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Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students:
The Case of Turkey
(Policies, Practices, and Perspectives)

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Abstract

This report on higher education for young Syrian refugees in Turkey is part of a broader regional study commissioned by UNESCO. The project aims to assess the impact of the conflict in Syria on higher education for Syrian refugees in host countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey.

This report presents the findings of an investigation that aims to identify major lines of action in higher education in emergencies, namely, legal frameworks and policies implemented by key actors within the sector, and it gives insights into the current status of higher education for Syrian refugees and displaced persons in Turkey. The report employs a qualitative approach and intends to explore and understand the challenges and opportunities for Syrian refugee students in accessing higher education. The results show that the large number of refugees, who have changed the national demographics within the country, present challenges for state and local communities in meeting the needs of both the refugees and the host communities. Refugees face multiple challenges in accessing education: (1) legal issues including lack of documentation and restrictive host country policies, (2) ignorance of university application procedures or lack of academic and career guidance to understand pathways to the labor market or further education, and (3) financial shortcomings. The demand for higher education continues to far outstrip the opportunities available. Findings of the study add to the understanding of the vital role of higher education in improving living conditions and giving a sense of hope for the future in the context of protracted situations. The study offers policy and program recommendations to decision- and policy-makers for the national and international communities, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, education stakeholders and other institutions with the overall goal to improve and guide further practice and research in supporting access to higher education for displaced persons in protracted situations.

Keywords

Young Syrian refugees, Displaced persons, Higher Education, Syria, Turkey.

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List of Acronyms

AA	Associate's degree
AFAD	Disaster and Emergency Management Authority
ASSAM	Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants
BA	Bachelor's degree
DAAD	German Academic Exchange Service
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
DGMM	Directorate General of Migration Management
FSU	Free Syrian University
GoT	Government of Turkey
HOPES	Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians
IIE	Institute of International Education
IMPR	International Middle East Peace Research Center Humanitarian
INGO	International non-governmental organization
ISSUE	International Syrian University in Exile
LYS	Bachelor Placement Exam
MEB	Ministry of National Education
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHR	Orient for Human Relief
ÖSS	Student Selection Examination
ÖSYM	Student Selection and Placement Center
PRS	Protracted refugee situation
TEC	Temporary Education Centers
TÖMER	Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center of Ankara University
TL	Turkish Lira
TP	Temporary Protection
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
YGS	Higher Education Entrance Exam
YÖK	Council of Higher Education
YÖS	Foreign Student Entrance Examination
YÖS	Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı
YTB	The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities

Introduction

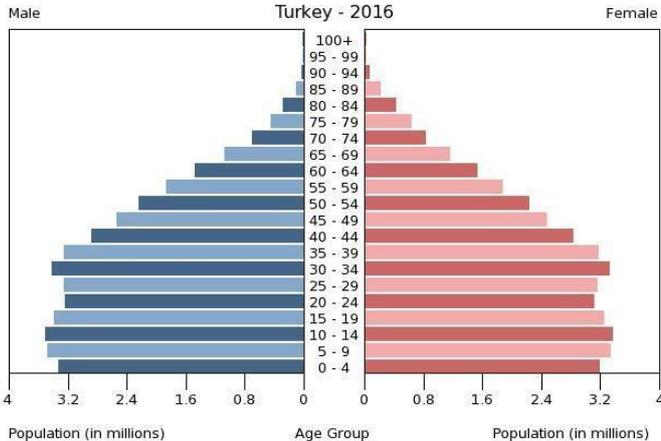
The outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011 interrupted every facet of Syrian civilians' lives. The number of internally displaced Syrians is estimated at 6.5 million, while the number of registered Syrian refugees regionally has risen to 4,806,762 people (UNHCR, September 2016). The influx of refugees over the past five years has overwhelmed the main host countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey and presented challenges for these states in meeting the needs of the millions of refugees. One of the most significant long-term consequences of the Syrian crisis is the disruption of Syrians' education. As of 2015, an estimated 90,000-110,000 out of 450,000 Syrians aged 18-22 years are qualified for higher education (Redden, 2015). The continued disruption of Syrians' higher education poses a great threat to the financial status and quality of life for these refugees. Moreover, refugee youth are at risk of being a target for military recruiters, criminal gangs, and the sex industry if not integrated into the host society (Zeus, 2011). Finally, an uneducated "lost generation" will not be equipped to rebuild economic, political, educational, and health infrastructures in post-war Syria.

Turkish National Context

Geographic/Demographic

Turkey is established over a territory of 783,562 square km in an area historically called Anatolia, at the crossroads of Middle East, the Levant, Asia, and South Eastern Europe. It has a population over 78 million people. The official language of the country is Turkish but there is a sizable minority (15-20 percent according to various estimates) who speak Kurdish, who mostly live in the eastern and southeastern provinces. It is a secular state with over 95 percent of the people identifying themselves as Muslim. While the majority of this group is Sunni Muslim, there is a sizable minority of Alawis, a branch of the Shia sect. It is a relatively young population, as shown in Figure 1, and has a declining birthrate of 2.06.

Figure 1. The Age and Gender Distribution of Turkey's Population 2016



Source: CIA Factbook

Political

Turkey is governed by a parliamentary system where the legislative authority is vested in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The country has an elected president, currently Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who constitutes part of the dual structured executive branch together with the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) headed by the prime minister. Erdogan was elected in 2013, and the latest parliamentary elections were held on November 1st, 2015.

There was a failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15th, 2016. It was quelled within hours due to poor planning and execution and little support. The non-participating armed forces, police and crowds of protesters took to the streets in support of the president. The coup tightened the president's grip on power; the government has responded by declaring an initial three month state of emergency and intensified its long-running purges of the military, judiciary and police force (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016).

Socio-economic

Turkey is characterized as a transitional middle-income economy with about 10 thousand USD GDP per capita, and exhibits characteristics of an emerging market. The table below illustrates some of the basic indicators of the Turkish economy.

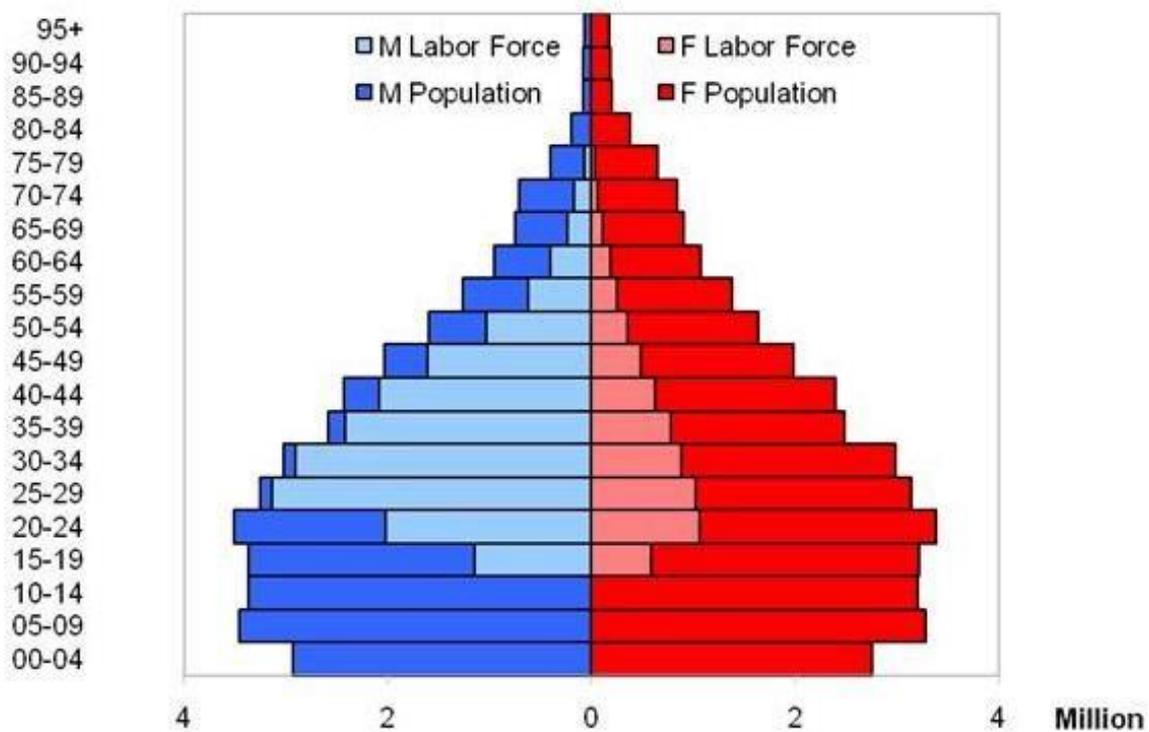
Table 1. Basic Indicators of the Turkish Economy

	2014	2015	2016 (forecast)
Population (million)	76.9	77.7	78.6
GDP (US \$ billion)	798	722	Not applicable
GDP Per Capita (US\$)	10,400	9,300	Not applicable
Real GDP Growth (%)	3.0	4.0	3.4
Inflation (average %)	8.9	7.4	Not applicable
Unemployment (%)	9.9	10.8	Not applicable
Exports of Goods (US\$ billion)	158	144	Not applicable
Growth rate (%)	+4	-9	Not applicable
Imports of goods (US\$ billion)	242	207	Not applicable
Growth rate (%)	-4	-1478.6	Not applicable

Exchange Rate: US\$1 to 2.83 Turkish Liras (TRY) on 28 Apr 2016
Source: IMF, Eurostat, Turkstat

The following figure illustrates how the active labor force is distributed across age groups, showing low female participation in the labor force.

Figure 2. Labor Force Participation and Population Distribution in Turkey



Currently only 29 percent of the women are actively working, down from a 34 percent in 1990. Around 20 million women are not in labor force, and a considerable part of those employed are in the agricultural sector.

Education System in Turkey

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, every citizen has the right to education that is free of charge. Except in specially licensed and foreign institutions, Turkish must be taught as the first language. Since 2012, it has been mandated that twelve years of education is compulsory for boys and girls in Turkey.

The Ministry of National Education (MEB) governs the education sector in the country and is responsible for drawing up curricula, coordinating the work of official, private and voluntary organizations, designing and building schools, and developing educational materials. The Supreme Council of National Education makes decisions related to curricula and regulations prepared by the Ministry. In the provinces, educational affairs are organized by the Directorates of National Education appointed by the Minister, but working under the direction of the provincial governor. The central government is responsible for all educational expenses of public schools, and about 10 percent of the general budget is allocated for national education.

