file, made by the emigration attaché the moment a migrant decided to move within Australia. The original card was sent to the consulate in the consular area of new arrival and continued to record the migrants interaction with the emigration authorities.
[3] The process is outlined in a series of Jupyter notebooks. A summary notebooks with references to more detailed analyses is available in a Github repository
https://github.com/HoekR/MIGRANT/blob/master/results/exploring_data_integration/notebooks/Profiles.ipynb
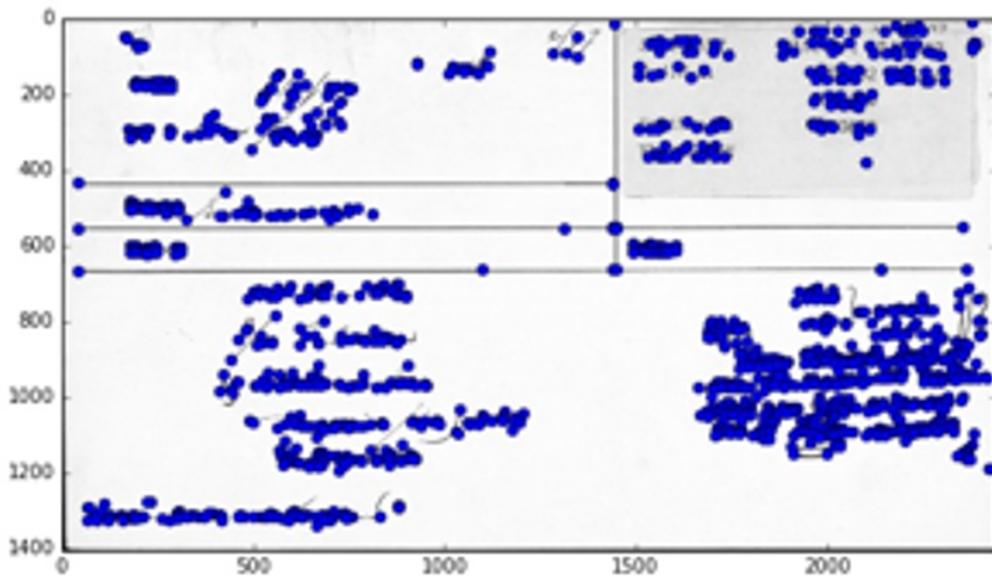
fig.1 script edges on an migrant registrationcard
(source - emigrant registration cards)

What we know about the cards is analyzed in the sample analysis. We distinguished different stages and influences on the cards, that may be depicted in the schema in fig.2
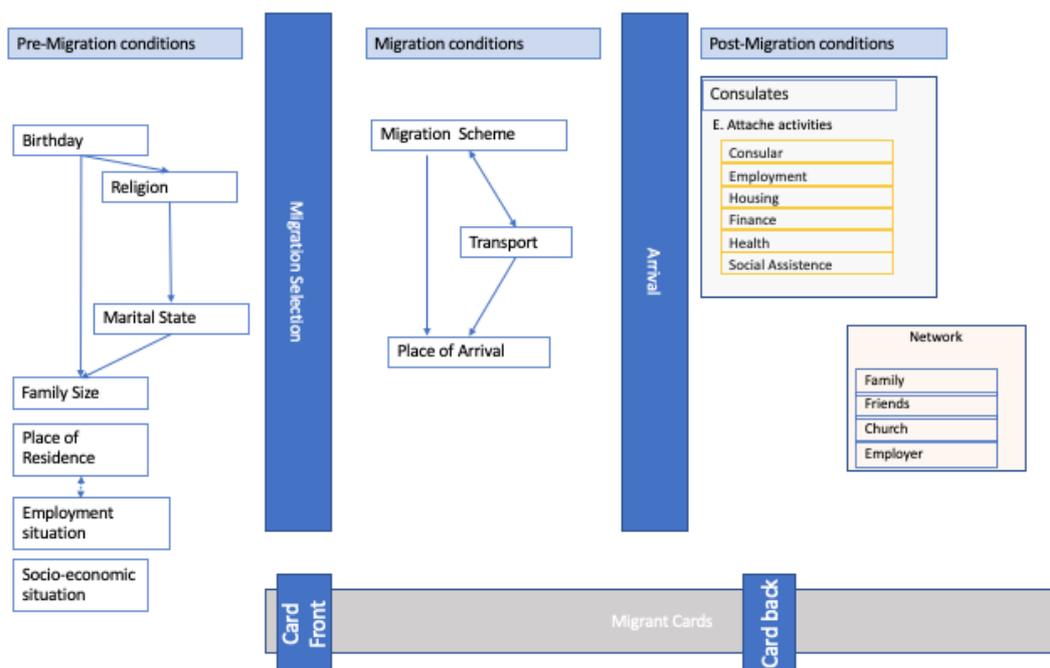

