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# Refugee Integration through Higher Education: Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Policy Report

2018

This report aims to contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular focus towards:

- SDG 4 - Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- SDG 5 - Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities Partnerships for the Goals: Reduce inequality within and among countries.

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## Executive Summary

The globalised world is facing one of the highest levels of displacement from civil wars, conflicts and persecutions. Forty per cent of the displaced people come from Syria, a civil war that has become one of the biggest humanitarian and refugee crises of our time (UNHCR 2016). The increasing refugee flows in recent years brings challenges for the host countries. More than half of the Syrian refugee population is composed of children and youth, and therefore education becomes more important for their protection, integration and empowerment. Regardless of the increased attention to education in humanitarian responses to emergencies, higher education remains a low priority that comes after basic needs in a refugee situation (Zeus, 2011; Dryden-Peterson, 2012). Only one per cent of refugees can access higher education compared to thirty-six per cent globally. The high proportion of children and youth and their protracted situation makes education a durable solution – a key method for the integration of refugees into a host society. This policy report aims to understand the tertiary education experiences of refugee youths and how these experiences affect their integration process in a host country. This report specifically focuses on the case study of Turkey, due to the large presence of Syrian refugee youths in this country. From the findings of this research, the main challenge that young refugees face in the higher education system is the language, while the second challenge is prejudice and negative stereotypes that they experience in their daily interaction with local students. Therefore, this report suggests tailored recommendations to improve these situations.

## Introduction

Inclusive and quality education for all and the promotion of life-long learning is highlighted as a priority for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and emphasises equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality tertiary education. Education is a cornerstone for refugee integration and empowerment of the refugee youths to contribute to more sustainable developments.

Turkey, which has been mentioned as an emigration country, is now the top refugee hosting country in the world with 3.5 million Syrian refugees – a high proportion of which are youths. Regardless of positive national legislation and practices to increase child and youth participation in education, attendance rate after primary school is still low and even lower after secondary education. In higher education it is around four per cent (UNHCR, 2018c).

This policy report focuses on the challenges and opportunities that Syrian refugee youths in Turkey face during the integration process, particularly when it comes to their access to education programmes. The object of this report is to call attention to the effect of the higher education experiences of the Syrian refugee youths on their integration in Turkey; 1) what are the main barriers and challenges in higher education; 2) how does being in higher education affect their integration process in the host country. The report considers previous relevant research on the topic and seeks to understand in detail the situation of higher education provided to Syrian refugees in Turkey through a qualitative study based on 25 in-depth interviews. It concludes by presenting several policy recommendations to better understand difficulties and opportunities that access to higher education programmes entails for refugee youths.

## Refugee Youths & Education

Refugees are defined by the Geneva Convention (1951) as individuals who have fled their places and crossed an international border due to war, conflicts or a well-founded fear of persecution. In 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that every two seconds nearly one person is forcibly displaced as a result of conflict or persecution in the world (UNHCR, 2018a), and more than half of this refugee population are children and youth. The global refugee education strategy supports 'integration of refugee learners within nation systems' due to the increasing number of refugees living in urban areas, and the

protracted situation of refugees (UNHCR, 2012). Refugee children and youth may spend their entire school-age years in a host country, and this situation provokes the question of education as a durable solution: How is it possible to provide education as a durable solution in a protracted displacement situation? The aim of UNHCR to be ‘a fully age, gender and diversity inclusive organisation’ has meant that youths and their needs – also depending on their gender and age – become an important element of the refugee situation in their host countries; therefore, today the idea of young refugees as a social group with particular needs, including differences between women and men, is increasingly taken into account when designing policy recommendations (UNHCR, 2013). UNHCR’s education strategy centres on promoting access for refugees to a broad continuum of educational opportunities, ranging from formal education to higher education (UNHCR, 2018). The prolonged displaced refugee situation and high proportion of young population are of concern, making education more important for the integration of refugee youths as well as for the stability of the region. In light of Sustainable Development Goals, the recent intergovernmental negotiation process ‘The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration’ covers all dimensions of international migration, addresses empowering migrants, promoting inclusion and social cohesion, and facilitates the contribution of migrants with their capital to sustainable development.<sup>1</sup>

In the main host countries – Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan – of the vast majority of the displaced Syrian population (over 90%), Syrians are not granted refugee status and are being treated as ‘guests’ (Paredero et al., 2017). The neighbouring host countries – except Turkey – are not a part of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Turkey, as a part of the convention, still maintains geographical reservation, which means that only those fleeing as a result of ‘events occurring in Europe’ are given refugee status in Turkey, due to the reservation Syrians are under ‘temporary protection’<sup>2</sup> in Turkey. Therefore, Syrians in these neighbouring host countries are not granted with the ‘refugee’ status (Ferris and Kirişçi, 2016). This fact creates differences in the response strategies in each host country – relating to policies on housing conditions, labour rights, registration status and education (Achilli, Yassin, and Erdogan, 2017). Their status consists of uncertainty, which makes their future

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<sup>1</sup> Global Compact for Migration, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Temporary Protection Regulation*, 2014.

unpredictable. On the other hand, host countries make a significant contribution by opening their national education system to the refugees and removing the barriers to access it.<sup>3</sup>

In the region, Turkey is hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees with a high ratio of a young population. After the first years of the so-called Syrian refugee crisis passed, Turkey started to focus on making several regulations for Syrians to ensure their rights; for example refugee children and youth can enrol in Turkish schools and universities free of charge (UNHCR, 2017b). Higher education has started to be emphasised as an important tool for integration; the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) – responsible for all higher education institutions as an autonomous institution in Turkey<sup>4</sup> – highlights the integration problems of Syrian students in both society and universities, and the inequalities in the ratio of female/male students in tertiary education.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Turkey gives importance to the integration of educated Syrians into the labour force and it has started to naturalise them ('Göç ve Uyum Raporu', 2018). However, there is still a gap in the social integration policies, youth is often overlooked, and the issues related to Syrian refugees are not yet in the development plans.

