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SYRIAN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Istanbul University: Improving Capacity and Knowledge Sharing (WESREF-IU) Project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 EU Framework Programme for and Innovation under grant agreement No. 78724

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We hope this book will lead to more accessible and inclusive higher education systems for refugees in search of a peaceful and sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, which triggered one of the biggest human tragedies in recent history, more than six million people have fled the country seeking asylum in neighboring countries and beyond (UNHCR, 2020a). While many governments and the international community in general have failed to respond to this emerging humanitarian crisis, millions of Syrian refugees are being hosted in neighboring countries without future prospects as the unrest continues well into its ninth year. In the face of the rising and unprecedented challenge of mass exodus and protracted displacement, each country has been confronted with growing needs of the affected populations within its particular political, economic and social contexts. As children and youth are among the displaced majority, the need for education has attracted public attention. Efforts to ensure a 'no lost generation' climbed high on the international agenda in a very short time span. Education has emerged as a top priority in this context as an important tool of sustainable development, and therefore refugee protection, integration and empowerment. By framing this humanitarian crisis as an education crisis, the needs and challenges of Syrian students (e.g. low enrolment rates, inclusion in education systems struggling under ever increasing pressure) have been central concerns. Higher education has only recently become part of the discussion.

Considering the estimated 100-200,000 Syrian youths (EU, 2016), who have had their higher education disrupted, and the upcoming generation providing access to higher education is one of the greatest challenges of displacement, both for the host countries and the refugees themselves. Despite being a fundamental human right, access to and participation in higher education among asylum seekers and refugees remain very low and strictly dependent on national contexts and priorities. Global average higher education enrolment rates of 3% compared with 37% for non-refugees clearly indicates the unmet demand for higher education in refugee contexts (UNHCR, 2019d). Furthermore, in the face of documented aspirations among refugee populations, knowledge and research related to higher education in refugee studies continue to be limited.

As the biggest refugee host country since 2015, Turkey has faced enormous challenges with the arrival of millions of displaced people in a relatively short period. The total number of Syrians currently under the country's temporary protection scheme has reached 3.6 million. This figure does not take account of unregistered people nor the 110,000 who have been naturalized (Mültecider, 2020). A high proportion of this population (more than 1.6 million) is registered Syrian children under 18. Almost half a million, however, are youths aged 19-25

who are considered as university age (DGMM, 2020). Taking into consideration the relatively young Syrian population, although provision for education has long been among the priorities of the Turkish Government, meeting the demand of ever-increasing numbers has, and still does, weigh heavy on the government.

Thanks to favorable legislation and unprecedented efforts, enrolment rates in basic education reached 63%, with a total number of 684,919 Syrian students registered for the 2019-2020 academic year. While enrolment rates in primary (89%) and secondary (70%) levels are considered to be acceptable, attendance rates after secondary school continue to be very low at only 33% (MEB, 2020). Barriers preventing access to higher education, financial ambiguity, and concerns over the quality and acceptability of the education are contributory factors in the low enrolment rates in higher levels of basic education.

As an educational continuum, access to higher education continues to be a problematic policy area where further research is necessary for evidence-based sustainable policy making, implementation and assessment. The number of Syrian students under temporary protection and enrolled at Turkish HEIs (HEIs) for the 2018-19 academic year reached 27,606 or 25%, which makes them the largest group of international students (YÖK, 2020b). This number also corresponds to an estimated 5% of the Syrian university aged population, which is above the world average of 3%. In 2019, the world average, which stood at 1% after five consecutive years, witnessed a rapid increase reaching 3%. This change is partially attributed to the Turkish case along with other good practices (UNHCR, 2019d, pp. 18-19, 52). The number is still very low compared with a world average of 37% for non-refugee students, and requires further attention and improvement. Albeit the remarkable increase, the vast majority of university-age eligible Syrians are still unable to access higher education in Turkey. Moreover, considering the opportunities higher education holds for Syrian youth, access to higher education alone is not enough for meaningful participation and success. So far, little is known about Syrian students, their access, education trajectories and participation in Turkey's HEIs.

With this background, the WESREF-IU project and this book evaluates Turkey's higher education system, policies and practices in responding to Syrian refugees' educational needs. In that regard, the book first provides a literature review on refugees' access to and participation in higher education globally and within the context of host country policies and practices in order to capture general trends. We aim to review the existing body of scholarship

and literature in order to identify key prominent themes and synthesize the emerging field accordingly. The literature review reveals that higher education for refugees is a recent but growing line of study. While the research is mainly focused on the issues and challenges over access, concerns over participation; diversity of refugee learning needs; their intersectionality; support mechanisms; and responses of higher education systems and institutions from different perspectives and disciplines are among the emerging themes identified. The literature reviews also identified main conceptual and analytical frameworks that are used to analyze the findings of our fieldwork. Following this conceptual background underlying key higher education policy developments and themes underpinning the analysis, we present the findings of the fieldwork conducted in three different HEIs in Turkey within the scope of the project.

The research aims to provide an evidence-based overall review of Syrian students' access to and participation in the Turkish higher education system with an intention to contribute to the current literature and discussion on refugees' integration in higher education in the region and beyond. We have sought to answer how the Turkish higher education system and institutions are addressing the challenge of improving access and participation of Syrian students and researchers in this era of massive displacements. Accordingly, in the first section we provide an overview of the current situation of the Syrian population registered under the temporary protection scheme in Turkey with the latest demographic data. After presenting the research design and methodology, the report maps the legislative, regulatory and institutional framework for Syrian students' access to higher education in Turkey through document analysis, statistical data and fieldwork, which is conducted at İstanbul, Gaziantep and Karabük Universities. In addition to providing a needs analysis based on interviews and focus group discussions with Syrian students in order to have a better knowledge and understanding, the study analyzes how three selected cases have responded to this rising demand while identifying good practices and shortcomings. The findings of the research emphasize the benefits of improved legislative and regulatory framework in order to provide Syrian youths with access to higher education in Turkey; while revealing the different ways of its implementation at institutional level depending on specific contexts, policies and strategies in order to accommodate the rising demand and participation.

The chapter summarizes the findings of the research along with identified and recommended institutional good practices, which can be transferred to other institutions and

countries. The results of the needs analysis and cross-case analysis reveal additional support for Syrian students and researchers to access and participate in higher education is required. Although there are common, cross-cutting themes such as language and academic support; lack of social interaction with local students; financial problems; gender imbalance; their importance varies in the three cases due to their institutional context and specific conditions. This degree of differentiation also exposes the need for greater understanding and more customer-tailored support programs rather than overall approaches in addressing these diverse challenges. It is against this backdrop that the following chapter continues with a presentation of the evaluation and findings of the pilot support programs specifically tailored for prospective and current Syrian students and researchers along with awareness raising, knowledge sharing and dialogue events held at Istanbul University within the scope of the project. These programs include application and admission support, orientation and preparation programs, language support for academic writing and communication. While providing a more detailed understanding of the needs of students and researchers in higher education, the pilot programs and evaluations also contributed to our general knowledge on the use of support mechanisms among students and their strategies and experiences of navigating the higher education system. In that regard, the findings aim to contribute to the debates concerning the provision of support services for refugee students in HEIs in order to meet different needs of students and to provide inclusive and responsive environments. Both the research and pilot programs serve as reference points to discuss the good practices, challenges and potential of higher education in refugee contexts.

Within that framework, in addition to bringing together the expertise and experience of different HEIs, identifying good practices in the field, sharing knowledge and establishing coordination among key stakeholders are among the objectives of this project. As acknowledged in the literature review, there are a variety of initiatives and programs established by different academic communities, civil society organizations, government bodies with regional and international organizations to support refugee integration into higher education. These fragmented but broad multi-level and multi-actor networks provide many opportunities but require good coordination and cooperation. In that regard, placing HEIs as focal points of coordination among ongoing efforts and networks for supporting refugees in accessing and participating in higher education is found to be very fruitful. Finally, beyond documenting the distinct educational needs of students and scholars at institutional level, the project aims to contribute to policy making and implementation for increased refugee participation in Turkish HEIs and wider society. Based on the results of the research and pilot

programs, the book therefore concludes with a series of recommendations for improving access to and participation in higher education for refugees in the region.

As a final word, although HEIs cannot solve all the issues facing refugees, they can certainly contribute to increasing their participation in higher education by improving institutional structures, policy, capacity and awareness. Considering the relationship between higher education and society, HEIs can and have played an important role in responding to new dynamics and demands while taking up new societal responsibilities as venues of communication, coordination and integration, and acting as agents of change in the society.

CHAPTER 1

Refugees' Access to Higher Education

1.1. Higher Education for Refugees: Global Normative Context

The fundamental right to education for asylum seekers and refugees is under serious threat both in neighboring first asylum countries and resettlement countries. Higher education provision and research has especially been neglected in this respect since it is still considered a luxury (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Kamyab, 2017; Magaziner, 2015; Pilkington, 1986; Sherab & Kirk, 2016; Zeus, 2011).

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, however, states that: "…higher education should be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." Furthermore, in refugee situations, Article 22 of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees declares that signatory States shall:

"Accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. The Contracting States shall accord to refugees' treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education."

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to education and states in Article 13 that: "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education."

Finally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which to this day is the most universal international normative framework, recognizes the right to education and acknowledges higher education as a part of that right while stipulating that States shall: "…make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means."

Despite the increasing codification of the right to education in various international documents, higher education takes second place compared with basic education and is merely implicitly addressed in the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees adopted in 1951. Considering the fact that access to basic education is problematic and low enrolment rates require immediate action, as a part of education continuum, higher education opportunities can certainly have a positive impact on basic education enrollments (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Sherab & Kirk, 2016). Access to further levels of education for asylum seekers and refugee youths is indispensable for their sense of agency, belonging and well-being (Baker, Ramsay, & Lenette, 2019; D. Gateley, 2014; D. E. Gateley, 2015; A.

Harris, Spark, & Watts, 2015; Morrice, 2013b; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019). Higher education offers transcendent future prospects and opportunities for young refugees with limited physical and social mobility, and constrained environments (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019) while preventing isolation, marginalization and waste of human capital (Lenette, 2016; Morrice, 2013b; Sherab & Kirk, 2016). Higher education is a driving force of development and a major tool of integration that provides internationally recognized skills and qualifications and which opens crucial pathways to employment for asylum seekers and refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010). In addition to individual and societal benefits higher education provides opportunities for increased regional development, welfare, stability and security (Arar, Kondakci, & Streitwieser, 2020; Avery & Said, 2017; Barakat & Milton, 2015; Coffie, 2014; Dryden-Peterson, 2010, 2016; Milton & Barakat, 2016; Sherab & Kirk, 2016; UNHCR, 2018b; WorldBank, 2011; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). Briefly, literature suggests that higher education emerges as critical spaces in displacement conditions and refugee contexts at individual, societal and regional levels.

Recently, refugee access to higher education has been climbing up the global refugee agenda and has been included in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, 2016. In recognizing the importance of higher education in the refugee context, the Declaration confirms the promotion of higher education among the set of commitments introduced. Article 82 indicates that:

"…We will also promote tertiary education, skills training and vocational education. In conflict and crisis situations, higher education serves as a powerful driver for change, shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women by maintaining their hopes for the future, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination and acts as a catalyst for the recovery and rebuilding of post-conflict countries."

After two years of discussions the Global Compact on Refugees consisting of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and a Programme of Action which sets the concrete measures to achieve the objectives[1] of the Compact was affirmed on December 17, 2018 (UNHCR, 2018a). As a milestone act of solidarity, the Compact commits to increase investment in access to quality education for refugees including higher education. Higher education which emerged as an important topic of discussions during the preparation of the Compact, is featured under the Education Section (B.2.1):

1 The four key objectives are: 1) to ease pressure on host countries; 2) to enhance refugee self-reliance; 3) to expand access to third-country solutions; and 4) to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (UNHCR, 2018a).

"In line with national education laws, policies and planning, and in support of host countries, States and relevant stakeholders will contribute resources and expertise to expand and enhance the quality and inclusiveness of national education systems to facilitate access by refugee and host community children (both boys and girls), adolescents and youth to primary, secondary and tertiary education."

UNHCR appraises education as a broad continuum ranging from informal education to higher education.

"Higher education can act as an equalizer, bringing refugee and host communities together to learn, socialize and work side by side. Universities and HEIs are places that facilitate personal growth, local and regional connection, peace across communities and create the leaders of tomorrow" (UNHCR, 2019a, p. 2).

Accordingly, in its report entitled "Missing Out Refugee Education in Crisis", UNHCR focuses on higher education programs stating that higher education forms an integral part of its mandate and increasing opportunity is a priority (UNHCR, 2016). In its latest reports on education UNHCR, attributes great importance to higher education and has developed a strategic road map (UNHCR, 2018b, 2019b, 2019d, 2019e).

The Refugee Education Strategy, developed by UNHCR in order to translate into action the educational provisions of the Global Refugee Compact, aims for an enrolment rate of 15% within a decade. The report lists the challenges to higher education in protracted refugee contexts as: low number of HEIs and available places; distance to campuses and movement restrictions; low number of students graduating from secondary school, particularly girls; high tuition and fees; restrictions on fields of study open to refugees; lack of academic certification required for admission; lack of reliable power and connectivity for connected higher education programing; demands to contribute to family financial sustainability taking priority over higher education; additional barriers that affect female refugee enrolment disproportionately; and barriers, compounding those already present at primary level, faced by youths with disabilities (UNHCR, 2019d).

In its Framework to guide and meet the 2030 education commitments of the Compact and the Refugee Education Strategy, the UNHCR determines six outcomes to: "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". The fifth outcome features higher education as the stakeholders pledge to ensure: "Enrolment in accredited higher education is increased and barriers including recognition of prior learning and qualifications, restrictive policies and financing limitations are eliminated" (UNHCR,

2019b, p. 6). The Framework lists a variety of potential pledging areas for host governments, partners, HEIs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other regional and international organizations (UNHCR, 2019b, pp. 28-31). There is a growing consensus on enhancing higher education's role in humanitarian responses for durable sustainable solutions aimed at asylum seekers and refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019).

Accordingly, provision of access is mainly provided through scholarship schemes to tackle financial and restricted mobility challenges of higher education for refugees. There are several initiatives and scholarship programs[2] that fund refugee students in higher education through international, regional and local donors as well as HEIs (Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik, & Jeong, 2019, pp. 9-12). One of the most established, the UNHCR's higher education scholarship program DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) has granted more than 15,500 scholarships to refugee students since its inception in 1992 (UNHCR, 2019a).

The current strengthening of efforts to feature higher education among priorities for refugees globally can easily be associated with the increasing shift away from direct aid and encampment policies to self-reliance and empowerment in protracted refugee situations (Betts, Bloom, Kaplan, & Omata, 2017; Betts & Collier, 2017). Higher education with close links to job market integration and economic development has a prominence in the new contextualization of the international refugee regime. While this approach is plausible, it also comes with severe criticism for leaving the burden on the transit and neighboring countries hosting refugees. Despite the UNHCR's emphasis on equitable international burden sharing for refugees, there is growing dissatisfaction with the refugee protection system regime (Anker, Fitzpatrick, & Shacknove, 1998; Schuck, 1997, 2014; Thielemann, 2017). The power asymmetry based on geography and proximity to the crisis emerges as a way of relief from the international responsibilities and obligations for distant donor countries while their commitment to provide funding is often viewed as discretionary (Betts, 2018; Crawley, 2017).

Furthermore, the elitist nature of higher education raises issues concerning inequality in refugee context (Dryden-Peterson, 2010). According to Bengtsson and Barakat (2017) emphasized objectives of expanding higher education scholarship opportunities can serve as a means of preserving higher education as a luxury, privilege for the elite. For that matter, while strengthening inequalities deriving from disadvantages in basic education these

2 IEE (International Institute for Education), DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), World University Service of Canada (WUSC), the Windle Trust, the Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JCHEM), Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, Australian Catholic University Program (ACU), United Tertiary Refugee Students are among the organizations offering scholarship programs for refugees.

programs cause diversion from the aim of strengthening national education systems including higher education. Thus, although they solve some of the financial and administrative challenges for well-educated and fortunate students, they may be very demanding for students who have limited opportunities and disrupted education (Avery & Said, 2017). Hence, scholarship programs, which are already limited in scale, raise further concerns over their sustainability due to the high costs and mobility restrictions involved (Avery & Said, 2017; Crea & McFarland, 2015; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019; Zeus, 2011).

In the face of limited scholarship opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees and its critics, innovative higher education provisions including online and blended models are encouraged, and promoted globally as viable solutions (UNHCR, 2019b). With the increasing use of digital technologies in higher education, online and blended learning platforms emerge as alternatives to physical infrastructures and on-site learning in displacement (Colucci et al., 2017; Crea & McFarland, 2015; Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Farrell et al., 2020; Gladwell et al., 2016; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019; Sherab & Kirk, 2016). Regardless of its promotion as an alternative solution to global education challenges, online education is not a straightforward formula due to the requirement of high technological infrastructures, low completion rates, accreditation problems related to poor monitoring and quality concerns and inadequate social interactions (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Farrell et al., 2020; Fincham, 2020; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Kamyab, 2017; Reinhardt, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Deribo, Happ, & Nell-Müller, 2018).

Consequently, despite the normative rights-based framework and ever-growing consensus on the benefits of higher education among the key global stakeholders, the responsibility remains within the national domains. Enormous barriers and challenges still lay ahead for asylum seekers and refugees (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Joyce, Earnest, De Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Access to higher education is still exceptional for refugees. As acknowledged by the UNHCR in its reports, the demand for higher education among refugees still remains unmet (UNHCR, 2012, 2018b). As the main actors managing access to higher education, the various State approaches and responses are vital for tackling these challenges. According to UNHCR data, there are more than 25.4 million refugees in the world and despite the increase in basic education enrolment rates in the last three consecutive years only 1% of eligible refugees gained access to higher education in the same period. However, there is a positive shift and as a promising example, in Syria's neighboring countries where the majority of refugees seek asylum, enrolment rates of Syrian students in higher education reached 5% in 2017, which gradually improved the overall

global rates (UNHCR, 2018b). The current 3% enrolment at HEIs represents a steady increase, which is partially attributed to the Turkish case along with other good practices (UNHCR, 2019d, pp. 18-19, 52).

1.2. Literature Review: Challenges in Refugee Access to and Participation in Higher Education

Despite the growing interest in refugee studies and focus on basic education, research on refugee access to and participation in higher education is still lacking but beginning to gather momentum. Although research has mainly focused on refugees' pathways to higher education and obstacles ahead, their inclusion and participation in higher education both at student and institution level continues to be an under-researched subject as well as available support programs and networks (Arar, Kondakci, & Streitwieser, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). There is an apparent need for better understanding of the refugee engagement in higher education and academia, as well as the role that HEIs can play in improving refugee success, integration and inclusion (Joyce et al., 2010; Lenette, Baker, & Hirsch, 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

In their meta scoping study Ramsay and Baker (2019) provide a systematic review and synthesis of the research related to refugees in higher education through an extensive overview of 46 peer reviewed articles published between 1999 and 2018. While the majority of the research published after 2010 illustrates the growing trend and interest, the focus has been mainly on resettlement countries, which contrasts with the very low rates of resettlement among refugee populations worldwide.[3] This gap reveals an "imbalance in production of knowledge" within broader global power hierarchies (Baker et al., 2019) and clearly indicates the need for further research on higher education in first asylum countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Furthermore, there is a growing need to incorporate higher education within the context of forced displacement and refugee studies along with other disciplines (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019). Accordingly, Arar, Kondakci, and Streitwieser (2020) in their study on gaps in policy for education of displaced immigrants, reveal the necessity to bridge research on migration and internationalization in higher education. As acknowledged in other domains of forced migration research, the perceptions and experiences of refugees in the research is often lacking (Baker et al., 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

3 Despite the fact that the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact on Refugees acknowledge the need to expand resettlement and to work towards increasing resettlement paces and other legal pathways, the situation is far from satisfactory. Less than 1% of the global refugee population is selected for resettlement while the majority remain in protracted refugee situations. According to UNHCR data, among the 1.2 million estimated to be in need, 55,680 refugees were resettled in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019c).

Barriers to Access

Existing academic literature and reports on higher education systems and their responses to global refugee flows mainly focus on access and the barriers preventing access. Studies reveal various challenges for asylum seekers and refugees on their path to higher education. Although refugees do not constitute a homogenous[4] group and conditions within host countries vary enormously between first asylum and resettlement countries, some common themes and barriers emerge from the literature.

Firstly, although there may be no legal restrictions preventing asylum seekers and refugees from accessing higher education, the restrictive legal and regulatory framework in some host countries may hinder access. For example, restricted mobility including encampment policies (El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Zeus, 2011); mandatory detention and dispersal regulations (Berg, 2018; Lenette et al., 2019; Morris-Lange & Brands, 2016; Steinhardt & Eckhardt, 2017); and national quota practices (Dryden-Peterson, 2010) can all act as barriers. Very limited or even a lack of available options and resources for higher education at camp settlements further complicate the situation (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Wright & Plasterer, 2010; Zeus, 2011). Even in urban settings, highly regulated policies such as different entitlements attached to different statuses (Houghton & Morrice, 2008; Lenette et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007) or frequent changes paired with complex and contradicting regulations including a multitude of bureaucratic requirements (AIDA, 2017; Berg, 2018; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011) which may be very hard for asylum seekers and refugees to meet further deterring access. These systematic policy barriers often related to an ongoing political discourse of security and xenophobia, which have permeated public consciousness implicitly or explicitly, can also prevent refugees from accessing and participating in higher education in both first asylum and resettlement countries.

At institutional level, complexity and unfamiliarity with the higher education system (Berg, 2018; Daniel, Devine, Gillespie, Pendry, & Zurawan, 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007); lack of or limited information, advice and guidance (Bloch, 2007; Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Houghton & Morrice, 2008; Morrice, 2009); coupled with a lack of encouragement and support (Berg, 2018) are among the barriers for young refugees. Additionally, non-recognition of prior learning and qualifications is another barrier and a source of frustration

4 In fact, as expressed by Baker et al. (2019) despite their national, cultural, social, economic, political or personal conditions or experiences, it is the structural exclusion from public services that brings refugees together as a form of "accidental community".

with its discriminatory nature (Berg, 2018; Guo, 2009; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Schneider, 2018) for asylum seekers and refugees on their path towards higher education (Bloch, 2007; Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Jungblut, 2017; UNHCR, 2018b; Yıldız, 2019). Another documented challenge at institutional level is the academic and administrative staff's relatively low levels of awareness, familiarity and experience of working with refugees (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Earnest et al., 2010; V. Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lenette, 2016). In tandem with increasing demand and lack and/or scarcity of time and resources, institutional staff may come under a great deal of pressure, which may also affect their perceptions and attitudes. Limited studies exist on institutional perspectives, specifically the perspectives of staff, and therefore further research on this area is required (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

Apart from the regulatory and institutional obstacles emerging from host countries' political, legislative and institutional contexts, asylum seekers and refugees inherit various disadvantages deriving from inadequate, interrupted education, trauma experience, language difficulties (Berg, 2018; Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Elwyn, Gladwell, & Lyall, 2012; Hannah, 1999; V. Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al., 2010; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Naidoo, 2015; Stevenson & Willott, 2007) and concerns about temporary status (Bloch, 2007; Lenette et al., 2019; Morrice, 2009; Morris-Lange & Brands, 2016; Vukasovic, 2017). Financial constraints and precariousness also act as barriers preventing their access to higher education (AIDA, 2017; Berg, 2018; Earnest et al., 2010; El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; D. Gateley, 2014; Joyce et al., 2010; Schneider, 2018; Steinhardt & Eckhardt, 2017; UNHCR, 2018b; Watenpaugh, Fricke, & King, 2014; Watenpaugh, Fricke, & Siegel, 2013).

Gender Dimension

Intersectionality, misrecognition of relative inequality, tensions concerning gender roles, class and race in conjunction with other documented challenges are among the most prominent themes of higher education studies for refugees. Gender blind perspectives in refugee studies have been challenged by gender studies. The gendered dimension of access to and participation in higher education has recently started to gain attention (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; El Jack, 2012; A. Harris et al., 2015; V. Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Significant gendered barriers reinforced by displacement and refugee conditions reveal power relations that particularly disadvantage women from accessing and participating in higher education. The way gender intersects in complex ways with power relations related to class, ethnicity, race and other issues such as educational background, trauma experience, language barriers further complicate the process and marginalize women in displacement and protracted refugee contexts.