fig 2. schema of influences on migrant registration cards

The different stages in the scheme are all visible on the cards. As we wrote above, the front of the cards was (primarily) filled in before migration, and the back of the cards after migration. The card fronts are therefore better structured. There is also a time lag with an average of 2.5 years and a median of 1 year between the date of emigration on the front of the cards and the first dates on the back of the cards. Although the cards sometimes contain information about the travel themselves and the first time after arrival, this is not structural. In the information distribution this translates to a different characteristic for the card fronts compared to the card backs (fig 3).
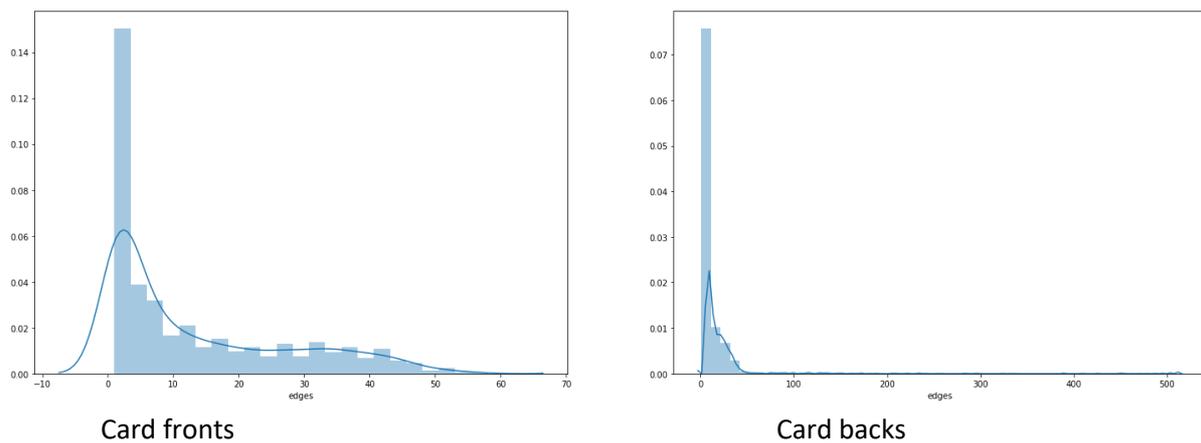

Card fronts   Card backs

fig 3 differing distribution of edge densities on registration card fronts and backs
(source - emigrant registration cards)

Because the cards contain partial reflections of the lives of the migrants, it is obvious to assume that some properties of the migrants would determine the information on the cards. Of course, the cards represent the perspective of the registering authorities, that is the Dutch Emigration service (NED) in the Netherlands and consulate personnel, mainly the emigration attaches and the social work officials in Australia. We have studied the possible relations between all the variables, ranging from age to family composition, religion, place of residence in the Netherlands primary to migration and the migrant scheme (some examples in fig 4)
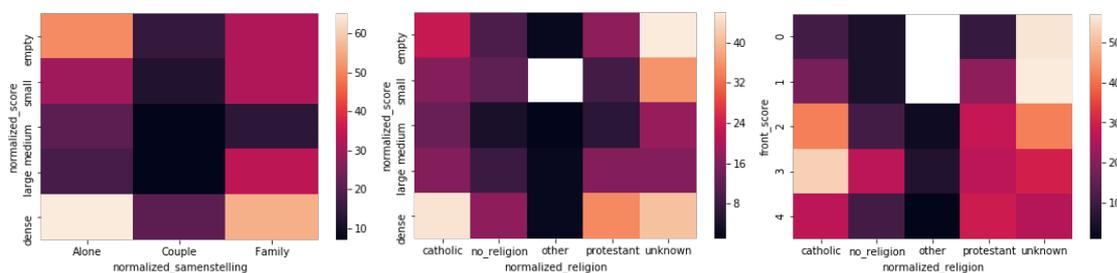