Access to and progress within the education system functions as a significant marker of integration, and also as a major means towards this goal. Education has a significant effect on increasing opportunities for employment, for social connection, and for language learning (Ager and Strang, 2004). Being in education marks 'normality' with restoring 'student identity' and it is a means of creating continuity with their past and with being facilitated by education and employment opportunities available to them (Ala Sirriyeh, 2010; Mosselson, 2007). Higher education is a crucial instrument to reverse the narrative of refugees being 'passive victims' to being 'individual agents' who are empowered and who adapt themselves into the host country (Zeus, 2011), to give a space for contact with members of host communities, and as a role in establishing relationships supportive of integration (Ager and Strang, 2008). Education restores in refugee youths a sense of hope for the future and increases their capability to find solutions for themselves and their host and home communities (UNHCR, 2016). Education protects refugee children and youth from different types of exploitation, empowers them to live productively and independently with

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<sup>3</sup>'We Made a Promise: Ensuring Learning Pathways and Protection for Syrian Children and Youth', 2018.

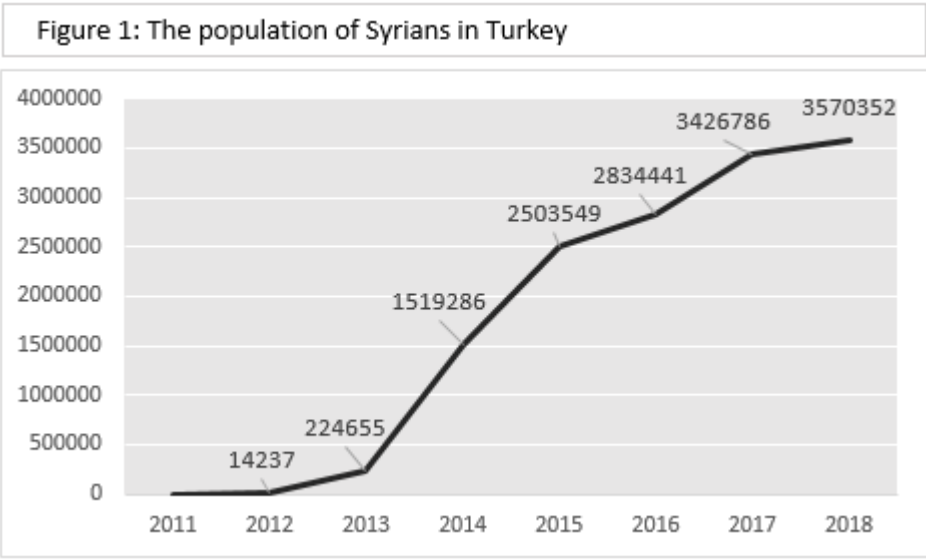
<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.yok.gov.tr/>

<sup>5</sup> 'International Conference of The Council Of Higher Education in Hatay - Detail - Yükseköğretim Kurulu', n.d.

strengthening community resilience, and enables them to learn about themselves and the world around them (UNHCR, 2017a).

### Integration of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

From the beginning of the so-called Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey and the other neighbouring countries have applied an open-door policy and the non-refoulement principle. In the seventh year of the so-called crisis, there are over 3.5 million Syrians – as well as more than 365,000 asylum seekers and refugees of other nationalities – living in Turkey. Even though Turkey is a part of the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol, there has been the geographic reservation. For this reason, Syrians are granted neither refugee nor asylum seeker status under Turkish national law, instead being given special status. Syrians who registered in Turkey have been protected under temporary protection status, which provides them access to health, education, social assistance, psychological support, and to the labour market (*Temporary Protection Regulation, 2014*).



Source: [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/gocistatistikleri\\_363\\_378](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/gocistatistikleri_363_378)

The profile of Turkey has transformed from an emigration or transit country to a destination country for asylum seekers and refugees. Turkey has been a country of emigration for decades due to guest workers, skilled migrants and refugees, whilst at the same time has been a country of immigration especially for the people of Turkish descent and culture from the post Ottoman territories and also irregular migrants from former Soviet countries (Kirişçi, 2003). In Turkey, historically durable solutions for asylum seekers and refugees who were not belonging to Turkish culture or were not coming from Europe have been either to

be resettled in a third country or voluntary repatriated. The so-called Syrian refugee crisis 'local integration' is a third durable solution – which was placed on the agenda due to the impossibilities of the first two options. In the new legal framework regarding foreigners and international protection<sup>6</sup> – that has formed to regulate the principles and procedures with regards to foreigners' entry into, staying in and exit from Turkey, and the scope and implementation of the protection to be provided for foreigners who seek protection in Turkey – the term 'harmonisation' is officially used as a term to replace 'integration'.

Despite the perception of temporariness, due to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the protracted situation of the displaced Syrians it becomes a sociological reality that millions of Syrians would stay permanently in Turkey, and it is crucial that this reality is accepted and reflected in the long-term policies for the displaced population and their integration in Turkey (Erdogan, 2017). Recently, refugee integration in Turkey has moved from the periphery to the centre of policy and social debates (Huddleston and Tanczos, 2017) for two main reasons. Firstly, the local and refugee societies share the same spaces due to the high proportion of urban settlements of refugees spreading to every region of the country – only six per cent<sup>7</sup> of the displaced population are sheltered in camps. Secondly, the perception has shifted from short-term protection to long-term integration policies for Syrians in Turkey due to the prolonged stay and the ongoing conflict in Syria. Even though their ad-hoc status does not lead to citizenship rights, it is expected that a number of Syrians will be naturalised under the article of exceptional citizenship of the Turkish Citizenship Law (2009). The Turkish government has started to consider offering Turkish citizenship to Syrians in order to preclude informal labour and to introduce educated Syrians into the labour force.<sup>8</sup> Around thirty thousand Syrians have already become Turkish citizens ('Göç ve Uyum Raporu', 2018).