The Turkish national educational system is composed of two main sections: formal education and non-formal education. Formal education is the regular education of individuals in a certain age group and given in schools. This includes pre-primary education, primary education,

secondary education and higher education. Non-formal education in Turkey is offered by a network of training centers that are supervised by the MEB. Some examples of non-formal education services include programs that teach reading and writing, educate dropouts, teach balanced nutrition and a healthy life style and provide continuing education. In addition, distance higher education, a form of non-formal education, is offered at the Open Education Faculty of Anadolu University.

Higher Education in Turkey

Universities, faculties and four-year higher education institutions are founded by law in Turkey, while the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) establishes two-year vocational schools, departments and divisions. Universities are under the supervision of this Council and their programs must be regularly accredited. YÖK is a fully autonomous national board of trustees without any political or government affiliation. The language of instruction at local institutions of higher education is generally in Turkish. Some institutions use English, French or German as the language of instruction, offering an additional preparatory year for students if necessary. For the academic year 2015–2016, a total of 6,689,185 students were reported pursuing associates, Bachelors, Master's and Doctorate programs at the nation's 190 public and private institutions across the country.

Table 2. Number of Higher Education Institutions in Turkey, 2014

Type of institution	Number
State universities	104
Non-profit foundation universities	72
Independent post-secondary schools	8
Other higher education institutions (e.g. military and police academies)	6
Total	190

Source: Council of Higher Education

After high school, graduates enter a two-stage examination system known as the Higher Education Entrance Exam (YGS) and Bachelor Placement Exam (LYS) (formerly known as ÖSS - Student Selection Examination) in order to be admitted to a higher education institution. These nationwide centralized examinations are administrated by the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) every year. ÖSYM determines candidates for the enrollment of each university and faculty after evaluating the grades of related subjects, high school average results and preferences according to the student capacity of each faculty. Those with good grades are qualified for four-year undergraduate programs to obtain a Bachelor's Degree (BA), and those with lower grades can be admitted to two-year higher education programs to obtain an Associate's Degree (AA) upon completion of the program. Dentistry and veterinary Medicine courses last for five years and medicine for six years.

Table 3. Total Enrollment in Higher Education in Turkey, 2015-2016 (Source: MEB, YÖK)

	New Admissions			Total Number Of Students		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Total	823,176	712,233	1,535,409	3,621,517	3,067,668	6,689,185
Vocational training school	316,431	301,301	617,732	1,198,343	1,087,063	2,285,406
Formal education	128,695	107,739	236,434	408,713	286,812	695,525
Secondary education	641,75	38,155	102,330	211,441	106,643	318,084
Distance education	4,829	4,262	9,091	17,411	12,170	29,581
Open education	118,732	151,145	269,877	560,778	681,438	1,242,216
Undergraduate	427,328	362,398	789,726	2,123,284	1,777,317	3,900,601
Formal education	182,309	198,762	381,071	795,094	824,428	1,619,522
Secondary education	52,280	39,065	91,345	238,814	181,891	420,705
Distance education	2,290	4,128	6,418	11,147	13,664	24,811
Open education	190,449	120,443	310,892	1,078,229	757,334	1,835,563
Masters	71,228	42,531	113,759	249,498	167,586	417,084
Formal education	52,286	36,380	88,666	206,977	151,590	358,567
Secondary education	11,249	4,452	15,701	26,082	12,208	38,290
Distance education	7,693	1,699	9,392	16,439	3,788	20,227
Doctorate formal education	8,189	6,003	14,192	50,392	35,702	86,094

After graduating from a four-year faculty, students can pursue a Master's Degree that lasts for two years with thesis and non-thesis options. Access to doctoral programs requires a Master's Degree and lasts a minimum of four years with a doctoral thesis at the end. The graduates of medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry can directly apply to doctorate programs.

The purpose of higher education in the country is to allow students to pursue an education that is aligned with their interests and skills, in conformance to the science policy of the country and in consideration of qualified manpower in needed by society. According to the Turkish law, higher education institutions are responsible for the training of their own academic staff. Meanwhile, primary and secondary school teachers are trained in universities for four years, receiving a BA degree upon completion.

The major source of income of state universities are the funds allocated through the annual state budget, which is equivalent to about 60 percent of the total university income. In addition to this, a university can generate its own income from the services provided by that university, such as patient care in university hospitals. Student contributions to state universities account for only 4 percent of the total university budget, and the student fees in private foundation (Vakif) universities are much higher.

Table 4. Number of Turkish Students Receiving Scholarship and Education Loans 2015

Type of Support	Total
Loan	996,672
Study Grant	353,792
Total	1,349,464

Source: Directorate of Higher Education Loans and Dormitories Institution

International Students Admission

International students seeking to enroll in the university programs at Turkish institutions of higher education apply directly to universities and must have completed their secondary education in a high school in which the education is equivalent to that of a Turkish lycee. Additionally, these students need to have their high school academic records confirmed from a Turkish Embassy in their country. The applications of international students are considered by the universities within their limit of the allocated places for internationals. The students must also take the Foreign Student Entrance Examination (YÖS), which consists of two tests: a basic learning skills test and a Turkish language proficiency test. Language courses are organized for those who do not speak Turkish, and in some Turkish universities courses are taught in English, French or German.

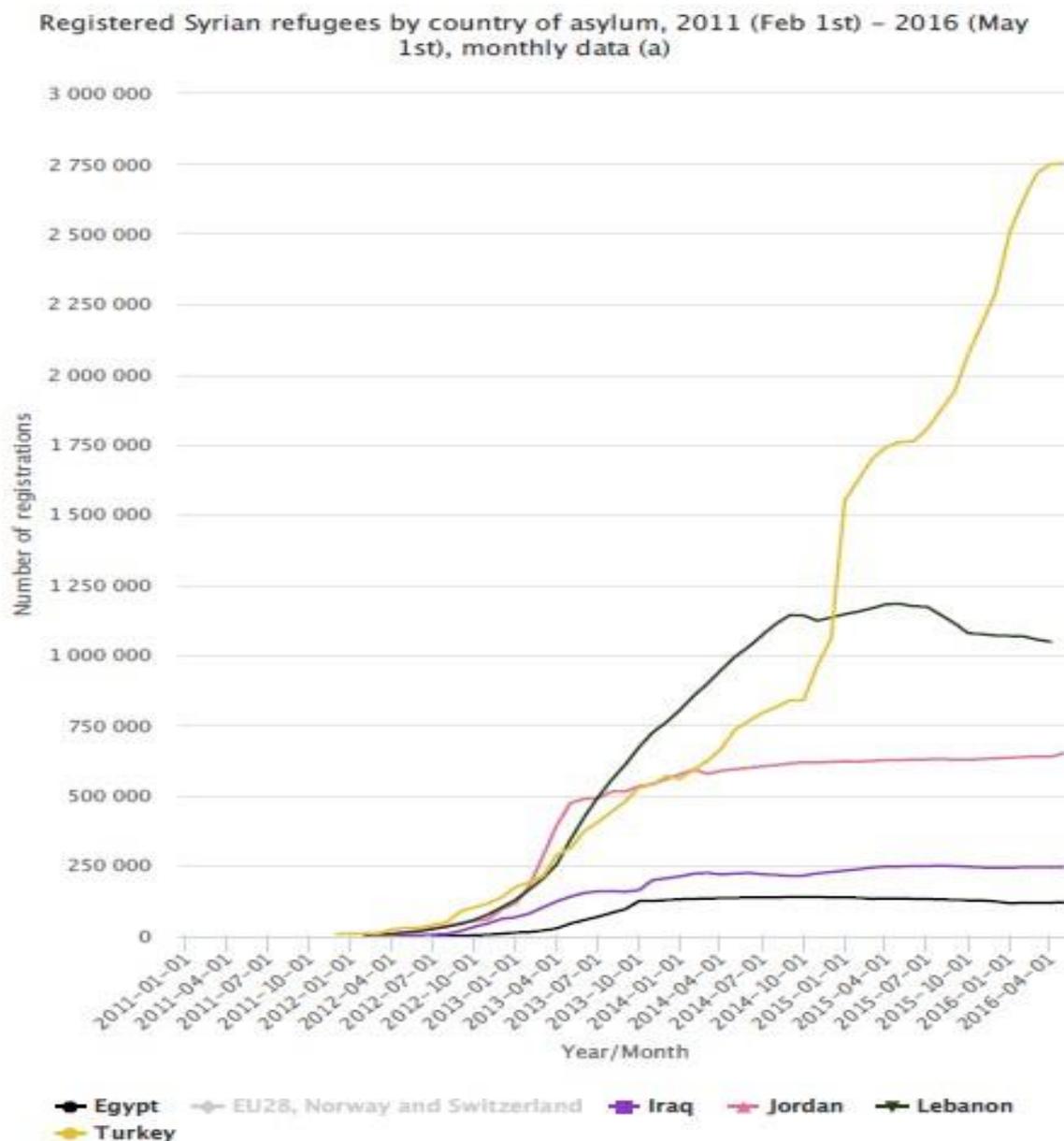
Syrian refugees can follow the aforementioned path of international students based on the existing legal framework. Due to their legal status under temporary protection, the Turkish state guarantees their right to education. Furthermore, several laws and bylaws have been passed to extend the scope of their access to Turkish institutions by allowing them to access higher education free of charge without taking the YÖS, contingent upon the quotas allocated to them at all universities across Turkey. The legal framework leading up to this stage has been outlined in detail in the following sections.

Syrian Refugees Context in Turkey

Geographic/Demographic

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees globally, with 2,992,000 registered refugees as of May 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). Registration patterns in Turkey through the years 2011 and 2016 reveal that the number of registered refugees has significantly increased since 2014. The figure below shows the variation in the number of registered refugees in Turkey, as opposed to Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, between 2011 and 2016.