Despite the diversity and heterogeneity, depicting refugee women as vulnerable subjects is problematic as it overlooks their resilience and determination. Socially constructed gender roles, patriarchal values and institutions affect educational pathways and access to public spaces. Although development of agency through education remains problematic, family roles set by socially constructed cultural norms shift considerably, which also reflects the wider changes in perceptions and attitudes towards education (El Jack, 2012; Fincham, 2020; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Higher education creates opportunities for women to convert their resources into capabilities, enacting their agency and redefining social and cultural structures in which they navigate. Nevertheless, while a high level of aspirations and motivations are identified in various research studies, renegotiation of gender roles and challenging these long-established inequitable social and cultural norms require more nuanced approaches to the gender dimension whilst incorporating a variety of factors in research.

Support Programs

Given these multiple obstacles and refugees' distinct needs in higher education there is a growing body of literature acknowledging the need to develop tailored support programs for refugee students and researchers (Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, & Miles, 2018; Baker et al., 2019; Berg, 2018; Earnest et al., 2010; Hannah, 1999; V. Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al., 2010; Lenette, 2016; Morrice, 2009, 2013a; Naidoo, 2015; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017). Types of support varies from guidance, counseling, orientation, language and academic support to scholarship opportunities. Aside from documenting these support needs, little is known regarding the scope and impact of the support structures available for refugees. A more nuanced understanding of refugee needs and an evaluation of the design and efficacy of support programs is vital and needs further investigation. Streitwieser et al. (2019), in their recent paper, examine, classify and assess current interventions to widen refugee participation and success in higher education in North America and Europe. The wide range of interventions by host governments, HEIs, NGOs and individuals that are introduced at multiple levels, vary in size, focus, extent, targeted groups, delivery methods and outputs. The authors classify these interventions into accredited, on-site or blended learning, international online platforms, scholarships, information sharing platforms, assessment of credentials and qualifications and other efforts including language support, preparation programs and peer mentoring. The research identifies the problematic areas to be developed as: short-term focus, lack of refugees involved in the design and implementation, and lack of evaluation of available programs due to perception and framing of refugees as sole beneficiaries rather than assets. The report also stresses the collaborative

nature of these efforts while acknowledging the need for a greater understanding of the dynamics and actors involved (Streitwieser et al., 2019). In another study affirming the need to bridge the research on migration and the internationalization of higher education, the authors emphasize the atypical character of displaced students among international students, which requires different policies, pathways and practices (Arar, Kondakci, & Streitwieser, 2020). Similarly, in her study based on interviews with members of German HEIs from a system theoretical approach to intersectionality, Berg (2018) recommends supporting institutions financially, and more networking and knowledge sharing among institutions in order to institutionalize support structures for refugees.

Likewise, a greater understanding of refugee choices, strategies and experiences to access support systems is very important for such systems to have any meaningful impact. In their study analyzing refugee student choices of support programs in Australian universities Baker et al. (2018) suggest that students prefer "warm (familiar-formal) support" offered through trusted people who act as brokers and/or "hot (familiar-informal) support" from other students or experienced community members instead of old (unfamiliar-formal) institutional support. Another study points out the gendered pathways to higher education; the role of mobile technologies and online social networks; and peer-to-peer support in refugee camp contexts (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Drawing upon the capability approach[5] another study suggests a shift in focus from needs to strengths for interventions to operate in a multi-dimensional and holistic way (D. E. Gateley, 2015). Premised on autonomy and capability approach Interventions should focus on human agency, giving space and voice to refugees' aspirations and goals while balancing the necessity to address real challenges. Refugees have to be actively involved in these processes in order to move beyond vulnerability, to foster self-reflection and autonomous decision making, while supporting choices and enhancing opportunities. According to D. Gateley (2014); (2015), sustainable interventions ensuring inclusion of refugee initiatives,

5 Based on Sen's (1992) works, the "capability perspective" is an interdisciplinary approach that has been applied in refugee studies as well as for higher education research (Fincham, 2020; D. Gateley, 2014; Schneider, 2018; Zeus, 2011) to focus on the human dimension and agency in the quest to move beyond the discourse of vulnerability and victimhood, which is often associated with refugees. The approach, while acknowledging refugee experiences, does not allow those to take precedence and to predetermine future options and outcomes, and emphasizes the agency of refugees. The approach further enables the pushing of boundaries of higher education research from focusing on resources, knowledge and skills building based on market economy to a more equality and justice-driven research emphasizing the role of higher education in providing well-being especially for disadvantaged communities. Sen distinguished between capabilities and functions. "Well-being" is understood in terms of capabilities, which means actual opportunities and freedoms to choose, achieve and realize desired, valued functions. Converting opportunities into functionings depends on conversion factors that further determine the outputs.

should be funded without restricting refugees' autonomy. Eventually, the need for elaborated research, which explores and analyzes the kind of support that responds to the distinct needs of refugees, bolsters their agency and has an impact on their access to and participation in higher education systems, is underlined in various ways.

In addition to literature identifying and addressing the challenges for increased refugee access to and participation in higher education, emerging literature points to the humanitarian and societal role of HEIs in responding to new demands arising from the inflow of students from refugee backgrounds. This literature, based on different disciplines and perspectives, provides very valuable insights as well as conceptual and analytical tools for evaluating institutional responses (Earnest et al., 2010; Fincham, 2020; Jungblut & Pietkiewicz, 2017; Jungblut, Vukasovic, & Steinhardt, 2020; Loo, Streitweiser, & Jeong, 2018; Schneider, 2018; Thompson, 2008).

Widening Participation

This emerging interdisciplinary research primarily, builds on literature concerning the role of higher education and widening participation for underrepresented or non-traditional students within the higher education systems (Fincham (2020); McCowan (2016); Thompson (2008)). But further provides valuable conceptualizations and frameworks for access and participation that can be used in refugee contexts. In order to increase the "positional" benefits[6] of higher education and reduce inequalities for disadvantaged groups, McCowan (2016) presents three principles for understanding equity of access: availability, accessibility and horizontality, in line with Tomaševski (2006) seminal "4-A Scheme" for understanding the right to education. In his seminal work, Tomaševski (2006) summarizes governmental human rights obligations that stem from the right to education, structured into a simple 4-A Scheme – making education: **Available, Accessible, Acceptable** and **Adaptable**. As a social and economic right, **availability** requires the government to ensure that education is available. **Accessibility** refers to the obligation to secure access to compulsory education for all without any discrimination but this does not necessarily apply for secondary or higher education. **Acceptability,** on the other hand, embodies quality concerns to ensure that education, which is available and accessible, is of a good quality. Finally, **adaptability**, which basically

6 McCowan (2016) distinguishes between intrinsic, instrumental and positional value of higher education. While benefits such as the value of being educated in itself, having an understanding of the world and engaging in critical dialogue is considered as intrinsic, instrumental benefits encompass a broad range of human functions varying from employment participation, well-being. Positional benefits, which can be described as a subset of instrumental and intrinsic benefits of higher education, on the other hand refers to the opportunities that one has in relation to others, considering the context of scarce goods (pp.648-649).

concerns the content, requires education to be adapted to the student's particular needs not vice versa. While education may be available, it is not always accessible or acceptable for individuals and communities. Available opportunities, therefore, are not always adapted to or suiting their particular needs or realities.

Drawing upon this scheme, McCowan (2016) develops a three-dimensional conceptual framework encompassing: Accessibility, Availability and Horizontality. In this scheme, **accessibility** refers to equitable and fair procedures for access; while **availability** focuses on the overall number of places available as well as the existence of facilities and staff. Individuals must have a fair opportunity of participating in higher education whilst there must be sufficient places. Hence, accessibility requires the removal of barriers such as financial obstacles as well as other constraints concerning language, culture and identity along with policies and interventions to provide adequate information, guidance and preparation. Although without any explicit discrimination, practice reveals that despite the removal of formal barriers, access still remains difficult for disadvantaged marginalized groups. A range of positive discrimination policies, affirmative actions are therefore required to ensure equitable access. Lastly, the principle of **horizontality,** which is based on the idea that access and availability for disadvantaged groups do not necessarily translate into meaningful participation and opportunities in the broader society. This principle addresses the problem of stratification and hierarchy in terms of the quality and prestige among institutions. Hierarchy in general confines disadvantaged students to the lower ranked (quality/prestige) institutions given the positional dimension of higher education (McCowan, 2016).

Similarly, Fincham (2020) in her study based on empirical qualitative research adopts Tomaševski (2006) 4-A Scheme and examines the availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of higher education opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In order to go beyond the simplistic utilitarian resource-based human capital approach, the author building on the capability approach proposes education should provide people freedom to achieve well-being which should be understood in terms of their capabilities meaning their actual opportunities and freedoms to choose, achieve and exercise their desired functionings.[7] The study, which recognizes different motivations and needs for undertaking higher education, therefore acknowledges the structural differences related to gender, ethnicity, social exclusion among others, and the role of social norms and discrimination that may shape and restrain an individual's ability to convert resources into capabilities. The

7 See footnote 6 above on capability approach.

paper identifies the perception of higher education to be both functioning and capability based enabling refugees to achieve further functioning. In accordance with McCowan (2016) the study reveals that Syrian youths' motives for higher education are intrinsic and instrumental (economic and social) but more nuanced and complex than assumed.

In her study, Fincham (2020) further finds that although a number of strategies including scholarship opportunities, online learning and non-formal programs have been implemented in order to provide quality higher education and meet the increasing demand, accessibility remains limited. Financial constraints are still a major barrier to accessibility and although scholarships are a conversion factor they are unfortunately limited in scale and quality. Concerning acceptability of higher education for refugees, research reveals that refugee youth perceive available opportunities for them as lower quality than the opportunities offered to locals. This is also parallel to McCowan's conceptualization of lack of horizontality (2016). Apparently, existing high stratification and hierarchy in higher education encourage perceptions of lower quality/prestige of available higher education opportunities among Syrian youth. Adaptability efforts such as online learning opportunities seem to be at odds with functioning and capability sets as well as local perspectives and values. Ultimately, although access to higher education is becoming increasingly available in these countries accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of higher education opportunities still remain problematic in meeting the needs of Syrian students. One reason is due to the one-size-fits-all approach, which is conceptualized according to a decontextualized and homogenized universal refugee subject that neglects a variety of identities. This conceptualization exposes the most vulnerable youths including females and the marginalized more at risk. Henceforth, the study uncovers complex ways in which home and community-based factors including cultural aspects and gender roles intersect with higher education policies and practices (Fincham, 2020).

In his research on widening participation in higher education for Muslim women in the United Kingdom, Thompson (2008) discusses the paradoxes of widening participation while emphasizing different approaches through civic and community engagement. In addition to generic issues that emerged in existing research (e.g. financial pressures; inflexibility of courses and institutional practices; lack of advice, guidance, administrative support and resources), a series of paradoxes exist that need addressing. These paradoxes include widening participation/worsening finances, higher qualifications/lower value, access without accessibility, increasing needs/decreasing support, changing knowledge/fixed curriculum, institutional diversity/existing hierarchy. According to Thompson, a university's commitment

to a wider social purpose, civic mission and developing community relationships as part of widening participation can reduce these identified paradoxes. This commitment, however, concerns becoming part of the society through outreach, awareness and aspiration-raising activities, training programs and flexible progression routes, which move universities to focus more on providing services valuable to communities. But in a stratified and hierarchical institutional context this requires flexibility, resources, institutional support and organizational innovation, which emphasize systematic and structural concerns with sustained and visible community presence.

Policy Frameworks and Institutional Implementations

In addition to research on higher education, public policy and administration disciplines offer some valuable conceptualizations for analyzing and evaluating refugees' access to and participation in higher education. With the massification of higher education and its increasing relevance in diverse policy areas a deeper engagement with policy making has emerged in higher education research as the sector has become a case of particular interest for political, public and administrative sciences. Drawing upon the extension of a multi-level governance approach (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), the "multi-s" of higher education governance and policy coordination (e.g. multi-level, multi-actor and multi-issue) become more evident in refugees' access to and participation in higher education. The framework developed by Vukasovic, Jungblut, Chou, Elken, and Ravinet (2018) provides a useful analytical tool for unpacking its complexity. In addition to levels, particularly those focusing on the distribution of authority, the authors supplement additional features as involvement of multiple actors and policy sectors and their interactions. The multi-issue aspect of higher education for refugees requires coordination among very distinct policy areas varying from research, innovation, home affairs to foreign policy. It also highlights the multi-actor character with the involvement of various actors operational at different levels including different ministries; UN agencies and other non-state actors; HEIs and their students, researchers and staff. The "multi-s" framework offers a useful tool to understand the centralization and de-centralization in higher education policy and implementation for refugees; the dispersal of power from the central level to the local institutions; the organizational level for dynamics; and the involvement of various stakeholders in the process with their transnational dimension.

In their comparative study on the system and organizational level responses from a public policy perspective, Jungblut et al. (2020) explore the public policy dynamics and institutional responses in Germany and Flanders. Their country analysis report with contributions from a variety of authors from different countries further highlights this perspective (Jungblut &

Pietkiewicz, 2017). The introduced analytical tool focuses on three dimensions of policy making: policy styles, main drivers, and the extent of involvement of non-state actors. Based on the garbage can (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) and multiple stream (Kingdon, 2003) models, the authors analyze the policy styles by evaluating whether a policy is proactive or reactive, or whether it is problem or solution driven. As a second dimension, main drivers of the policy are investigated according to a classical top-down or bottom-up approach based on a street-level bureaucrat model developed by Lipsky (2010). The third dimension examines the actors involved in agenda setting, policy design and implementation — whether they reflect reliance on the State or involve non-state actors.

According to this three-dimensional conceptual tool, the policy dynamics in Germany and Flanders are found to be both reactive and solution driven in response to a focusing event. Take for example, the scope of increasing refugee inflows and opening borders in Germany. This response is both reactive and solution driven, and mainly relies on a remodeling of existing solutions both at system and organizational level. Regarding main policy drivers, the Flemish case is primarily bottom-up with lack of a more integrated top-down approach due to the autonomous nature of its institutions. The German case, on the other hand, proves to be a bottom-up approach but a fully State-coordinated one; while the Flemish case strongly relies on non-state actors (Jungblut et al., 2020). The study provides a useful tool for analyzing and comparing various policy responses across different cases. Hence the authors underline the need to expand the scope and assess the efficiency of policy dimensions.

Based on the developed conceptual framework, Jungblut and Pietkiewicz (2017) offer a structured comparison of four case studies including Flanders, Germany, Norway and Romania in their country report. In addition to the commonly documented challenges, (e.g. lack of recognized legal status; language skills; social support; problems with recognition of qualifications; and cultural integration issues), the authors compare different policies and instruments designed and implemented according to the offered framework. Based on its long tradition of hosting refugees and pre-existing recognition procedures for academic qualifications,[8] when it comes to policy making Norway's approach appears to be more proactive. The implementation analysis, on the other hand, offers various degrees of mixture between top-down and bottom-up approaches with Flanders and Romania being mainly bottom-up. The cross-case study reveals the need for support from high level policy-making structures in line with bottom-up initiatives for increased access and participation of refugees

8 For another comparative country case study on the integration of refugee students in European higher education, detailed analysis of the Norwegian case and the testing of the NOKUT's (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) Qualification Passport for Refugees in Turkey see (Yıldız, 2019).

in higher education. Hence policy actors and coordination analysis show the need for cooperation between public and private actors even in cases where public actors play key roles while many initiatives rely on public funding. A combination of hierarchical and network coordination, missing only in the Romanian case, proves to be very important for consistent implementation (Jungblut, 2017).

In the same vein, Streitweiser, Miller-İdrisss, and De Wit (2016) in their study examining the role of higher education in responding to the refugee crisis, describe the European response as a gradual shift from an emergency-based one to more coordinated efforts. Based on the current tide of internationalization, the authors argue that HEIs that have already developed infrastructures for international students are better equipped and more flexible to deal with a mass influx and increasing demand of refugee students.

Streitwieser et al. (2019), in their research on current interventions to widen refugee participation and success in higher education, list six categories of interventions. Based on rationales for internationalization (Knight & De Wit, 1995) they propose five interrelated rationales: (1) academic, (2) political, (3) economic, (4) socio-cultural and (5) humanism. The study specifically emphasizes the humanistic rationale related to concepts of human rights, ethics and social justice. Apparently, humanism, which is catalyzed by the Syrian war and displacement, motivates institutions for further interventions as a way of responding to humanitarian crises within the existing internationalization framework. Ergin, de Wit, and Leask (2019) appropriately name this emerging phenomenon as "forced internationalization". By doing so, they refer to the strategic internationalization efforts by the host governments and HEIs in the face of increasing demands and needs of higher education for refugees.

However, integrating this high level of displaced students into higher education systems and societies in general requires attentive policy making, and adequate funding with social tolerance and patience. In a new special issue on higher education and forced displacement Arar, Kondakci, and Streitwieser (2020) present key insights based on case studies in primary destination countries such as Germany, Turkey and the USA. Case studies reveal that although clear inclusion policies are lacking at national level, institutions that initially applied typical internationalization policies and practices, have gradually extended their practices and organizational capacities to receive and respond to the special needs of displaced students. Likewise Berg (2018) argues that how institutions respond to these challenges depend on funding, individual engagement and path dependency of already existing structures, and highlights the role of networking and knowledge sharing.

As identified in the above-mentioned studies, the German case showed an outstanding good practice in integrating refugees into the higher education system (Berg, 2018; Schneider, 2018; Streitwieser, Brueck, Moody, & Taylor, 2017). While the interventions of the central authority have proven to be efficient, in resonance with other studies, bureaucratic complexity, lack of a comprehensive framework for admission and language requirements were still considered to be among the factors affecting access. Tough competition for limited quotas of foreign students coupled with the system's equal treatment principle, which sets equal standards for unequal conditions, continues to be overlooked by the higher education systems, and is among the perceived challenges for refugee students.

1.3. Concluding Remarks

Despite all these documented obstacles and challenges in literature there is still a high level of aspiration and motivation among young refugees wanting access to higher education, which they regard as a means and hope for a better future for themselves and their families. They value higher education as a way to gain qualifications and employment, as well as to integrate and make social connections (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Fincham, 2020; D. E. Gateley, 2015; Hannah, 1999; Lenette, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Watenpaugh, Fricke, et al., 2014; Watenpaugh et al., 2013). Whether emerging from optimism or frustration, educational aspirations which Schneider defines as "navigational maps" –drawing upon Appadurai (2004)–reveal the challenges as well as agency, creativity and resilience of refugee youth. These "navigational maps" (Appadurai, 2004) also highlight the role of HEIs in the functionings and capabilities. Refugee students who conceptualize higher education as a way of negotiating their identity, place in the world and student status as a parameter transcending their refugee identity (Schneider, 2018). Higher education therefore contributes to moving beyond the vulnerability and agency dilemma for refugees (D. Gateley, 2014; D. E. Gateley, 2015). Beyond empowering and providing self-reliance, the advantages of higher education go beyond individual gains contributing more widely as the youths become the voices, role models and agents of change and development for themselves and their community (Morlang & Stolte, 2008; Wright & Plasterer, 2010; Zeus, 2011).

Nevertheless, as the research suggests there is a growing gap between aspirations and reality where opportunities are very limited and obstacles are huge (AlAhmad, 2016; Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Shakya et al., 2010; Sherab & Kirk, 2016; Watenpaugh et al., 2013). However, an existing body of literature reveals a rising interest in research focusing on higher education for refugees from a variety of disciplines and

perspectives. While a significant number of studies draw attention to the challenges and obstacles for access on the basis of needs analysis; further research incorporating factors varying from gender dimensions, institutional contexts and support mechanisms are necessary for a more nuanced understanding. Moreover, as the literature suggests some of the documented challenges can be tackled at institutional levels through analysis of the institutional policies and practices. Higher education systems are, however, often ill-equipped and underprepared to support the inclusion of underrepresented groups such as refugees and to mediate their diverse needs (Baker et al., 2019).

Yet, the rapid increase of displaced Syrian people seeking asylum in 2015 represented a key challenge for higher education systems and institutions in the region. HEIs were faced with the need to accommodate an unexpected growing number of students from refugee backgrounds within a relatively short time. While each HEI responded to this challenge in their specific contexts, it has generated a body of knowledge offering valuable lessons. Examining the impact of this massive displacement on higher education policies and practices in host countries is crucial to ensure access for refugees and respond to their diverse needs; whilst also discussing the role that higher education plays in addressing new emerging societal challenges.

In this respect the following chapter will focus on the Turkish higher education system. Three HEI case studies will provide a comparative approach in order to investigate the good practices and shortcomings in responding to challenges of forced displacement, and ensuring increased access to and participation in higher education for refugees. Findings of the pilot support programs designed and implemented throughout the application process and the higher education context at one of the cases—İstanbul University—will be evaluated in order to have a better understanding of the distinct needs and experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. As suggested by the research and in light of the common barriers identified, there is a need to focus on support mechanisms and their assessment in order to improve their impact and make them permanent and more central to mainstream. Hence the book will continue with recommendations on how to enhance refugee access to and participation in higher education based on the findings of the research and evaluation of pilot support programs with the aim of developing higher education systems that enhance participation of all disadvantaged groups including refugees on equity basis.

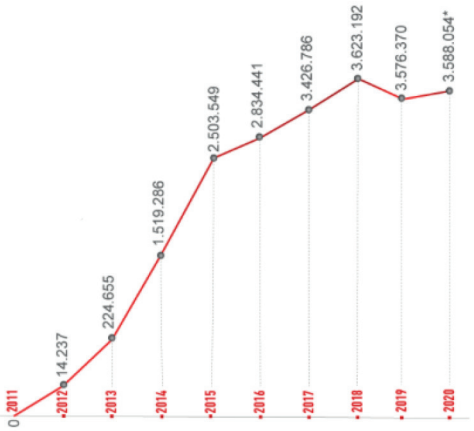
CHAPTER 2

Syrian Youth's Access to Higher Education in Turkey

2.1. Background

In the face of prolonged unrest and forced displacement in Syria, millions of Syrian refugees are being hosted in neighboring countries while many governments and the international community have failed to respond to this emerging humanitarian crisis (Kamyab, 2017). Since 2015, Turkey has been home to the largest number of refugees in the world. The country is currently hosting approximately 3.6 million of the total 5.6 million people who have fled Syria, in addition to the 330,000 asylum seekers and refugees of various other nationalities (DGMM, 2020; UNHCR, 2020b). Since the country ratified the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees with "geographic limitation", protection under international law is limited and legally grants refugee status only to people coming from Europe.

Figure 1: Distribution of Syrian Refugees in the Scope of Temporary Protection



Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) statistics (June 18, 2020)

In that regard, individuals fleeing violence and war in Syria are not granted refugee status but they are under a temporary protection scheme, which is based on the recent "Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)".[9] The new law and temporary protection scheme form part of the country's recent legislative and institutional reforms, which aim to build effective migration governance. Such reforms have been crucial for determining the migration policies and dynamics in the region.

9 As the first asylum law, the LFIP, which was endorsed and entered into force in April 2014, establishes the national asylum system governed by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) for migration governance. For a full English version of LFIP see:https://en.goc.gov.tr/kurumlar/en.goc/Ingilizce-kanun/Law-on-Foreigners-and-International-Protection.pdf

Since the civil war in Syria, labeled as one of the biggest refugee crises of our time, erupted in 2011, Turkey has been faced with an unprecedented level of immigration. With the first influx in 2011, along with the subsequent open-door policy,[10] the challenge of accommodating ever increasing numbers became a public concern and dominated the public agenda. As the Syrian population settling in urban landscapes surpassed the camp populations as early as 2013, providing a functioning infrastructure and access to basic services became a priority.

While the LFIP provides a legal basis, the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR),[11] issued in October 2014, formalized the *ad hoc* temporary protection measures and provided a regulatory framework for registered Syrians to access education along with health, social assistance and support. Considering that the majority of the population is composed of children and youth, education among other humanitarian responses to emergencies, gradually became a major concern for their protection, well-being, self-reliance and empowerment.