The European Council on Refugees and Exile defines refugee integration as a two-way and multi-dimensional process, involving the migrants in the receiving society and a perception of acceptance of the host community (ECRE, 1999). The perception of 'guests' under temporary protection has increased the social acceptance based on emotions, with overstaying situation the lack of right-based discourse jeopardises the two-way refugee integration, stability and security for the future of both societies. Portraying Syrians as

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<sup>6</sup> *The Law on Foreigners and International Protection*, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma\\_363\\_378\\_4713\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik)

<sup>8</sup> 'Erdoğan'dan Türkiye'deki Suriyelilere vatandaşlık açıklaması', 2016.

victims constructs the perception that they may need temporary protection and humanitarian assistance but not rights (Rygiel, 2017). In addition to the lack of right-based discourse, local people's perception – which is also structured by false facts spread on social media – is centred on the burden, a security issue, and the fact that Syrians might become competition for accessing rights (Saferworld, 2016; Şimşek and Çorabatır, 2016). More than sixty per cent of Turkish people define their social distance to Syrians as very distant or distant, compared to only five per cent of Syrians (Erdoğan, 2017b). On the other hand, it must be taken into consideration that people do not safely wait 'in limbo' until a host nation decides whether or not to accept them – the processes of integration or alienation inevitably begins (Strang and Ager, 2010).

The refugee integration framework consists of ten domains: employment, housing, health, education as markers and means, social bridges (with locals as a key factor in the 'two way' interaction), social bond (within the community members), social links (with institutions) as social connection, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability as facilitators, and rights and citizenship as foundation (Ager and Strang, 2004). When taking into consideration the high proportion of children and young refugees, education as markers and means of the integration has become more important. Education provides a location where refugees can increase their social connection and they can learn how to negotiate a new culture (Mosselson, 2007). The policies of Turkish government show parallelisms with the global refugee strategy that focuses on 'integration of refugee learners within nation systems', and Syrian children's attendance to the Turkish state schools with their Turkish peers is promoted while closing temporary education centres that use adapted Syrian curriculum in Arabic. The Syrian students' families can benefit from conditional cash grants if their children attend schools and continue their education. In addition to compulsory education levels, free access to the Turkish universities and scholarship opportunities open doors to higher education for Syrian youths.

The following section explains how Syrian youths access to higher education and what kind of possibilities they have on the path to higher education.

### [Higher Education & Syrian Refugees in Turkey](#)

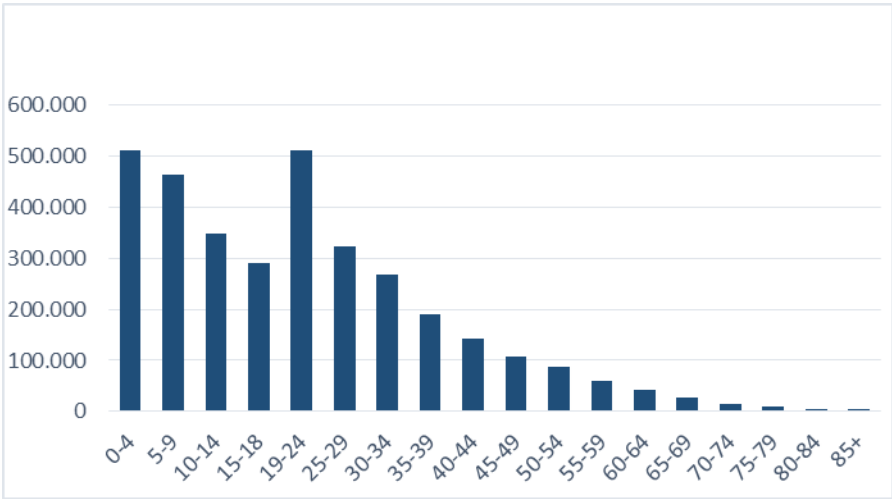
The Turkish national legislation states that all children, including foreigners, have the right to benefit from free basic education (12 mandatory years). Among approximately one million



Syrian school-age children, more than 600 thousand were enrolled in schools in 2017-2018 semesters. That said, even though there has been a significant enrolment number, almost forty per cent have not yet accessed education.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the high number of school-age children, the ratio of the young population is considerably high among Syrian refugees in Turkey. In the uncertain situation, the young people represent the chance for a more sustainable livelihood for their families, and their integration and social cohesion is essential for the stability and security of both their home and their host countries ('Göç ve Uyum Raporu', 2018).