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Fig 4 Some examples of analyses of migrant properties and and card densities, that were inconclusive[4]
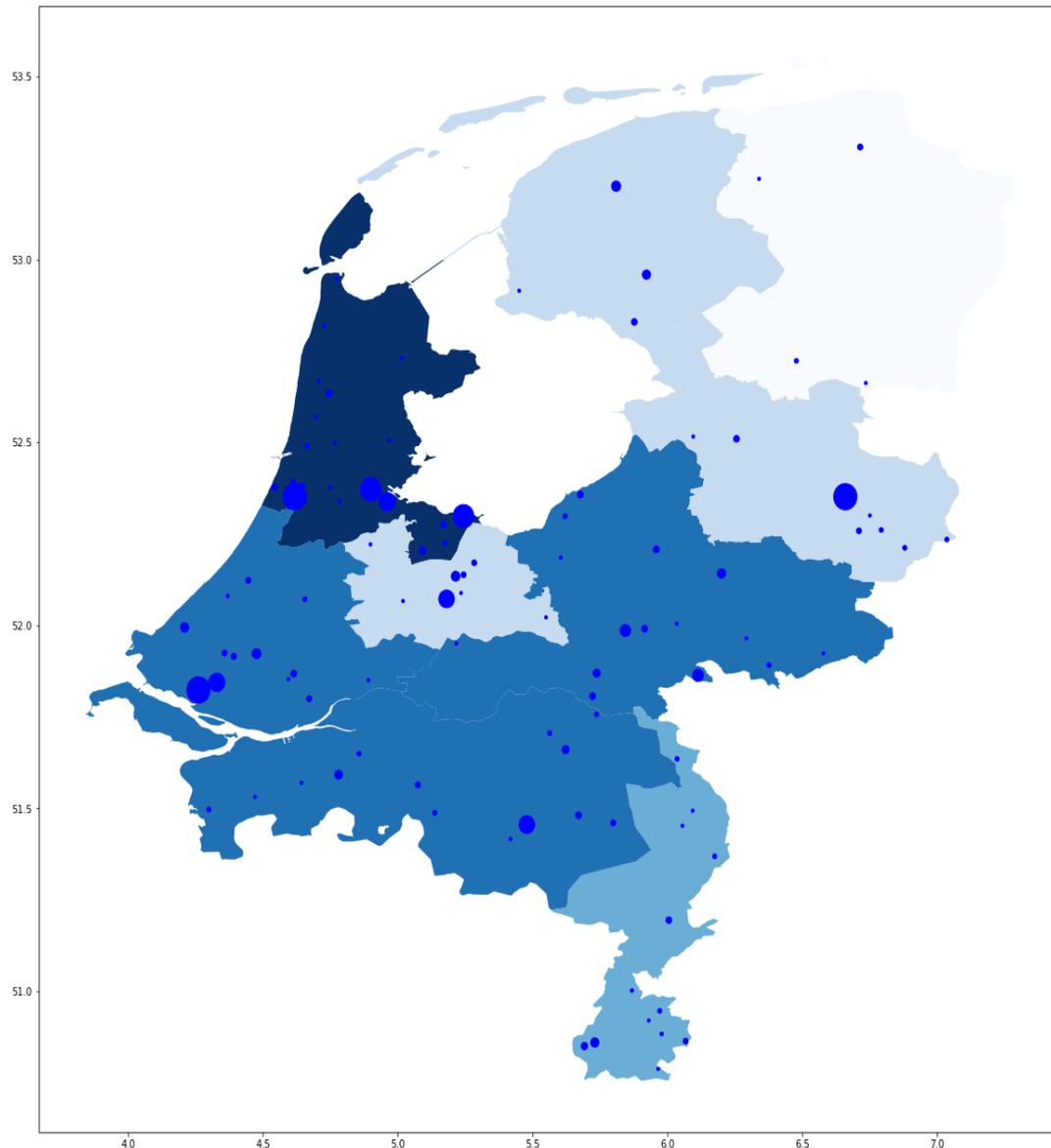*(source: emigration registration cards)*

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[4] For more analysis see the notebooks in note 3 above.