Figure 2: Distribution by Age and Gender of Registered Syrian Refugees Recorded by Taking Biometric Data

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TOTAL	1.932.381	1.655.673	3.588.054
0-4	255.026	246.222	501.248
5-9	281.913	258.689	540.602
10-14	202.369	182.169	384.538
15-18	139.857	116.160	256.017
19-24	284.136	211.164	495.300
25-29	200.179	145.982	346.161
30-34	157.467	114.286	271.753
35-39	117.547	95.632	213.179
40-44	84.055	74.706	158.761
45-49	59.179	56.386	115.565
50-54	49.302	48.406	97.708
55-59	37.572	37.588	75.160
60-64	28.167	29.066	57.233
65-69	20.221	20.589	40.810
70-74	7.703	8.655	16.358
75-79	3.759	4.658	8.417
80-84	2.184	2.899	5.083
85-89	1.077	1.505	2.582
90+	668	911	1.579

Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) statistics (June 18, 2020)

10 Despite initially declaring the situation as a "mass influx" and taking the necessary measures based on open-door principle, visa-free entry was reversed and visa requirements were introduced by the beginning of 2016. The Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR), however, leaves decisions on admission to the discretion of the provincial governors and most of the official border crossings have remained closed since 2017.

11 For an English version of the TPR see: https://www.goc.gov.tr/kurumlar/goc.gov.tr/Gecici-Koruma-Yonetmeligi-Ingilizce.pdf

Ongoing war in Syria, coupled with the widespread and increasing numbers of Syrian people in Turkey's urban settlements and their more prolonged length of stay[12] have shifted the thinking on planning and policy from the temporary to the more long term. The influx of millions of displaced young people in a relatively short period urged Turkey to take legal, regulatory and institutional measures in order to respond to their educational needs. Aside from the well-documented structural problems, language barriers, integration issues and quality concerns, the sheer numbers of students requiring education has also posed a challenge for the Turkish Government. According to statistics provided by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE), there are currently 684,919 Syrian students enrolled in primary and secondary education in Turkey including open education, which implies an enrollment rate of approximately 63% (MEB, 2020). With the gradual shift from an *ad-hoc* emergency approach to a more inclusive, comprehensive long-term education policy, enrolment rates of Syrian children in basic education have increased progressively.[13] Despite this upward trend for the four years following the 2013-2014 academic year, enrolment rates have clung to around 60% for the last three years. The number of children still not in school is alarming; while the increasing dropout rates at secondary level is further problematic.[14]

In line with the amplified attention given to basic education, higher education remains among the educational priorities for public authorities since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis (Cumhuriyet, October 20, 2012).

In addition to university students, whose education has been interrupted due to war in Syria, there are 495,300 Syrian youth aged 19-24 years currently under the temporary protection scheme in Turkey, and a further 256,017 aged 15-18 (DGMM, 2020). Considering the large numbers of Syrian youth in Turkey who are, or soon will be, eligible for higher education, the need for more research and analysis on the higher education opportunities available to them is vital to ensure policies can be created and implemented.

12 Currently, accommodation centers are in the course of closing in Turkey and only 1,7% of the Syrian population reside in the camps. Website of the Directorate General of Migration Management issues the updated statistics frequently (DGMM, 2020).

13 For further reading on educational provisions for Syrian students in Turkey see: Ozer, Y. Y., Atesok, Z. O., & Komsuoglu, A. (2017), *Transformation of Turkey's Educational Policies Addressing Immigrants and Refugees*; A. Esen & M. Duman (Eds.), *Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Turkey: Finding and Recommendations* (pp.157-184); WALD. Özer, Y., Komsuoğlu, A., & Ateşok, Z. Ö. (2016), Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Çocukların Eğitimi: Sorunlar ve Çözüm Önerileri, *Asos Journal, 4*(37), (pp.76-110); Ozer, Y. Y., Komsuoglu, A., & Atesok, Z. O. (2017), "One Common Future, Two Education Systems: The Case of Syrian Children of Istanbul", *European Education, 49*(2-3), (pp.114-132).

14 Primary school enrolment rates are 89%, the rate decreases to 70% for lower secondary and to 33% for upper secondary levels (MEB, 2020).

As the numbers of Syrian students has been on the rise since 2012, there was an urgent need to prepare the higher education system and institutions for their participation and inclusion. Enhanced understanding is now required in order to respond more adequately to the multifaceted, complex needs of Syrian students. Additional support is necessary to ensure their active engagement in academic life and most importantly to assure their integration into the higher education system, which may contribute to social inclusion in the long term.

2.2. Research Design and Methodology

Current State of Research

During the time of this research, some —mainly grey—reports commissioned by humanitarian organizations were starting to emerge but their coverage of refugee access to and participation in higher education in Turkey was rather limited. The first detailed report on Syrian university students and scholars in Turkey was published in 2014 as part of a broader regional project by Watenpaugh, Fircke, and King (2014). In a subsequent similar regional project by the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, Yavcan and El-Ghali (2017) focus on policies and current status of higher education for Syrian students in Turkey. Following this, policy reports by Dereli (2018) and Hohberger (2018) examine the educational conditions, challenges and opportunities for Syrian students in higher education based on qualitative research and bringing together student experiences and perspectives. Dereli (2018) mainly focuses on the integration process in higher education; while Watenpaugh, Fircke, et al. (2014), Yavcan and El-Ghali (2017), and Hohberger (2018) examine higher education policies and different programs provided by the various actors. Based on policy-oriented qualitative approaches the latter also consider the educational conditions and needs from the students' and scholars' perspectives. The first and most comprehensive quantitative study targeting Syrian students and academics in Turkey is a report based on the ongoing project "Elite Dialogue" (M. Erdoğan, Yavcan, Mohamad, Kavukçuer, & Sancı, 2017). As per the findings of the performed needs analysis in the project, common well-documented challenges include: the language, financial issues, lack of knowledge and information during the application process, and the procedures for recognizing qualifications. Likewise, the main concerns identified after enrolment are linguistic, academic and social. There is also a general call for better cooperation and collaboration among key stakeholders both at national and international levels in order to increase the access and participation of Syrian students in higher education. In another book chapter based on the project A. Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018) summarizes the findings of the survey as Syrian youth who have low enrolment rates, experience trauma and are academically vulnerable

with unclear perspectives and guidance. They are not integrated socially in the local community and generally have unclear future aspirations and prospects.

At academic level, the first article published concerning the provision of higher education for Syrians was published in 2013. In his research, Seydi investigates the education provisions for Syrians, focusing on problems and demands by conducting semi-structured interviews with Syrian academics and educators in Turkey. The study highlights the unmet demands for higher education as one of the biggest issues facing the Syrian population (Seydi, 2013). Another research report carried out by Karadağ (2016) at Adıyaman University analyzes the preparedness of HEIs for Syrian students in the context of internationalization in higher education. Based on ten interviews conducted with Syrian students, the author identifies the main problem areas as: low performing institutional communication in advertising and branding; insufficient social activities; and adaptation problems. While on the other hand, students stated that the guidance they received from academic staff, the language preparation courses and accommodation facilities provided by the university were adequate.

In a subsequent small-scale study, Sezgin and Yolcu (2016) examine the problems that Syrian university students face during the socialization process. The research is based on interviews conducted with eleven students at the Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, which is one of the border region universities. Although Syrian students do not express any problems and remain silent concerning integration, they avoid communication with local students and people due to prejudices and misperceptions. Not surprisingly, a study conducted at the Kilis 7 Aralık University located in one of the border cities with a very large Syrian population, reveals the negative perceptions and attitudes that local university students hold towards Syrians (Topkaya & Akdağ, 2016). Another study carried out with ten local Turkish students, however, reveals mixed results. In his research on local students' perceptions and experiences with Syrian classmates, Ergin (2016) finds that although local students have positive opinions towards internationalization at higher education most of the participants have serious concerns regarding Syrian students accessing higher education in Turkey. Local students tend to perceive Syrian students' access to Turkey's higher education as unfair, compared with access for locals. The same students are also concerned about the pressure on the already limited institutional resources and the job market amid very high levels of unemployment among the country's youth. Rather surprisingly, local students do support their Syrian classmates, while acknowledging the humanitarian concerns, their basic right to education, and their contribution to internationalization and cultural diversity in the classroom. However, it should be noted that the research was conducted in an HEI where the language of instruction is English and numbers

of Syrian students are low, compared with other HEIs. The English language preparatory program, in which the interviews were conducted, may also have provided a venue for better communication and interaction among local and Syrian students since they communicate and study in a language foreign to them both. As stated by the author, the limited number of Syrian students at the HEI where the interviews were conducted should not be overlooked, given the fact that the perceptions may be different at border universities where Syrian student numbers are higher. Accordingly, a more recent study based on Bauman and May (2019) conceptualization of strangers in everyday life, analyzed the experiences, interactions and encounters of both Syrian students and their Turkish classmates at Mersin University. In this study, authors Attar and Küçükşen (2019), examine the adaptation and social problems among students from a micro-sociology perspective. The study finds that both groups of students keep their distance and prefer to be separated spatially both at campus and in classrooms, which in turn adversely affects their communication and feeds prejudices. As per the Syrian students who express exposure to different kinds of prejudice and negative behaviors, improved Turkish language proficiency may contribute to better communication and relations. The study, involving interviews with 23 participants, reveals the need for enhanced communication and systematic support for Syrian students at institutional levels. The report concludes with a plea for more comparative studies on the different institutional contexts.

In a more recent study, Cin and Doğan (2020) shed light on the various pathways for Syrian students to enter higher education in Turkey. Building on Sen (1992) capability approach[15] frequently used in refugee education research (Fincham, 2020; D. Gateley, 2014; Schneider, 2018; Zeus, 2011) the authors examine how students navigate their way through higher education in Turkey and which opportunities are available to them afterwards. Since access does not always lead to inclusion and meaningful participation, the authors focus on the conversion factors enabling access, functionings and valued capabilities developed through the educational process, relations, opportunities. The analysis is based on the narratives of 15 interviewed refugee students. While the approach captures the multi-dimensional aspect of higher education for refugees in Turkey, it also provides solid theoretical grounds for understanding students' aspirations, journeys and values. Despite the limited scope of the research, students coming from different cities provide greater understanding and insight into student perceptions. As per the findings, economic resources, social connections, care and support were found to be helpful in navigating their way through higher education. Most students value higher education as it allows them to be part of the host

15 See footnote 6 above.

community, to achieve their ambitions and to lead a more gender equal and free life. The study reveals the role that higher education—particularly for women—plays in compensating for inequalities and discrimination, socializing and stepping out of their communities despite the constraints that alienate them. The report therefore underlines the need for institutional support and appropriate educational arrangements in order to turn resources into valued functionings, strengthen agency and transform lives.

In brief, there is a growing empirical interest in refugee studies, particularly given the immediate influx of millions of Syrians forcibly displaced in Turkey. Considering the increasing numbers of children and youth among the Syrian population, refugee education has become an important topic and area of research. Although little is known and few studies specifically focus on higher education, the subject has recently started to gain traction among academics.

This section provides an overview of current research on the access to and participation in higher education for refugees in Turkey in order to identify key prominent themes and current gaps. The research reveals the need, demand and aspirations for higher education among Syrian youth despite the challenges ahead. While existing research mostly consists of grey literature based on reports and policy papers that focus on the challenges of access for both prospective and current refugee students, literature emphasizing the distinct experiences of students is beginning to emerge. Although this new literature, which is based on short-term, empirical, small-scale research in which students are the primary participants, is generally limited in size, scope and extent it does provide solid grounds for further research. As many of these studies reveal, further research and longitudinal analysis, expanding the size and scope, is needed in order to better capture the multiple facets, dimensions and intersectional factors of this recent phenomenon. Our research therefore draws attention to the policy responses and institutional implementation based on comparative analysis of three HEIs. In addition to students, in this study academic and administrative staff are also included in the data collection. In view of the general consensus in the literature, we propose an assessment of particular kinds of support programs that facilitate refugee students in accessing and participating in higher education. With this study we aim to contribute to the establishment of more responsive and inclusive higher education systems for refugees.

Research Design and Methodology

Various contextual factors need to be considered while studying refugee access to higher education. These factors include for example: disrupted and inadequate education; experience of displacement or loss; post-migration transition into a new environment; the culture;

language; feelings of uncertainty; and the educational system and institutional level challenges. With that in mind, research in this area requires intersectional, multi-level approaches and a holistic view to provide a comprehensive framework for the wide range of factors (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004). To capture this complex environment adequately, a qualitative approach combined with quantitative data was adopted for this research. In addition to the findings and evaluations of the case studies and pilot programs, incorporating the insights of refugee students, researchers and key stakeholders (e.g. policy makers and academics) at both national and international levels was a major concern. Events and consultations that incorporate a variety of perspectives were organized constantly for feedback, refinement and enhanced understanding (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

As we seek to understand how HEIs respond to the increasing needs and demands of Syrian students, this study is expected to contribute to the emerging field. We provide an analysis of the Turkish higher education system, its experience with students from a comparative institutional aspect and based on a public policy approach that combines student perspectives with longitudinal project data. This research aims to bring together the perspectives of refugee students, researchers, academics and administrative staff, policy makers and civil society. This applied interpretive, qualitative approach enables the shared dialogue between researchers and interviewees and, as such, assures a rich account of data from different perspectives.

Firstly, a detailed document and literature review was undertaken in order to map both the global framework and international practices. Publicly available documents related to the higher education of refugees in Turkey were analyzed to identify national regulations and practices. Interviews were then conducted between December 2018 and February 2019 at the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in Ankara, which is the main regulatory body for higher education. Three senior officials responsible for policy on refugee students in Turkish Higher Education were interviewed. These interviews with the main policy makers primarily served to confirm the accuracy of the knowledge gathered from the literature review. They also helped to shed light on the legal framework for asylum seekers and refugees wanting to access higher education in Turkey, as well as the relatively new regulatory framework for Syrian students under the temporary protection scheme. The interviews also provided an opportunity to test and reflect on the research design as well as the interview content for the coming fieldwork.

Secondly, in order to map the institutional implementation of the regulations for the fieldwork, two public HEIs—Gaziantep and Karabük Universities—were selected alongside Istanbul University as good models considering the high ratios of registered Syrian students.

These three HEIs were selected on purpose, in order to capture the different institutional and regional contexts. Gaziantep University, for example, is in a border region with a large Syrian population; while Istanbul and Karabük Universities, situated in two very different cities far from the Syrian border, also accommodate large numbers of Syrian students. Istanbul is host to the biggest Syrian population, not just in Turkey but also in the whole of Europe. Whereas Karabük, a small and remote city in the Western Black Sea region does not have a large Syrian population but still accommodates more than 1,500 Syrian university students. These three HEIs were chosen in order to trace the institutional similarities and differences, and identify good practice concerning refugee access to and participation in higher education.

Concerning the research design and fieldwork, different procedures and schedules were employed. At Istanbul University, where the project team had preliminary findings from previous projects, a more comprehensive recruitment and communication procedure could be employed due to the available time all through the project implementation. Fieldwork could therefore follow a different process and schedule, which comprised other modules carried out over an extended period of time. In addition to the interviews and focus groups with Syrian students and researchers at Istanbul University within the scope of the previous project,[16] which provided the preliminary findings for the current study, interviews were conducted between July 2018 and October 2019 in order to follow up and ensure continuous updating of the findings. As well as the interviews, participants of the pilot application and admission support, orientation program, and academic language support implemented within the scope of the project provided additional data for the research. Pilot support programs designed and implemented within the scope of this project are discussed and evaluated in order to unpack the challenges that both HEIs and students face. Such analysis enables the creation of effective policies that meet the distinct needs and demands of refugee students and academics, and helps boost their participation in higher education. In that regard, although certain support programs (e.g. academic, language courses, guidance and counseling) do exist, research and analysis of their design, implementation, access strategies along with the evaluation of students' choices and experiences of such services is quite scarce (Baker et al., 2018; Naidoo, 2015). Hence, opening a debate on the provision of responsive support services and programs for refugee students and researchers is among the objectives of this current research and book.

16 The data used were initially collected for the project entitled "Supporting Refugee Application and Admission to Higher Education Institutions in Turkey" (SUPREF). This project was funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund—the Madad Fund—in response to the Syrian Crisis and came under the scope of the HOPES regional program implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in partnership with the British Council, Campus France and the Dutch organization for internationalization in education—Nuffic.

Due to time constraints, a more condensed schedule was implemented at Gaziantep and Karabük Universities comprising: (1) survey, (2) interviews and (3) focus groups. Respectively, a survey was conducted to examine the implementation and admission policies; the available support mechanisms and experiences; and whether there is a specific member or unit in the organization responsible for the process. Aside from identifying the institutional framework and practices, we aimed to understand the general level of knowledge about the process and the available support services. Both students and staff were included in the survey for the sake of receiving different perspectives. Students at Gaziantep and Karabük Universities were recruited with the assistance of academic and administrative staff, and according to the research criteria. While the risk of institutional gatekeeping is acknowledged, it was selected as the most feasible opinion due to time constraints and the students' familiarity and connections with the student body. At Istanbul University, a more comprehensive approach, with a detailed communication strategy, was used to recruit both research and pilot program participants.

Interviews and focus group discussions were then held in order to gather more detailed information. Interviews with the academic and administrative staff, for example, covered good practice and specific procedures, mechanisms and practices developed to support refugees as well as problems experienced during the process. A needs analysis was undertaken with refugee students, researchers and academics through focus group discussions. The aim of these discussions was to capture the "voice" and experiences of refugees and record their views concerning their own needs; aspirations; achievements; knowledge and information on higher education; the challenges they faced; the adaptation process; level of engagement; feelings of belonging and connection to the university; availability of support mechanisms and services; and their attendance at lectures. Interviews with academic and administrative staff, and a focus group with students were conducted on February 4 and April 18-19, 2019 at the universities of Karabük and Gaziantep by three project researchers. At Karabük University, six staff and 17 students were interviewed with a further eight staff and 13 students at Gaziantep University. Finally, an info session, workshop and international seminar were organized at İstanbul University with the participation of Syrian students, researchers, administrative and academic staff, representatives from the CoHE and international organizations. The aim of these events was to explore the issues raised in more detail, to highlight the preliminary findings of the research, and discuss the possible recommendations. A thematic content analysis consisting of key findings gathered into distinct themes and recommendations was employed in order to easily communicate the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

Given the substantial participation and extent of personal data collected for the research and pilot programs, ethics approval was obtained from Istanbul University's Research Ethics Council prior to the implementation of the project. All data has been collected in accordance with this approval and the ethical guidelines of the project. As part of the ethical approvals procedures, preliminary consent form templates and information sheets describing the aims, objectives and implications of the project were provided in an understandable language. These forms and information sheets explicitly state that participation is voluntary and any participant has the right to decline participation or may leave at any time without any consequence. Apart from the written consent, all participants were informed of the consent procedures above, and assured that all data would be anonymous and remain confidential if data is shared or made available for secondary analysis.

Despite the risk of gatekeeping and bias due to participants representing their institutions, the interpretive, qualitative approach with on-site observations and informal conversations allows for shared dialogue between researchers and interviewees. The use of mixed methods targeting refugees (e.g. prospective and current students, researchers, academics) policy makers, institutions and organizations ensures a rich dataset gathered from different perspectives, which permits triangulation of results.[17]

Particular care and consideration are also required for researchers working with potentially vulnerable young people who may have experienced displacement, violence and/or trauma (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014; D. E. Gateley, 2015). In addition, the project encompasses some measures to mitigate against the risk of stigmatization and to help avoid situations that may be traumatizing for participants. In addition to an established Ethics Advisory Board, the university Guidance, Counseling and Social Support Unit has provided psychological support and guidance to the researchers throughout the project. The project deliberately avoids focusing on vulnerability preferring instead to emphasize agency and resilience. The research focuses specifically on the participants' agency and resilience by exploring their experiences, views and the strategies they have developed to overcome any challenges they faced in gaining access to and participation in higher education.

The research also aims to build a space for dialogue between researchers and participants. The lack of agency and appropriation of refugees in research is a current subject of critique

17 "Triangulation" is a method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities, agreement and mismatch among the perspectives of different stakeholders in the research data (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003).

in the literature (Baker et al., 2019; Block et al., 2014; D. E. Gateley, 2015; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011). Within that perspective the research, program design and implementation process have been developed in a participatory manner in consultation with refugee undergraduate and graduate students and key stakeholders. The research and pilot programs have benefitted immensely from the experiences and recommendations of the Syrian team members, who worked throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of the project. This proactive approach, which has enabled engagement with students, scholars, stakeholders, participants and team members, opens the field to more equitable research design and implementation in the future. Accordingly, in its strategic framework the UNHCR lists, along with other key stakeholders, the role of academic networks to increase refugee inclusion. In addition to supporting evidence-based research, and accessible learning opportunities for refugees, the document highlights the importance of systematically including refugees as co-researchers in the projects (UNHCR, 2019d). Among the recommendations is that future research should include scholars from refugee backgrounds. However, the documented risks of alienation and exploitation of subcontracted labor relations for refugees in academic work require further attention and consideration (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019).

2.3. Syrian Students' Access to and Participation in Higher Education in Turkey

Despite the increasing interest and advocacy in refugees' access to and participation in higher education and the relevant expanding normative framework in the global context; in practice, implementation fully depends on national legislation, regulation and policy. While strong partnerships and collaboration among various international and national stakeholders are vital to scale up and expand higher education for refugees in host countries, it is national regulation, policy and provision that essentially shape the outcomes. Against this background, in this section we discuss higher education policy and provision for Syrian students in Turkey; their pathways to higher education and the perceived obstacles. The section then provides an analysis of the regulatory and institutional framework for refugees' access to higher education in Turkey.

Revised and Improved Regulatory Framework

The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) is the central agency with the mandate to administer and plan higher education policy in order to coordinate and support the higher education system in Turkey. The Turkish higher education system is among the biggest in the region with 206 HEIs consisting of 129 public universities, 75 foundation universities and four vocational training schools, which accommodate 7,940,133 enrolled students (YÖK, 2020b).

While education is free in public universities subject to some minor administration fees, tuition fees at foundation universities are generally high and vary according to the program and institution. The language of instruction is mainly Turkish, while there are programs available in English, French, German and some have introduced Arabic. Depending on the program, language proficiency is mostly required and for students who do not have certificates proving their proficiency, HEIs may require enrolment to a preparatory language class. Despite Turkey's long tradition of centralization in education (Çelik & Gür, 2013) admission to higher education for national students is based on a nationwide central placement system administered by the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM), whereas a decentralized system is in place for international students. Each higher education institution determines their own admission criteria and procedures within the general framework of the CoHE along with the available quotas.[18] In recent years with the current tide of internationalization in tandem with the rising supply and demand, the system has experienced rapid growth. There are currently 148,868 foreign students enrolled at HEIs in Turkey. The system is experiencing an expansion in numbers, scope and experience with foreign students and researchers (Özer, 2016).

Despite the recent growth, higher education in Turkey is severely competitive and the system is constantly struggling to accommodate the increasing demand of eligible and aspiring national and international students.[19] A new and unexpected dimension has been added to the ongoing internationalization trend with the influx and inclusion of large numbers of Syrian students. This new factor, which Ergin et al. (2019) calls "forced internationalization" due to the increasing access and participation of Syrian youth in a highly competitive and already strained higher education system, has led to new regulations and measures in order to cope with this new challenge.

The fact that more than half of the total number of Syrians under the temporary protection scheme consists of children and youth under the age of 18 pushes education policy and provision high up the political agenda. The relatively young Syrian population, their continued and protracted displacement and already disrupted education limiting their future access to the labor market highlights the importance of providing higher education for them. As per the latest statistics of the DGMM (2020), the number of Syrian youths of university age (19-24 years) in Turkey is currently 495,300. Counting the 256,017 youths aged 15-18 and the

18 These admission criteria and procedures vary from Foreign Student Exams (YÖS) conducted by HEIs to standard international exams such as SAT, ACT or based on diploma grades.

19 As per the statistics of the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM), of the 2.5 million applicants to the central exam system requesting access to higher education, only 904,176, including 150,715 open education students, gained a place for the academic year 2019-2020.

increasing graduation rates from secondary education, higher education emerges as an important tool of empowerment, integration and social cohesion as well as regional development and stability. Although higher education enrolment rates in Syria prior to the conflict are estimated to be around 26%, there is lack of accurate data regarding the educational levels of the Syrian population in Turkey. However, they are a diverse group with a wide range of educational backgrounds varying from no formal education to postgraduate qualifications (M. Erdoğan et al., 2017; Watenpaugh, Fircke, et al., 2014).

