

Access, Qualifications and Social Dimension of Syrian Refugee Students in Turkish Higher Education

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Abstract

Forced migration has been a crucial social phenomenon in the last decade. It has inevitable impacts on higher education in the world and EHEA in particular. Since 2011 the Syrian refugee population living in Turkey increased to 3.3 million, which makes Turkey the country having the most refugee population in the world. As of April 2017, 14,740 Syrian students were enrolled in 140 Turkish higher education institutions. However succeeding in enrolling has been a challenging experience for both the students and the Turkish universities in terms of recognition of the qualifications.

This paper, which aims to investigate the access routes, qualifications and social dimension of the Syrian refugees studying in Turkish Universities, is based on quantitative data gathered during a research called Elite-dialogue completed in May 2017. The field research involved 497 university students who participated in the interviews, of whom 395 filled in the online interviews and 102 participated in the face to face interviews during workshops in four cities (İstanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep and Mardin). The questions were designed to learn about their academic and social inclusion into Turkish higher education. Therefore the interviews consisted of questions relating to their academic background to understand if they attended or received any degree at home. The interviews covered also their experience in accessing Turkish universities, the quality of the education experience, their qualifications and the barriers they have faced so far. Lastly, the financial and social conditions they face, the social, financial and academic level of their family; and their future plans for employment were investigated.

New legislative rules and implementations, new understanding of the access routes in a centralized higher education system, new approaches to the recognition of prior learning, new programs to overcome language barriers and to keep the quality high have been the challenges that Turkey has been facing in the last five years. The findings of the research, analyzed in the paper, will contribute to overcome the new challenges of refugees in higher education in Turkey and in the EHEA.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on the findings of the “Elite Dialogue” project which was designed and implemented as a comprehensive and multi-layer study on Syrian academicians and higher education students in Turkey in 2017. Considering the numbers and tendency of Syrians to stay in Turkey, this paper argues that the qualified young groups, higher education students within the refugee population must be involved to set up the inclusive, comprehensive and long-term adaptation policies. This group has a potential for bridging the Turkish and Syrian communities; their profile, expectations and challenges must be investigated in order to create data based new policies.

Although the research focused on two target groups in the higher education: Syrian academics and students, only the study with the students will be discussed in this paper. The main question of the survey was “how do the Syrian higher education students adapt in the Turkish higher education system and in Turkish society”. More specifically the research tried to find out what their academic and social profile are, what challenges they face and what expectations they have so that some recommendations for the new policies can be suggested. As Turkey has a young population and accessing higher education is a highly competitive for all high school graduates; young group of Syrian refugees need to be dealt with delicately. They have potential to be mediators between their community and Turkish society, since majority of the refugees in Turkey have lower educational background. Secondly, Turkish higher education system is already the second biggest one in the EHEA in terms of student numbers. Adding some thousands of Syrian students to the system is a big challenge in terms of capacity and quality. Therefore this research aimed to contribute to better understand the profile, qualifications and expectations of the Syrian students already admitted into the system. A survey was conducted with 497 Syrian higher education students and of 395 surveys qualified to be evaluated, which makes this survey the most extended one done with the Syrian students so far in Turkey.

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY¹

The Syrian crisis, which has been identified as “the biggest migration wave in recent history” by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), began with the demonstrations and protests in Syria, which then turned into serious conflict and later into a civil war. Number of Syrians fleeing from this war atmosphere initially to neighboring countries has exceeded 6 million in the six years between April 2011 and July 2017. In Syria with a population of 22.4 million in April 2011, at least 465 thousand people were killed, hundreds of thousands of people were injured, more than 6 million people left Syria, and 7-8 million were forced to move within the country. This uncommonly high number shows that in the last five years, at least 25% of Syrians were forced to leave their country. The total number of refugees in Turkey in November 2017 is over 3.5 million.² This makes up 4.5% of Turkey’s 80-million-population. Majority of the refugees live all around Turkey as can be seen in the map below and only %8 live in the camps established in the region.³

¹ This study uses the concept of “refugee” for Syrians in Turkey, regardless of legal-administrative context in Turkey, realizing that they are not legally “refugees”, and as a concept reflecting the situation better in a sociological sense. Legal framework in Turkey and the reasons for this use are addressed in the section titled “Legal and Administrative Regulations on Refugees”.

² http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/duzensiz-goc_363_378_4710_icerik