Only the place of residence (fig 5) and the migrant scheme showed conclusive influence on the information distribution. This allows for one conclusion, but also a further research question. The conclusion is, that in selecting the largest files (that is the cards with the highest information density) from the registration card files, will not introduce a selection bias for variables such as age, family composition or religion. If we want to study migrant lives, the distribution of information density does not reflect any sub groups among the migrants. Of course, there is a selection bias because cards with a lot of information reflect the most eventful lives, for whatever reason, but this constitutes a point of further study and it is a good idea to compare them with (a selection of) less information dense files.

Connecting policy to the registration system
The further research questions that this raised, is why the place of residence and the migration scheme did have a marked influence on the cards (fig 5). To be able to assess that, we have to consider the intention of the instrument of the cards for the authorities. It was a type of monitoring device that was used at two different stages of emigration. The first was to record and streamline the emigration process itself. That stage, however, ended with the arrival of migrants in Australia and was primarily recorded on the card fronts. The second stage that was recorded on the card backs (and possible follow-up card) started well after arrival. The question is why the Dutch authorities would care about the Dutch who had left. This is only obvious for the strict consular activities in which official intervention of either a consul or the ambassador was required, such as passport prolongation and remigration. But the range of activities employed by the consulates was much broader and had to do with the well-being of the migrants. This reveals that there was an active policy by the authorities aimed at making emigration a success.[5]

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[5] For a similar assessment of the Old Bailey accounts as a public policy resource see Devereaux, 1996 and Shoemaker, 2008, who characteriezed the Old Bailey Proceedings not so much as a impartial record of crime proceedings but "as a deliberate intervention, on the side of the authorities and the property-owning classes, in the century-long debate over how to respond to the apparently ever- rising tide of criminality in London" (p. 580)

fig 5. Map of the origin of Dutch-Australian emigrants (1951-1992)
(source - emigrant registration cards)

The two influences of the migration scheme mentioned above reflect different sides of the policy. The variation place of residence suggests that there was a conscious policy on the part of the authorities to stimulate migration in parts of the country. Although this is known from historiography, the focus has been primarily on the agrarian sector, as postwar emigration policy is understood as a solution for the 'small farmers problem' in the Netherlands.[6] However, as emigration was meant to be complementary to the industrialization policies (Van Faassen, 2014), this calls for further research, because it seems likely that there also was a relation with postwar changes in the industrial situation of the Netherlands and the closing of the Limburg coal mines in the early 1960s.

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[6] This might also be an explanation for the underrepresentation of emigrant units from Zeeland and the Northern Dutch provinces.

The effects of the different migrant schemes is much more subtle. Most migrants travelled under a migration scheme, that is an agreement of the Dutch and Australian governments that subsidized the passage on the migration ships or planes. The most important was the Netherlands-Australian Migration Agreement, that was officially operative from 1951, but there were more schemes.[7] The schemas implied an involvement of both the Dutch and the Australian authorities that found an expression in many areas.

In the NAMA case, Australian co-subsidizing of the passage required migrants to work in Australian government service for two years. The schema also included migrant selection with both Australian and Dutch involvement (Schrover and Van Faassen, 2010). On the other side, it also implied that the Dutch authorities wanted to make migration a success. Return migration was always sizable, but the contemporary files in the archives were marked secret (NL-HaNA, 2.15.68, inv.nrs. 883-884; 1408) and to take away reasons to return, the Dutch authorities invested in social officers that resided at the consulates, partly in response to bottom up pressure from the civil society organizations, who had the majority in the Dutch emigration governance system (Van Faassen, 2014, Ch.2). They supported the emigrants by intervening in their affairs, providing assistance in all sorts of social matters. They also were the ones who (predominantly) filled out the backs of the cards. In our sample, we have classified the types of events they noted in categories. Below we will discuss the event types 'finance' and 'housing'.
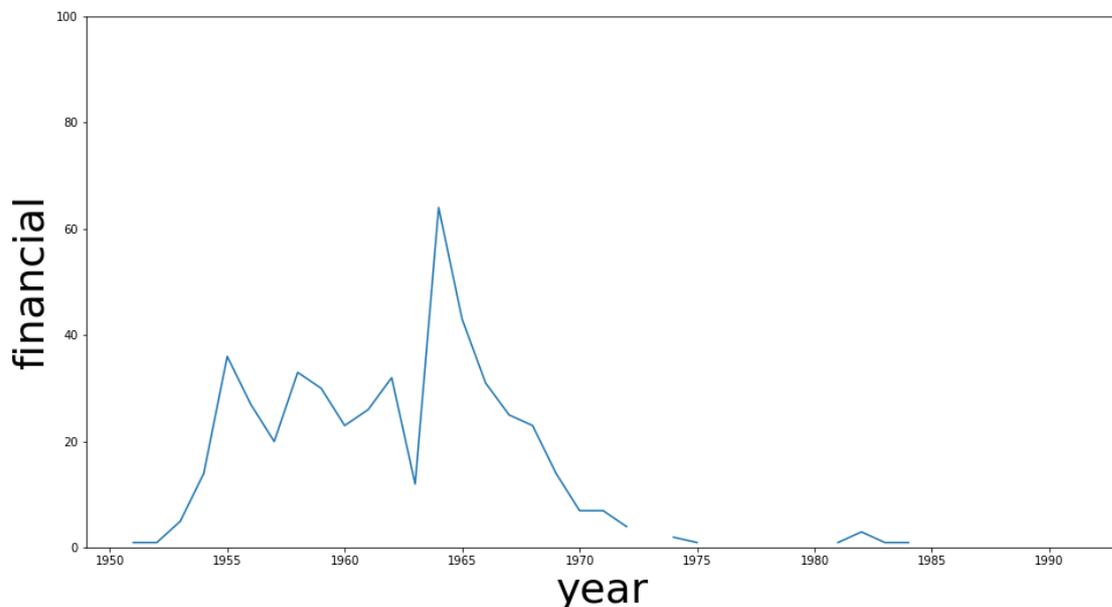
fig 6. financial events/year
(source - emigrant registration cards)