Within the legislative and regulatory framework of LFIP and TPR, which identify the legal status of Syrians in Turkey, education provision is placed on a legal basis. According to Article 28 of the TPR concerning education services, Section 2 authorizes the CoHE to determine principles and procedures related to associate, undergraduate, masters and doctorate degrees for Syrian people under the temporary protection scheme. As the central body, setting the regulatory and institutional framework, the CoHE requires and coordinates all efforts to improve the access and participation of refugee students, researchers and scholars (YÖK, 2017).

As identified in the literature review, despite the fact that higher education is often neglected in refugee emergencies, with the immediate rise of Syrian refugees the CoHE was prompt to take action at a relatively early stage before the legislative and regulatory framework of the LFIP and TPR. Following the mass migration of Syrians from 2012 onwards, assuring continuation of higher education for Syrian university students in order to prevent any deprivation, was among the priorities of the CoHE. In his statement on October 20, 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Atalay indicated that the CoHE had already made arrangements to allow Syrian university students to continue their education at Turkish HEIs and that efforts to teach the Turkish language for high school graduates to attend higher education had already been introduced (Cumhuriyet, October 20, 2012).

Accordingly, the CoHE immediately started to issue a series of circulars and decisions in order to facilitate and increase Syrian youth's access to and participation in higher education in Turkey. The CoHE General Assembly Decision of September 3, 2012 allowed Syrian university students without academic or identification documents to enroll at seven universities[20] in the border provinces as *special students*.[21] The Decision, which was originally

20 These border universities are: Gaziantep University, Kilis 7 Aralık University, Harran University (Şanlıurfa), Mustafa Kemal University (Hatay), Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, Çukurova University (Adana) and Mersin University.

21 "Special Student" refers to a student enrolled at one HEI but who can continue their education at another HEI due to the desire to gain other cultural experiences or special conditions, health and other related reasons, reserving to keep their registration on the related higher education institution.

promulgated for the academic year 2012-2013 and later extended, enabled Syrian students to attend courses thus preventing any disruption to their studies during their displacement. Given the perception of temporariness prevalent in these first years, the main objective was to enable students to feel more secure to continue their education so they could go back to their studies in Syria uninterrupted rather than assuring their formal registration and integration in the Turkish higher education system. Hence, the "special student" status does not provide degrees or diplomas, as these are only available after formal registration, which requires the submission of official documents. Although appreciated as an immediate emergency policy response, the Decision was also criticized by Syrian researchers and students due to its inconsistent application and rigid procedures for regular registration (Seydi, 2013).

On September 21, 2013, the CoHE issued a new Decision to regulate the transfer procedures to Turkish HEIs in special conditions. According to the addition of Clause 2 included in the related Regulation,[22] students coming from countries where education is interrupted due to war or humanitarian crisis can apply to transfer to the Turkish HEIs. By facilitating the transfer procedures, the Decision aimed at securing more flexible pathways for Syrian higher education students whose education had been interrupted due to conflict and displacement. Subsequently, on October 9, 2013 according to the new Regulation, the CoHE declared the procedures and principles were to be followed for the transfer of students who had started their higher education in Syria and Egypt before the 2013-2014 academic year (excluding specialization programs in dentistry and medicine). The Decision introduced an additional quota of up to 10% to be assessed by the relevant HEIs for these transfer students.[23] Additionally, students without documents were to be accepted as "special students" until they could provide the necessary documents.[24] While easing accessibility through flexibility, the Decision ensured availability of higher education for Syrian students through increased transfer quotas. While regulating the transfer procedures for refugee and refugee-like status students, due to the decentralized structure for the admission of foreign students, the CoHE leaves the implementation and conditions of admission to the HEIs. Hence, the

22 For the amendment to the "Regulation Concerning Transfer, Double Major and Minor Degrees at the Level of Associate and Undergraduate Degree Programs Among HEIs and Credit Transfer Between HEIs", the "Additional Clause 2" which contains regulations concerning transfer in special conditions see: https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=13948&MevzuatTur=7&MevzuatTertip=5

23 For the "Principles concerning the procedures for Syrian students to transfer to Turkish HEIs" see: www.yok.gov.tr/web/guest/ek_madde_2

24 Originally promulgated for the current academic year, the Decision on "special students" later extended in scope and subsequent academic years. In 2014, the Decision extended to Yemen and the right to apply for "special student" status was extended to all HEIs.

conditions and evaluation of admission is under the HEIs' mandate and responsibilities. HEIs have established *ad-hoc* recognition committees to assess and evaluate the required documents for the transfer and recognition of qualifications and gained competences.

In the same year a subsequent Decision of the Council of Ministers introduced free tuition for Syrian students admitted to Turkish public universities. Fees are to be covered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) on behalf of the Turkish Government (YÖK, 3.9.2013). Although not very high compared to the tuition fees of private foundation universities, exemption from international student fees, which are higher than national student fees, eases the financial burden of higher education. Concerning costs, for first year applicants to Turkish HEIs, YTB introduced special scholarship programs including the Turkey Scholarships Program (Türkiye Bursları).[25] Aside from assuring the special quotas and placements, these scholarship programs cover tuition fees, provide a monthly stipend, accommodation and Turkish language courses if necessary. Furthermore, a degree of flexibility was introduced for students lacking official documents for admission through the YTB, which in cooperation with the UNHCR also offers an intensive Turkish language program to facilitate refugees access to higher education (UNHCR, 2018b). In a subsequent Decision, in order to overcome the quota constraints and language problems, the CoHE allowed for higher education programs to be provided in Arabic at eight border universities. In addition to increasing the availability of opportunities, the central authority's efforts to ease the language barrier and financial costs of higher education for students can be considered a push for greater accessibility and availability.

Although not directly involved in higher education policy, another important factor for facilitating application procedures related to document submission and recognition of foreign credentials is high school diploma equivalencies. Diploma equivalences for foreign students are issued by the MoNE.[26] During the first years of displacement, school leaving Baccalaureate exams were held in Turkey by the Higher Commission of Education of the Interim Government and later by the MoNE. Accreditation and equivalency procedures for Syrian students are now integrated into the Turkish national education system through the open education system and its infrastructure.

In brief, since the early influx of refugees in 2012, the government and the CoHE have been prompt in responding to the higher education needs of Syrian students and taking action

25 ttp://www.daad-turkiye.org/imperia/md/content/informationszentren/ic-istanbul/ytb_2016_07_eng.pdf.

26 Although some discrepancies existed in the first years of displacement, the procedure has been refined and now runs smoothly according to the students. And it is newly integrated into the electronic system of MoNE: http://www.meb.gov.tr/meb-denklik-islemleri-elektronik-ortamda/haber/20113/tr.

to support their access and inclusion in Turkey's higher education systems and institutions.[27] Introduction of the special student status, free tuition, additional quotas, new programs in Arabic and enhanced scholarship schemes have been supportive. Furthermore, a degree of flexibility has been introduced for transfer applications. While the framework for first-year applicants has not been revised, transfer procedures have particularly facilitated the currently enrolled higher education students enabling them to continue their education in Turkey.

From a public policy perspective, the policy response was *ad hoc*, reactive and began as an emergency response to the forced displacement of and need to integrate the ever-growing numbers of Syrian students requiring access to higher education in Turkey. Relevant policy change was driven by the challenges initiated by external shocks outside of the political system (Bovens, T'Hart, & Peters, 2002). As suggested by Kingdon (2003), the policy window triggered by an external event opened the way for the inclusion of Syrian students in Turkey. While writing this book, an article, similar to our elaboration, observed that this reactive and gradually developing higher education policy is marked by modifications, alterations and additions in the face of ongoing challenges (Arar, Kondakci, Kasikci, & Erberk, 2020). The ongoing internationalization also contributed to this policy response. Pre-existing structures and instruments for supporting internationalization were expanded to include refugee and refugee-like students thus the CoHE's common vision and strategy of internationalization strengthened this policy response. However, implementation of this policy framework has been strictly dependent on institutional policies and practices, which vary enormously among HEIs.

From the 4-A's perspective (Tomaševski, 2006), while regulatory amendments, new Arabic programs and additional quotas provided for higher education opportunities (availability), a considerable degree of flexibility was introduced to boost accessibility and offer inclusive procedures for Syrian students, which can be considered some sort of systematic adaptability. Apart from flexible procedures to overcome restrictive regulations and strict document requirements, exemption from international student fees at public universities and the introduction of scholarship programs were developed to ease the financial burden of higher education for Syrian students. In that regard, Turkey has sought to provide an inclusive higher education for Syrian students with its revised regulations and decisions.

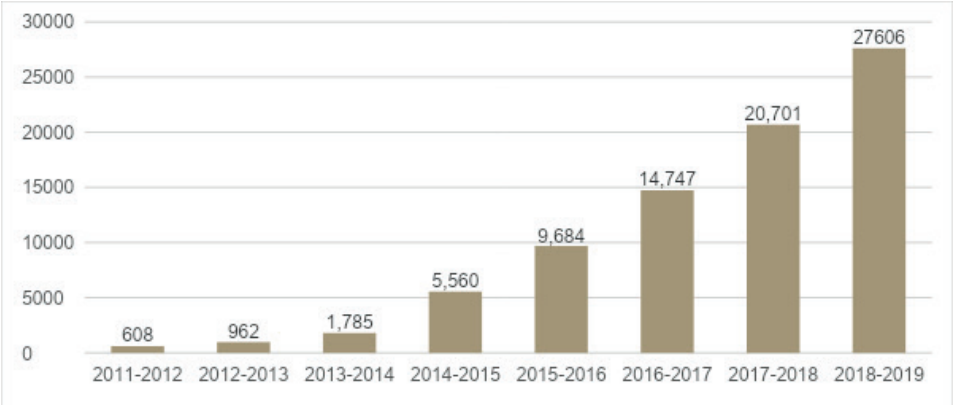
27 For a detailed analysis of the policy responses and improved framework of higher education for refugees see: Atesok, Z. O., Komsuoglu, A., & Ozer, Y. Y. (2019). "An Evaluation of Refugees' Access To Higher Education: Case of Turkey and Istanbul University". *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, pp.119-136; Ateşok, Z. Ö. (2018), "Mapping the Field: Regulative and Institutional Framework for Refugees' Access to Higher Education in Turkey", *Asos Journal, 6*(81), pp.622-638.

Although efforts to prompt the principle of availability and accessibility are evident in the regulatory framework developed for Syrian students, acceptability and adaptability of these opportunities are problematic and strictly depend on institutional policies and practices. Therefore, despite the central authority's regulatory framework to assure availability of higher education opportunities, the accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of these opportunities for Syrian students requires further investigation at institutional levels.

Current Situation: Challenges and Responses

As per the CoHE's statistics starting from the academic year 2013-2014, the effects of this new supportive legislation and regulatory framework can be traced through the steady and increasing trend in the enrolments of Syrian students at higher education. Within this regulatory framework 27,606 Syrian students under temporary protection were enrolled at Turkish HEIs for the 2018-2019 academic year (YÖK, 2020b).

Figure 3: Enrolled Syrian Student Numbers in Turkey



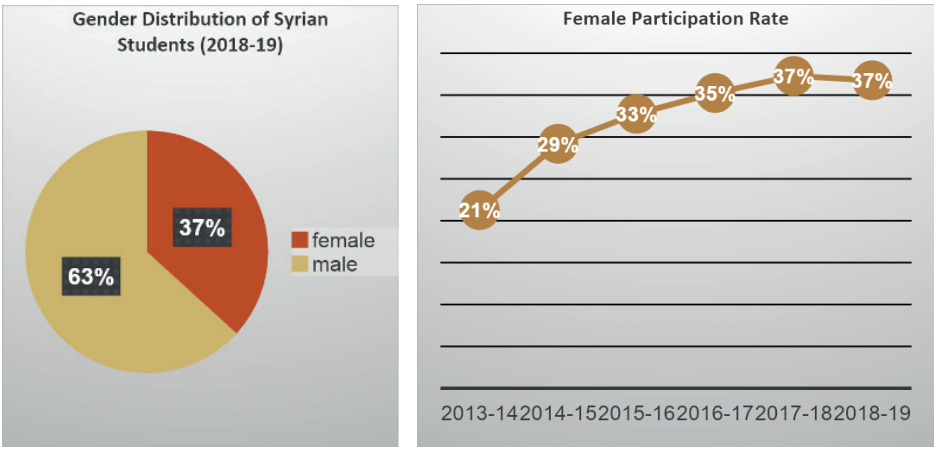
Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

Among the total 148,868 international students enrolled at Turkish HEIs, 25% are Syrian students constituting the largest group. This also corresponds to an estimated 5% of the Syrian university aged population in Turkey, which is above the world average of 3%. In 2019, the world average of 1% after five consecutive years, witnessed a rapid increase, which is partially attributed to the Turkish case along with other good practices (UNHCR, 2019d, pp. 18-19, 52). As per Hohberger (2018), the improved regulatory framework, enhanced infrastructure and internationalization trend implemented in the previous decades contributed to providing higher education opportunities for Syrian youth. Enrolment rates are, however, still very low compared with the world average of 37% for non-refugee students. That aspect

therefore requires further attention and improvement. Notwithstanding the remarkable increase, the vast majority of university-age Syrians are still unable to access higher education in Turkey. Directly connected with the efforts to increase basic education enrolment rates of Syrian students, the increase in demand for higher education will further emphasize the accessibility of opportunities.

As discussed, availability does not lead to accessibility. Considering the prolonged nature of displacement and the opportunities higher education holds for empowerment, agency, well-being, social cohesion and integration, providing secure pathways to higher education for Syrian population is vital. Ability for Syrian students to access opportunities are generally intersected with individual and community-based factors including class, culture, traditions and gender roles, as well as higher education policies and practices both at national and institutional levels (Fincham, 2020). The uneven distribution of female students in this respect sheds light on the gender dimension of access. Syrian women constitute only a small portion of students enrolled at Turkish universities. This discrepancy is attributed to cultural gender norms; early marriage among Syrian youth; and family preference of allocating resources to male members (Dereli, 2018; Fincham, 2020; Watenpaugh, Fircke, et al., 2014). The research has, however, identified a kind of social transformation whereby war and displacement have changed the perceptions about higher education for women and encouraged some parents to be more willing to permit their daughters to continue their education (Fincham, 2020, pp. 13-14). Despite a slight increase of female participation in higher education since the beginning of the immigration, a need for further investigation and awareness raising is apparent in order to boost Syrian women's enrolment rates to higher education.

Figure 4: Gender Distribution and Female Participation Rates of Syrian Students



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

Regarding policy, through immediate legislative and regulatory action, the CoHE has taken the necessary measures to facilitate and provide flexible pathways for Syrian students in order to widen their access to higher education in Turkey. However, implementation strictly depends on the policies and practices of the HEIs. To that end, the CoHE coordinates and supervises the HEIs' efforts to enhance Syrian students, scholars and researcher access and participation. On March 9, 2017, the CoHE organized an international conference on Syrian students in the Turkish higher educations, which brought together representatives of HEIs and key stakeholders.[28] In line with the challenges identified in the literature review, some of the obstacles highlighted at the conference included: a lack of information and knowledge concerning the Turkish higher education system; inadequate language proficiency; financial difficulties; problems with recognition procedures; integration challenges; lack of support programs; and uneven enrolment rates of female students (YÖK, 2017). The prolonged nature of the refugee crisis and the necessity to implement long-term permanent policies rather than temporary ones were the main themes emphasized by the conference. In conjunction with efforts to increase enrolment rates in basic education, the inclusion of Syrian youth in higher education will inevitably dominate the agenda going forward and further stipulate the demand for the needs analysis for higher education. Implementation of the current regulatory framework in the HEIs is, therefore, of crucial importance. Although a supportive framework to boost Syrian students' access to higher education has been created, the flexibility of the regulations allows for autonomy in institutional implementation. Therefore, an analysis of institutional implementation is essential if we are to evaluate the efficacy of the regulatory framework.

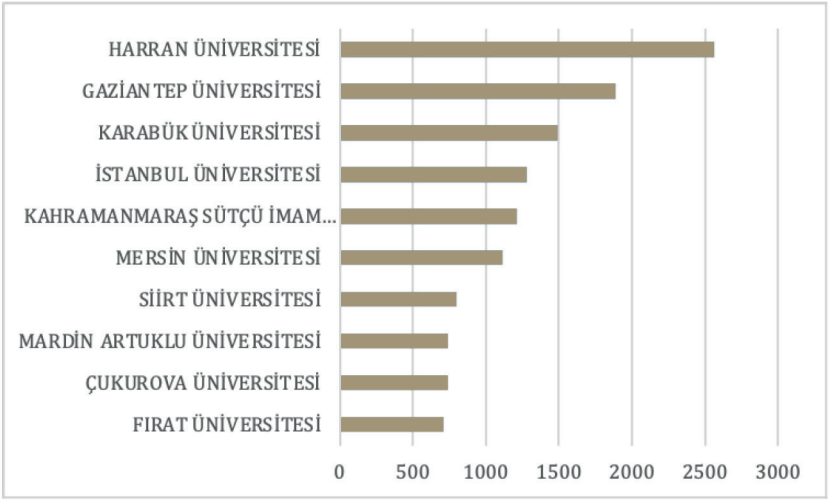
The 27,606 Syrian students are accommodated in 104 public and 49 private foundation universities among a total 129 public, 75 private foundation universities and four foundation vocational training schools in Turkey. Firstly, more than 87% of the Syrian students are enrolled at public universities, while only 3,529 students (or 13%) attend private foundation universities (YÖK, 2020b). Although the share of foundation universities has increased constantly owing to the favorable regulations and increased scholarship opportunities provided by international stakeholders (Hohberger, 2018), the uneven distribution among public and private institutions is apparent. The conglomeration at public institutions, which

28 For the details on the conference see: -http://yok.gov.tr/web/cohe/detail/-/asset_publisher/5RbPUkPMffYu/content/international-conference-of-the-council-of-higher-education-inhatay;jsessionid=E6F9CBCA78B7134DAA028701798F31D2?redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fyok.gov.tr%2Fweb%2Fcohe%2Fdetail%3Bjsessionid%3DE6F9CBCA78B7134DAA028701798F31D2%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_5RbPUkPMffYu%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_count%3D1.

may be a result of the CoHE's Decision on free tuition, requires further attention and improvements to scholarship schemes considering the financial constraints of the refugee context. The importance of cooperation and collaboration with key scholarship providers should also be underlined.

The university with the highest number of Syrian students is Harran University (Şanlıurfa) with 2,564 students followed by another border city institution—Gaziantep University—with 1,887 students. Although not in the border region, İstanbul University, based in the city hosting the largest Syrian population, accommodates 1,280 students. The enrolment rate at Karabük University, on the other hand, is exceptional considering the relatively low numbers of Syrian residents in the city. Some 1,487 Syrian students are enrolled at Karabük University, while the number of registered Syrians in the city is 1,069 (DGMM, 2020).

Figure 5: The Top Ten Turkish Universities Listed By Numbers of Registered Syrian Students



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

Secondly, if we are to analyze the institutional breakdown of Syrian students, the distribution in HEIs seems proportional and reflects the provincial breakdown of Syrians according to the cities.[29] However, the top ten universities listed in terms of registered number of Syrian students accommodate almost half of the total number. This implies that there is conglomeration at a limited number of HEIs, while the majority of Turkish universities have less than 40 registered Syrian students and a further 33 universities have no Syrian students.

29 The city of Istanbul hosts the largest number of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey, with 500,169 registered inhabitants as of June 2019. Şanlıurfa is ranked fourth largest with some 420,509 Syrians under TP after Gaziantep (448,879) and Hatay (432,907) (DGMM, 2020).

This uneven institutional distribution of Syrian students further suggests an imbalance of the burden sharing among HEIs. Whilst a few publicly funded HEIs struggle to cope with the rising demand of higher education for Syrian students, the majority is in a relatively less stressed and challenging position. Despite the supportive central regulations, the decentralized framework may hinder its efficacy. Although it enables autonomous practices, decentralization can lead to divergent policies and practices in implementation and raises questions concerning institutional gatekeeping. Another concern arising from the imbalanced distribution is the potential tensions due to local discontent. The already constrained environments and limited resources in which and with which public HEIs operate should not be underestimated, bearing in mind the highly competitive context for local students to access higher education in Turkey. As a study carried out with local students in Istanbul has revealed, their main concerns regarding Syrian students' access to higher education in Turkey is based on the perception that additional students place further strain on the already limited and drained resources at public institutions. Other concerns are related to the perception of unfair access to higher education and increasing competition in the job market (Ergin, 2016). False facts combined with the negative discourse dominant in the media, mean prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes are among the challenges identified by the Syrian university students in Turkey (Dereli, 2018).

In order to assess the different institutional responses to the inclusion of Syrian students, after a brief introduction of the general institutional framework and process for admission of Syrian students at higher education in Turkey, case studies will be evaluated accordingly. While each HEI has its own specific context, the aim is to identify commonalities and divergences, and spot good practices on policy responses. The conceptual framework developed for comparing policy solutions for integrating refugees in European higher education by Jungblut et al. (2020) will be adapted and applied to draw conclusions from the case studies accordingly. The framework, based on four dimensions consisting of policy-making style, policy implementation structure, involvement of actors and policy coordination levels, will provide a coherent structure to compare case studies. In order to assess the participation and inclusion of Syrian students, the 4-A Scheme framework will be applied for a better understanding of the institutional responsiveness (Tomaševski, 2006).

Evaluation of the Decentralized Institutional Framework: Case Studies

Despite the centralized test-based admission of the higher education system in Turkey, the admission procedure for international students is decentralized and relatively complex. Since the CoHE removed the centralized test-based system in 2010, a decentralized system is in

effect under the foreigner students' admission procedures including Syrian students (YÖK, 2020a). Accordingly, although the CoHE sets the main regulatory and institutional framework through procedures and principles,[30] application and admission procedures for both the first year and transfer students are established and carried out by the HEIs.

In line with CoHE legislation, each HEI decides its own criteria for international students' application and admission. While test-based systems are generally used for first year students, admission through diploma grades, language proficiency exam results, national or international Baccalaureate results, transcripts may also be accepted according to the institution's decision and the CoHE's approval (YÖK, 2020a). Admission procedures for transfer students may also vary from proficiency tests to credential evaluations of *ad-hoc* recognition committees' in cooperation with student admission officers. Thus, students unable to submit proper documents are accepted as "special students" according to the relevant CoHE Decision. The requirements and process for admissions are announced on the institutional websites and directly implemented. The application and admission procedures are carried out by different departments depending on the institution's organizational structure. This process can fall under the remit of the admissions departments, international offices, international students' offices or student affairs. Transfer procedures, which require a complex assessment, interpretation and decision-making procedure, may therefore demand collaboration between different departments and academic staff out of the regular organizational structure. Due to increasing international applications, recruitment and expertise necessity, a tendency towards administrative centralization within the institutions may emerge (RAGU, 2007, pp. 34-38).

Although procedures for first year admission students and transfer students are entirely different, the improved regulations have particularly facilitated access and assured a degree of adaptability considering institutional inflexibility constitutes a main barrier for Syrian students (Fincham, 2020, pp. 19-20). The decision to leave the first year admission procedures intact may have been the right decision in the first years of displacement. Nevertheless, considering the prolonged stay and increasing numbers of high school graduates eligible for higher education, particular regulations aimed at first-year admissions should be considered in order to increase the availability and accessibility of higher education opportunities. Although, there are available scholarship programs and special pathways for first-year admission, they need to be elaborated in order to assess their implementation and impact.