Figure 3. Registered Syrian refugees by country of asylum, February 2011-May 2016



Source: Migration Policy Centre, EU

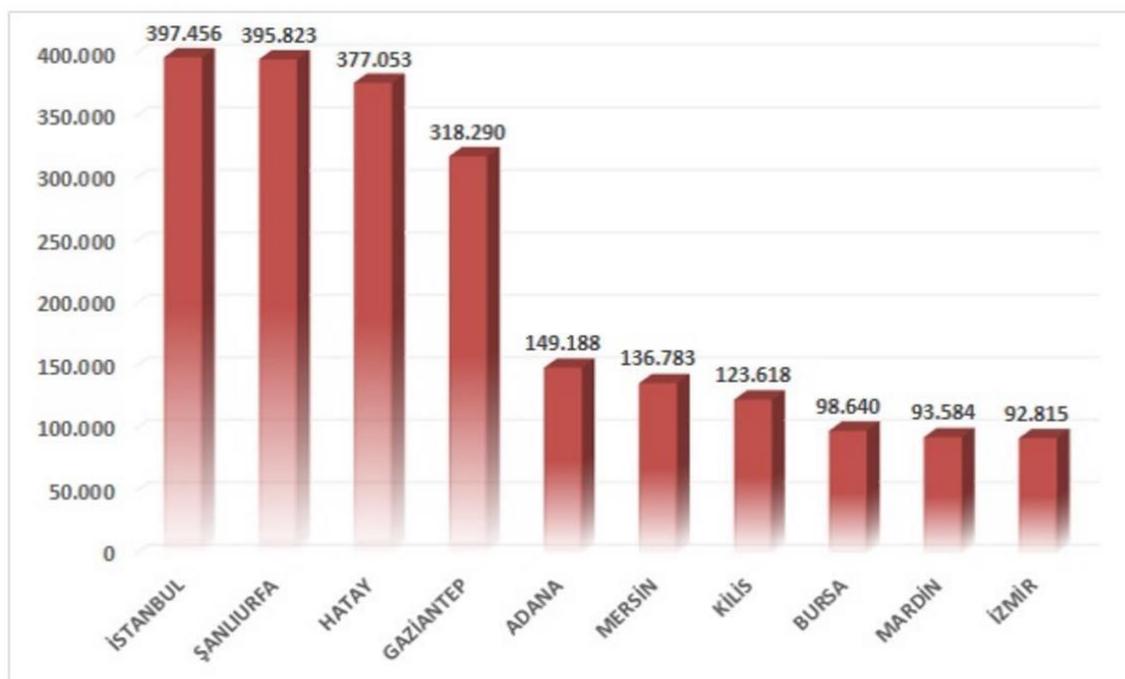
The first Syrian refugee group entered Turkey on April 29, 2011 due to Turkey’s open door policy, which has endured to the present day (Ahmadzadeh, Corabatir, Hashem, Al-Husseini, Wahby, 2014). Syrians are spread throughout the country, with 64 percent residing in the metropolitan centers of Istanbul and Ankara or large cities in the southeast such as Antakya, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa as of 2015 (UNICEF, 2015; Fricke, King & Watenpaugh, 2014). In 2015, about 36 percent of Syrians lived in 22 refugee camps, and current numbers put 10 percent of refugees in 26 camps in 10 cities in the country. The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) manages official refugee camps (UNICEF, 2015; Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014). The border town of Reyhanlı is described as having the same conditions as a refugee camp (Fricke et al., 2014). The following Table 5 illustrates the distribution of camp populations across these 10 cities. These cities are mostly located in border areas and received especially the first wave of Syrians as the civil war broke out.

Table 5. Geographical Distribution of Syrians under Temporary Protection by the 26 Temporary Accommodation Centers (Camps) Across Turkey as of September 29, 2016

City	Population
Sanliurfa	107,610
Gaziantep	37,547
Kilis	32,364
Kahramanmaras	18,278
Mardin	3,991
Hatay	19,164
Adana	9,959
Adiyaman	9,476
Osmaniye	7,574
Malatya	7,773
Total	253,736

The camp population rates are also important in relation to out of camp refugees as many Syrians move outside of camps to nearby city centers in search of jobs in order to make an honorable living at the expense of bearing the costs of their accommodation and basic needs. The following Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the entire Syrian refugee population in the top 10 host cities across the country. As shown, a majority of these cities including Istanbul, Mersin, Bursa, and Izmir are big cities that offer a variety of employment opportunities but do not have refugee camps or capacity to sustain a refugee population, especially in the area of educational infrastructure.

Figure 4. The Geographical Distribution of all Syrians under Temporary Protection



The Syrian population under temporary protection in Turkey is a relatively young population. Half of the 2.7 million are in fact children as illustrated by Table 6, which has been prepared using the most recent data from Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of Turkey.

Table 6. Total Population of Syrian Refugees in Turkey by Age and Gender 2016

Age	Men	Women	Total
0-4	192,635	179,631	372,266
5-9	197,945	187,018	384,963
10-14	150,494	137,630	288,124
15-18	131,359	110,657	242,016
19-24	218,833	173,667	392,500
25-29	147,068	114,634	261,702
30-34	120,079	96,017	216,096
35-39	86,069	73,454	159,523
40-44	59,292	55,961	115,253
45-49	47,908	44,046	91,954
50-54	37,313	36,042	73,355

55-59	25,202	25,285	50,487
60-64	17,491	17,976	35,467
65-69	11,298	11,675	22,973
70-74	6,146	7,093	13,239
75-79	3,763	4,496	8,259
80-84	1,987	2,531	4,518
85-89	1,075	1,239	2,314
90+	438	585	1,023
Total	1,456,395	1,279,637	2,736,032

Source: DGMM

Political

With respect to international as well as domestic legal frameworks surrounding the refugee crisis, Turkey is a party to the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Signed and ratified by 144 nations, this Convention is the preeminent authority on the manner in which host countries are to receive and treat refugees. Nevertheless, Turkey raised a geographical limitation when it signed and ratified the Convention and accordingly, only defines persons of European origin as refugees. As a result of this geographical limitation, which was once common but now applied by only four signatory states, Syrian refugees in Turkey are not part of an asylum regime. Instead, they are given assistance and resettled in third countries under the status of “temporary protection” (Bidinger, 2015). Turkey has pursued a Temporary Protection (TP) open policy to all refugees fleeing Syria under the competency of the newly established Directorate General of Migration Management. According to this status, Syrians in Turkey have access to emergency, health, and education services but their legal working rights are restricted. The new Law on Foreigners and International Protection, Syrian Refugees came into effect on April 11, 2014. It provides rights and benefits for “foreigners” in the country “in order to facilitate harmonization of the society” (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014). Since the Syrian crisis began in 2011, Turkey has maintained an emergency response of a high standard, predominantly upholding an open-door policy and ensuring non-refoulement. This approach, however, has had a major shortcoming given the prolonged stay of Syrian refugees: the temporary protection regime does not grant any working rights to those who are granted protection.

Socio-economic

In Turkey, the number of displaced Syrian people almost doubled in 2015 after the intensification of the conflict south of its border. The Turkish refugee camps became increasingly crowded and could not host more people. The preexisting exploitative working conditions of Syrian refugees worsened with this added influx of refugees. The inability to find employment and make a decent living, in addition to several problems pertaining to social

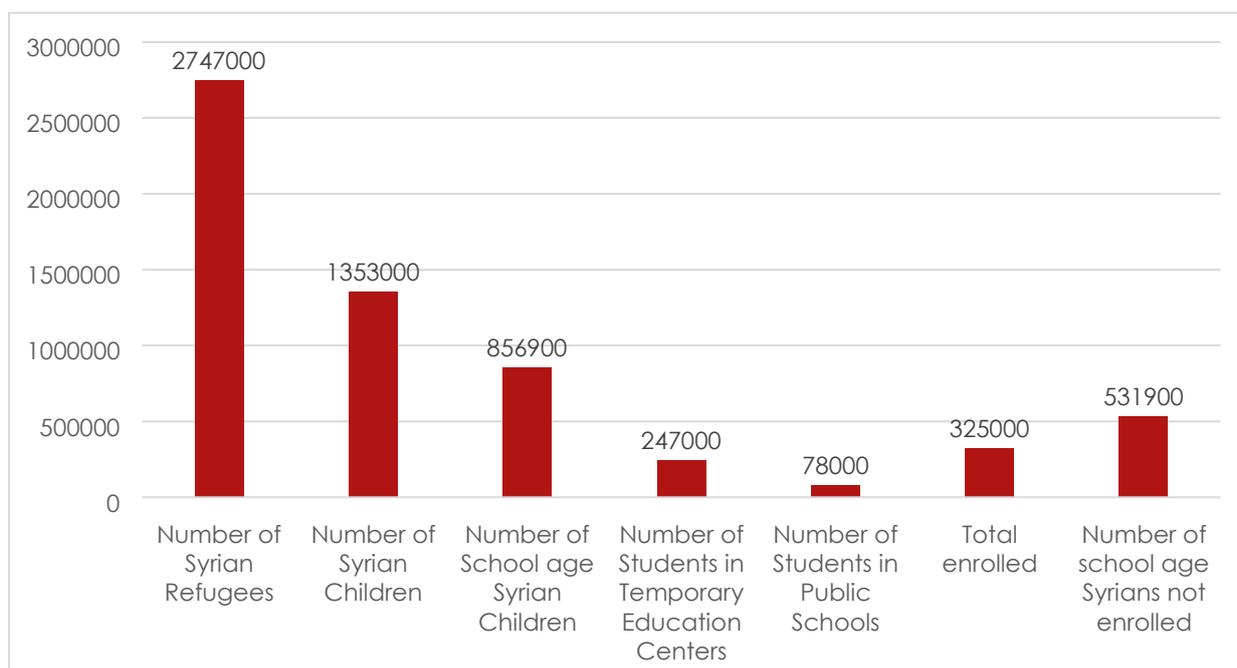
integration, constitutes a major reason for seeking refuge in other countries beyond Turkey and the Middle East region (Yavcan, 2016). Many of the Syrians who have abandoned the first refuge location report that the lack of non-exploitative employment opportunities that matched their skills, financial needs, concerns for security and protection, search for better opportunities for their children, and the hope for educational opportunities were all among the factors that lead to this geographic shift in location.

While the data on the non-camp refugee population is limited, one obvious challenge for this group of refugees relates to employment. While under the temporary protection scheme, Syrians in Turkey can have access to health as well as some education and social services; however, the lack of an existing legal framework for integration into the labor market constitutes a major shortcoming. Turkish state officials acknowledge this limitation and point to the internationally well-received new draft law which is set to allow the Syrian population the right to apply for work permits within the industries selected by provincial governance boards. As it stands, however, most Syrians still need to work without a legal framework in order to survive. This has led to the creation of a dual labor market where refugees are willing to work for two-thirds of the wages paid to locals. Furthermore, with the arrival of more refugees from Syria, they face fierce competition with other refugees for jobs, leading to a race to the bottom with regard to paid wages. This situation has also resulted in various exploitative practices, lack of any social security scheme, as well as inaccessibility of high-skilled jobs for refugees. A new labor law passed in January 2016 provides refugees with the opportunity for integration into the local labor market with less of a reason for secondary immigration. This law allows the Syrian displaced population to apply for work permits with their employer's sponsorship and the availability of 10 percent foreigner quota for each workplace.

Educational

It is estimated that there are about 800,000 school aged Syrian children in Turkey, most of whom live outside of the camps and are deprived of basic necessities such as accommodation, humanitarian aid, and education that are offered in the camps. Of those 800,000 eligible students, only 330,000 are enrolled in the education system, mostly in Temporary Education Centers (TECs) as represented in Figure 5. The enrollment rates in the AFAD-managed camp schools are over 95 percent, and the government partners with the Ministry of National Education, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to provide educational services. Despite their successful efforts to provide such services inside the camps, there remains a significantly low enrollment rate outside of camps. Given that 61 percent of non-camp refugees and 54 percent of camp refugees have only primary education or less, education is currently a chief concern for international and governmental relief efforts in Turkey (AFAD, 2014, p. 26).