Figure 2: Registered Syrian Refugees in Turkey- Distribution by Age

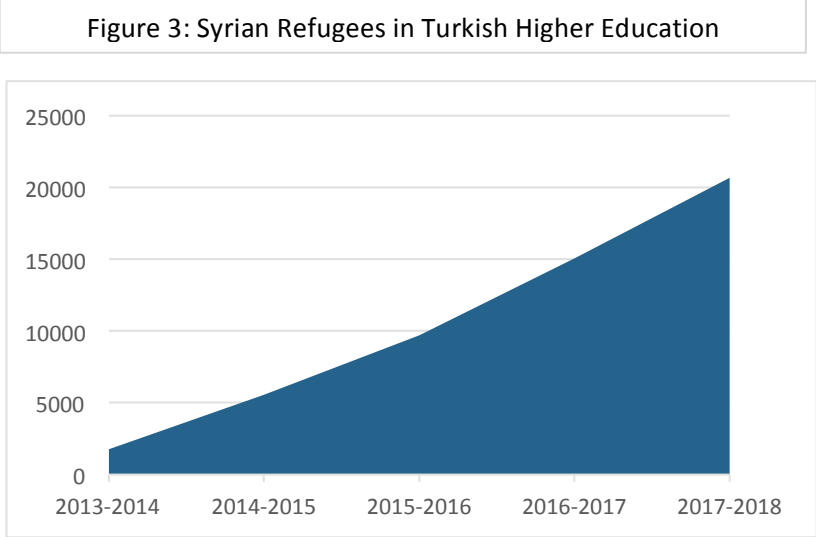


Source: <http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/gocistatistikleri>

Syrians have always been able to enter Turkish universities as international students, and following the increased number of Syrians who have migrated to Turkey due to the ongoing civil war, regulations have changed in the interests of Syrian students. Since 2013–2014, Syrians have been exempted from paying tuition fees unlike other international students and the number of Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities has been increasing each semester. In the 2017–2018 academic year, 20,701 Syrian students have studied in Turkish universities as a part of the total 115 thousand international students in 153 different public and private universities. This number consists of those students who were transferred from

<sup>9</sup> 'Turkey Education Sector | Q1 January- March 2018', 2018.

Syrian universities, and those who completed their high school in Turkey or another country and then entered university in Turkey.



Source: <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

Syrian refugees wishing to enrol in a Turkish university need to submit their identity card, a proof of having completed high school, the results of the Foreign Student’s Examination (YOS) taken by the university in which they wish to enrol, and a proof of language proficiency depending on the instruction language of the course (language courses may be provided after enrolment) (UNHCR, 2018b). Syrian youths can enrol in UNHCR-supported higher education preparation programmes for high school graduates aiming to increase Turkish proficiency before starting universities (UNHCR, 2018c). There are various organisations that provide scholarships to Syrian students who study in universities: the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), UNHCR through the DAFI scholarship programme, and some NGOs such as Sparks. For example, Turkey Scholarship provided by YTB for international students covers – apart from monthly scholarships that vary depending on the level of higher education – flight tickets, university tuition, general health insurance, dormitory fees, and Turkish language courses. In 2018, around five thousand Syrian students have taken advantage of these scholarships.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> ‘We Made a Promise: Ensuring Learning Pathways and Protection for Syrian Children and Youth’, 2018.

Despite all improvements in accessing higher education, it is important to mention that only four per cent of Syrian refugees can continue their tertiary level education in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Before the war more than twenty per cent of Syrian youths were studying at university.<sup>12</sup> In terms of educational achievement and enrolment rate in Syrian universities before the war there was no big difference between males and females (Buckner and Saba, 2010). In Turkey, enrolment rate of Syrian female students (37%) is less than the enrolment rate of their male peers (63%); however, each year more female students enrol in university and the gap decreases. The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) highlights the disequilibrium of attendance rate depending on gender and the importance of increasing female youths' attendance in higher education in consideration of their roles on the integration process.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the number of Syrian refugees attending higher education in their host countries is increasing, it is still far from the pre-conflict situation. Higher education is a crucial tool to empower refugees and to reverse their victimised and marginalised narrative to become individual agents. With higher education, the adaptation of refugees to their new surroundings and their integration into their host societies has accelerated (Zeus, 2011).

### Challenges and Opportunities on Integration through Higher Education

The research focuses on higher education experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey, providing a general picture of the challenges in accessing higher education, on being a university student, and the positive outcomes of being in higher education for the Syrian youths.

Their positive experiences at Turkish universities can be summarised into four main categories. Firstly, the free of charge higher education possibility and scholarship opportunities are mentioned as the main factor for making it possible for them to access university; secondly, studying in Turkey as a whole new experience provides them with the possibility to learn a new language and a different culture, which makes their lives easier in Turkey and broadens their horizons; thirdly, compared to the Syrian education system, the Turkish education system is based on more practical activities that improve their practical knowledge; and fourthly, being a student in higher education affects their personal

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<sup>11</sup> <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi)

<sup>12</sup> 'Syrian Arab Republic- Central Bureau Of Statistics', n.d.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/31875825/Yuksekogretim\\_Kurulu\\_Hatay\\_Konferansi\\_Sonuc\\_Bildirgesi.pdf](http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/31875825/Yuksekogretim_Kurulu_Hatay_Konferansi_Sonuc_Bildirgesi.pdf) (T.C Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2017).

development improving their general motivations and their ability of time management, and provides a higher sense of freedom – especially for female students (Wiebke Hohberger, 2018b).

Apart from these opportunities, young Syrians have faced some challenges when accessing higher education, as well as during their time at university. Financial problems, lack of knowledge of the application process, problems in the preparation of application documents, and academic barriers are the main challenges when entering universities (Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017; Erdoğan, 2017a). Scholarship opportunities are possible both before and after acquiring a place in a Turkish university and they are of vital importance for refugee students to be able to manage during the education period. When they pass the first step of becoming university students, academic concerns and social interactions have been mentioned as the main issues by Syrian youth (Hohberger, 2018a). The lack of academic Turkish proficiency especially can affect their success in the first years, and increasing the possibilities of Turkish language courses has been highlighted in different studies. Lastly, challenges in social life are based on a lack of communication between local and Syrian students due to a language barrier or the perception of the local communities that newcomers are competitors (Wiebke Hohberger, 2018b; Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017), even though the social distance that Syrian students put between their Turkish peers is very low (Erdoğan, 2017a). Syrian university students think that the news in the Turkish media does not reflect the reality and generally marginalises Syrians (Erdoğan, 2017a).