30 For general principles on foreigner students' admission see: https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Ogrenci/yurtdisi-yatay-gecis-kayit-kontenjanlari/2018_Yurtdisindan_Ogrenci_Kabulune_Iliskin_Esaslar.pdf

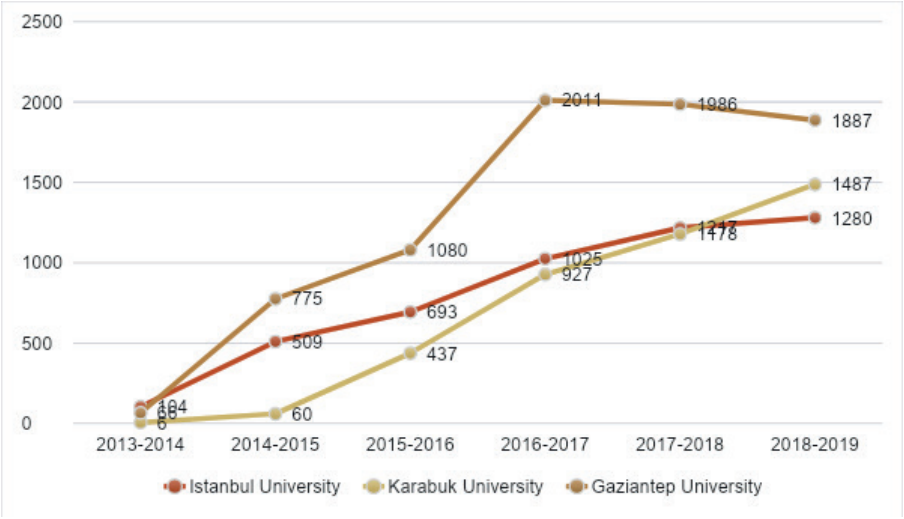
Moreover, in order to assess the responsiveness of these procedures, their degree of accessibility, acceptability and adaptability should be evaluated at institutional level.

A decentralized system, on the other hand, provides a degree of flexibility for institutional autonomy, which allows autonomous policies, decisions and practices. Despite the top-down centralized system for higher education admissions, due to the ongoing internationalization process the CoHE moved towards a decentralized system in international students application and admission in 2010. The COHE increased international quotas and HEIs got to determine the accession criteria and quotas in line with the CoHE's guiding principles and rules. This degree of flexibility introduced for the policy implementation can be evaluated as a bottom-up trend. Although the regulatory framework is set by the CoHE, it may be altered and adjusted to the specific context and local objectives by the HEIs. This flexibility also implies the potential for divergent practices and uneven implementation among HEIs, which results in disparity in burden sharing as discussed above. Furthermore, the decentralized system makes it harder for students to navigate their way through the system. Since each institution determines and announces their accession criteria and quotas on their websites, students have a hard time navigating through the complex websites in another language without support. The need for information and guidance become more apparent through application (Atesok et al., 2019).

Hence although policy making relies on public actors in a top-down manner, implementation depends on the HEIs. The gradually increasing decentralization in the international student admission procedures has also resulted in a responsive multi-level and multi-actor environment (Vukasovic et al., 2018). Moreover, in addition to reliance on HEIs for implementation, there is increasing involvement of other policy actors both governmental and non-governmental (particularly e.g. Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the General Directorate of Credit and Dormitories Agency and the UNHCR). The growing involvement of international non-governmental organizations in policy making and the enhanced collaboration in implementation is noticeable particularly in efforts to increase scholarship opportunities for refugee students and scholars (Yıldız, 2019; YÖK, 2017).

Therefore, although the regulatory framework seems effective for supporting Syrian students, an institutional analysis is necessary to draw conclusions on their access to and participation in higher education in Turkey. In order to map institutional implementation of the improved regulations and their responsiveness, apart from Istanbul University two public HEIs—Gaziantep and Karabük—were selected for their good practice.

Figure 6: Enrolled Students at Three HEIs, 2013-2019



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

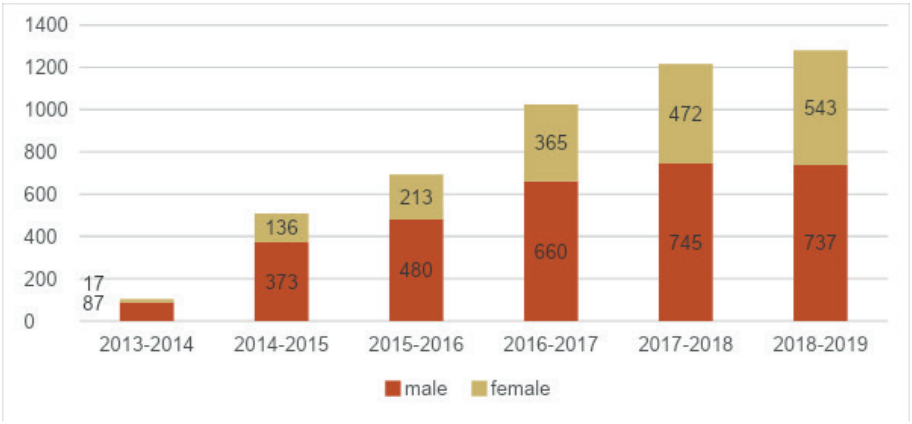
Aside from the high number of enrolled students, these three HEIs have been deliberately selected for their different contexts. Gaziantep University, for example, represents a border region with a dense Syrian population, while Istanbul and Karabük Universities, two very different cities far from the Syrian border, both accommodate large numbers of Syrian students. The sprawling metropolis of Istanbul plays host to the biggest Syrian population not just in Turkey but also in the whole of Europe. Karabük, a small and remote Western Black Sea region city has a modest Syrian population but still accommodates more than 1,500 Syrian students at its university. These three very different HEIs are preferred in order to trace and identify good practices while offering a comparative analysis.

Istanbul University Case Study

Istanbul alone is currently hosting 500,169 registered Syrians, making it not only the biggest refugee host city in Turkey but also a new capital for Syrians (DGMM, 2020). Besides being Turkey's biggest city, Istanbul is also the capital of higher education with its 11 state and 44 foundation universities attracting 45,085 international students, among which are 5,957 Syrians. Istanbul University alone hosts almost one quarter of the city's registered Syrian students. Istanbul University is Turkey's oldest university and is a vast prominent HEI with 22 faculties, 17 graduate schools, 16 institutes and 58 research centers. The university currently provides services to over 250,000 students who are attended by 12,337 administrative staff and 5,784 instructors.

In the academic year 2018-2019, some 1,280 of the 6,648 international students at Istanbul University were Syrians, making it the fourth biggest HEI in terms of registered Syrian students after the two border universities and Karabük University (YÖK, 2020b).

Figure 7: Number of Enrolled Students at Istanbul University, 2013-2019.



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

First of all, the most prominent path for foreigners including Syrian students to gain access to Istanbul University is through the 'Foreign 'Student Exam' (YÖS), which is an institution-wide centralized process for first-year admission. The exam cannot be used for transfer procedures or application to graduate levels. It is also based on online application and admission procedures that require uploaded digital versions of the documents. Original documents are therefore only submitted after admission and during registration. The exam is available in Turkish, English and Arabic for students lacking Turkish language proficiency and for admission to programs available in other languages. For all programs, admitted students have to provide certificates of their language proficiency. Students with inadequate language proficiency must complete the preparation classes administered by Istanbul University's Department of Foreign Languages. Secondly, in accordance with the CoHE Regulation for students studying in countries where education cannot be pursued due to ongoing violence and humanitarian crisis, Istanbul University provides a 10% quota for the transfer of students enrolled at HEIs in Syria, Egypt and Yemen before the 2013-2014 academic year. Application is online and submission of original documents is required for evaluation.[31] Considering the extent of the university's capacity, this quota decision is

31 The information sheet and detailed guide for application and admission procedures prepared under the scope of the WESREF-IU project are available in Turkish, English and Arabic languages and can be found at: http//cdn.istanbul.edu.tr/FileHandler2.ashx?f=ysk_kilavuz_final_22_nisan.pdf; http://cdn.istanbul.edu.tr/FileHandler2.ashx?f=ysk_brosur_final_22_nisan.pdf.

definitely a big boost to increase availability for Syrian students. Lastly, in coordination with the CoHE and Turkey's Scholarships program administered by YTB, Istanbul University offers places to students awarded scholarships in an attempt to enhance availability and accessibility. Application for Turkish Scholarships is also online, and entails a detailed evaluation and selection process including interviews in which applicants present their documents.[32]

If we are to analyze the breakdown of Syrian students admitted to Istanbul University, the majority has come through the transfer in special circumstance procedure. Transfer in special circumstances is a novelty introduced for application and admission procedures, as a way to secure access to higher education for Syrian students. According to the findings of previous research[33] conducted at Istanbul University and in accordance with the CoHE's Decision, university management agreed to use the 10% maximum quota allowed for transfer in special circumstances. As per our interviews with administrative staff, these new transfer procedures provide greater flexibility to respond to the rising demand of Syrian students wanting to continue their education in Turkey. As a proof of this implicit flexibility introduced at application and admission, the number of students holding special student status has gradually diminished. Now only a very few students currently hold the special status. According to the Istanbul University statistics, the number of students admitted through transfer in special circumstances continues to increase gradually. These numbers are, however, expected to decline as the CoHE Regulation stipulates that students must have been registered at a HEI in their home country before the 2013-14 academic year.

Due to this implicit flexibility, the decision to use the 10% quota, and considering the variety of the programs and extensive quotas offered by the university, administrative and academic staff are faced with a large number of applicants and application files. Unfortunately, the staff was neither experienced nor equipped to deal with this new and increasing work load. First, there are very few staff who have Arabic language proficiency thus there is a clear lack of an institutional standardized system for examining and assessing the acquired knowledge and qualifications. his new overload of work became problematic and affected the management of services provided. Although the first years were tough, the situation is

32 Details are available at: https://turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/en/page/prospective-students/evaluation-and-selection-porcess.

33 The project entitled Supporting Refugee Application and Admission to HEIs in Turkey (SUPREF) is funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund—the "Madad Fund"—in response to the Syrian Crisis, and falls under the scope of the regional program—HOPES— implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in partnership with the British Council, Campus France and the Dutch organization for internationalization in education—Nuffic.

improving as the admission offices and students are learning. While students are developing coping mechanisms and support networks, university staff is building up a great deal of knowledge, skills and experiences.[34] The workload is, however, still demanding and affects the service provided for both Syrian and local students and further hampers the application and admission process management.

Another pathway for Syrian students to gain entry to Istanbul University is through the centralized automation system YÖS, which is more simple and easy to use for both applicants and management staff compared with the transfer procedure. The transfer procedure, which is managed by the Department of Student Affairs together with Faculty Student Affairs Offices and academic committees, requires a high degree of cooperation. While the Department of Student Affairs is responsible for planning and coordination, faculty offices together with academic committees and staff manage assessments, admissions and placements after admission. The YÖS process, on the other hand, is managed through a special unit. The Faculty Student Affairs Offices only gets involved after admission and placement during registration. Apparently, the transfer procedure is complex and detailed both for the applicants and admissions officers since it requires cooperation among different units and involves assessment of documents. For applicants this process appears far more complicated taking into account the vast bureaucracy and language barrier. Furthermore, inconsistent implementation is observed among different units due to the novelty and complexity of the new regulations. Therefore, despite the increased accessibility, adaptability and availability with the quota decision, further efforts are needed at institutional level to respond better to the needs of Syrian students.

That said, first-year admissions through the YÖS comprise only 20% of total annual admissions. As of the 2018-19 academic year, only 99 students were admitted and placed at Istanbul University through the YÖS. Although the CoHE accepts the increased quota for transfer in special conditions, first-year admissions are still subject to international institutional quotas; meaning that international students face two quotas during admission. Firstly, there are institutional quotas subject to CoHE approval and then, at institutional level, country quotas are in place, which imply more competition for limited places among international students. Considering the heightened numbers, country quotas work against Syrian applicants when competing with other nationals and imply very little chance of admission especially in highly demanded and regulated programs such as medicine and law.

34 For a detailed analysis of the framework and comprehensive needs analysis at Istanbul University see: Atesok, Z. O., Komsuoglu, A., & Ozer, Y. Y. (2019). "An Evaluation of Refugees' Access To Higher Education: Case of Turkey and Istanbul University", *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, pp.119-136.

In that regard, the institutional country quota system for first-year admissions requires review and revision in order to increase availability, accessibility and accommodate the increasing numbers of Syrian students requiring higher education.

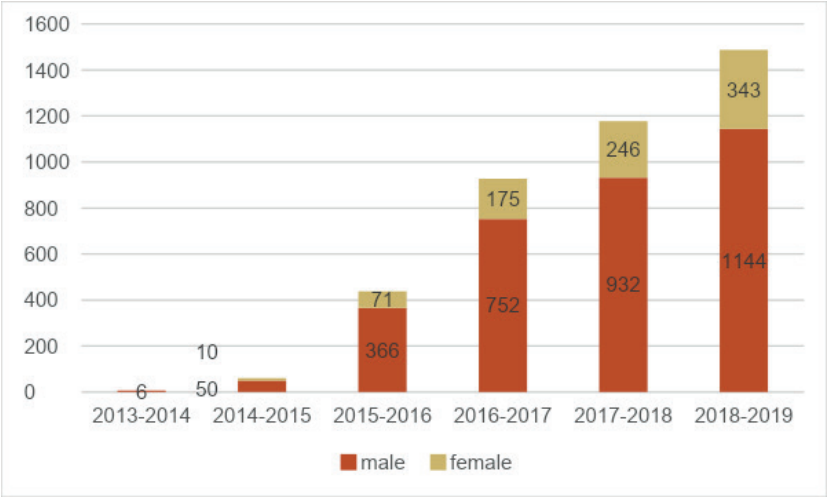
Aside from the quota limitations, the majority of first-year students coming through the YÖS are placed into Open and Distance Education programs, which require lower attainment scores compared with the regular day-time programs. This low level of attainment among Syrian students is alarming and raises concerns over the quality of basic education provided for them in Turkey (Ozer, Komsuoglu, & Atesok, 2017). Considering the fact that learning inequalities begin early and widen as children get older, without the appropriate support systems the disadvantages to accessing higher education opportunities become enormous (Rose & Alcott, 2015).

The main obstacles preventing Syrian students from studying at Istanbul University are identified as: financial hardship; language issues; non-recognition of prior learning; a lack of information or guidance; and inconsistent implementation of the regulations, which are in line with the common challenges that have emerged in the literature (Atesok et al., 2019). The programs developed in order to meet these challenges within the scope of the WESREF-IU project are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Karabük University Case Study

Karabük is a small city with a population of 248,014, located in the inner Western Black Sea Region, which is not among the preferred destinations for Syrians. Karabük University, which is the first and only HEI in the city, is a relatively new public university founded in 2007. Within its 16 faculties, 4 institutes, 4 higher schools and 8 vocational higher schools are registered a total of 53,000 undergraduates and graduates, of which 6,619 are international students from 83 different countries. Among these students, Syrian nationals represent the biggest group at 1,487, which places the university third after two border region universities in terms of registered Syrian students. Considering there are only 1,069 registered Syrians under the temporary protection scheme residing in Karabük, the university is definitely a point of attraction for Syrian students. This fact also makes the university an exception and a good practice example to be analyzed in detail.

Figure 8: Number of Enrolled Students at Karabük University, 2013-2019



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

Syrian applicants are subject to the same admission requirements as international students, although the main pathway for them is via the Foreign Student Exam (YÖS). Unlike at Istanbul University, admission through diploma grades, national or international baccalaureate results and transcripts are accepted at Karabük University, subject to the University Senate and CoHE approval. Until two years ago, other university exams were also accepted in applications, but last year it was ruled that only institution-wide centralized Foreign Student Exam would be accepted for admission.

Although no breakdown of the admission pathways is available, according to interviews with the International Student Coordinator, who is responsible for all international student applications and admissions, YÖS results and diploma grades seem to be the main ways. Furthermore, according to data gathered from focus groups and surveys, among the 17 participants, 10 were admitted based on their diploma grades, six through YÖS and only one had gained a YTB scholarship. Although the data may not be representative, it can definitely give an idea of the admission pathways to Karabük University confirming the interview findings with administrative staff.

Transfer procedures also differ in their institutional implementation compared with Istanbul University. Although Karabük University, in accordance with the CoHE Decision, accepts the transfer of students enrolled at HEIs in Syria, Egypt and Yemen before the 2013-2014 academic year, implementation is not widespread with only 75 students admitted via this way. According to the interviews, one reason for the low uptake is due to a lack of

communicating announcements. Although the university accepts applications for transfer procedures, it is rarely communicated to the students via website, unlike at Istanbul University.

The organizational set-up for considering applications and admissions also differs from that at Istanbul University. At Karabük University, the whole procedure is carried out by the International Students Office, rather than different departments. This office therefore continues to be the focal point for all communication with international students once they are accepted and throughout their studies. According to the interviews, this administrative centralization proves to be more effective, since it makes it easier for applicants to navigate their way through the system during application, admission, registration and afterwards. On the other hand, this centralized system is made possible due to the low numbers of applications and admissions coming through the transfer procedure. Despite the simplicity of centralized systems, the transfer process demands a thorough assessment, interpretation and decision making that in turn requires collaboration with different departments and academic staff.

Compared with the other two case studies, Karabük University has adopted a proactive approach, regarding Syrian students as a part of the institution's internationalization policy. Doing so has resulted in a good model for increasing access and integration. From the Rector to the management staff, the inclusion of Syrian students is supported and including them within the internationalization strategy has payed off. From the academic year 2015-2016, the university began to attract Syrian youth seeking higher education opportunities. The supportive environment and framework has, however, not been communicated institution-wide, but rather through informal student networks. As per the survey findings and the interviews, the majority (11 out of 17) were informed about the university from their friends and relatives. Likewise, it was mostly friends that supported applicants during the application process (9 out of 17 participants). The importance of informal networks also emerged in the research at Istanbul and Gaziantep Universities, but was even more apparent at Karabük University. Due to small city conditions, the network and informal support schemes continue after registration. Furthermore, the university's International Students Office is in constant contact with these networks, which enhances communication between the university and the students.

Concerning the challenges students encounter at Karabük University, financial constraints come to the forefront, with 8 out of 17 students citing this as the most significant obstacle. Similarly, the fact that the city is small and cheap was among the reasons mentioned for applying to the university. Lack of language proficiency, which can affect academic success, and a need for support during courses were among the other obstacles encountered, which are

in line with the findings of the other cases. Although some initiatives based on *ad-hoc* projects with national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) exist,[35] there is a need for a more structured approach as is apparent in the other cases.

In terms of gender, the breakdown is very different from the other cases and the general nation-wide female participation rate of 37%. By comparison, only 23% of the total number of Syrian students at Karabük University is female. According to the interviews, the general reason for this very low uptake is due to the cultural and security concerns of Syrian families, which prevent their daughters studying away from home. Considering the very low number of Syrians living in Karabük city, coupled with the fact that young Syrian women from other cities cannot benefit from the higher education opportunities provided by the university, this further explains the low uptake. Providing higher education for young Syrian female students continues to be a challenge.

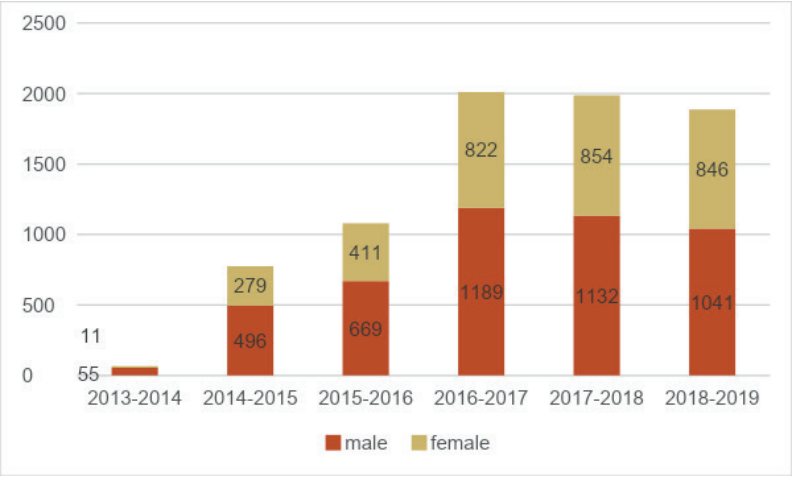
In sum, Karabük University is found to be in good terms with the availability and accessibility of higher education opportunities for Syrian students. Specifically, the decision to accept students on the basis of their high school diplomas and baccalaureate grades boosted accessibility. Although no specific efforts to improve acceptability and adaptability were adopted, the size of the university with its organizational simplicity and personal leadership increased the institutional responsiveness to a certain degree. However, the gender dimension and providing access to opportunities require further efforts considering acceptability and adaptability.

Gaziantep University Case Study

Gaziantep is the sixth largest city in Turkey with a population over 2.1 million. The city, which is located 60 kilometres (km) from the Syrian border, is a trade hub and industrial city and now home to 428,724 Syrians. Due to its location, commercial and cultural ties with Aleppo, at the outset of Syria's civil war Gaziantep was a main entry point and safe haven for Syrians crossing the border to seek asylum (Gültekin et al., 2018). Gaziantep University, founded as a public institution in 1987, currently comprises 16 faculties, 5 graduate schools, 4 vocational schools, 11 higher vocational schools and 26 research centers. There are 53,769 students enrolled at the university, among which 3,501 are international students coming from 109 countries. With 1,887 Syrian students enrolled, Gaziantep University is the second biggest HEI after Harran University—another border city university.

35 https://igamder.org/TR/projelerimiz/my-first-day-on-campus-is-the-best-day-at-my-university.

Figure 9: Number of Enrolled Students at Gaziantep University, 2013-2019



Source: Data compiled from CoHE statistics (2020).

Gaziantep University was among the seven HEIs in the southern border provinces directly affected by the immediate influx of Syrian refugees. The situation was further compounded by the CoHE Decision allowing students to enroll as special students without academic or identification documents for the academic year 2012-2013 onwards. In accordance with the CoHE Decision to establish new programs in the Arabic language to accommodate the increasing numbers of Syrian students, Gaziantep University established Arabic Programs for Syrian students starting from the 2015-2016 academic year. Currently, 460 students from various faculties (e.g. the Faculty of Theology, Engineering, Architecture, Education, Economic and Administrative Sciences) are enrolled in these programs. Apart from the Arabic programs, the university's trans-border establishment is another striking point. In the academic year 2018-2019, in order to provide higher education to internally displaced persons and similar situations in Syria, Gaziantep University established vocational schools in Jarablus, which is a Syrian city located very close to Turkish border. Around 200 students have since enrolled at the Jarablus Vocational School, which offers five programs in Arabic consisting of Theology, Patient Care, First Aid, Private Security and Office Management. Thus came the new decision to establish three faculties in Syria including Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences in El-Bab, Faculty of Theology in Azaz and Faculty of Education in Afrin (ResmiGazete, 3 Ekim 2019). Both cities located in north-west Syria, close to the Turkish border can be signaled as having both an innovative and proactive approach to policy making and implementation. Moreover, these trans-border establishments of Gaziantep University provide greater higher education opportunities for Syrian students.

In terms of institutional responsiveness, a considerable degree of availability, acceptability and adaptability has been introduced by offering programs in the Arabic language and opening trans-border facilities for internally displaced Syrian students.

Another important point concerning validity of the statistics stressed at the beginning of the interviews is the estimated high number of Syrian students who have been naturalized and granted Turkish citizenship. As these students are not registered as Syrian in the university or CoHE electronic databases, the number of students from Syrian backgrounds is assumed to be higher in Gaziantep and in Turkey in general. Therefore, according to the International Student Coordinator—later confirmed by the students themselves—those of Syrian origin in the system continue to rise despite the seemingly downward trend. This finding is further documented in a report based on a workshop organized by the border universities international office staff in Gaziantep (Efendioğlu, 2017). Correspondingly, some students expressed that their families and they had been invited by the migration authorities to consider naturalization.[36] Thus, among the participants one student had obtained Turkish citizenship while some others expressed their interest.

The main pathway for international students to access higher education is through the Foreign Student Exam (YÖS), which was introduced only this year (2020). Prior to this, other university exams including the Istanbul University YÖS were accepted along with diploma grades, national or international baccalaureate results and equivalent exam results. As in the case of Karabük University, no detailed breakdown of the admission pathways is available, According to the International Students Coordinator, however, Syrian students are generally admitted on their diploma grades including baccalaureate and equivalent exam results.[37] The survey and focus group results indicate that the majority of the students at Gaziantep University are admitted on their diploma grades and equivalent exam results. This is particularly common in border regions as a way to address equivalency problems and increase access to higher education for Syrian students. Only one in 13 students gained entry through the YÖS, according to the focus group. As in the case of Karabük University, admission through diploma grades can be considered a factor in increasing the accessibility of higher education opportunities for Syrian students.

36 The same findings emerged in the workshops organized for Syrian academics and researchers at Istanbul University within the scope of the SUPREF project. The majority of the participants stated that they had been invited to apply for citizenship by the migration authorities.

37 In the first years of the displacement, Baccalaureate exams for school leavers were held in Turkey at the Higher Commission of Education and later by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Equivalency procedures for Syrian students who graduated from Syrian schools have now been integrated into the Turkish national education system through an open education system.