Figure 5. The Enrollment and Non-Enrollment of Syrian Children across Public Schools and TECs as of September 15, 2016



Source: DGMM

For the academic year 2014-2015, 34 TECs in the camps and 232 TECs outside the camps were in operation in collaboration with several Turkish or Syrian foundations or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (HRW, 2015; UNICEF, 2015d). These schools provide instruction in Arabic with some supplementary Turkish language instruction, free of charge to all students. In 2016, 200 school buildings across the country were designated to the service of Syrian students. An additional 170 buildings, such as NGO or municipality buildings, were used as classrooms for these centers.

Table 7 below illustrates the existing and targeted enrollment rates at public schools, camps, and temporary education centers at different schooling levels. The data has been retrieved from a MEB communication to the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Accordingly, only about 75,000 Syrians are enrolled in public schools with their Turkish peers. Furthermore, in all public schools, camp schools and TECs, as we move from primary school to middle school and high schools, the enrolment rate is reduced dramatically.

Table 7. MEB January 2016 Figures on Existing and Targeted Enrollment of Syrian Refugees

	Existing				Target			
	Public Schools	Camps	TECs	Total	Public Schools	Camps	TECs	Total
Pre-School	4.757	7.786	5.898	18.441	15.000	10.000	15.000	40.000
Primary School	51.415	43.761	104.508	199.684	60.000	50.000	120.000	230.000
Middle School	14.362	19.431	38.467	72.260	20.000	25.000	60.000	105.000
High School	5.214	9.619	18.347	33.207	10.000	15.000	50.000	75.000
TOTAL	75.748	80.597	167.247	323.592	105.000	100.000	245.000	450.000

Source: MEB

Early in the Syrian crisis, it is estimated that there were about 4,000 Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities, until 2015-2016 when enrollment increased to around 10,000 students and more recently to around 14,000 students for 2016 -17 as reported by the Higher Education Council in 2016. The following table depicts the enrolment of the Syrian refugee students across the different degrees across higher education institutions in Turkey for the academic year 2016-17.

Table 8. Syrian refugee Students Enrollment in Higher Education in Turkey 2016-17

Degree level	Number of Students Enrolled
Associate Degrees	1,102
Bachelor Degrees	12,127
Masters Degrees	1,067
Doctoral Degrees	335
Total	14,631

Source: Higher Education Council, 2016

In 2013, the Government of Turkey (GoT) authorized the adoption of a revised Syrian curriculum for TECs and in-camp schools, replacing the material on Bashar Al Assad with Ottoman history and offering science, social science, math, and Turkish language courses (UNHCR, 2014, p.26; Evin, 2014). The Syrian Education Curriculum provided a curriculum in Arabic based on the Syrian one in around 700 classrooms in camps (ICC, 2014, p. 9). Although the government had previously placed several restrictions on the operations of international relief organizations and Syrian organizations in Turkey, in 2013, the GoT allowed Syrian organizations to cooperate with Turkish ones to provide health and educational services to refugees. In the past, according to Turkey's Migration Policy Center, in Antakya and Gaziantep, Syrian teachers were allowed to establish their own curriculums in semi-official school set-up by Syrians themselves (MPC, 2013). On top of that, an investigative piece by Al-Monitor

indicated that in addition to the 32 schools established in Reyhanlı, there were also illegal schools founded by the opposition and some even by Al-Qaeda (Evin, 2014). In the 2015-2016 school year, with the new MEB directive of September 2015, the regulations on the curriculums of these schools were tightened in an attempt to standardize the curricular and other educational activities of these schools.

Higher Education for Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Statistics about enrollment of Syrian refugees in higher education before the war show that an estimated 26 percent of Syrian urban men and women, as well as 17 percent of rural men and 15 percent of rural women, studied in college, at university, or had vocational training (Fricke et al., 2014). Estimates from 2014 depict a plummet in the percentages of Syrian students participating in higher education compared to pre-war statistics. Of the students aged 18-24 and thus eligible for higher education, a mere 17 percent of internally displaced Syrians were enrolled; under 2 percent of refugees in Turkey; 8 percent in Jordan; 6 percent in Lebanon; and 8 percent in Egypt (Cremonini, Lorisika, Jalani, 2015). A more general estimate places the total participation of Syrians aged 18-24 in higher education at 20 percent before the war and less than 5 percent in 2016 (EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2016). In fact, only 1,463 male and female youth, adolescents and adults (constituting 2 percent of the targeted 74,855 individuals) had access to vocational training or higher education in 2016 (3RP Regional Monthly Update, July 2016).

There are 104 public universities and 72 non-profit foundation universities in Turkey. The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) oversees every institution of higher learning: universities, institutes of high technology, post-secondary vocational schools, and military and police academies (Council of Higher Education, 2014). The estimated percentage of Syrians enrolled in higher education in Syria before the war was over 20 percent and as high as 26 percent. Using the estimate that approximately 10 percent of Syrians in Turkey were between the ages 18-22 (officially placed at 847,266 but likely over a million), the number of eligible refugees (who could not enter university after secondary school or were forced to abandon their university studies) was between 20,000 and 30,000 in 2014 (Fricke et al., 2014). A mere 1,784 Syrian refugees, or 2 percent of the university-age group, enrolled in Turkish universities in the 2013-2014 academic year (Fricke et al., 2014).

There are a few avenues through which Syrian students can apply for admission to higher education institutions in Turkey. Syrian refugees may apply to public and non-profit foundation universities as regular international students, though they are subject to public universities' department quotas, or through government-funded scholarship programs (Fricke et al., October 2014). All international students have to take the admissions exam, *Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı* (YÖS); however, since 2010 each university has created its own version of the test in the language of its choice (Fricke et al., 2014). Since 2013, Syrians under temporary protection were given the option to be exempt from this exam and the right to apply universities directly without an exam. This was implemented first at seven universities in cities bordering Syria and then at all universities across country. The development of the policies in this area has been elaborated in the policies section of this report. Students may also be

required to submit national or international baccaulaureate test results, high school transcripts and diplomas, passports, Turkish residency documents, and language proficiency test results (Fricke et al., 2014). The table below shows the number of Syrian refugee students enrolled across five of the universities in Turkey.

Table 9. Top 5 Universities in terms of Number of Syrian Students

University	Number of Students
Gaziantep University	16670
Istanbul University	990
Karabük University	927
Mersin University	724
Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University	654

Previously, Syrian students were able to apply for the Türkiye Bursları (Turkey Scholarships” program, which gives 4,000 students access to public universities; however, in 2014 the government announced that a total of 5,000 scholarships would be given specifically to Syrian students (Fricke et al., 2014). According to current statistics, over 3,000 Syrian students have been granted scholarships so far. The table below depicts the number of students receiving scholarships in Turkey.

Table 10. Number of Syrian students receiving government scholarships through YTB at different stages of tertiary education

Type of Degree	Male	Female	Total
Associate Degree (AA)	34	7	41
Bachelor Degree (BA)	1609	871	2480
Master’s Degree (MA)	238	69	307
Doctorate	161	37	198
Research	1	1	2
Expertise in Medicine	11	1	12
Language Course	70	29	99
Total	2124	1015	3139

Source: MEB and YÖK

Many barriers still pose challenges to Syrian students seeking access to higher education. It is noteworthy that the Turkish educational infrastructure could accommodate only 925,000 of more than two million applicants for higher education in 2014 (Fricke et al., 2014). Syrians face many of the same adversities enrolling in higher education in Turkey as they do in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, such as issues providing proper documentation and authentic academic records from Syria, affording associated education costs, and transferring credit from previous years of study. Studying in Turkey is particularly difficult because most Syrians do not know Turkish, the main language of instruction, or English: language barriers emerge as a problem even in the process of researching universities and filling out applications (Fricke et al., 2014).

Moreover, the Turkish government has recognized the Syrian Interim Government's baccalaureate exam, allowing Syrians to apply to higher education institutions; however, the Interim Government has failed to conduct the exam and award certificates in a timely manner, barring Syrians from accessing higher education (UNICEF, 2015).

A number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) have sought to support Turkey's efforts to provide for and integrate Syrian refugees. The government, particularly the DGMM, has regulated the work of these NGOs. The Dutch INGO, SPARK, is among these nonprofit actors having an impact on refugees' lives through support of education initiatives. It created the International Syrian University in Exile (ISSUE), hosted by the University of Gaziantep, and began offering summer and winter university sessions in June 2013 (Fricke et al., 2014). The university offers courses lasting a maximum of three weeks taught by Syrian professors with a focus on rebuilding post-conflict Syria (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014). SPARK has also supported 200 Syrian students in Turkey with scholarships for higher education as of 2016 (SPARK Turkey, 2016). Additionally, in 2013, Syrian businessman Ghassan Aboud founded the Orient for Human Relief (OHR), based in Reyhanlı, which addresses the needs of post-secondary education Syrian students by offering English and Turkish classes, preparatory courses for international higher education exams, and vocational training to a few thousand students each year (Fricke et al., 2014). OHR also operates in the Nizip refugee camp with permission from the Turkish government, also offering these educational programs to Turkish citizens living in poverty (Fricke et al., 2014). Founded in October 2013 by Syrians in Turkey, the Free Syrian University (FSU) is a nonprofit educational institution offering ten different faculties of study for students unable to access Turkish universities (Fricke et al., 2014). Remote learning is also available for students, as well as financial aid; however, FSU lacks accreditation and so is not viewed favorably by some Syrian students and academics (Fricke et al., October 2014).

Many groups have supplemented the Turkish government's scholarships for Syrian students with scholarships and grants. The UNHCR initially awarded 12 students in Turkey full scholarships through its Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) (UNICEF, 2015), which increased to 70 students the following year, and most recently to 750 students. Additionally, UNICEF aided over 2,000 students whom enrolled in Turkish language courses at Ankara University through the Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center of Ankara University (TÖMER) program (UNICEF, 2015). The Sampaio Foundation's Global Platform for Syrian Students offers funding for tuition and living costs for Syrian refugees, as do the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) (Jazar, 2015).

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

As the Syrian conflict has endured its fifth year without a clear end in sight, Syrian refugees have entered a “protracted refugee situation” (PRS) (Fricke et al., 2014). Once refugees have lived in exile for five years and entered PRS, the UNHCR estimates that the average PRS length in the host country lasts twenty years (Fricke et al., 2014). Higher education is of the utmost importance not only for post-conflict rebuilding, but also for the present realities of Syrian refugees, as well as for the host country. Studying in a university allows women to pursue careers rather than early marriages; men in higher education similarly can provide a source of income after graduation and are less likely to be radicalized by the fighters crossing the open Turkey-Syria border (Fricke et al., 2014). Additional research into Syrian refugees’ access to higher education in Turkey is paramount.