An example of a direct influence of a migration schema is visible in the financial events (fig.6). From the graph, it would seem that there were many migrants with financial issues in the mid-1960. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that these mostly stem from migrants that migrated under the

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[7] For an overview of the different schemes see resources.huygens.knaw.nl/emigratie/gids/instelling/3251792704, also van Faassen, *Polder en emigratie*, 165-6.

so called program for youth (*Jongeren Programma, JP*) who could only stay for one or two years in Australia and had to save with the consulates for their return fare. The sums they saved were notated in succession on the registration cards. Archival research to find an explanation for this phenomenon revealed that this temporary migration, embedded in youth programs, was a deliberate policy of both governments, aiming at increasing the 'emigratability' of the Dutch population (when departure figures went down after 1956) by introducing young people to perspectives abroad for a longer period of time. After their return to the Netherlands, the youth could function as 'goodwill ambassadors' for emigration, as they were expected to supply emigration supporting information (Van Faassen & Hoekstra, 2015).[8]
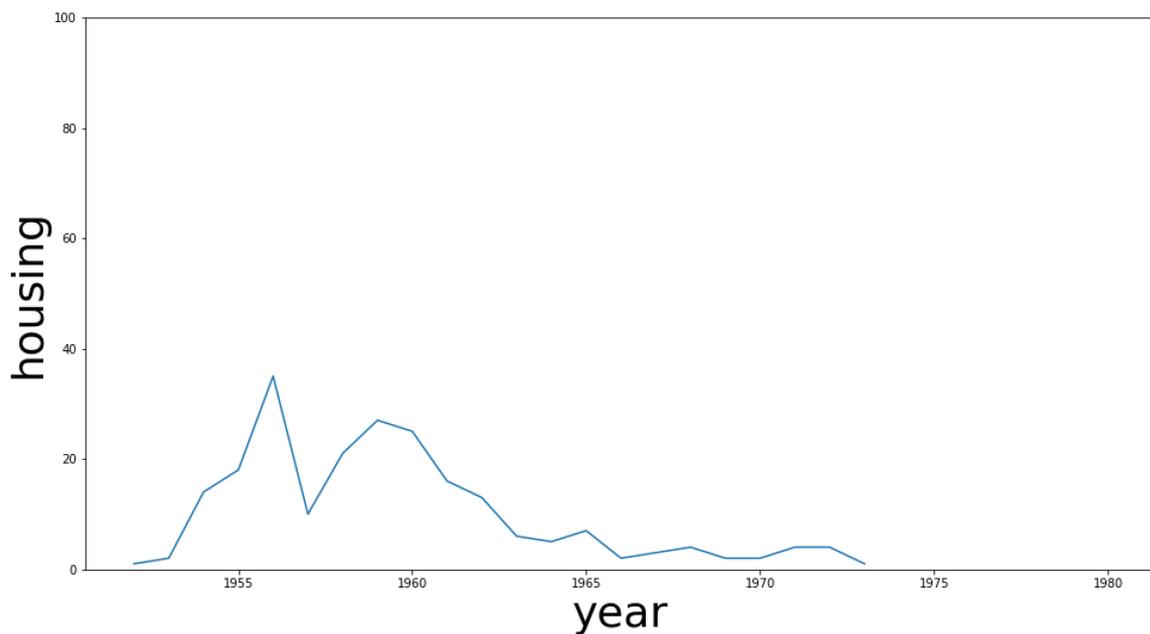