Concerning transfer procedures, Gaziantep University makes the announcements and accepts applications. Accordingly, approximately one quarter of the total number of enrolled students has been admitted through the transfer in special conditions procedures. In common with the case of Istanbul University, transfer procedures are managed with the collaboration of various units tasked with assessing and evaluating foreign credentials. According to the interviews, the process was very complex and credit transfers were not effectively implemented. However, the process is now managed in a more effective and deliberate way since Gaziantep University has long established ties with the higher education system and institutions in Syria (Cinkara, 2017), which provide a better understanding and expertise for recognition procedures. Likewise, the language barrier constitutes less of a problem in the application and admission process at Gaziantep, compared with the two other cases. This is largely thanks to the Syrian origins of staff, their ability to speak Arabic and the support of Syrian community in Gaziantep. However, since the Syrian community is very large, students tend to feel less inclined to integrate. This is especially true of students studying in Arabic programs so language problems still exist.

The main challenges expressed are complexity of the system and language problems. Although students communicated well in Turkish during the interviews, they expressed difficulty in note taking and following lectures. As in other cases, students basically rely on informal social networks for support rather than institutional schemes. Although Gaziantep University is better equipped to offer support programs (e.g. project-based orientation and leisure programs) students seek support among friends, relatives and Syrian organizations in the city. Likewise, it was mostly friends and relatives who supported applicants during the application procedures (8 out of 13 participants). Financial problems were less of a concern in Gaziantep as most students had been working part-time in temporary posts. Some work for NGOs, some in temporary education centers and others in language and driving schools. The effect of being in a big and vibrant city with a large Syrian community is clear in providing job opportunities for students at higher education. This is also similar to the Istanbul case where there are more opportunities for students to work to earn a living, support their studies and their families.

Another common point with Istanbul University is the decentralized approach to managing applications, registrations and the onward process in collaboration with various departments and units. A report documenting the needs of administrative staff at border universities and based on a workshop organized at Gaziantep University, identifies a number of issues with the decentralized approach to managing international student admissions. Decentralization increases: the work load and challenges in assessing foreign credentials and fighting fraud;

communication problems with YTB during scholarship management; and inconveniences due to the electronic transfer of student data during the naturalization process of Syrian students (Efendioğlu, 2017). It is observed that in the first years of the inflow, the challenges of integrating Syrian students at Gaziantep University were tackled in an *ad-hoc* and reactive manner, and has since undergone major restructuring and reorganization. However, the university had the advantage of the expertise and knowledge deriving from its ties with the Syrian region and education system, which made the process more smooth, compared with Istanbul University. In relying on pre-existing structures and experienced personnel, the policy emerges as a mix of proactive and reactive styles.

Furthermore, the city and social networks offer an easier adaptation for Syrian students and researchers compared with the sprawling metropolis of Istanbul or a remote and small city such as Karabük in the Black Sea region. According to the interviews, however, integration is not very high, since students live and work mostly in Syrian neighborhoods where there is less opportunity to come into contact with the locals. Social ties with the locals are therefore weaker in the Gaziantep case. Although university can play an integrative role, in this case Syrian students had very little interaction with local students. So aside from orientation programs, the students require more language and academic support, and social events that bring together local and international students.

At this point the University's ties and cooperation with both local and Syrian NGOs thus international organizations appear to be more close and effective than in the other two cases. As a main entry point for the large wave of Syrian refugees, the city and the region have borne a heavy burden since the first days of the crisis in Syria. Subsequently, in those first days a considerable degree of collaboration among different actors occurred, which enabled the university to cope with the challenges of displacement and integration of Syrian students at higher education.[38] Although cooperation is based on *ad-hoc* arrangements that rely on networks rather than formal enduring collaboration, a more inclusive approach that involves multiple actors can be observed at Gaziantep University.

2.4. Findings and Discussion

In the face of the increasing demand from the Syrian population for higher education, at the national level the CoHE's timely and consistent measures have in effect increased Syrian student enrolments at Turkish HEIs. The policy making and implementation appear more

38 For some of the projects and events with key stakeholders at Gaziantep University see: https://spark.ngo/voices-students-gaziantep-university/; http://habermerkezi.gantep.edu.tr/?p=55554; http://goc.gantep.edu.tr/upload/files/20%20Haziran%20Renkli%20Eng-min.pdf.

reactive considering that the regulations were issued after the first immigration wave. The emerging internationalization trend and the established structures on the other hand allowed for fast adaptation based on pre-existing structures. Decisions to establish trans-border facilities are both innovative and can be considered proactive. Another pre-existing and remodeled public instrument—scholarship programs for international students—managed by the YTB have provided placements for Syrian students in close cooperation with the CoHE and HEIs. At system level, as a response to the increasing need and demand for higher education, the CoHE's immediate measures enhanced the availability and accessibility by: removing tuition fees at public universities; increasing quotas; providing scholarship schemes; and introducing flexibility about the required documentation. While increasing accessibility, opening both new programs in the Arabic language and trans-border facilities have further added the acceptability and adaptability dimension. The response to the varying needs has revealed the necessity for further investigation at institutional level.

Despite the top-down policy making and high levels of centralization in implementing the regulatory framework, the decentralized structure, established to enhance internationalization, allowed institutional autonomy and some degree of bottom-up structuring. However, this decentralization and autonomy in implementation has raised the question of the uneven distribution of Syrian students in the HEIs. It further reveals that implementation of the regulatory framework strictly depends on institutional policies and practices. Integrating such an immense number of students from different educational systems and backgrounds represented a great challenge to which each HEI responded according to their specific context, institutional resources, pathways and strategies. Comparing the three different HEI policies and approaches provided an assessment of the institutional responsiveness, while also identifying common challenges and variations in institutional policies and practices, and their policy implications.

The language barrier; complex and changing procedures; systems with inadequate and/or inaccurate information and guidance; and thus difficulty in assessing foreign credentials are among the common challenges that came to the fore during the application and admission procedures in all of the cases. Although it is becoming much easier and smoother compared with the first years of immigration, staff are feeling overwhelmed due to the high application numbers, short notice and pressing deadlines. Pressure is more prevalent in the larger universities and cities due to a lack of support, and unfamiliarity with the language and education systems. There is a common plea to return to a centralized test-based system in all of the three cases. This demand can be traced through reports from the border region universities (Efendioğlu, 2017).

Concerning application and admission procedures,[39] the students more or less stated the same challenges albeit varying degrees of attributed importance. While all stated the decentralized system and changing institutional regulations as the biggest challenge during application at institutional level, language problems were more pressing in Istanbul and Karabük. Lack of information is cited as being very challenging especially at Istanbul University, due to complex admissions structure. Staff are perceived to be more supportive at Gaziantep and Karabük universities than at the other institutions. As expressed by the staff, students also stated that the process is getting easier as both the universities and students gain greater understanding.

With respect to Syrian students' achievement and participation in higher education, although students seemed to be proficient in the Turkish language, in all focus group discussions they expressed difficulty in understanding and following courses. They therefore demanded further language support through more courses. Financial issues were not raised in an openly manner but concerns were voiced among the male participants who were generally working in one or two part-time jobs simultaneously, which also negatively affected their attendance on the courses. Participants tended to struggle more with the small city conditions and lack of job opportunities to finance their studies. Although, there were both Turkey Scholarship and UNHCR scholarship beneficiaries among the participants, the opportunities to gain a scholarship were found to be very limited and narrow in scope. Another point raised by the participants was the need for orientation activities on campus. Students feel the need to engage more actively with their campus and peers. It was very common for Syrian students to hang out, socialize with their Syrian peers rather than locals and other international students. In all of the cases, in order to overcome these challenges students have developed their own coping mechanisms and strategies based on their social networks. These informal support mechanisms and networks are rarely integrated into the official institutional schemes.

According to the elaboration of the institutional framework based on the engaged analytical structure, the policy making and implementation styles have been mainly reactive and top-down in three cases with varying degrees of deviation. While Istanbul and Gaziantep Universities developed reactive approaches with rapidly increasing demands of higher education, Karabük University's approach can be evaluated as more proactive.

39 For a full account of the challenges Syrian students face during application and admission procedures at Istanbul University see: Atesok, Z. O., Komsuoglu, A., & Ozer, Y. Y. (2019), "An Evaluation of Refugees' Access To Higher Education: Case of Turkey and Istanbul University", *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, pp.119-136.

As a metropolitan university with extensive capacity, Istanbul University's response to implement the 10% quota for the transfer in special circumstance procedure had a direct effect on increasing admission and enrolment rates. However, the top-down approach in policy making and implementation was problematic and had placed a heavy burden on the administrative and academic staff. The situation was further compounded by the scarce resources, and an inadequate knowledge and experience of both the Syrian educational system and the Arabic language. This resulted in inconsistencies in implementation and divergent practices among faculties due to the decentralized transfer process, and the lack of standardized institutional procedures and cooperation. Another negative effect of the decentralized system and vast structure for registering students is the lack of relationship between the university and students. Only a few students and faculty staff knew about the International Students Office that is responsible for improving relations and communication. Istanbul University proved to be the weakest in terms of communication and dialogue with Syrian students and researchers. The fact that Istanbul is a very large sprawling, busy and chaotic metropolitan city also contributes to this communication problem. In view of the lack of adequate communication and support programs, students have albeit rudimentary and casually elaborated their own coping mechanisms and strategies. Therefore, although the university has improved availability through increased quotas for transfer students, accessibility needs further attention despite the flexibility introduced for admission procedures. In order for students to benefit from the available higher education opportunities and to enhance their overall well-being, acceptability and adaptability of these opportunities to the needs of Syrian students require further improvements. Students struggle with financial hardship, adaptation problems, lack of language proficiency and socializing with other students during their studies. An institutional structure is necessary to promote institutional inclusiveness and adequately respond to the varying needs of these students.[40]

Despite its reactive approach to coping with the increasing demand, Gaziantep University has mostly relied on pre-existing structures and experienced staff. Their knowledge of the Syrian educational system due to the geographical proximity, historical affinity and deep-rooted ties has surely helped in this regard. Thus the innovative strategy of launching Arabic Programs and trans-border establishments can be considered as proactive from a policy making and implementation approach both at national and institutional levels. As a border university familiar to applicants from neighbouring countries, remodelling existing structures and instruments has contributed in reducing the challenges of inclusion for large numbers of

40 Support programs and strategies developed in order to overcome these challenges at Istanbul University within the scope of the WESREF-IU project and their findings are discussed more in detail in the following chapter.

Syrian students in a relatively short period since the first tide of migration. Compared with other cases, students and researchers were in a more favourable situation since they could rely on the existing support networks thanks to the Syrian community in the city. The decentralized structure, on the other hand, emerged as a hurdle due to the complexity and unfamiliarity of the system for Syrian applicants. In comparison with the other two cases Gaziantep University has also developed a more inclusive and cooperative framework in policy implementation. Due to high levels of cooperation in the region since the first days of migration, the level of policy coordination in Gaziantep University seems to be higher than in the two other cases. The established Syrian networks and organizations together with active international organizations who have funding opportunities have been vigorously involved in the institutional efforts to ease Syrian students transition to higher education and support their integration in their studies. Coordination, which is grounded on *ad-hoc*, project-based, multi-level and multi-actor networks is mainly hierarchical given the top-down policy making and implementation. Efforts to integrate Syrian youth in higher education require more comprehensive and coordinated approaches. With the inclusion of various key stakeholders including local and refugee communities, Gaziantep University emerges as the only case with this level of policy coordination among the other good practices. Therefore, Gaziantep University is found to be more responsive in terms of availability, accessibility and acceptability. However, both acceptability and adaptability can be improved with more orientation and intercultural support programs.

Karabük University is the exception, as it had developed a much more proactive but nevertheless top-down approach. The strategy to elaborate Syrian students' participation as part of the institution's internationalization policy resulted in a good model for boosting access and integration. A remote university town with very few Syrian residents has become one of the biggest institutions accommodating Syrian students. The implementation of the relevant strategy is further reinforced by the centralized organizational structure for international student admissions with the same unit being responsible for communication and relations with all international students, including Syrians, during their studies at the university. The remodelling and using of existing structures and instruments have proved to be efficient. Thus, the campus and city being compact and easy to navigate have contributed to the establishment of better relations between the university and the students. Although bottom-up student initiatives are stronger, better organized and provide a channel to voice their ideas and demands, within this hierarchical organizational framework the key actors are still the university management. Since the number of Syrian residents in the city is very low,

the involvement of local actors and initiatives in policy making and implementation is limited. However, the university has accomplished a considerable degree of cooperation with national and international stakeholders on a project basis in order to improve the integration opportunities for Syrian students. Consequently, Karabük University is found to be in line with the availability and accessibility principles and better able to respond to Syrian students, considering the quotas introduced in the internationalization strategy, along with facilitated procedures and better organized admission structures. Despite the better communication established with the students, their varying needs are not met adequately. As identified in other cases, there is a lack of scholarships, orientation and guidance programs to support students' academic achievement and well-being. Comprehensive support systems should be established in order to enhance adaptability and acceptability.

2.5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions

As part of our research, we have aimed to provide an evidence-based overall review of Syrian students' and researchers' access to and participation in the Turkish higher education system. The intention is to contribute to the current literature and discussion on the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in higher education within Europe and beyond. We have sought to highlight institutional responses, and more specifically how the Turkish higher education system is addressing the challenge of improving access and participation of Syrian students within the current global context of mass migration. In addition to providing a needs analysis based on interviews and focus group discussions with Syrian students, in order to have a better knowledge and understanding of the situation the study analyzes how three selected cases have responded to this rising demand while also focusing on good practices.

Against this background, we provide an analysis of the legislative and regulatory framework in which HEIs operate. While regulating bodies, namely the CoHE, have introduced timely and consistent measures laying the ground for a national action plan that has resulted in increased enrollment rates, some points of concern still exist such as the uneven distribution of Syrian students across the HEIs. Since there is strong decentralization in international student admissions, HEIs are autonomous to decide on their own admissions criteria and relevant quotas. Whilst a number of public universities—border universities in particular—are heavily burdened and under pressure to act, the majority of HEIs do not experience this pressure. It is no coincidence that the interviewed administrative staff generally support a return to the centralized foreign student exam administered by the CoHE.

This unequal burden sharing is specifically alarming given Turkey's already strained and competitive higher education system and the fact that public universities operate with scarce resources and constrained capacity. Under this challenging pressure, tensions may easily arise among academic and administrative staff, not to mention the local students given the structural problems of higher education as highlighted in the literature (Arar, Kondakci, Kasikci, et al., 2020; Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Ergin, 2016). Considering that higher education provision for Syrians in Turkey is among the most circulated misinformation and misperception notions in Turkey[41] managing this pressure is vital to fight against disinformation and discriminative attitudes and discourses both at institutional and societal level. Although not always explicit, the participants in our study have stated their concerns regarding the misperceptions and misinformation on the exaggerated provision available to them at the HEIs (e.g. admission without documents and exams; full financial scholarships for all students). The means to fight this misinformation and address the identified social distance among students through better communication, awareness raising and intercultural interventions should be discussed.

Another disturbing point is the low participation rates of female students. Despite a slight increase in the last five years, considering the intersectionality of gender and displacement, further action plans and measures based on positive discrimination are necessary at national and institutional levels in order to increase adaptability (Dereli, 2018). While the male students are burdened with providing a financial income during their studies, female students are weighed down with domestic chores. Although they express their resilience through higher education opportunities, more tailored programs for female students are needed in all three cases. The situation becomes more striking in small university towns where access to higher education is further constrained by cultural and security concerns. Students and families may hesitate to send their children to study alone in a remote city unfamiliar to them. Gender-based constructive institutional approaches are required since female students face more obstacles assessing and participating in higher education in cities outside the ones in which they reside. Furthermore, students with children are burdened with additional domestic responsibilities and therefore require more support for nursery and other necessities.

In order to overcome these potential problems, a more balanced and sustainable approach based on improved policy coordination among HEIs and managed by the CoHE is essential.

41 According to the findings of a recent survey conducted by INGEV Foundation (2020) concerning attitudes towards Syrians in Turkey, while 60% of local population believe that "Syrians go to the university they want without any exams", another 60% assume that "the State gives scholarships to every Syrian who goes to university".

To ease the uneven distribution, HEIs accommodating large numbers of Syrian students and researchers should be more substantially supported. Again under the coordination of the CoHE, the pre-existing and remodeled public instrument of scholarship programs provided by the YTB could be expanded in scope with a specific gender sensibility. Since the Turkish Scholarships Program offers places in close coordination with the CoHE, HEIs could play a more active role in sharing the burden.

The analysis also highlights the cooperation among public bodies, HEIs, local and Syrian organizations that are active and experienced in the field and have the financial capacity to act. The CoHE should play a central role in this policy coordination with a variety of key stakeholders involved in policy implementation. The need to open channels of communication and ensure the inclusion of Syrian students and researchers' initiatives is particularly important to obtain a more balanced and sustainable approach. This level of cooperation requires clear guidelines, regulations and management.

At institutional level, the comparative analysis of the three different cases shows that each HEI's approach and policies are shaped by its specific context, existing structures and organization. In the three cases, policy making and implementation styles were mainly reactive and top-down with varying degrees of deviation. While Istanbul and Gaziantep Universities developed reactive approaches to the rapidly increasing demands on higher education, Karabük University's approach can be evaluated as more proactive. In all three cases, the policy decisions supportive of Syrian students' integration had a deep impact on increasing their access to and participation in higher education. The Karabük case specifically highlights the importance of proactive policy making and implementation. On the implementation side, while *ad hoc* and decentralized management schemes, policies and practices lead to a mixed response within and among HEIs they also come up short in responding to the complex needs of Syrian students. In that regard, the centralized procedures and organizational structure at Karabük University has resulted in more efficient management and enhanced communication with students while addressing their needs and demands. The necessity for establishing policy structures involving a variety of actors and a level of policy coordination among them is also evident at institutional level. Gaziantep University, with its ties and cooperation with key stakeholders, is therefore an emerging good model.

The results of the needs and cross-case analysis also expose the necessity to support Syrian students and researchers more in accessing and participating in higher education. Although there are common, cross-cutting themes (e.g. language, academic support, lack of social interaction with local students, financial problems, gender imbalance,) their salience

differs in varying degrees among the three cases due to their specific context and conditions. While financial challenges and low employment opportunities emerge as more pressing problems at Karabük, language and academic support are perceived as more essential at Istanbul University. In Gaziantep conversely while the language barrier is perceived as less of a problem, social activities bringing Syrian and local students together are in greater demand. This degree of differentiation reveals the need for greater understanding and more customer-tailored support programs to address these diverse challenges rather than overall approaches. Against this background, the following chapter will discuss the findings of the pilot support programs developed and implemented at Istanbul University within the scope of the WESREF-IU Project.

As a final word, although HEIs cannot solve all the problems of Syrian students and researchers, they can definitely contribute to increasing their participation in higher education by improving their institutional structure, policy, capacity and awareness. Moreover, some HEIs have already stood up to their responsibilities of integrating Syrian students and researchers. These identified best practice cases should be supported through national schemes in order to create a more inclusive, responsive and sustainable higher education provision for refugees. Thus a considerable degree of knowledge and expertise, which is very valuable for policy making, has been accumulated during this process. In that regard, cooperation and knowledge sharing among HEIs and other key stakeholders in the region and beyond is crucial to address the global shortcomings.

Picture 1: Fieldwork at Karabük University, Karabük, February 4, 2019



CHAPTER 3

WESREF-IU Project: An Evaluation of the Pilot Support Programs, Awareness Raising and Knowledge Sharing

Despite the documented aspirations of refugees, there are several challenges hindering their access to and participation in higher education. Apart from structural barriers (e.g. financial hardship, temporary legal status, discrimination associated with the refugee label and status) other challenges such as general unfamiliarity with the higher education system structures and language; non-recognition of academic qualifications; and a lack of or inadequate information, advice and guidance can be tackled at the institutional level (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; Elwyn et al., 2012; Houghton & Morrice, 2008; Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Access, academic achievement and engagement with campus and studies can be improved through institutional policies and practices to ensure meaningful participation in higher education. However, despite the potential for enhanced communication and integration HEIs can be culturally alienating and exclusionary places for people coming from different backgrounds and cultures. Hence, the adaptation problems related to an unfamiliar academic culture, norms and practices combined with inadequate language skills for academic writing and communication, amid financial burden and stress, require additional support at institutional level (Baker et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2019; Berg, 2018; Bowen, 2014; Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; A. Harris et al., 2015; Houghton & Morrice, 2008; Morrice, 2013b; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). There is an urgent need for greater understanding of refugee engagement in academia and the role that HEIs can play in improving their integration and inclusion (Arar, Kondakci, & Streitwieser, 2020; Joyce et al., 2010; Lenette, 2016; Streitwieser et al., 2019). Although intercultural contact and diversity during university education enhance the learning experience of local students, many HEIs do not consider refugees as part of their widening participation strategies and internationalization targets. There is therefore a general lack of support and strategy for refugee students at HEIs (Baker et al., 2019).

In order to overcome these challenges to access and participation, institution-wide support programs specifically tailored for students and researchers have been designed and implemented within the scope of the WESREF-IU project. Furthermore, with the objective of increasing awareness raising and dialogue within and across HEIs with key stakeholders and promoting the development of spaces for enhanced dialogue and cooperation, HEIs can play an active role. In that regard, a series of events have been organized and held at Istanbul University with the participation of Syrian students, researchers, key administrative and academic staff and various stakeholders. Discussion and consultation with the stakeholders

whose work indicates a certain degree of expertise within and beyond the academy in the field contributed to diversification of the analysis while providing a more inclusive methodological research and evaluation.

This chapter will further discuss the key results and outcomes of these events with a focus on the nature of the higher educational space in terms of its purpose, uses, dynamics, and limitations. We also aim to elaborate on the underlying components that allow reflection and transformation to occur in order to cope with increasing access and participation of refugees in the long-term period. Therefore, beyond documenting the distinct educational needs of students and scholars at institutional level, the findings aim to contribute to policy making and implementation for increased refugee participation in Turkish HEIs and wider society.

3.1. Application and Admission Support

Mixed, conflicting messages and information regarding the application and admission process is a generally observed challenge in refugees' access to higher education (HE). There is a general confusion both for the students and service providers surrounding application and admission requirements, and recognition of prior qualifications and documentation during the process (Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). A lack of available information, advice and guidance combined with complex and changing regulations are among the documented challenges in various countries during refugees' access to higher education (Berg, 2018; Joyce et al., 2010; Jungblut & Pietkiewicz, 2017; Morrice, 2009, 2013a; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Furthermore, navigating an unfamiliar system in a foreign language without advice and guidance can be very frustrating and can further affect the application and admission rates (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Elwyn et al., 2012; Joyce et al., 2010).

Accordingly, a lack of available information, advice and guidance are among the documented challenges for Syrian students due to complex and decentralized application and admission procedures for international students in Turkey (Hohberger, 2018; Watenpaugh, Fircke, et al., 2014). According to our research, the complexity of the system was further problematic for Istanbul University applicants considering the vast and overlapping organizational scheme and confusion over the new regulations. Despite the large number of Syrian students enrolled at Istanbul University, there are no specific support mechanism or processes addressed at refugee students in the International Students Office, which is responsible for foreign students and their applications and admissions. All international applications are processed in a generic manner without any specific measures for refugee

students. A specifically tailored support at institutional level seems to be necessary during the application and admission procedures. Correspondingly, our research reveals the necessity to improve and translate website content and exam guides for foreign students in order to specifically meet the needs of refugee students.