### [Empirical Findings: Being a Syrian Student in a Turkish University](#)

This report presents the results from an investigation that consisted of 25 in-depth interviews conducted with the participants' consent via video calls. My identity as a young person and a foreign student who studies in another country provides me with an insider position during the interviews with Syrian youths and it helps me to create a trusting and warm atmosphere. Twenty interviews were conducted in Turkish and five were conducted in English.

Individuals of different ages have been included and, even though three master students and two graduates also took part on the study, the average age was 23 years old, which clearly indicates the fact that some of them lost some years without education. Although the

number of Syrian female university students (37%) is lower than male students (63%),<sup>14</sup> this study focuses more on female students in order to make their experiences heard.

Figure 4: Interviewees' descriptive data: Age

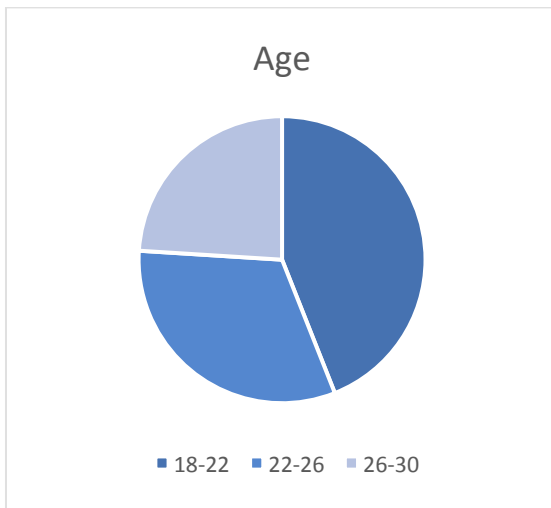
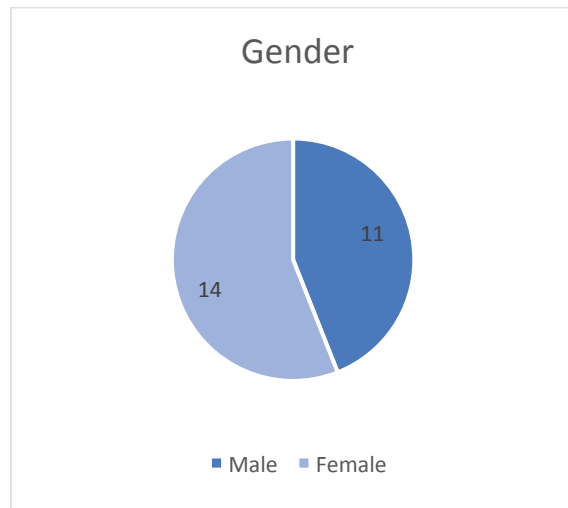


Figure 5: Interviewees' descriptive data: Gender



The interviewees study in universities of ten provinces and from various departments. The majority of them have a Syrian high school diploma, whilst only nine of the interviewees obtained their high school diplomas in Turkey.

Figure 6: Departments of the interviewees

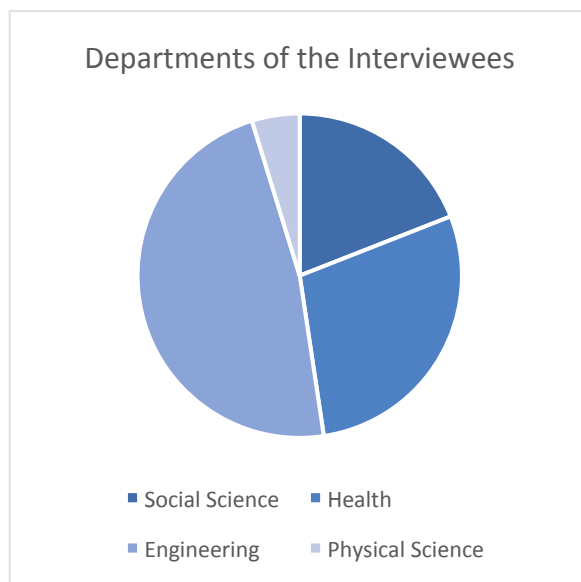


Figure 7: Country of high schools

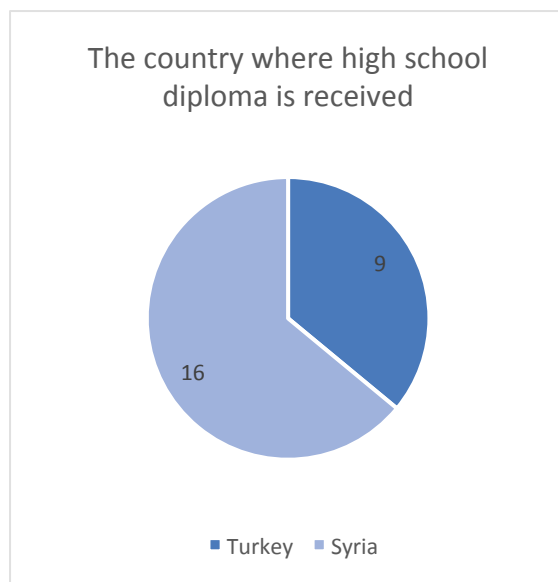


Figure: Interviewees' university departments

Figure: The country of interviewees' high school

This study does not aim to be fully representative but does aim to understand what the main challenges of their integration into the host societies are, particularly when accessing higher

<sup>14</sup> <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> ('Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi', n.d.)

education systems. The findings of this study, focusing on the Syrian university students, cannot be generalised to all society, however, they provide an in-depth understanding of what these challenges could be for those students who enrolled in higher education programmes by listening to their own experiences.