It is estimated that about 2.9 million Syrian refugees are in Turkey of the approximately five million refugees displaced due to the civil war in Syria. Today, it is estimated that Syrian refugees ages 18-24 years consist 443,244 of the refugee population in Turkey. As of 2015, of the refugee students aged 18-24 and thus eligible for higher education, less than 2 percent in Turkey enrolled in higher education but numbers increased in 2016. In 2017, the number of enrolled refugee in tertiary education in Turkey increased to about 4%. It is important to explore the policy processes that led to the rapid improvement during last year as well as to gain comparative insights from other contexts with a perspective into higher enrollment rates in the future.

Furthermore, these statistics contrast with the relatively progressive legal framework allowing for refugees to integrate into the higher education system. Therefore, it is essential to explore the implementation stages of the higher education policies implemented to identify the obstacles to refugee integration from both the demand side and supply side.

The Turkish case offers some unique practice examples in terms of the ease in which degree equivalency can be established, the way in which the refugees are granted exceptions where no entrance exam score is required (as opposed to locals) and a very high number of domestic and international scholarships offered to refugees. Therefore, mapping the higher education policies targeting Syrian youth and exploring the implementation of these policies is critical.

Therefore, this study aims to identify policies and practices that enable Syrian refugees to access higher education in Turkey with the aim of understanding the challenges and opportunities during this protracted crisis by investigating the perspectives of key stakeholders. This report builds on research previously conducted and attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the international, regional, and national legal frameworks and practiced policies for provision for higher education for refugees?

2. What are the policies and practices of the different organizations and bodies involved in the funding, planning, administering and providing higher education opportunities for Syrian refugee students in Turkey?
3. What are the challenges facing the formulation, planning an execution of higher education access for Syrian refugee students in Turkey?

Methodology

The present study follows an exploratory qualitative approach that aims to gain insight into the perceptions of the study participants and understand intra-subjective multiple meanings of the policies, practices and perspectives on higher education for Syrian refugees in Turkey. Current policies regarding refugee higher education are mapped based on the laws and bylaws issued by state institutions involved in this process, including regulations of Turkish Higher Education and Ministry of National Education as well as Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). The press statements of these institutions were also reviewed to understand any recent developments and the way they are framed by different media outlets. Interviews were conducted with specialists in these institutions, particularly aiming at providing an idea of the policies and trajectories into the future. Interviews were also conducted with practitioners including sub-national actors, such as higher education institutions, support institutions as well as NGOs involved in the provision of higher education, and beneficiaries, namely Syrian refugee students. Finally, interviews were conducted with the representatives of international actors that impact on both policy and implementation.

Data Collection Procedure

The main tools for data collection included individual and focus group interview protocols developed for this study. In addition, both the higher education and state institutions' websites and the informative material provided to study participants at the time of the interviews were used to yield the statistical data on students. This data has been augmented by statements of Ministries in the press and recent research papers and reports published.

Data was collected from multiple sources: (1) individual interviews with representatives from the state institutions, from Turkish public and private universities, and from aid organizations; (2) focus group interviews with Syrian refugee students in Turkey; (3) documented legal frameworks and policies and procedures; (4) and online studies and journals. Thorough desk and media reviews were conducted to survey policies and regulations governing access of refugees to higher education.

Research Participants

This study included sixteen interviews that were conducted with universities and NGOs in Turkey. The universities interviewed have been identified based on the student distribution data provided by the YÖK.

The individuals interviewed were mainly sought through a media analysis, as there are certain names and officials in press releases at these universities or through other contacts known at the institution. The NGOs interviewed were also selected with a similar method. In addition to media releases and previous contacts, a thorough analysis of the projects of various ministries which were carried out with different NGOs provided lead information on identifying key stakeholders within the higher education sector in the country.

In addition to the interviews, three different focus group discussions were conducted in two neighboring cities of Syria, namely Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa with prospective and existing university students. The focus group discussions aimed at providing an understanding of the perceptions of the implementation of the policies governing the access and retention of Syrian refugee students in higher education institutions across Turkey. The participants for these focus group discussions were selected with a snowball technique via contacts at local NGOs, universities and university clubs. The selection criteria ensured variation in gender, field of study, age/year of study, language of instruction in program enrolled (Turkish vs. Arabic), socio-economic status, scholarship status and city of origin.

The first two focus groups were conducted with students enrolled at four different universities, namely Gaziantep University (public, includes programs in Arabic), Harran University (public), Hasan Kalyoncu University (private-Turkish) and Zahraa University (private-Syrian) respectively. These focus group discussions yielded data on difficulties in accessing higher education and after enrolling, the level of satisfaction with academic and administrative processes at their institutions, the factors that affect their achievement and retention, their relations with their peers from the host society, and their future plans. A third focus group was conducted with college age Syrian youth who have not accessed higher education yet or dropped out of the system. This focus group discussion identified the reasons that led to the exclusion of these students.

Table 11. Focus Groups Conducted

Focus Group Meetings	Location	Status of Students	Number of Participants	Number of Female Participants
Meeting I	Sanliurfa	Existing	7	2
Meeting II	Gaziantep	Existing	7	3
Meeting III	Sanliurfa	Prospective	5	4

Data Analysis

The researcher followed the procedure for interpretive data analysis and treated the case as a comprehensive case in and of itself following the guidelines provided by Merriam (2009). The analysis progressed in three phases: (1) data preparation, which involved the transcription of interviews and the write up of notes; (2) data identification, which included the coding and organization of the data of the text into analytically meaningful, and easily locatable segments; (3) and data manipulation, which included the finding, sorting, retrieving, and rearranging of

segments of data in order to interpret the findings while accounting for both the emic and etic perspectives.

The results reported address the three research questions of this study pertaining to: (1) The legal frameworks and practiced policies for provision of higher education for refugees in Turkey, (2) the policies and practices of different organizations and bodies involved providing higher education opportunities for Syrian refugee students in Turkey, and (3) the challenges facing the formulation, planning and execution of higher education access for Syrian refugee students in Turkey.

Legal Frameworks and Policies: Policies, Programs & Support

Policies

International and Regional Legal Frameworks

Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, according to which refugees have a right to education, particularly basic education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the basis of the UNHCR mandate around the world and in Turkey. While the aforementioned exemplify the international frameworks surrounding the refugee integration policies regarding higher education, study participants report that there is limited involvement and lack of prioritization of the issue of access to higher education by the international community. Previous research confirms that higher education has been largely ignored in emergency situations, with the focus of educational development and aid aimed at meeting the Education for All and Millennium Development Goal targets of primary education (Dryden-Peterson, 2012).

National Educational Policies and Frameworks

The Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection and the Temporary Protection Law, which specifically refers to higher education, constitute the basis of UNHCR's work in Turkey and provide a national framework. Despite the global trends towards supporting primary education for Syrian refugees in host countries, national higher education policies have followed quite a progressive pattern in Turkey. As indicated in the section describing Turkish higher education system, even before the arrival of the Syrian refugees many international students enrolled in Turkish higher education institutions, such as Iranians and Azerbaijanis. The Higher Education Council of Turkey reports that the current legislation allows universities in Turkey to determine the number of international students they would like to accept each academic year. The number of international students an institution can accept is 50 percent of the number of Turkish students enrolled at that university.

Until 2013, Syrians were subject to the same university admissions criteria as other international students. Specifically, they had to provide Turkish state recognized (equivalency established) high school diplomas, and passports. Then, Syrian students applied to universities that require them to take a YOS (Foreign Student Exam). However, the Higher Education Council of Turkey took a series of decisions in 2013 facilitating the

Syrians' access to higher education. Several legislations and bylaws were passed, such as easing transfer processes, relaxing the original documentation submission for degree equivalency, providing a high school completion test option (in the absence of a high school diploma), a university fee waiver system for all Syrian students and availability of large number of state scholarships through YTB.

Policy Impacts

Policy Impact on Access and Documentation

Some of the decisions made by the Higher Education Council of Turkey in 2013 allowed Syrian refugee students to transfer their studies to a higher education institution given that they had the required authenticated documentation and academic records. In the absence of such documentation, students were accepted as special students at seven universities across the country and allowed to transfer their completed credits upon authentication of their academic records. Despite this procedure, the challenge of obtaining academic records or high school degrees was echoed as one of the challenges facing the Syrian refugee students in pursuing their studies. Despite the efforts made by the state institutions to facilitate admission processes, many universities introduce additional requirements that are perceived as challenges to access, as reported by one of the study participants:

Every university is like a country, requiring different documents and admission processes. While it is understandable for universities to have autonomy, there shouldn't be this many differences across them.

(Gaziantep Focus Group Participant Number 5)

High school diploma equivalency and high school proficiency and equivalency exam are required for accessing higher education as per the Ministry of Education bylaw 2014/21. As a result, provincial MEB offices were assigned to issue high school diploma equivalency to Syrian prospective students with proper documentation, which could be a copy of their high school diploma. This is important, because prior to their arrival to Turkey a number of the prospective Syrian students had applied to and were admitted to programs at Syrian universities. This bylaw allows these students to establish their diploma equivalency in the absence of original documents. Additionally, students get a second option if they fail to establish equivalency of their diplomas, which is the 12th grade high school proficiency test. About 5,000 students are reported to have taken the exam in 2015. Over 7,000 students were reported to take the exam in 2016. The exam is conducted by MEB at the temporary education centers in the cities with high numbers of Syrians, namely Adana, Adiyaman, Ankara, Batman, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Konya, Malatya, Mardin, Mersin, Osmaniye and Sanliurfa. The applicants need to have their information entered into the ministry's system for foreign students called YOBIS and this is mostly done by registering at a temporary education center with their temporary protection identification card.

Policy Impact on Access and Financing of Higher Education

The Higher Education Council directive dated 18/06/2014 provided Syrian refugee students a tuition waiver within the public university system, which later became extended to all universities in Turkey. Furthermore, with the passing of the cabinet of ministers Decree of 2014/6787, all Syrians are exempt from paying tuition fees at all public universities when pursuing a bachelor's degree. This policy has been extended to include two-year associate degrees and graduate degrees with the cabinet of Ministers decree of 2015/8040. Student study participants reported the positive impacts of these policy procedures on their access and retention within higher education institutions in Turkey.