Within this background pilot application and admission support targeted at refugee students during their application to Istanbul University were designed and implemented between August and December 2018 within the scope of the project. The main objectives were removing institutional barriers for Syrian students during the application procedures by providing information, advice and guidance support, while enhancing institutional capacity for increased access and participation of refugees. Three Syrian students of Istanbul University were recruited as project assistants through an evaluation and selection process. The students were trained on application and admission procedures to Turkey's HEIs and the implementation process at Istanbul University. This enabled these students to provide information, advice and guidance to prospective refugee students during their application to Istanbul University. The recruitment criteria announced and implemented was determined as: being a student at Istanbul University; having a good level of Arabic, Turkish and English language proficiency; and having some experience and/or knowledge of foreign students' application procedures to Turkish HEIs. In total, 48 students and researchers applied for the position, 28 were invited for interview according to the qualifications stated on their resumes. According to the determined criteria candidates were interviewed, evaluated and three remarkable students and researchers were selected. During a two-day training program the project assistants were briefed regarding the objectives, activities, implementation and outcomes of the project according to the project manual. They were then trained in order to provide accurate and up-to-date information regarding the regulatory framework for refugee access and participation in higher education in Turkey and its implementation at institutional level by Istanbul University. The regulatory framework for foreign student admissions to higher education in Turkey and the specific decisions and the related amendments by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) concerning refugee and refugee-like students' access and participation were introduced and discussed. Istanbul University' institutional and organizational scheme, institutional directives and decisions regarding foreign student applications and admissions procedures were subsequently introduced with the aim of equipping project assistants with accurate information on Istanbul University and refugee students access. Finally, student experiences and the obstacles they faced trying to gain access to Istanbul University were discussed and

their contribution to the support program and project were underlined. On the second day of training, project assistants spent the day in the application and admission head office and faculties in order to get to know the institutional procedures and implementation apart from the regulatory framework.

These three students from a refugee background, who also subsequently became facilitators, took part in enhanced dialogue and communication with students, academic and administrative staff. Within the determined objectives, 88 applicants in total were supported during their application to Istanbul University. Of this number, 39 applicants were supported on site, in person and 49 were contacted by the support team virtually through a social media group that had been established by Syrian students.

In addition to applicants, upon request, the project team has also provided support to Istanbul University application admission staff during the application period. While the project assistants have reported regularly, constant meetings have been held in order to evaluate and discuss the implementation and outcomes of the program. Based on the evaluation and findings of the program, the main challenges and domains for support can be grouped into four main emerging themes:

- Language barrier
- A lack of clear information and guidance
- Inconsistent implementation of the regulations
- Online system-based problems

Language Barrier

Communication problems due to the language barrier emerge as the main challenge during application procedures. While applicants have a low level of Turkish language proficiency, application and admission staff can mostly communicate only in Turkish language. Furthermore, official websites, regulations, institutional directives, decisions and announcements are only available in the Turkish language. While for first-year applicants, an English version of the "Foreign Students Exam" Guidelines exists and some of the information on the accompanying website is available in the English language, there is an absolute lack of translation for transfer procedures.

In that respect, our project team mainly guided applicants and supported them during their communication with university staff. Furthermore, the online application tool, which is only available in the Turkish language, proved to be very difficult and complex for applicants

with a low level of Turkish. Our project assistants, upon request, have personally guided applicants through the online application.

Lack of Clear Information and Guidance

Another challenge mainly related—but not limited—to the language barrier is the lack of clear information and guidance during the application procedures. While good quality information is valued at institutional level, the complexity of the system can lead to confusion among personnel specifically concerning transfer procedures. While information regarding the application and admission procedures is only available in Turkish, the content of the information may be inadequate, unclear and even conflicting. There is a general confusion concerning admission requirements, documentation and recognition of prior foreign credentials, which also results in inconsistent implementation of the institutional decisions.

Moreover, although the Foreign Students Exam website for first-year applicants has a clear content and design, no specific page or menu exists on the official website for transfer procedures where applicants can easily navigate through and reach the necessary information. As an alternative, students have established their own social media network and platform in which they discuss and answer questions regarding application procedures. According to the founders, the platform receives approximately 100 messages daily during the application and admission periods.[42]

Inconsistent Implementation

An inconsistent level of knowledge and implementation is often the issue at institutional level. Different levels of knowledge and experience among administrative staff may result in inconsistent implementation of the institutional decisions. In that regard, our project team have observed problems and inconsistencies in document requirements and submission especially in faculties and schools with low levels of Syrian students. Reluctance in accepting application documents by the administrative staff; a lack of translated documents; equivalency for high school diplomas; and the limited time schedule were among the main challenges observed and experienced by the project team. An up-to-date clear, easy-to-read and interpret guidance on the issue would benefit both institutions and applicants. An institutional guideline was designed and prepared for Istanbul University as a deliverable within the scope of the project in order to provide a degree of standardization in that regard. Apart from clear, written

42 For an example of these networks available see: www.facebook.com/groups/i.u.suriyeliler/; and for more information on these networks see: Atesok, Z. O., Komsuoglu, A., & Ozer, Y. Y. (2019), "An Evaluation of Refugees' Access To Higher Education: Case of Turkey and Istanbul University", *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, pp.119-136.

guidelines, all staff should be informed and trained properly concerning their responsibilities and a university-wide strategy is needed with special focus on refugees' complex needs and demands. This will further ease the problems concerning the conflicting and overlapping scope of authorities and responsibilities among the organizational units, which is often the case considering the implementation of complex and new transfer regulations.

System-based Problems

Another frequent support request concerned the online tool of the application system. While the tool being available only in Turkish was deemed problematic due to language barrier, the bugs and system problems further hinder the application process. The system is specifically problematic for transfer applications. However, in addition to the bugs in the system, the most frequent problems listed were mainly due to unfamiliarity with the higher education system and its institutions. Sender institutions need to be introduced to the system in order to proceed with the transfer application. Although an online application support tool on the system is available, it is not used very much and not even recognized by the applicants. Furthermore, the very short timeframe for submitting applications and the language barrier limit the communication and magnify the system problems.

Other Issues

Although not directly related to institutional policies and practices, another challenge that emerged in the support program concerned the equivalency procedures. In order to apply, prospective students are required to submit the equivalent higher education diplomas as determined by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). This process can be very lengthy especially during the application and registration period. Another challenge not directly linked to application and admission procedures but quite important is the problem of finding accommodation that students face after registration. Admissions for students entering via the transfer procedure are later than those of first year applicants so they miss application period for dormitory accommodation, which is a very important issue for students coming from other cities. Institutional accommodation services for Syrian students should be improved and further discussed.

Aside from the program's specific findings, additional emerging themes identified in other programs (e.g. inadequate communication and concerns over sustainability) were also observed during this program. The university's communication in general, which will be discussed in more detail below, requires further improvements. A lack of clear information and guidance exists and starts as early as the application process. The university website and

announcement mailings, which are used during the project implementation to reach more students, are deemed to be inadequate for effective communication with both prospective and current Syrian students, and researchers. The official website proved to be unsatisfactory for providing accurate information to prospective students with limited language proficiency in Turkish. Furthermore, its design and content, which is far from satisfactory, needs further improvement.

Improvements

In that regard, the delivered outputs of the project such as the information sheets providing basic information and the clear guidelines are crucial to support prospective students and the university staff. Firstly, the info sheets available in three languages (Arabic, English and Turkish) were designed and prepared in various formats (e.g. pdf, book and information sheets) to provide accurate and clear information on Istanbul University's application procedures for applicants coming from refuge and refugee-like backgrounds. Apart from these info sheets, application and admission guidelines were prepared, again in the three languages, with the aim of providing clear information, guidance and ensuring an even and accurate implementation of the application and admission procedures with a degree of institutional standardization. In order to provide a degree of sustainability, both the info sheet and guidelines have been uploaded onto the university website under a special tab entitled "refugee and refugee like student applications to Istanbul University".[43]

The university website has also been greatly improved with the aim of overcoming the language barrier, providing accurate information to prospective students and enhancing institutional communication. Website content has been translated and updated according to the student comments and research by the project team under the supervision of Istanbul University Foreign Students Exam Unit. Accordingly, a more student-friendly, interactive and multilingual website has been developed according to student and researcher requests and observations.[44]

As a further step, ways to integrate informal student networks and platforms, which proved to be more effective in communication and dissemination, were discussed with the Department of Information Management and with the university Communication and Public Relations units. A student forum is among the projects planned to further improve

43 For the guidelines and info sheets uploaded to the Istanbul University website see: https://yos.istanbul.edu.tr/tr/content/basvuru/siginmaci-ve-multeci-ogrenciler-icin-basvuru-destek-kilavuzu; https://wesref.istanbul.edu.tr/en/_.

44 For the revised website please visit: https://yos.istanbul.edu.tr/ar/_

communication and sustainability. And last but not least, the project team, which comprised various staff and students all working together, contributed to mutual understanding, communication and cooperation. This spirit of cooperation and understanding not only enhances institutional communication and capacity for recognizing the special needs of refugee students but also contributes to raising awareness concerning Syrian and other refugee students' access to and participation in higher education. While the project team has gained valuable experience and knowledge, administrative staff had the opportunity to work with Syrian students. According to them the experience has enhanced their work and awareness while relieving some of the work load that can be very heavy especially during application and admission periods. First of all, working with the Syrian project members has contributed to identifying obstacles in the application and admission procedures and developing solutions for refugee applicants, while building up better understanding of their complex and varying needs. Through this face-to-face communication and cooperation some technical problems (e.g. system based IT problems, translation errors) that had remained unsolved and unknown to the staff reached to solution. Furthermore, the staff stated that the support provided by the team members during the busy application period was very effective and successfully helped to alleviate the intense work pressure. In order to sustain this kind of support and cooperation, the university looked into the possible options for recruiting Syrian students to part-time positions to support administrative staff. However, it appeared that although there is a scheme for recruiting part-time students to work in the different university departments, foreign students were not included. The project team therefore recommends that Syrian students be included in the scheme.

3.2. Orientation Program

Apart from the application and admission process, for students from different cultural and educational backgrounds adapting to university can be a daunting experience particularly if there is no preparation or orientation program. Research has catalogued that refugee students face additional challenges while adapting to higher education and the new institutional and social contexts (Baker et al., 2018; Earnest et al., 2010; A. Harris et al., 2015; Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Although orientation programs are organized on a faculty basis at Istanbul University, there is no specific program aimed at refugee students that takes into consideration their complex needs and demands. During our research it was revealed that only a few students were aware of and had participated in the faculty-based orientation programs. Additionally, adapting to the studies, academic and campus life, which was perceived as totally different from the Syrian context, was very challenging especially in the

first few years. Students mentioned that knowledge such as elective courses or passing grades, which is often taken for granted and perceived as common knowledge, was unfamiliar and unknown to them at the start of their studies. Participants felt like there were common rules in higher education for everyone and it took a while to get to know and adapt to them.

In that respect, WESREF-IU orientation program was organized in two sessions with a total of 72 newly registered students participating. The overall aim of these sessions was to introduce new students to campus life, academic culture and norms, and to equip them with the necessary skills to navigate their way through the system. Such orientation sessions also facilitate student participation in higher education in general and support their further engagement in their studies, the campus and the city. Another aim was to contribute to institutional capacity building on refugee student support programs in order to understand and respond better to their varying needs and demands. In an effort to overcome the language barrier simultaneous translation was available in both English and Arabic. However, only Arabic was requested since the majority of international students attending the orientation program were Syrians.

The content of the presentations and the design of the orientation program in general was aimed at facilitating the engagement of students from diverse backgrounds including local, international and refugee background students with the academic life, system, campus and the city. Basic information and knowledge was provided such as navigation through the university online registration and information system, assessment and grading systems, use of campus services including counseling, health, accommodation, employment and social services available for students. The very basic and simple content, which is taken for granted by many and not included in the regular orientation programs, was very much appreciated by both local and international students who were transiting to the HEI without much information on credit systems, mandatory and elective courses, access to internet on the campus, online system or library sources.

General Observations and Findings

The content and program are designed and implemented using a participatory approach through cooperation with both local and Syrian students, researchers and staff working with refugees. The main facilitators and members of the project team were Syrian students of Istanbul University recruited to offer support in the application and admission process of this pilot program. Their participation in the project was very insightful. Information on social activities available for students and procedures for joining and establishing student clubs

were added to the program upon their request. This request also reveals how students value the social opportunities and interactions that higher education can provide and the need for social interventions at institution level (Morrice, 2013b; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Vickers et al., 2017). According to this demand, representatives of university students and clubs were invited to participate in the preparation. While their contributions to the program were very important, the social contact and culture of working together that emerged from this cooperation was very fulfilling and inspiring for all participants. Another demand put forward by the Syrian team members was regarding international exchange programs and internship opportunities. While there is no legal restriction for Syrian students to participate in exchange programs, problems over visa applications and passport expiration often reduce their chances. The demand specifically reveals how students value international opportunities and the transcendent prospects that higher education holds for refugee youth albeit limited physical and social mobility and constrained environments (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019; Wright & Plasterer, 2010; Zeus, 2011). In that regard, future projects in cooperation with international stakeholders that aim to increase Syrian student mobility during higher education would be very beneficial.

Furthermore, the content was designed in order to address and respond to the specific needs of Syrian students, such as the problems they faced during the registration process. This was intentional to increase knowledge and awareness among the local students and to quash the general misperceptions and misinformation concerning Syrian students' access to higher education in Turkey. This point is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. During the content preparation, Syrian team members highlighted some issues as problematic such as the dissemination of information concerning tuition fee exemption that is provided to Syrian students as other domestic students. Stating that local students were already uncomfortable and resented the support that Syrian students receive, it would be inappropriate to include such content. Although not explicitly stated, the students' uneasiness of the issue provided insight into the xenophobic public discourse and perceptions of navigating in a hostile environment based on misinformation. Another aim of the orientation program and the project as a whole, was to fight against the misinformation frequently circulating in the Turkish media regarding Syrian students entering university without any examinations or evaluation. In that regard, apart from providing guidance and preparation for Syrian students, the orientation program aimed at strengthening social inclusion and fighting against implicit or explicit discrimination on the campus. Lastly, the orientation program, especially the presentation content, has provided an added value for the institutional capacity building. The

presentation was used in the orientation programs of different faculties. Furthermore, as a contribution to awareness raising, the event and pictures were disseminated through the institutional website.[45]

Apart from, presentations on education processes, the automation system, the library, scholarship opportunities, accommodation, food and health services provided to students, information on student clubs and activities was prepared and presented by related staff and student council representatives. After a cocktail lunch for participants to socialize and get to know each other, the program was closed with a campus tour. Istanbul University's Beyazıt Campus is located in the historical old city and is very big and dispersed with faculties and units spread all over the region. In that regard, getting to know the campus and navigating around can be challenging for newcomers. Students were provided information both on campus life and the historical background of the university and city. Additionally, the campus tour was a novelty that was appreciated and attracted many students with its content and design. The students valued the knowledge provided concerning the venues and specifically expressed the feeling of a bonding with the historical and cultural heritage of the campus, which they found very inspiring.

Shortcomings of the Program

General observations and evaluation of the program were very positive and the overall feedback was favorable. Especially, the presentations and campus tour were highly appreciated. Although attendance rates were lower than expected, participation numbers were still comparatively high considering other programs in the project. Participation rates are promising and clearly demonstrate the demand for these kinds of preparatory events and activities for Syrian students. Nevertheless, the communication and institutional capacity to reach Syrian students should be evaluated and discussed within this context as the main shortcomings of the program. The challenges of inadequate communication with Syrian students and low participation rates, which are also the common emerging problems in other programs, require detailed investigation.

Inadequate Communication

The communication and dissemination process of the orientation program was a very important indicator for understanding the communication capacity of the university in case of Syrian students. Announcements for the program were prepared in three different languages

45 For the news and pictures on the website see: http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/tr/haber/istanbul-universitesi-wesref-iu-oryantasyon-programi-gerceklestirildi-6700680055004900340005F007900420050007300670031 00

(Arabic, English and Turkish) and communicated through the university website. A dynamic communication strategy is applied in order to reach Syrian students and researchers. Apart from announcements on the institutional website, which proved to be inadequate, mailings and student social media networks were also included in the strategy.

An announcement was first uploaded to the university website for a week. Although the announcement appeared in three languages including Arabic, the application rates of Syrian students were very limited compared with local Turkish students. Only two of the 342 newly registered Syrian students applied for the program, which implies that the institutional website is not an effective means of communicating with Syrian students and requires further improvement. On the other hand, the demand among the local students for the program was very interesting considering the existence of the faculty-based orientation programs. In order to reach more Syrian students, an announcement was sent via e-mail to all newly registered Syrian students. Doing so, increased application numbers to 40 in just three days. As expected, mailing proved to be more effective in reaching target students. However, for further communication and increased application, our Syrian team members sent the announcement to Syrian student social media groups and it was understood that the announcement had already been shared on the networks by students who had received the e-mail. This also demonstrates the strong communication network among Syrian students. In the end, the total number of Syrian students who signed up for the orientation program reached 54 out of a total of 440 applicants.

Low Participation

It was totally intentional to make the program open to both local and international students, with a content targeted and designed for all students. The aim was to provide a venue where students could get to know each other and learn about the problems they had been experiencing both common and differentiated ones. Therefore, while all students were targeted, the main target group was Syrian students. In order to fully respond to demands and provide a better program, applications were evaluated according to a quota system based on faculty student numbers while giving precedence to Syrian applicants. In total 220 students were invited to participate in the orientation program; however, only 72 students attended the program, which is a very low participation rate. Another important indicator was the participation rate of Syrian students; it was higher than local students. Among the 54 Syrian students who signed up for the program only 26 actively attended and participated. Although attendance rates were lower than expected, the participation is promising and demonstrated the demand for this kind of preparatory events particularly among Syrian students.

During the evaluation, the main reason for non-attendance was indicated as bad weather conditions, and other errands and affairs. However, for the future organization of such events low participation rates should be kept in mind and, more importantly, be monitored closely.

3.3. Academic Language Support Program

Inadequate language skills for engaging in studies, participating in classes, academic writing and assessment can be very challenging for students without any experience of the academic culture and system in the early years of their studies. A variety of research studies have identified inadequate language skills as the most challenging obstacle for refugee students (Berg, 2018; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2009; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Streitwieser et al., 2017). Accordingly, problems related to language proficiency have been stated as the biggest barrier in all of the cases during our research. Although students had appeared to have very high levels of Turkish during the interviews, many specifically underlined the academic language inadequacy they had been experiencing. And some stated that if they had had better proficiency, it would have been easier for them to communicate with their local peers in the classroom. Considering the reciprocal relationship between language learning and academic resilience with language proficiency being strictly linked to other aspects of life including adaptation, integration and cohesion, language support therefore requires a more holistic perspective (Berg, 2018; Cinkara, 2017; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Morrice, 2009).

Although the majority of courses at Istanbul University are in the Turkish language, language proficiency is not among the admission requirements since preparation classes are available after registration for students who do not meet the proficiency levels. Apart from these preparation classes provided by Istanbul University's School of Foreign Languages free of charge—unlike the Turkish Teaching and research centers available for Turkish instruction at other universities—the university's Language Center also offers a variety of language learning opportunities for foreigners for a certain fee. Despite these opportunities, language proficiency is among the biggest challenges for both prospective and current students. According to the findings of the research and pilot programs, preparation classes are not appropriate enough to understand and follow the courses. Although preparation classes being free of charge is considered to be very appealing, the instruction and content are deemed to be unsatisfactory to meet academic levels of language proficiency. Almost all of the interviewed students emphasized language problems as the most important barrier in their studies and social life. Furthermore, although most of the students in the focus groups had a very high level of proficiency and expressed themselves very well in Turkish, all of them

stated that they had had difficulty in note taking and following the courses or reading comprehension in the lectures.

Within the scope of the project, therefore, a language support module targeted at Syrian students and researchers has been designed and developed by Istanbul University's Language Center. The center has years of academic experience of teaching language and, more specifically, is specialized in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. The pilot program was implemented between July 2018 and May 2019 with the aim of providing language support to refugee students and researchers in order to increase their academic achievement and participation in courses and university life. The program further aimed to contribute to institutional capacity building on refugee support programs in line with the project objectives. During the first two months the content and schedule of the program was developed and prepared with the guidance of the Language Center. A curriculum and program were developed specifically to improve the Turkish language proficiency of Syrian researchers and students who had at least a B1 level of Turkish proficiency. It was intentionally designed for upper levels of proficiency in order to enhance language skills that would contribute to academic learning. Thus, the support program has been deliberately designed as a module beyond language support, and provided a venue to improve language proficiency and academic participation.

The program, which was designed and implemented for two semesters, started receiving applications as of October 2018 and continued until February 2019. An online application form required applicants to fill in some basic information regarding their level of Turkish language proficiency and the basic language skills (reading/listening/writing/speaking) they need. Furthermore, applicants were asked to choose from among four available course hours (e.g. Tuesday morning/Thursday morning/Friday morning/Friday afternoon) in order to design a flexible and appropriate program in line with their needs and demands. Classes were formed according to the applicants' proficiency level and selected time schedule. Moreover, when developing the program and curriculum special attention was given to the different academic programs and backgrounds of the applicants.

During the fall semester 79 of the 102 applicants had registered; by the spring semester 87 among 129 applicants had registered. In total, 231 students and researchers applied and 166 registered to the program. Although in total, students from 44 different departments, 12 faculties and four institutes applied to the program, the majority came from the Faculty of Letters (63 applicants), Faculty of Open and Distance Education (35), Faculty of Science (19) and Economics (19). This is also in line with the general distribution of

students to the faculties. The following departments were the most prominent ones: English (23) and Arabic Language and Literature (20); Business Management–including both regular and distance-education programs– (26); Economics (12); and Law (12). During application process the majority of students stated that they needed support mainly in writing (70 applicants) and reading (65), while reading comprehension was stated as the most difficult area (124). Difficulty in note taking (29) and article writing (30) posed less problems followed by expressing themselves (10) and listening comprehension (6). The stated levels of Turkish language proficiency were mainly B1 (53 applicants), B2 (59) and C1 (55). The program content and courses were designed in line with the above mentioned demands.

General Observations and Shortcomings

The objectives of the program were twofold. Firstly, identifying the language problems of students and finding solutions. Secondly, tracking the progress reports to evaluate the program and its efficiency. Program evaluation was followed up with constant meetings and in a workshop organized at Istanbul University with the participation of students, researchers and instructors.

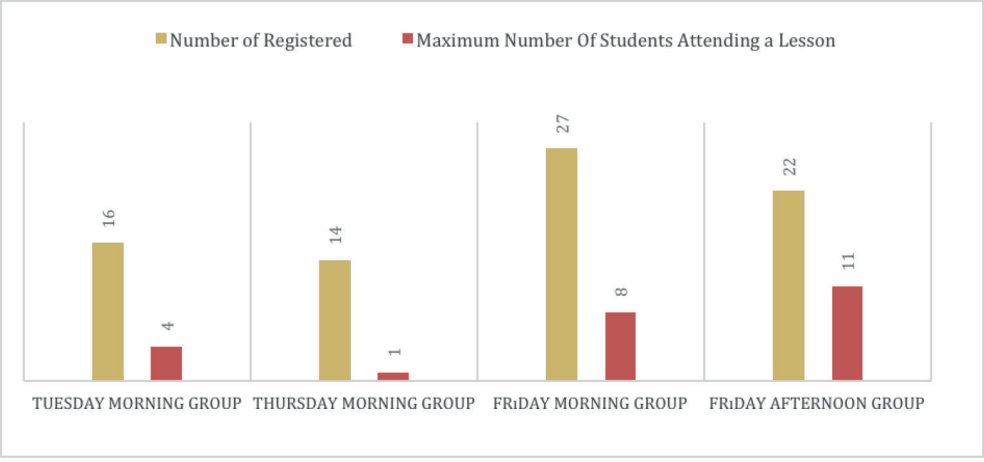
The first challenge that came across in the implementation phase was the issue of dividing into classes. Although students are assigned according to their proficiency levels, since they come from very different faculties and departments, a consistent level of homogeneity cannot be assured. Furthermore, since students come from very different educational backgrounds and academic programs, they also have different expectations, language levels, course terminology needs and preferences. More departmental, faculty-based language support could be more efficient as different programs require a different kind of terminology. As a future solution, faculty academic staff could be contacted to contribute more to the language support program. Close collaboration among faculties and language centers could improve the content and participation while enhancing institutional capacity accordingly.

In line with the findings of other programs, effective communication was another emerging problem during the implementation and afterwards. Although, announcement mailings were sent to all of the Syrian students registered, it was observed that some students and researchers were not fully informed concerning the language support program. The university website, mailing and social networks still seem inadequate for effective communication with Syrian students and researchers.