Previous research relating to higher education experiences of Syrians in Turkey has focused on all problems and barriers that Syrian youths have faced while entering and studying in Turkish universities. The objective of this qualitative research is to understand the main challenges that Syrian refugee youths highlight as the most significant barriers for their integration into higher education, as well as the most noteworthy positive side of their study as a university student in Turkey relating to policies focusing on refugees and higher education for Syrians. The findings are analysed according to the refugee integration indicators.

Figure 8: Indicators of Integration



Source: Ager, Alastair, and Alison Strang, 2004. Indicators of Integration: Final Report

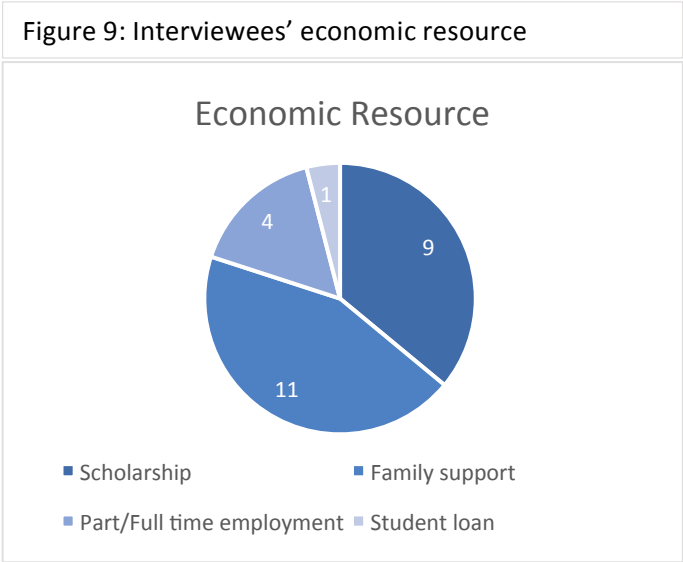
*‘Studying gives my future back to me. I did not have any hope about my future, now I have a future.’ (Male, 23)*

Education is the first step for the integration of youth and child refugees, and it is very important to give their normality back. All of them have hopes and dreams, and being

students helps them to regain their ability to think about their future and being university students makes their lives easier. When they are talking about the future, they have very clear ideas about what they want to do. Providing higher education free of charge as well as the possibility of continuing education, makes Turkey an attractive destination country for Syrians who have been seeking a safe place to be able to continue education. Free higher education is always highlighted as the most positive Turkish policy.

*‘Books, schools, universities; everything is free for Syrians in Turkey. It is very good for us. It was my reason to come to Turkey; to be able to continue my study.’ (Male, 19)*

In spite of the favourable step, students face several problems while accessing their right to free education due to the non-centralised foreign student exam (YÖS), as each university holds a different exam meaning that Syrian refugees need to travel from one university to another one to do the exam and they need to pay the travel costs and examination fees. Moreover, the lack of information about the application process may cause lost years, whilst the cost of the Turkish language courses is hardly covered. The first economic resource is family support; however, in several cases families cannot afford to cover the costs of educational needs of all siblings. Scholarship opportunities are very important for them to be able to continue their education in Turkey, especially for the female youths.



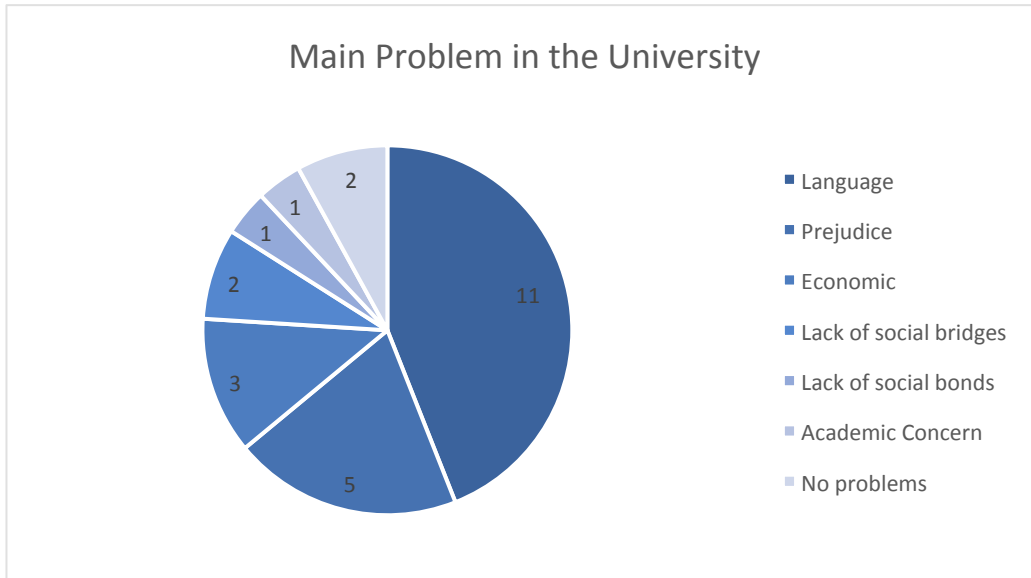
*‘If I did not have a scholarship, I could not continue my education.’ (Female, 19)*

*‘My brother is working. He could not continue his education here because of economic hardships. Thanks to the scholarship I can go to university.’ (Female, 21)*

Aside from accessing Turkish universities as a first step, integration through higher education is the main focus of this report. When one asks them about the most important challenge

during their university period, language is generally mentioned as the main challenge, followed by prejudice.