Policy Impact on Access and Language of Instruction

Language is probably the biggest obstacle for Syrians' integration into the higher education system in Turkey, a problem faced in many refugee and migration situations (Erisman and Looney, 2007). Besides the expansion of TÖMER courses offered by universities in the region after admission, which have high fees, the Higher Education Council issued a regulation allowing the universities in the region to offer programs in Arabic. As of the 2016-2017 academic year, the Higher Education Council has granted permission to establish higher education programs in Arabic language at universities in Hatay, Gaziantep and Sanliurfa. For instance, in Hatay, this mandate covers 32 different degree programs. It should be noted that some of these programs at these universities are not fully operational yet, as they experience difficulties in filling the quotas for these paid programs with a special tuition fee. Also, within the scope of the challenges presented by the language of instruction, study participants reported that most universities place students in the same classes with little attention to the varying levels of Turkish proficiency. In addition to the crowded classrooms that result, students are faced with inexperienced instructors who lack training particularly in the language teaching area.

Programs

A number of challenges emerged through the study at the implementation stage of the policies outlined above, such as the difficulty in ensuring common standards with university admission processes. Universities across the country ask for different types of documentation from prospective students, an issue evident both from the interviews conducted with NGOs on the field and the focus groups. Nevertheless, there is no single institution/NGO that provides counseling regarding all of this information to the prospective students, a shortcoming addressed by both the Higher Education Council representative and the participants in the focus groups. This leads to misinformed students, which is common across young refugees and asylum seekers in accessing relevant educational advice and information (Gateley, 2015).

Additionally, universities may offer prospective Syrian students the opportunity to take the Foreign Student Exam to increase their chances of accessing the institutions. Most students show interest in taking this exam to increase their chances of getting accepted. However, not all universities offer this exam regularly and when they do, as indicated by the students in the focus groups conducted, the weight of different subjects differ from one university

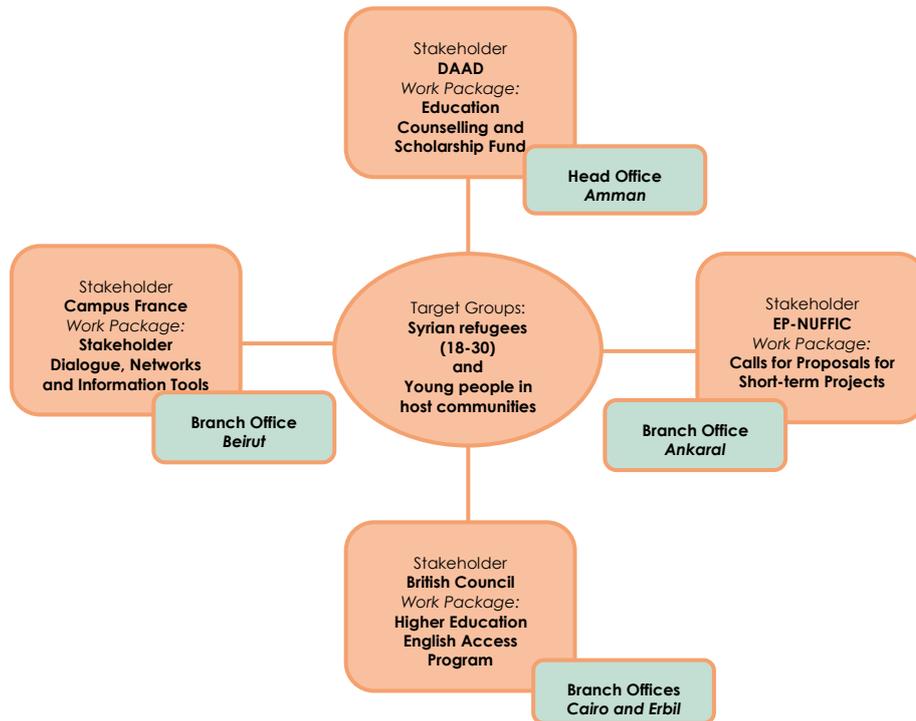
to the other. Therefore, it is not possible for prospective students to prepare for a standardized exam. Secondly, students need to pay 100 to 200 Turkish Lira (TL) to take this exam in addition to the application fees, presenting the added burden of finances that Syrian refugee students struggle with. When the potential transportation and lodging costs associated with the entire application process is added, this process creates a major economic burden on the already limited funds of refugee students.

Among the programs in place to support Syrian refugee students to access higher education in Turkey are the ones put forth and implemented by UNHCR. In collaboration with YTB, UNHCR has awarded 1600 TÖMER scholarships across 11 cities and several refugee camps to improve Turkish language abilities. The UNHCR's DAFI program awards scholarship to students where they are seeking asylum. It is largely funded by the German Foreign Ministry and in collaboration with YTB. For 2014-15, 12 scholarships were awarded in Turkey, and the number reached 70 scholarships in 2015-2016. For 2016-2017, the number dramatically increased and 750 refugee recipients will be awarded this scholarship that involves all registration costs, medical insurance and a 1,000 TL stipend. Three hundred of the awardees will also get their university TÖMER costs covered.

UNHCR also collaborates with and funds several NGOs across Turkey that work mainly on refugee protection and channel the information and feedback they receive from the field to the authorities. As part of this process, UNHCR is currently mobilizing a workshop with MEB provincial officials and central agency for better policy coordination and harmonization of implementation within the higher education sector.

Another international initiative addressing higher education prospects of Syrian refugees in Turkey is the Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) program. HOPES is a direct reaction to the Syrian crisis with the objective of empowering young people from Syria to build their own career paths by directly addressing their education needs. Funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis - The Madad Fund - the project provides a wide range of educational programs to Syrian refugees in host countries across Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. The portfolio includes academic counseling to up to 42,000 young Syrians regionally, language courses to 4,000 students, more than 300 full academic scholarships and higher education short courses for more than 3,500 student refugees. HOPES is implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in collaboration with its partners from British Council, Campus France and EP-Nuffic.

Figure 6. Implementation Plan of HOPES



A third international initiative in supporting Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Turkey is the SPARK fellowship program supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To respond to the growing demand for higher education, SPARK established its presence in Turkey in 2012, running projects in Syria and supporting the Syrian community in Turkey. Since then, its Turkey office has set up five higher education institutions inside Syria, accommodating hundreds of students, and has offered a wide range of activities for Syrian students in Turkey.

SPARK scholarships provide student tuition fees, other allowances such as local transportation, study materials, monthly stipend, might be supported depending on the educational program. After organizing a Summer University in 2013, SPARK continued to organize a Winter University the year after. Together with the United Kingdom-based Asfari foundation, SPARK set up the Gaziantep Youth Entrepreneurship Programme to assist 100 students in setting up their own businesses. In cooperation with Gaziantep University, SPARK also organized the 10 week Conflict Sensitive Project Cycle Management Summer Course for 50 Syrian students. Moreover, in cooperation with Gaziantep University, SPARK set up multiple scholarship schemes for Syrians, supporting over 200 students so far.

One of the most popular programs for providing language training, the TÖMER program has been established at universities in the provinces with dense Syrian populations. However, the training of the faculty at these institutions is not standardized, and low budgets mean that classroom sizes may be too big and the quality of course material differs from one place to the other. This issue was highlighted by some language schools and

TÖMER certified school officials as well as focus group participants. In addition to TÖMER programs, universities offer degrees in Arabic per the new regulations. Gaziantep University for instance offered 28 different programs with tuitions ranging from 1,300 USD to 2,500 USD in the 2015-2016 academic year. The interview conducted with an international office representative of Gaziantep University further provided the information that there are 307 students enrolled in these Arabic programs, and over half of them (171) are scholarships recipients.

In addition to the programs highlighted, there are private universities that exist outside the national framework and are set up by several foundations from across the world. One that was interviewed for this project was Zarha University in Gaziantep. In this institution, with engineering, theology, education, and administrative sciences faculty, the instructors all speak Arabic and the language of instruction is Arabic. It is a Sudan based institution which was established with support from Zakat foundation and El-Fenar. Currently there are about 150 students enrolled in various departments. One of them participated in our focus group discussions and indicated the following:

When I came to Turkey, I worked at restaurants, car wash places. I didn't feel like continuing to study when I came here. I was depressed and psychologically not ready to go back to school. I went to a free Turkish course offered by the municipality but I dropped out, as our teacher was quite prejudiced. I went to another municipality course, this time paid, and it was so much better. I got placed in Agri University Pharmacy program but I didn't want to study that, so I started at Zahra to the computer engineering program on a full scholarship. I know my degree may not be recognized by the Turkish state, but I am planning on going back to Syria anyhow.

(Gaziantep Existing student focus group Participant 7)

As the Higher Education Council of Turkey does not accredit this institution, the graduates do not expected to receive a diploma recognized by Turkey. This institution targets especially those students that had a hard time integrating into the Turkish higher education system in terms of language and certification and students who plan to go back to Syria when the conflict is over.

Support

Financial Support

As indicated earlier, a number of scholarships are available for Syrian refugees who are interested in pursuing higher education in Turkey. Some of the DAFI scholarships are offered to students pursuing their undergraduate education, in addition to one year TÖMER Turkish language training, covering any tuitions or fees. For example, within the DAFI program, students enrolled in undergraduate programs receive 1,000 Turkish Lira (about 330 USD), those in graduate level programs receive 1,250 Turkish Lira (about 400 USD) and those enrolled in PhD programs receive 1,500 Turkish Lira (about 500 USD) per month. Among these, increasing numbers of DAFI scholarships are awarded to Syrian students in collaboration with YTB. These numbers are more than what Turkish students receive in scholarships or loans and exemplify an important social inclusion mechanism for

refugee youth. Table 10 below shows the number of Syrian students receiving government scholarships through YTB at different stages of higher education.

Table 12. Number of Syrian students receiving government scholarships through YTB at different stages of higher education

Type of Degree	Total	Male	Female
Total	3,139	2,124	1,015
Associate's Degree (AA)	41	34	7
Bachelor's Degree (BA)	2,480	1,609	871
Master's Degree	307	238	69
Doctorate	198	161	37
Research	2	1	1
Expertise in Medicine	12	11	1
Language Course	99	70	29

Source: MEB and YÖK

In addition to YTB scholarships, internationally supported institutions such as SPARK and DAAD also provide similar scholarships for Syrian students.

Academic Support

Academic support emerged as a critical factor not only in retaining Syrian refugee students in study programs within higher education institutions in Turkey, but also in the preparation of prospective students for the university admissions. Two of the sources of academic support that study participants highlighted are information sharing and language training. Information sharing means informing the students about their alternatives in applying for universities and directing them with regards to the necessary documentation they need when applying. As this is a very dynamic policy area, the rules and regulations change quickly and stakeholders are not aware of their rights and opportunities immediately. For instance, when the high school degree qualification and equivalency tests were offered by the MEB for the first time, many students were not aware and missed the exam. Since this exam was offered only once a year, an issue criticized by many in the field, prospective students had to wait another year to take the exam. This challenge contributed to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of communication between different institutions such as DGMM and MEB, consequently keeping a number of Syrian refugee students outside universities.