Low Participation

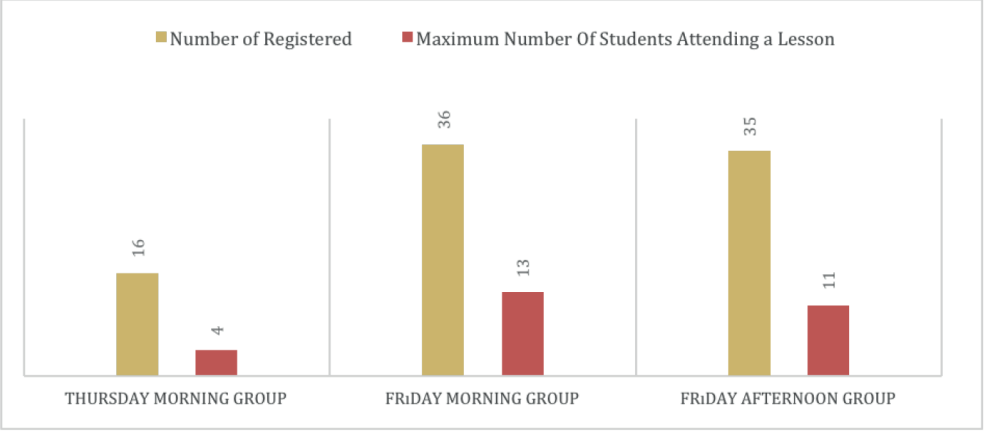
As the longest program implemented, the main shortcoming was the low attendance rates. Although in total 231 students and researchers applied and 166 registered to the program, their attendance and participation remained lower than expected. Despite the flexibility offered, attendance varying between 7-50% is very low considering the high levels of application and registration.

Figure 10: Number of Students Registered and Attending Language Classes, Fall Semester, Term 1



Source: WESREF-IU Project Data.

Figure 11: Number of Students Registered and Attending Language Classes, Spring Semester, Term 2



Source: WESREF-IU Project data.

In order to boost attendance rates, the schedule was revised for the second term of the program and a certificate of attendance was given to students who showed up regularly. Initially, however, only four participants were entitled to receive the participation certificate; while by the final semester a total of 15 participants were entitled to a certificate but only 12 were distributed. According to the evaluations, the main reasons stated by participants for their low attendance were linked to the limited spare time due to the heavy daily work load. This makes sense considering the high employment rates among Syrian students. During the application process, 54 stated their employment status as working, 44 stated part-time worker and 97 as unemployed. However, these rates still do not correspond to the low levels of attendance considering the 97 unemployed. Other stated reasons for non-attendance were special circumstances and inadequate motivation by the students.

Nevertheless, according to the students who did attend the classes, the most appreciated and valued program implemented within the scope of the project was the language support. Students who participated in the workshop cited inadequate language skills for participation in classes, academic writing and assessment as their biggest challenge. Although Istanbul University provides Turkish language preparatory classes for international students free of charge, the content is deemed unsuitable for academic participation. In that regard, the content and curriculum of the preparatory classes require further examination and revision.

The program and content of the pilot academic language module, on the other hand, was found by the participants to be very helpful. The program was designed and evaluated according to the participants' requests. Including reading, writing and speaking exercises, for example, goes beyond mere language support and provides the possibility to improve their communication skills and general knowledge on academia and university rules and practices.

As a final point, apart from being the most appreciated pilot program by the researchers and students, it also contributed to the design of institutional support mechanisms and the enhanced the understanding of refugee students' and researchers' varying needs in academia. Although the program was designed and evaluated according to the needs and demands of the students and researchers, low attendance rates require further investigation and analysis. First of all, the time schedule and content should be more flexible, and evaluated according to the multiple needs. Although it may not always be feasible, some classes could be designed according to the specific academic domains. The program was designed and implemented for two semesters during the course period and in line with the academic calendar. A more condensed, shorter program could also be designed upon request. A more proactive and customer-tailored communication strategy could also be implemented.

3.4. Venues for Broader Cooperation, Engagement in Awareness Raising and Dialogue

A variety of stakeholders are involved in refugee access to higher education; organizations such as UN agencies, international and national NGOs, central regulating authorities, HEIs, voluntary regional, local refugee organizations. Despite the global normative framework and ever-growing consensus on the advantages of higher education among the key global stakeholders, a lack of communication and coordination still exists. The result is a significant gap in understanding and implementing higher education policies and practices as has already been documented in various research studies (Barakat & Milton, 2015; El-Ghali & Al Hawamdeh, 2017; Streitweiser et al., 2016; Watenpaugh, Fircke, et al., 2014). Given the complexity and multilevel, multi-actor, multi-issue aspects (Vukasovic et al., 2018) of the process, in order to prevent refugees disconnecting from higher education, HEIs can play an active role in bridging this gap and increasing coordinated action and cooperation. Moreover, central policy-makers, local authorities, scholarship providers as international donors and organizations tend to focus more on the basic education (primary and secondary education) due to pressing and increasing needs. Against this backdrop, higher education needs and demands, which are still perceived as luxury for refugees in host societies (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Kamyab, 2017; Magaziner, 2015; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019), require awareness raising and knowledge sharing.

Subsequently, beyond documenting and analyzing the distinct educational needs of refugees and designing support mechanisms at institutional level, the project also aims to contribute to awareness raising, improved policy making and regional capacity building for refugees' long-term integration. Through enhanced dialogue, knowledge and good model sharing among key stakeholders, the project aims to fulfill these objectives. Within this perspective, in order to promote the development of spaces for dialogue and cooperation among all these different institutions and actors, the project aimed to locate the university as a focal point of cooperation and integration. A series of events were, therefore, held on the university campus with the ultimate objective of strengthening ties between academia and civil society. Moreover, the events, which were designed for multiple target audiences, further contributed to incorporating views and consultations from a variety of perspectives for feedback, refinement and enhanced understanding.

Firstly, at the beginning of the project, an info session was organized by the project team with the participation of university administrative staff working in direct contact with Syrian students, researchers and other refugees. The objective of this info session was to increase institutional engagement in awareness raising and dialogue. Despite their vital importance and

continuous contact with prospective and current refugee students there is very limited research on the perceptions of academic and administrative staff in HEIs (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013; V. Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Our study reveals that both academic and administrative staff are increasingly overburdened with challenges of responding to the diverse needs of Syrian students. In line with the studies, our research underlines the need to support administrative staff who provide assistance to prospective refugee students and researchers in an already burdened work load (Atesok et al., 2019). Considering the prolonged nature of the displacement and general resentment fueled by misinformation on Syrian students' access to higher education, HEIs' societal role in awareness raising and training becomes more evident. The info session was carried out with the participation of 14 administrative staff in direct contact with refugee students. After providing accurate and up-to-date information concerning the Syrian students and researchers' access to higher education with a focus on well-being and mental health, the floor opened to discussions on staff experiences, available support mechanisms and ethical principles of working with refugees.

The main findings of the info session can be summarized as the need to increase institutional awareness and capacity to support refugee students, researchers and staff in direct contact with them. Ethical considerations and the well-being of Syrian students emerged as the most important issue. Although psychological support services are available at Istanbul University, there is a waiting list of approximately two months. In the short term, an agreement was reached with the Istanbul University Guidance, Counselling and Social Support Unit (IUREB) to give precedence to Syrian students and researchers, while possibilities and opportunities for increased institutional capacity for providing psycho-social support are being discussed and designed. Apparently, there is an urgent need to develop institutional ethical guidelines and principles for working with refugees. These entail general principles, guidance in dealing with situations of traumatization, forced displacement and adaptation problems in order to respond to their varying needs and assure their well-being. The info session further emphasizes the need for constant consultation and enhanced cooperation at institutional level in terms of responding to the diverse and complex needs of refugees. Coordinated collaboration is essential among the different stakeholders such as researchers, administrative and academic staff, health sciences, medicine and education faculties, guidance, counseling and social support units. As demonstrated in the case of Istanbul University, this need is even more evident for institutions with vast organizational structures where bridging the gaps among different units is vital to eliminate overlapping, duplications and inconsistencies in implementation and creating synergies.

A subsequent workshop was organized on campus within the objective of increasing institutional engagement in awareness raising and dialogue between HEIs and refugee communities. The workshop took place on January 18, 2019 with 21 participants. In order to debate, share, discuss, and disseminate the preliminary research results and the project implementation including evaluation of the pilot programs, the workshop brought together project researchers, assistants, academic and administrative staff, and students who had participated in the support programs. In line with the objectives, the workshop further aimed to enhance communication between university staff and Syrian students and researchers. It also provided a venue for Syrian students to share their experiences, evaluate and improve the pilot support programs of the project.

The main challenges and observations expressed concerning the application and admission support program were linked to the persistent language barrier as well as different levels of knowledge and information among administrative staff. In that regard, the official website and online application tool proved to be unsatisfactory for providing accurate information to prospective students with limited language proficiency in Turkish. In order to overcome these challenges, a more student friendly, interactive and multilingual website design was recommended, in addition to uploading info sheets and guidelines designed and prepared within the scope of the project. Furthermore, ways to integrate informal student networks and platforms into the institutional communication were also discussed. Although participants found the orientation program to be very pleasant and useful, the main challenges and observations were lack of effective communication and low attendance rates. Improving relations with local students, administrative and academic staff was also discussed. In that regard, further cooperation with student representatives and clubs were among the possible solutions to be evaluated. The long-standing academic language support, on the other hand, proved to be the most appreciated and valued program by the participants despite the low attendance rates. Given that inadequate language skills are the biggest challenge expressed by the students and researchers, the program and content of the module was found to be very helpful by the participants for improving their language proficiency and academic participation. The main reasons for the low attendance as indicated by the students and researchers were heavy work load, special circumstances and inadequate motivation. Meanwhile, the content and curriculum of the Turkish preparatory classes require further examination and revision. Some recurring themes such as the lack of effective communication between the university and students; low participation rates; and poor communication with local students, administrative staff and faculty members were again expressed during the

workshop. In order to improve relations there is an apparent need for further awareness raising and joint social events. As a first action a meeting with student representatives in order to discuss ways to improve relations between Syrian and local students is on the agenda.

The final awareness-raising, dissemination and knowledge-sharing event of the project was an international seminar entitled "Higher Education and Refugees: Access and Participation" held on April 22, 2019 on campus. The seminar, which aimed to increase institutional engagement in knowledge sharing, dialogue and coordinated action, also provided a venue to present, share and discuss the various research and papers with a broader academic audience and policy makers. The seminar also included local and international academics, researchers and representatives of the HEIs. Council of Higher Education (CoHE) as the main regulatory body of higher education and UNHCR, which is the key international stakeholder for refugee access to higher education and provider of scholarships in Turkey, contributed to the seminar with their presentations. Through discussions on the preliminary findings and identified best practice, the seminar refined and elaborated on the results from the diverse perspectives. The presentations during the seminar have covered a variety of cases from different countries including, Germany, Greece, Lebanon and Norway. Thus the seminar provided a venue to elaborate, compare and discuss different experiences and cases with theoretical and practical considerations. The international session was very insightful considering the tensions among the global normative goals, national/local contexts, institutional undertakings and personal aspirations. While highlighting the common global issues in refugee access to higher education, the case studies also showed that universities were taking a stand and responding to the increasing demand for higher education by refugees. Despite the limited public support, universities provide venues for collaboration and knowledge sharing among different stakeholders. As the final event of the project, the seminar fulfilled its first and foremost objective of establishing academic, institutional and personal connections among key stakeholders with the aims of sharing knowledge, enhancing cooperation and creating synergies in refugee access to academy and science. By creating a network of different stakeholders, public and private entities, ongoing projects and research studies, the seminar also contributed to the dissemination and further exploitation of the project's results.

3.5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions

In this chapter we have aimed to provide a detailed overview of the institution-wide support programs, which were designed and implemented within the scope of the project at Istanbul University, to increase refugee access to and participation in higher education. The

key findings and results have been evaluated with a focus on the nature of the higher educational space in terms of its purpose, uses, dynamics, and limitations, and the underlying components that allow reflection and transformation to occur.

The main finding can be summarized as the necessity to recognize the heterogeneous student body coming from diverse backgrounds with varying contexts and needs. In accordance, our study identifies the main challenges to designing support programs that build inclusive and responsive higher education environments as complex needs, inadequate institutional communication skills and low attendance rates. While designing and implementing support programs for refugees in higher education, multiple forms of disadvantage and their intersectionality should be considered as well as their familial, cultural, social and communal contexts whereas avoiding marginalization and stigmatization. Yet our research and experiences also reveal the resilience, coping mechanisms and strategies students and researchers developed in order to navigate and survive in an unfamiliar hostile environment. In line with the suggestions of other studies, the informal networks on which students often rely for information and guidance should be incorporated into formal structures (Baker et al., 2018) to prevent disconnection and communication problems. Providing inclusion and incorporation of agencies that are familiar to the students would enhance institutional responsiveness.

The programs have not only provided opportunities to support refugee students' engagement with higher education but also contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the perceptions and experiences of participants. Team members consisting of administrative staff, faculty members, students and researchers with participatory perspectives applied provided valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of Syrian students and researchers, which would not have been identified in a short 30-minute interview. Given the limitations of conventional qualitative methods, refugee participants may feel the need to please the interviewer, say what is expected of them or may be reluctant to express any discontent or critique that may strain social tensions. New longitudinal methodological perspectives may be necessary to grasp the voices of refugees. The longitudinal process implemented within the scope of the project further enhanced this aspect and facilitated the unpacking of the challenges both students and staff face in higher education. In this respect, we have deliberately aimed to provide multiple opportunities to engage with Syrian students and researchers as team members, participants and key stakeholders during our research. Discussions and consultations with the stakeholders whose work indicate a certain degree of expertise within and beyond the academy in the field contributed to diversification of the

analysis while providing a more inclusive methodological research and evaluation.

Opening up pathways to access is not enough. HEIs are responsible for providing inclusive and responsive environments for all students including refugee students and researchers. Universities are the best venues for the realization of refugees' aspirations. Recognition and understanding of their educational needs are not only important for their eventual success and empowerment but also connected to awareness concerning the value of diversity in the society. Through efficient mechanisms (e.g. flexible procedures, responsive support programs and extracurricular activities bringing together different bodies of students and stakeholders) universities can engage with and support refugees in higher education and beyond. This way they can broaden their mission and act as focal points of communication and cooperation among various actors such as policy makers, center and local authorities, civil society, host and refugee communities and international organizations and academia.

Picture 2: WESREF-IU Orientation day, Istanbul University, September 2018



Picture 3: WESREF-IU International Seminar "Higher Education and Refugees: Access and Participation", İstanbul University, April, 2019



CONCLUSION & FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the global normative framework and its recognition as a fundamental human right, higher education still continues to be perceived as luxury for asylum seekers and refugees. Enrolment rates also remain very low in both first asylum and resettlement countries. Considering the unprecedented levels of human displacement and recognized benefits of higher education, limited access is alarming. Education systems are, however, under increasing pressure and the challenges of integrating ever growing numbers of students and researchers from refugee backgrounds. Despite being neglected for a long time, higher education for asylum seekers, refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants is beginning to emerge as a research category gaining attention in a wide range of disciplines and research fields. In order to contribute to this emerging field, in this book we have tried to provide a detailed account of refugees' access to and participation in higher education in Turkey. Based on the project conducted at Istanbul University and the existing body of literature with a special attention to theoretical and methodological frameworks we have aimed at bridging the gaps in knowledge and policy making from a holistic perspective. Within this context, the research and book aim to highlight the outstanding nature of access to higher education in face of the protracted crisis in Turkey's higher education system, policies and practices in terms of responding to Syrian refugees' educational needs.

From the outset of the crisis, the timely response and consistent measures of Turkey's regulating body—the Council of Higher Education (CoHE)—have resulted in increased enrolment at the country's HEIs. Special student status, transfer procedures in special circumstances, free tuition and flexibility introduced for documents have all been instrumental in this trend. However, some points of concern remain such as an imbalanced distribution of Syrian students at the HEIs. This point is particularly alarming considering Turkey's already strained and competitive higher education system and the prevalent misinformation and misperceptions. The figures imply an uneven distribution of student numbers and lack burden sharing among HEIs, which may have attributed to the inconsistent implementation of the regulatory framework and raises questions regarding the institutional gatekeeping role. The research implies that despite the flexibility introduced for refugees in the legal and regulatory framework, its implementation depends on institutional policies and practices, which are already constrained by institutional capacity, resources. This therefore results in irregular and/or uneven implementation. The *ad hoc* and de-centralized management schemes, policies and practices lead to a mixed response within and among HEIs and may come up short in responding to the complex needs of Syrian students.

Accordingly, at institutional level, the comparative analysis of three different cases shows that each HEI's approach and policies are shaped through its specific context, existing structures and organization. Considering the challenges, although there are some common, cross-cutting themes such as language and academic support needs; lack of social interaction with local students; financial problems; and gender imbalance their saliences differ in varying degrees among the three cases due to their contexts and specific conditions. The results expose the need to further support Syrian students and researchers in their access to and participation in higher education. As the research suggests, there is no one-size-fits-all solution and each higher education institution shall respond to these challenges according to their local and regional context, institutional resources and strategies. The degree of differentiation reveals the need for better understanding and more specifically tailored support programs rather than overall approaches. Accordingly, there is a need for more research on the intersectional factors that can disadvantage refugee students and how HEIs have been dealing with these diverse challenges while focusing on capabilities.

On the other hand, a considerable degree of knowledge and expertise has been developed and gathered through this process. Further knowledge and good practice sharing, not just among HEIs, but all key stakeholders at various levels is required going forward. Although, HEIs cannot be capable of solving all the problems of refugees, they can certainly contribute to increasing their participation in higher education by improving their institutional structure, policy, capacity and awareness. HEIs shall remain committed to advocating enhanced participation for refugees, increased awareness raising and additional knowledge sharing. In that regard, the book highlights the need to increase regional capacity building regarding refugees' long-term integration into the higher education system through policy dialogue, knowledge and good model sharing.

In that regard, elaboration of the institutional policies and practices of the HEIs selected as good models and their varying responses to increasing demand and needs is substantial with the aggregated knowledge. Although the research suggests some common challenges such as the language barrier; complex and changing application and admissions procedures; inadequate and/or inaccurate information and guidance; lack of translation; assessment of foreign credentials; and identification of forged documentation there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each HEI responded according to their local and regional context, institutional resources, pathways and strategies. HEIs' determination, policies and strategies are instrumental in increasing Syrian student access to higher education. In that regard, Istanbul University's decision to accept up to 10% transfer quota and Karabük University's integration of Syrian

students' access and participation as a part of the university's internationalization strategy are prevalent. On the other hand, border cities universities seem to adapt well to the changing regulations given their ties, knowledge and experience with the Syrian education system as in the case of Gaziantep University. In all cases, a lack of sustainable institutionalized support is evident with the exceptions of some social events and *ad hoc* orientation programs. There is an apparent need to establish institutional-based programs in order to support refugee student access to higher education and enhance their engagement with their studies and university life. In that regard, the pilot support programs designed and implemented within the scope of the project provide valuable experience for other institutions in the region and beyond.

Application and Admission

- Due to changing and complex regulations, inconsistencies occur among and within HEIs during application and admissions procedures. Specifically, at understaffed HEIs that lack Arabic speaking administrative and academic staff, a centralized application and admissions system managed by one department seems more effective as in the case of Karabük University.
- Concerning support programs, due to the ties and existence of traditional networks, support during application and admission is not much in demand at Gaziantep University, but is crucial in big cities like Istanbul. The complexity of the system, inconsistencies and language barrier emerge as the main barriers during application. Within this background, the piloting of the support program designed and implemented within the scope of the project at Istanbul University can easily be replicated at other HEIs. Whereas, part-time recruitment and training of current Syrian students in order to support other prospective students and researchers contribute to institutional capacity, it further enhances communication with Syrian student networks while also empowering them.
- Despite the proactive communication strategy employed, our project reveals ineffective communication with Syrian researchers and students who mostly rely on personal and informal networks for information. In that regard, ways to integrate informal student and researcher networks and platforms into the HEIs' formal and traditional communication strategies should be elaborated for enhanced communication.
- According to the research, most HEIs in Turkey use online systems for application and admissions procedures, which can be very challenging for Syrian students and researchers coming from different educational systems and accustomed to face-to-face communication during application. In order to increase application rates and prevent issues with online systems, a flexible procedure combining on site and online systems could be tested.
- Our observations and research suggest that Syrian applicants mostly favor medicine and engineering programs. It is, however, crucial to provide accurate information on the

available programs that can extend their opportunities for admission and employment in the future while avoiding agglomeration in certain faculties and programs. Guidance through the application procedure is therefore very important and it is effectively employed at Karabük University as good model.

- Trans-border facilities (Jarablus Vocational School) and Arabic programs established by Gaziantep University, which were instrumental in reaching Syrian students, researchers and scholars, can be replicated in other border universities as a good practice model. While increasing higher education enrolment rates, trans-border facilities also create employment opportunities for Syrian researchers and scholars in higher education and academic circles.

Orientation and Preparation

- Basic information and knowledge, which are often taken for granted, are very much appreciated by the students and researchers coming from very different systems with little information on credit systems; mandatory and elective courses; access to internet on the campus; online assessment and grading systems; use of library sources; and other available services for students and researchers.
- Design and implementation of a general orientation program for the new comers in that regard is a very effective and simple way to facilitate Syrian students' and researchers' integration in higher education. Such a program also provides venues for local and other international students and researchers to come together and get to know each other. With its simple design and content, it can easily be replicated in other HEIs with the participation of current Syrian students, researchers and scholars in the preparation.
- Further activities bringing together international students and researchers with diverse backgrounds can foster integration as they can learn from each other's experiences and reflect on their learning process with other students and researchers.
- The orientation program implemented reveals the need for enhanced collaboration with student clubs and international offices to establish further social cohesion and integration events and occasions. These events and occasions should further include local authorities and NGO's that have gained considerable experience in refugee integration and social cohesion. HEIs shall benefit from this fostered synergy and network.

Academic Language Support

- Inadequate language proficiency is among one of the biggest challenges for Syrian students and researchers in the Turkish higher education system. As the longest support program designed and implemented within the scope of the project, the Academic Language Support Program aimed to provide language support to students and researchers

in order to increase their academic achievement and participation in courses and academic life, and to contribute to the capacity building on support programs in general.

- The program designed and implemented by Istanbul University's Language Center in a flexible manner according to the demands of the students and researchers proved to be very efficient and helpful by the participants. Although the program is implemented through two semesters in four different classes once a week, it can be replicated in other institutions within a shorter but condensed program according to the participants' demands. The contribution of the Language Center was crucial for the implementation of the program, however a simple program based on peer tutorial can also be effective for replication at other HEIs.
- In order to reach more students and researchers, the program is designed in a general manner within the scope of the project. However, it can be designed in a more tailored, area specific manner at other HEIs in order to compare participation rates and results.
- Furthermore, our research and observations during the program reveal the need for extra curriculum activities and their benefits on language learning. The program goes beyond the classroom encouraging participants to engage with their campus and peers, while contributing to awareness raising among local students and researchers.

Venues of Cooperation

- In line with the project objectives, organizing a series of events that bring together different stakeholders involved in increasing refugee access and participation in higher education proved very effective in increasing cooperation and creating synergies. Constant meetings, info sessions, training and workshops bringing together students, researchers, and administrative and academic staff are instrumental in that regard. Participation in international conferences and creating collaboration with other ongoing projects and research can also create synergies and networks for dissemination.
- The inclusion of Syrian students, researchers and scholars during the design and implementation of support programs and events is crucial for the success and sustainability of the organizations. Joint academic activities shall be encouraged and supported in order to increase Syrian researchers' participation in academic life, while these projects lay the foundations for further cooperation and scientific advancement.
- Extra-curricular activities underlining the common culture and value of diversity contribute to building a common future while providing arenas for social integration and communication.

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SYRIAN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Despite the global normative framework and its recognition as a fundamental human right, higher education still continues to be perceived as luxury for asylum seekers and refugees. Enrolment rates also remain very low in both first asylum and resettlement countries. Considering the unprecedented levels of human displacement and recognized benefits of higher education, limited access and participation are alarming. Education systems are, however, under increasing pressure and the challenges of integrating ever growing numbers of students and researchers from refugee backgrounds. Despite being neglected for a long time, higher education for asylum seekers, refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants is beginning to emerge as a research category gaining attention in a wide range of disciplines and research fields. In order to contribute to this emerging field, in this book we have tried to provide a detailed account of refugees' access to and participation in higher education in Turkey. Based on cross case analysis, the findings of the project conducted at Istanbul University and the existing body of literature with a special attention to theoretical and methodological frameworks we have aimed at bridging the gaps in knowledge and policy making from a holistic perspective.