Figure 10: Interviewees' Main Problems in the University



*'Besides the language difficulties everything is fine.'* (Female, 22)

*'At the day of the exam I could not understand the meaning of the questions, that's why I answered them wrong and I failed the exam.'* (Male, 22)

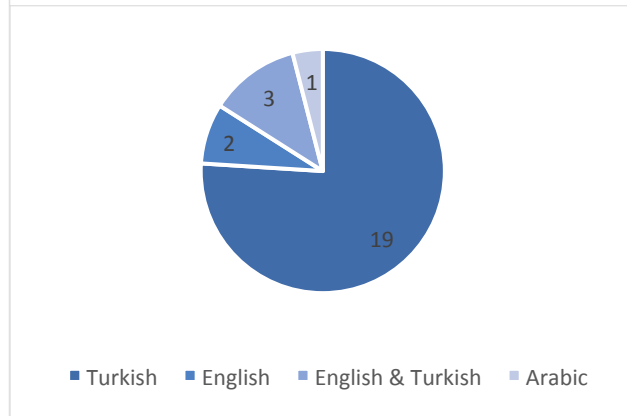
*'The underlying reason of the all problems is not sharing a common language. We could not talk to each other, we could not explain why we came here.'* (Male, 26)

Almost half mentioned that 'language' is the most significant obstruction, especially during the first years, not only as it creates problems for fulfilling their academic objectives but also as it makes it more difficult to enter into a dialogue with their Turkish peers. Even though the Syrian students attended a language course or preparatory classes for one year before starting university, they generally share the classes with other Arabic students, which decreases the opportunity to practice Turkish. Moreover, although they finish an advance Turkish language class, this level is not enough to understand Turkish in an academic environment due to the specialised vocabulary required that is not learned in a standard language course.



In some cases, the language of instruction is not Turkish. Learning Turkish is much harder for those who study in English or Arabic and it may create problems both inside and outside of university. Furthermore, locals' lack of foreign languages (mainly English) decreases the possibility to communicate in another language.

Figure 11: Interviewees' medium of instruction in the universities



The interviewees often mentioned that their Turkish proficiency has improved thanks to their university life, because in addition to taking classes in Turkish, they have the opportunity to use Turkish more often than the other Syrians who have not attended university. Language is essential for creating an intercultural dialogue between locals and Syrian students. If

there is not a common language, the possibilities to have an intercultural dialogue are almost non-existent.

*'Every time you have a conversation, you cannot continue because of language barrier.'* (Female, 22)

Universities play a paradoxical role in the lives of refugee youths. They may be places where refugees can learn how to negotiate a new culture, however, at the same time they are highly aware of their 'foreignness' (Mosselson, 2007). Interviewees often mentioned two different exclusive identities when they were defining the reasons for the barriers: being a foreign student and being a Syrian. The two dimensions of 'otherness' make their situation more complex. To define migrants as 'other' immediately labels them as 'the problem' (Strang and Ager, 2010).

The interviewees have frequently mentioned that they face negative discourses shaped by false facts and by the image of marginalised Syrians appearing in media. Exclusionary and discriminatory behaviours are caused by generalisation and faulty assumptions (Bello, 2017). The socially constructed pre-judgments and false facts spreading in media – such as the widely spread false fact that Syrians can enter university without any examination – stonewall the possibility of building a strong social binding, especially during the first year of

university. The type of prejudice that interviewees have faced at their universities is generally utilitarian prejudice, depending on the idea that the presence of migrants will worsen the country's conditions for economic factors (Bello, 2017) or will increase the competition to access the labour market.

*'Sometimes some of my classmates say to me "If you get a job, you will take our place".'* (Female, 25)

It is important to note that interviewees do not generalise Turkish people as one single group. On the contrary, they talk about 'some' Turkish students: 'some' of the local students have helped them from the beginning of their university lives in Turkey, 'some' students have negative attitudes based on different types of prejudice. They emphasise that generalisations tend to be false but that for some locals, the fact of getting to know 'a good Syrian image' is not enough to break the generalisations created by the media and prejudice. Apart from the utilitarian prejudice, cultural or ethnic prejudice are confronted in their daily lives and in university.

*'One of the friend said that "You are the only Syrian who I like". What should I say? Should I say "thanks"?'* (Male, 24)

Prejudice is the second most mentioned significant challenge that influences their university lives, and it deserves more attention to overcome the attitudes and to preclude transformation of the attitudes to the action of discrimination. The loss of feelings of safety and security is deepened by the loss of daily routine and lack of future orientation in refugee situations, and schooling provides the feeling of safety and the hope for a positive future for many refugee students (Mosselson 2007). If they face prejudice attitudes and even discrimination because of their identity during university, a period where the identity construction process is very important (Sarup 1996), it is possible that it will cause severe problems for their future.

Creating bridges to other communities supports social cohesion and opens up opportunities to extend cultural understanding; that is essential to establish the 'two-way' interaction at the heart of the integration (Ager and Strang, 2004). University provides a place for Syrian youths to interact with their Turkish and international peers. Due to the interaction with

their peers, they have learned the local culture and traditions that they always mention as being very similar to their own.

*'University students will have a significant role on social coherence. We can communicate with the (Turkish) society. We have learned culture and language.'*  
(Female, 25).

Some interviewees mentioned that some activities and university accommodations are segregated depending on the student status – domestic or international. Even though they appreciate and value the activities that universities, municipalities and governments organise for Syrian and other international students, segregation is understood as an obstacle for creating social bridging.

In addition, social bonds are also crucial for integration, they are understood as a sense of belonging to a particular group (Ager and Strang, 2004). There are lots of Syrian students' groups and organisations that make information available about the university application process, scholarship opportunities and accommodation possibilities, which is very useful for Syrian refugees. Thus, social media especially is used as an information tool.