Information Sharing

The actors providing information on higher education range from state actors to international institutions and local NGOs. Many local NGOs investigate these regulations

and transfer this knowledge to their clients as evidenced by their case files. Some have special organizations such as meetings with youth or informative sessions to disseminate this new information. State organizations also share this information via their websites and frequent press releases as evidenced by the coverage of the issue in the media. Also, social media is extensively used by international organizations and NGOs, as well as by the Syrian refugee youth themselves.

Language Support

The second dimension of academic support prior to enrollment relates to language training. While students are not required to submit language proficiency at the time of their initial registration for the higher education programs, they are immediately directed to the Turkish proficiency exam upon registering, followed by a preparatory period where they improve their Turkish language skills. Study participants indicated that students face language difficulties when reading materials, not when discussing or writing. It was reported that additional Turkish instruction or tutoring is also needed to better comprehend what is being taught in class. Some students indicated they attend the different sections of the same class as a way to repeat material. The challenges with language are not specific to the Turkish language. Many Syrian refugee students also face similar difficulties in English language instruction.

Most universities, especially those in areas densely populated by Syrians, offer state certified language training programs coordinated by a central TÖMER. However, some universities do not have this institutional capacity and students need to complete their language training elsewhere to obtain a C-I level certificate, further delaying their access to higher education.

It is important to note that even when universities have a language training capacity, the fees for this training differ from one institution to another and are quite costly. The high fees associated with preparatory stage exam participation have also highlighted by Stevenson and Willott (2007) in the British context. In Turkey, for instance at Harran University in Şanlıurfa, in order to obtain a CI certificate students are expected to complete 960 hours of language coursework which costs 3,888 TL (about 1,300 USD). On the other hand, at Dilmer, a private MEB certified language school in Istanbul, the accelerated CI certificate requires 6 months of intensive language training for about 1,600 USD.

As illustrated earlier, YTB and some international organizations give scholarships for these language courses. YTB even offers the courses free of charge to Syrians in camps and have started to offer them in urban settings as well. The following table illustrates the number of students who successfully passed the exam and obtained a C-I certificate free of charge through these courses on and off camp setting.

Table 13. Number of students obtaining a C-I language training certificate through YTB sponsored programs

Year	2013 (camp)	2014 (camp)	2015 (camp)	2016 (camp)	2016 (off – camp)
# of Students	1007	2046	1558	688	1000

Another approach for language training of the Syrian refugees is supported through language trainings offered by various NGOs that serve in community centers across the country, such as the Turkish Red Crescent, International Middle East Peace Research Center Humanitarian (IMPR). For instance a local NGO in Kayseri called Hilalder implemented a small-scale project to this effect with a grant they took from the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sport. Using their existing educational infrastructure in the form of classrooms, the NGO started the project in February of 2014 and implemented it with 1,728 hours of Turkish classes with four teachers, 50 hours of psych-social counseling with one counselor, 240 hours academic advising with four teachers to a total of 140 Students in Kayseri. Ninety-eight students completed the program (30 percent women) which also involved peer-to-peer counseling via the NGOs existing Turkish student body-volunteers in this case. All of these students were then placed at the university (most in Kayseri) and they all passed the Turkish proficiency exam and directly started their degree programs.

University Level Academic Support

While the practices for academic support may slightly differ from one institution to the other, once students are admitted to the institution, most of them are assigned to an academic advisor upon starting their degree program and given an orientation session targeting international students. Nevertheless, there is no systematic procedure for a proactive academic support that involves tracking their attendance and grades. However, there are several support programs implemented by some universities in collaboration with local or international donors. For instance, Gaziantep University collaborated with the Dutch NGO SPARK to have a two-week workshop for Syrian youth on emergency management, restructuring mechanism, transition economy and entrepreneurship, media and communication and research methods. About 130 Syrians between the ages of 18 to 35 participated in the program (Yeni Cizgi, 2016). At Bahçeşehir University, a special program has been organized for the Syrian students and their families with a specific focus on language learning opportunities and job search with the attendance of about 200 participants.

Attendance

Despite the efforts put forth by many institutions of higher education, some challenges persist, such as the problem of student attendance. All university personnel participating in the study indicated that Syrian students tend to skip classes more often than other students, and that they need ways to be able to better monitor students' attendance. There are no central statistics tracked and provided by Higher Education Council for Turkish or international students attendance/dropout rates. However the study provides some

insights into the issue. The issue of attendance is exacerbated at public universities where the non-attendance rates for Syrians reach at 50 percent. These results indicate that part of this attendance problem relates to the lack of socialization into the university atmosphere and its rules and regulations, as well as economic difficulties requiring these students to work to generate income. Additionally, it was reported that some students skip classes as they have a hard time following class discussions given the language barrier.

Academic Performance

In terms of academic performance, the study presents mixed results. Although some Syrian refugee students have been performing very well at some universities in Turkey, constituting a reason for pride for both the university and the Syrian community, most students perform poorly. The YTB scholarships have a constructive way of dealing with poor performance. Students' scholarships are not immediately annulled after they obtain low grades. Instead, first they are put on a probationary period and given the opportunity to improve their grades. If their grades are not improved during the probationary period, only part of their scholarship is reduced with a possibility to be increased again, given they achieve better grades. This process provides a transitional period for students, many of who already struggle because of their refugee status.

It was found that one of the factors contributing to the students' poor academic performance is the direct access to university without a placement test. The academic advisors and faculty members participating in the study indicated that the direct access policy is critical for providing social inclusion of the students, but it has major implications on the students' academic performance. One participant indicated: There is a greater variation in their school performance as compared to the Turkish students. This is mainly because we accept all students who apply without an elimination or ranking.

It is argued that there should be a central ranking mechanism for Syrian refugee students to consider their emergency conditions, or universities should be allowed to administer their own placement exam. Student participants also addressed the challenge presented by the academic performance as they expressed frustration with the lack of a central system and standards for their ranking and placement. Some indicated that they would be willing take an exam with other Syrian students that would rank them and place them according to their university choice, as is the case for Turkish students.

Legal Counseling Support

Struggling with finances and academic challenges, it becomes essential to provide Syrian refugee students with legal counseling in order for them to be well informed of the requirements for accessing higher education in Turkey. Several NGOs provide this kind of support to prospective Syrian students. Most NGOs such as IMPR, Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants (ASSAM), and Hilalder hold information sessions for higher education-aged youth informing them about the procedural requirements, the time and content of high school equivalency tests offered by Ministry of National Education of Turkey, and scholarship opportunities. Study participants indicated

that NGOs try to help when universities reject the students. The legal counseling and information sharing is also essential for institutions, as many seem to operate using outdated information on the bylaws.

Other Support

Other forms of support are made available to Syrian refugee students within the higher education sector, such as efforts to assist them to become more socially integrated. Some universities indicate that Syrian refugee students are not very engaged in social activities such as student clubs at the university. Some of the students may join the international students club where they socialize with other international students, but not members of the host society. This voluntary exclusion poses a challenge to their integration among the student body. These results are consistent with the findings of Sezgin and Yolcu's (2016) focus groups with Syrian students at Osmaniye University. It was reported that three students of the II surveyed indicated that they are members of student clubs. Most university administrators interviewed indicated that they have not heard or witnessed major inter-group conflict among groups, a finding also supported by Sezgin and Yolcu (2016). However, the students participating in this study reported that at times of tension with Turkish students, they feel marginalized. "This is Turkey, you cannot do it your way" is a remark they explained they receive which accentuates their exclusion and out-group identity. Some of the students also reported that at times they feel that some Turkish students are resentful towards them for entering the university without an exam. Nevertheless, their tension with the local population in some locations is higher than in others and refugees are blamed for "stealing their bread", "taking away their jobs". These tensions, explained the participants, become exacerbated every time they speak Arabic on the street.

Some universities put forth efforts to bring both cultures closer to each other through social activities on campuses. For example, in January of 2016 "Art Days for Syria and Turkey" is an event that was organized at Harran University in Şanlıurfa. Supported by the Danish Refugee Council and organized by a fine arts academy, participants engaged in creative drama and acting classes and painting, where they created a collective "One Picture 20 Hands" painting, played and sang Turkish and Syrian songs. A pre-post survey of the initiative indicated a positive change in the participants' intergroup perceptions. Study participants expressed a strong desire for similar programs that would allow them to engage more with the Turkish students.

Challenges

Many Syrian refugees who are within the higher education age group seek access to higher education in Turkey. Results highlighted the challenges and barriers from the perspectives of the participants that hinder the access of these young refugees to the higher education sector in the country. All of the student study participants acknowledged the determination and goodwill of the Turkish state in improving the integration of refugees into the educational system, especially at the higher level. There remains room for improvement in harmonized implementation of policies despite the major progress that has been in Turkey.

Financial Barrier

State institutions in Turkey put forth a number of policy reforms in order to bring down the cost of accessing higher education for Syrian refugees in the country, such as the YTB scholarships. These efforts are complimented by the scholarships provided by international organizations across the country, such as DAFI and SPARK. However, given the dire socioeconomic situation many of these students live in, making ends meet and earning a living remains a burden beyond the university costs. Financing higher education is a major challenge for Syrian refugee students. Many of these students need to work to support their families and cannot afford language fees or application fees, let alone sustain themselves during college without working. Scholarships are an important but short-term solution. The turbulence in students' financial status leads to missed opportunities as well as a waste of time and funds, as reported by one of the student study participants:

I have been all over the place. First, I went to TÖMER at Siirt University because it is cheaper. Then I got accepted to second shift program at Gaziantep University, but I didn't go because it costs about 6000 Turkish TL. Just so that I do not get distant from school, I studied theology at unaccredited Zahra University for a year. Finally, I got SPARK scholarship, now I study at the Arabic Business Administration Program. Normally, it costs money, but my tuition is paid by SPARK.

Academic Barrier

Issues of language and academic qualifications present challenges for Syrian refugee students pre- and post-enrolment. Turkish language proficiency is reported as a necessary precondition for access and success, with the exception of a few Arabic programs. Additionally, students who choose to pursue the Turkish language are faced with the burden of paying high fees of TÖMER, or engaging with inexperienced instructors who lack training in the language teaching. Additionally, language is reported to be a key factor in the retention of the Syrian refugee students in higher education institutions across in Turkey.

Lack of Academic and Career Counseling

“Study in college? For what?” This was echoed among the students study participants as they expressed their frustrations in prospective jobs after graduation from higher education institutions in Turkey. Many explained that as long as refugees do not have the right to work, it would be difficult to establish an incentive structure for refugees to pursue their higher education.

Additionally, many of these students are driven to courses of study by the scholarship they obtain or the “less expensive” opportunities they come across, with no attention being given to the demand within the local and global labor market, nor the students’ interests.