fig. 7 housing events per year
(source - emigrant registration cards)

One of the other prominent problems in the Dutch-Australian migration was housing. There is a wealth of studies on the first years after arrival especially from the migrant perspective, when emigrants were housed in camps (or, formally, reception centers) like Bonegilla, Scheyville, Wacol etc. or hostels and families were separated from the moment the man had to start working, for instance to fulfill the NAMA-scheme requirements (Peters, 2001, Ch.4, Walcker-Birkhead, 1988, 190-206; Eysbertse 1997) In contrast with the graph on finance, the housing graph doesn't show specific patterns that prompt analysis. In general, it follows the pattern of the departure peaks and tops, which is rather obvious. However, analysing the housing events per migration scheme show more variation (fig 8).

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[8] As follow-up of the Youth Programs (1959-1967) the Working Holiday Schemes were introduced (1981-).NL-HaNa, 2.15.68, inv.nr. 1351-1353 en 1355-1357. To stimulate migration after taking part in the Youth programs a Secondary Assistance Scheme was introduced.

	NAMA	LP	other	JP	NESS	NGAS
social assistance	30%	39%	34%	27%	17%	32%
employment	25%	23%	18%	24%	12%	18%
financial	13%	8%	17%	33%	4%	26%
consular tasks	13%	20%	15%	9%	54%	10%
housing	8%	5%	5%	1%	4%	7%
administration	7%	4%	8%	5%	8%	2%
health	3%	1%	2%	0%		3%
unknown	1%		1%	0%	2%	2%

fig 8 event-per-scheme in percents
(source - emigrant registration cards)

The first thing that stands out is that the Youth Program (JP) showed the least housing events, in contrast with the two largest and simultaneously runned schemes NAMA and the Netherlands Government Agency Scheme (NGAS), which have the highest percentages of housing events.[9] This is still rather obvious as migrants under the Youth programs usually travelled alone, or at least without a family. For the other schemes (which are often affiliated with churches and their social networks) it is known that most of the time sponsorships of private persons (including housing) were required. Close reading of the housing events on the cards of the sample however reveals an intriguing shift around 1960-1961. Complaints about the migrant camps and hostels then make way for questions about 'Building Societies' and 'Housing Committees'. Together with the downward trend in housing events/problems after 1960 in the graph in fig. 7, this can be interpreted as a possible starting point for further analysis on supposed governmental policy on housing. Archival research in both countries indeed reveals the other side of the 'camp -stories' in migrant studies.

In 1948-1949 the Australian Government organised a conference on housing for 'Australians and migrants' in which a policy was formulated to improve the supply of building materials and secure a greater output of houses. One of the suggestions to the Australian states was to order more 'prefabricated houses' (NAA, A445/202/3/34). Archival research in the Netherlands shows a twofold response to this idea. The Utrecht Building Company Bredero-De Vries, who already developed the

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[9] NGAS was a Dutch unilateral scheme for Dutch unskilled migrants, ineligible under NAMA terms, but in general suitable for emigration. The NGAS also guaranteed work and accomodation (Walker Birckhead 1988).

idea of 'prefabs' during the Second World War (Clark, 2002, 24-25) took the momentum (1950) to establish an Australian holding to build prefab-houses for Dutch migrants who were employed at the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Schemes, which ultimately resulted in the now famous Dutch Australian multinational *Lendlease Corporation*, led by Dick Dusseldorp (Schlesinger, 2018, Clark, 2002, 5, 23-25).[10] This initiative was supported by the Dutch government who developed in the early 1950s a policy of financing and sending prefab houses to overseas emigration destinations, in addition to their policy to solve their own domestic housing issues. In researching the specific files it becomes clear that this policy was based on reports from Dutch emigration attaches abroad. Thus we can conclude that the Duch emigration attaches in Australia 'translated' the complaints recorded on the emigrant cards in a more general policy issue on housing, leading the Dutch government to react with 'new' policy. (NL-HaNA, 2.15.68, inv.nr. 842, esp. 1385).