Syrian youths are becoming more informed each year about the process; when the first newcomers tried to enter university, it was harder due to the lack of information sources. Lack of information and lack of clear information sources were mentioned more often by the first newcomers than the most recent ones. Nowadays, older siblings, friends or social media groups help Syrian youths with the process.

*'My older brother who entered to university before me helped me for the applications.'* (Male, 19)

*'We are informed about the scholarships and other opportunities by Facebook groups.'* (Female 25)

Syrian student clubs and organisations, which almost all Syrian students attend, help the new students at the university. Moreover, having friends from the same community makes them feel more comfortable and not all alone in a foreign environment – connection within their community is even more essential for the female youths.

As mentioned above, temporary protection provides almost the same rights as the refugee status, but it creates uncertainty in their lives and regulations to access the labour market are not the same as for the citizens. Citizenship is seen as a step to enter the labour market in Turkey or as a way to build their future in a different country. One-fourth of the interviewees have already been naturalised and another quarter are in the process stage, according to the article of exceptional citizenship in the Turkish citizenship law. This result shows that governmental policies aiming to give the Turkish citizenship to educated Syrians are effective. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they have been invited to conduct interviews for their citizenship just because they are university students.

### Conclusions and Recommendations:

Through empirical findings, supported by previous research, this policy report highlights the main challenges of refugee integration, and particularly their access to higher education programmes. In spite of the positive and supportive policies of the Turkish government to promote refugees' integration into the Turkish education system – from primary school to higher education – Syrian youths face several challenges through their educational experiences. The findings of this study suggest that language is the main challenge at different stages of refugees' experiences of access to higher education programmes, followed by prejudice and negative stereotypes that refugees' experience in their daily interaction with local students. This was mentioned in several interviews and it significantly affects the construction of 'otherness': being both a foreigner and a Syrian in the university field of Turkey. The case study only focuses on the youth who access the tertiary level of education to understand the problems that they face in their integration process into the higher education field, which is a space that provides great possibility for interaction between newcomers and locals. Integration is 'a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation, by refugees and by the societies that receive them' (Sorgen, 2015). It is important to understand the current situation from a refugee perspective to create more effective integration policies not only to increase their chances of accessing tertiary education but also to create an atmosphere for mutual accommodation between both locals and newcomers.

On the basis of the empirical findings, the following policy recommendations are listed under three main categories:

1. Differentiate categories of refugees and their different needs:

- Creating diverse policies to meet the needs of each group among refugees is very important as 'refugees' are not a homogenous group. Youths are often overlooked as a social group with their particular needs, including differences between women and men. This social group needs more attention in order to empower them through education to become self-sufficient individual agents and promote sustainable solutions for their future. Due to the lower university enrolment rate of female refugees, the gendered nature of experiences in higher education needs more consideration. Policies addressing gender-specific challenges on all education trajectories are necessary to decrease the disparity in attendance rate at university between female and male. For instance, scholarship opportunities are more important to continue in higher education for female students. Indeed, providing more scholarships for female youths is important to ensure equal access for all women and men to tertiary education.
- Increasing international cooperation and sharing the responsibility of educating refugees is necessary to promote higher education for the youth in host countries. Putting more effort into achieving inclusive and quality education for all and promoting life-long learning as a part of the 'sustainable development goals' are fundamental in host countries. To facilitate access to higher education for newcomers, they need to be informed about the process, be guided through it, and supported with scholarships. It is significant to involve young men and women refugees in the policy development process and give space to hear their own ideas and experiences.

2. Eliminating linguistic barriers:

- In Turkey, the most emphasised challenge for young newcomers in higher education is the language. Even though they receive an advance Turkish language certificate, the lack of the ability of self-expression in Turkish and academic Turkish proficiency affects their university success and more importantly their social integration. In addition to increasing and extending the opportunities to access Turkish language courses, it is key to improve the quality of the courses and to add academic Turkish classes as a part of the courses. During university years, especially in the first year,

academic Turkish class might be opened as an elective course for the newcomers to improve their academic knowledge of the Turkish language.

- Language and cultural exchange activities that complement formal language learning with oral communication with peers are good options to improve language skills in Turkish universities. Promoting exchange activities does not only increase the possibilities of language practice for both local and refugee students, but also encourages intercultural dialogue that helps individuals to develop a deeper understanding of cultural practices, to foster mutual understanding, to promote tolerance and mutual respect, and to reduce prejudice and stereotypes (Barrett, 2013).
3. Help to improve the perceptions of Syrian refugees, by counteracting the negative stereotypes with good examples or improving the possibilities of interaction between refugees and local students:
- Promoting evidence-based public discourse and good communication strategies is significant to eliminate the false facts and generalisations about Syrians that cause problems on the two-way integration and social acceptance of newcomers into the host society. Right-based discourse is essential for dealing with the victimised, marginalised discourse of Syrians. The role of the state is to create inclusive societies, particularly through development of inclusive public media and inclusive education programmes (Bello, 2017).
  - The creation of a centralised university entrance exam and application system would make the process less complicated and the results more reliable for Syrian refugees. Furthermore, increasing the visibility of the exam and informing locals about the application and examination process that Syrian students follow in order to enter higher education is likely to eliminate misunderstanding and the controversial discourse that 'Syrians enter universities without exam'.
  - Creating spaces to increase interaction between Syrian students and local students in education is crucial, and they will be a bridge between both societies that will share a mutual future. For example, more joint events could be organised, and mentor or buddy programmes could be implemented to make newcomers' integration easier

into the university and to promote social bridging between local and newcomer students.

- Cooperation in sharing best practices among Turkish universities and also cooperation with universities from other countries that have specific policies and experiences in integration between local and refugee/migrant students is important to develop efficient policies to promote intercultural dialogue, while increasing inter group contacts within universities.

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