The January 2015 law enabling the refugees to apply for work permits was an important step. However, employers need to pay about 2,000 TL to apply for this permit, most refugees and employers are unaware of the associated paperwork, and more importantly, employers now will have to pay much higher wages (according to Turkish minimum wage standards). As a result, currently only about 3,000 permits have been issued.

Dim future employment prospects upon graduation constitute another barrier to accessing higher education. Given the current law, refugee graduates of Turkish universities are not treated differently in terms of their work permit applications as compared to other Syrian refugees in the country. All Syrians have to have an employer sponsoring their employment, and this employer should have no more than 10 percent of sponsored employees based on its number of workers. Allowing refugee students to work upon graduation legally in Turkey would provide a natural next step for them.

Legal Documents

The availability of legal documents presents another challenge. The state addressed the challenge by accepting copies of refugees’ high school degrees to establish degree equivalency. Furthermore, for students who fail to provide this kind of documentation, the Turkish Ministry of Education offers 12th grade equivalency tests for students to use when applying to colleges. Although a number of policy reforms have been achieved in order to allow Syrian refugees to access higher education in the absence of academic records, the availability of these legal documents remain essential for the sustainability of their status at the institution. Additionally, it was reported that the varying and constantly changing policies regulating admission processes at universities across the country present added challenges in the capacity of presenting the required legal documents.

Other Challenges

The challenge of fitting into the host society is not uncommon among refugee situations. However, this challenge becomes a barrier among students at universities, where they are perceived to be in competition with the local host community. One of the students study participants explained:

Have you all entered the university without an exam unlike us? Do all you take 1200 TL scholarship from the government?’ These are the things we keep hearing from our Turkish classmates. We took a graduation exam in Syria and only some of us are on a scholarship. There are so many misperceptions.

(Sanliurfa, Focus Group Participant Number 4)

These challenges may not necessarily influence the access of the Syrian refugees to higher education, but rather contribute to the risk of dropout and feelings of exclusion.

Conclusion

The study illustrates that in terms of the legal framework, many policies have been implemented in Turkey in the last three years targeting the inclusion of Syrians in the national higher education system. Some of these relate to language training, while others relate to certification and transfer and access to Turkish universities. Additionally, scholarships are provided to Syrian students. Current figures indicate that one third of all Syrian students are on a scholarship. Furthermore, Arabic programs are being offered for the first time at Gaziantep University and are expected to spread to other institutions. These are very important improvements that play a significant role in providing access and retention for Syrian refugee students in higher education in Turkey.

Nevertheless, some issues exist mostly at the implementation level, creating obstacles for Syrians' access to higher education. Policy recommendations are listed and discussed below.

Recommendations

The policy recommendations will be proposed along the following dimensions:

- Bureaucracy/information dissemination
- Language proficiency
- Economic reasons hindering access
- International cooperation
- Lack of clear future prospects

Short Term Policy Recommendations

- 1) The bureaucracy surrounding the certification of previous degrees and admission to colleges is an issue of major concern for those interviewed for this study. The first aspect of this relates to the implementation of MEB directives on equivalence by provincial offices. This requires better information dissemination both across the institutions and from institutions to individual refugee applicants.

Among these implementation challenges, a common/central system for ranking and potentially placing students is an issue raised by both academic advisors and students. Students are frustrated with the existing system as explained by one of the students:

How come no university accepts me to a department I want, even though I am so successful and determined? Why are people with a worse record than I am placed in engineering, and I am not? What did I do wrong?

From the academic advisors' perspectives, this would allow better-ranked students to be placed in better institutions and less variation among refugee students in a university. From the perspective of international organizations, standards are necessary while respecting the autonomy of the universities. This could be achieved by centrally disseminating the varying requirements of universities along with their Syrian and other foreign student quotas and exam

dates. Additionally, a more centralized system can be set up where students submit their application files and are then placed by YÖK, which is partly done at the moment –within the Syrian quota. Nevertheless, students tend to be willing to explore all potential options in order to be placed at their most desired program. In a more strict sense, Syrians can take an Arabic placement test for ranking and placement like their Turkish counterparts, however this would mean inserting a new process and potential hurdle for students to overcome. Also, it could pose some threats at the implementation stage. Currently, students who live in Syria can apply for undergraduate programs in Turkey without coming to Turkey. If there is a test, it could be hard to implement geographically. Either way, a centralized structure should ensure better information dissemination about changes in the policy area and clear road maps for students.

In line with this issue, it is recommended that the Turkish government engages in efforts to develop and ratify the “Arab Convention on Regulating the Refugee Situation in the Arab region” and its adoption. This includes the introduction of a specific provision on the right of education in the current text of the Arab Convention.

- 2) Students’ educational standards need to be better harmonized across institutions when they begin their studies at a local university through the TÖMER courses offered. These include but not limited to the following:
 - Students may be placed in TÖMER based on level of language proficiency at different language levels.
 - Setting a quota for the number of students for TÖMER programs across universities.
 - TÖMER programs constitute a major cost for Syrian students. Some subsidization could allow lower prices comparable to courses outside the university or the number of scholarship to covering only TÖMER costs could be offered like DAFI scholarships.
- 3) Students who attend the courses at universities do not seem to have major performance problems. Nevertheless, some catch-up courses or boot camps could be offered to help the students re-integrate when they drop out of the system. Academically, better tracking and preventive response mechanisms are needed in order to address non-attendance and drop out of students. Information on Syrian refugee student dropouts from higher education is still not available for a more informed plan to address this challenge.
- 4) The financial situation of many of the students also leads them to drop out of universities. The scholarships offered for continuing students is an important step. An increase in the number of scholarships offered would definitely ease the students’ suffering and increase the number of students who are qualified and interested in pursuing higher education. Improving students’ financial situation may also be accomplished through offering these students opportunities for work and study. Many of the study participants showed interest in formally working on or off campus in order to provide financial support to themselves and their families beyond higher education

costs. A regulation to this effect would allow them to support themselves while being gainfully employed at higher wages.

- 5) Raising awareness of the importance of higher education for refugees both locally and globally and facilitating better collaboration channels/methods with and among INGOs/NGOs is essential.
- 6) Expand access to high quality secondary education as a path towards tertiary, vocational and technical education for refugees, recognizing that post-primary education in all its forms can support transition to work, sustainable livelihoods and durable solutions for displaced persons.
- 7) Develop a Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) to track students' progress and drop out in light of youth mobility. Such a system would include nationals as well as refugees

Long Term Policy Recommendations

- 1) Improving the socio-economic status of Syrian refugees: Addressing the financial constraints faced by the Syrian refugee population in Turkey is an issue beyond higher education students. One of the study participants explained:

It is because child labor, and child labor is because of a lack of a widespread right of legal employment. If the fathers could work in decent jobs where they are paid official wage –even if it is minimum wage, their children would not have to go to work, and would go to school and then college.

(Sanliurfa Focus Group Participant Number 7)

Many of the Syrian refugees who are of higher education age are also responsible to provide for their families. Therefore, they are burdened with the responsibility of not only managing the cost of education and language learning, but also making sure their families are able to survive. From a long-term perspective, a holistic approach is necessary to address the underlying reasons for potential of exclusion from higher education. Experts and students alike named economic issues as an important direct and indirect reason for exclusion. Scholarships can only temporarily address these issues, while raising the living standards of the refugees or better yet allowing them to raise their own living standards could increase their educational integration in a more sustainable way.

The January 2015 law enabling the refugees to apply for work permits represents one of the initiatives put forth by the Turkish government was an important step. However, certain restrictions present the employers with difficulties in employing Syrian refugees. More progressive steps need to be taken in integrating adult, working age refugees in the labor market with a joint approach to control the informal economy so that children and youth can transition to higher education following their primary education.

The scholarships provided for Syrian refugees by YTB, INGOs and NGOs are very critical. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these scholarships are a short-term remedy with high financial and socio-political costs contributing to resentment from the public. In the long run, legal employment opportunities could offer a more permanent solution to economic difficulties and would enable students to support themselves during their studies by part time work.

2) Introducing sensitive and constructive public diplomacy/communication with the public: In the context of Turkey, as elsewhere in host countries within the region, Syrian refugees are seen as a burden to the local economy and society. The local population misperceives many humanitarian-oriented government decisions. One of the study participants reported:

When the Turkish president said Syrians will get citizenship, I have had Turkish friends who had stopped talking to me as they found it very unfair. Every time there is some news about this, our friends react. So the communication of these new policies should do more to convince the people so that we do not face these reactions.

(Sanliurfa, Focus Group Participant Number 5)

This illustrates that misperceptions about Syrian students may lead to tensions among Syrian refugees enrolled at higher education institutions. It is highly recommended that better information dissemination procedures are sought on issues such as the amount of scholarships, selection criteria, documents required from Syrians for their placement or any other issue related to Syrian refugees that could potentially put the students and the entire community as a target.

For students, this could be achieved with an emphasis on a rights based approach. As evidenced by the media analysis, most policies benefiting Syrians are framed as gestures of goodwill to a victimized population based on a moral and religious duty. If issues are framed as protection for a vulnerable population, based on obligations stemming from international refugee law and human rights law, some of the popular reaction by the host society could be mediated.

As such, it is important that the Turkish government ensures that refugee youth are systematically included in national higher education plans and programs and quality data is collected to monitor their participation and educational attainment. The government is also encouraged to develop policies and legislation that mainstream crisis response in national higher education planning and policy and allow for the inclusion of those affected by crises in higher education institutions in an equitable manner, through policy responses pertaining to language, needed documentation, recognition and accreditation.

The limited coverage scope of media coverage of this issue illustrates the absence of a depiction of highly educated Syrians, who could in the long term benefit both their host country and their country of origin. A more humanized discourse is needed putting forward the “ideal refugees” both by policy makers and the media would allow for a more balanced as well as constructive communication with the Turkish public.

3) Develop local universities into multi-dimensional institutions that add to the traditional curricula and traditional teaching modalities that go beyond on-campus offerings. These changes should also include the introduction of dynamic pedagogical practices where the focus is no longer on the professor but rather on the needs of the learner through active, interactive and experiential learning modalities, where students learn on their own or from peers. Such practices are particularly important in the context of refugee tertiary education, as the students are not typical students. It is critical for institutions to evolve and be creative

in *what* they have to offer and *how* they offer it. For example, new skills and competencies may be introduced within the curriculum that is offered to Syrian refugee students not only because of their specific needs as learners, but also because of the prospects of employment that would enable them to change their realities of being a refugee. Such competencies include information analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and communication. In addition, developing students' character to encourage their curiosity, sense of initiative, persistence, adaptability, ethical awareness and reasoning are equally essential for refugees. Obviously, emphasizing such traits will strengthen *all* students.

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