Further research on the housing policy leads to the conclusion that the questions about the Building Societies (and Housing Committees) on the cards from the 1960's onwards must in turn be understood as a reflection of a follow up of the 'prefab phase' of the housing-policy-abroad, developed by the Dutch government from 1954 and implemented from 1959 till 1975. In order to create a new incentive for emigration to Australia, the Dutch Government designed a policy in four consecutive steps in which money was provided by the Development Loan Fund, Australian Banks and later by Dutch institutional investors. They lended money to so-called Dutch(-Australian) Building Societies, which in turn made it possible for Dutch migrants to borrow money on low interest rates to buy newly builded houses (NL-HaNa, 2.15.68, inv.nrs 1262-1265). There even seems to be a closer connection with the Dutch initiated real estate business in Australia, although the exact relations require further investigation. Lendlease director Dick Dusseldorp started *Civil & Civic* as a foreign branch of the Bredero's Bouwbedrijf holding, with which it always kept warm ties. In the late 1950s Civil & Civic was involved in constructing residential areas in Sydney, in which director Dick Dusseldorp's intention "was to go beyond the 'standard' spec-built house of the period to produce repeatable model houses of superior quality " (Harfield & Prior, 2010, 1). One of the leads to research the relation between the Dutch government and Dusseldorp Civil & Civic is the fact that the moment the Bredero's Building company in the Netherlands did not want to invest large sums of money in Dusseldorp's Australian Civil & Civic anymore, Dusseldorp succeeded in convincing the Dutch National Investment Bank to give him a loan. These difficulties in financing ever larger building projects led Dusseldorp to find innovative ways of financing and he started the Lend Lease Company, that proved a very successful concept and in due course took over Civil & Civic in 1961.

The development of the Australian housing market and the involvement of the Dutch authorities in building activities in Australia were reflected on the emigration cards. First of all, the nature of housing activities of the consulates became less intensive as is visible in the graph. In some cases, however, the emigrant cards reveal other echo's of this housing policy in a rather propagandistic way: we find cards with remarks that the specific migrant was 'chosen' by the Dutch government for photoshoots in front of his new house during state visits of the Dutch Commissioner for Emigration to Australia.

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[10] Reports Huygens ING interns Alison Hurley and Rajae el Morabet Belhaj (both Leiden University). Bredero also built prefab houses in the Netherlands. (Clarck,2002, 25).

Conclusion

The inaccessibility of the migrant registration cards for analysis leads to blind spots in our research. The counting of script edges on the cards provided the researcher with a crude measure of the information distribution. The idea was to combine the distribution of information density with a more traditional sampling and analysis of the contents of the cards and in this way get insight in the determining factors for the information distribution. This relation proved very hard to establish. The analysis could only advance after the realization that the registration cards were an instrument of the registering authorities and their own policies were much more influential than the characteristics of the migrants. The involvement of policies of emigration support in the use of the cards provided an additional perspective that enabled us to analyse the distribution of information. While computer vision was instrumental in measuring the information distribution, further analysis is impossible without close reading policy files. This illustrates that for historical research computer assisted methods can provide an important extension of the methodology, but that they are most effective if combined with established methods.

The whole assessment of the information in the registration cards was established to prevent selection biases in further sampling migrant lives (and connecting them to dispersed cultural heritage materials). On basis of that assessment we now know that further sampling will not give a selection bias towards specific groups of migrants, but we should include the policies of the emigration authorities in our analysis. Therefore, this underlines Schrover and Moloneys' statement to create awareness of the interaction between policy and migrants choices. We can even go one step ahead: only the whole assessment of information revealed that states do use other, more hidden or implicit forms of categorization, like the on economic principles based migration schemes. Thus researchers should also take into account that there are micro forces such as seemingly 'neutral migration schemes' that can influence migrant's life course experiences. Furthermore, in combining close reading (sample) and distant reading (edging) of the cards we are able to conclude that the card system was not only a one way monitoring device, but that it was a constant form of systemic interaction with input and feedback loops between migrants experiences abroad and policymaking in the homeland.

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