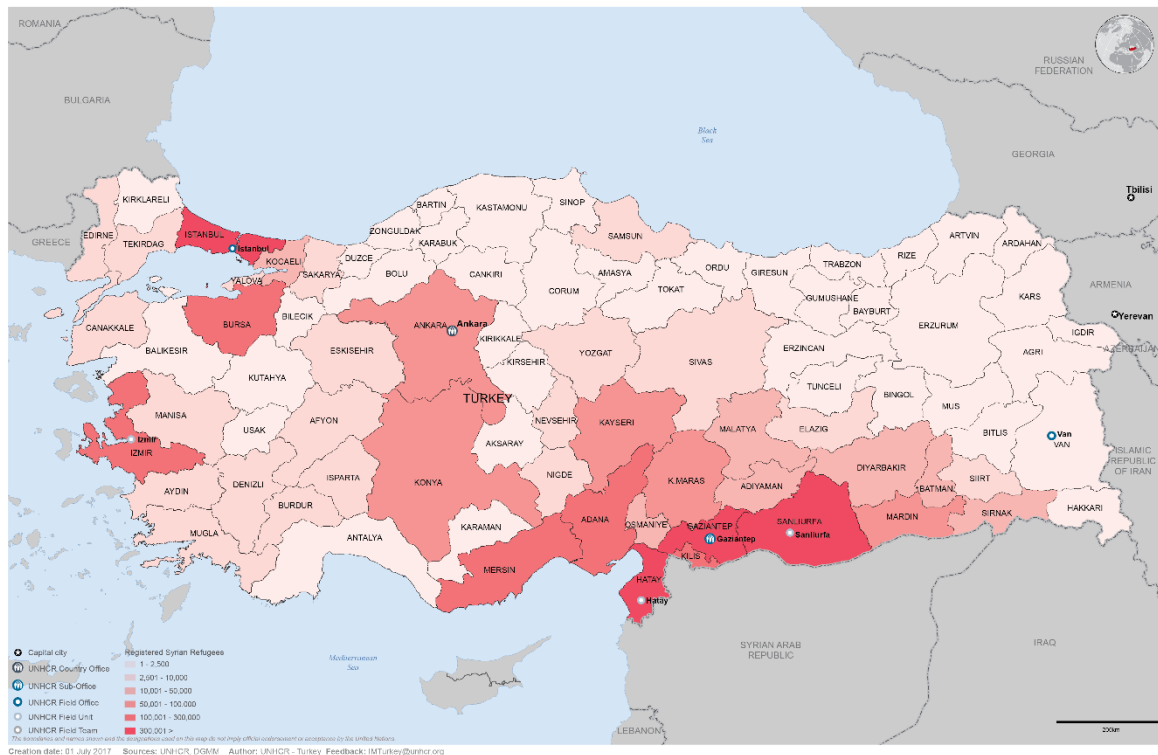
³ M. Erdogan,

Provincial Breakdown of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Turkey

Provincial Breakdown Syrian Refugees in Turkey

as of 29 June 2017



UNHCR: July 2017 / <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATIONS ON REFUGEES

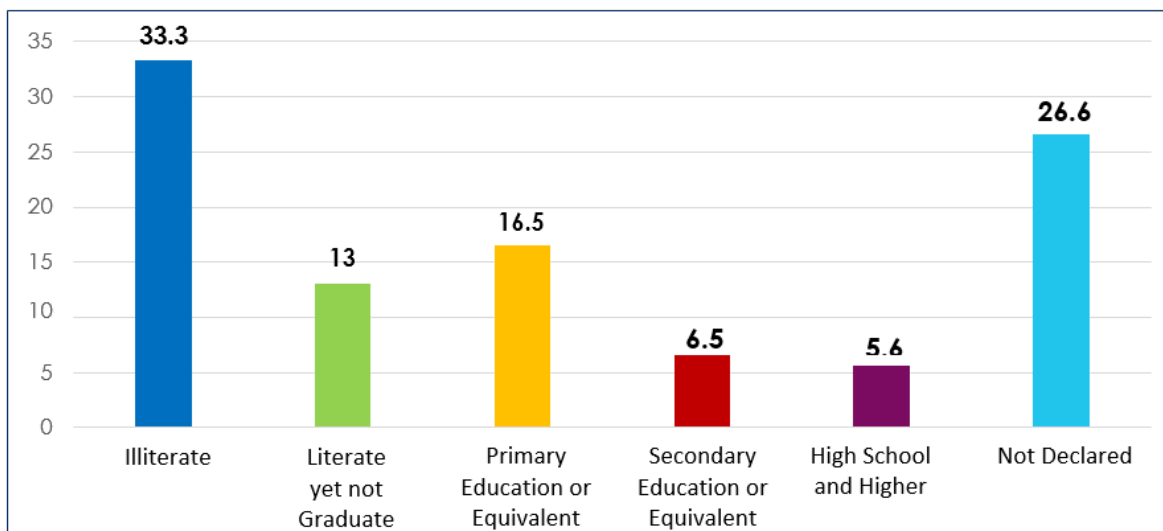
The UN defines refugee as “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”. Developing this status in international context was mainly affected by the human tragedy experienced in World War II. 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights uses the phrase “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” (Article 14/1). When the reasons for people seeking asylum in another country are justified, “refugee” status is granted. The legal status of refugees in international arena is determined by 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 “Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”. Two important exemptions were given to signatory countries on the validity of the convention, one regarding history (except from those experienced before 1951 or at all times), and geographical area. International liabilities of Turkey around asylum seekers and refugees are also determined under “**The 1951 Refugee Convention**” and “**The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees**”⁴. With a declaration in 1961, Turkey, one of the first countries to sign Geneva Convention, stated that “geographical limitations” shall be applied, meaning that whatever the reason is Turkey shall not accept people coming from outside of Europe as “refugees”. Many signatory countries of 1951 Convention used this exemption for a while, and afterwards left this practice by choosing “situation” over “country of origin”. National legislation amended after the Syrian crises “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” which constitutes Turkey’s legal infrastructure on migration and refugees in 2013, and Temporary Protection Regulation (2014), adopt this geographical limitation principle, which means that, under the current legal regulations in Turkey, regardless of the situations they are in, people who are in Turkey and in fact defined as “refugees” by international law are not considered as refugees officially in Turkey. Legal status of Syrians in Turkey is “temporary protection” under the latest “Temporary Protection Regulation”. The Regulation gives the sense of “well-meant support from the host for the guests - within the bounds of possibility”, rather than “rights” of refugees and involved liabilities of the state.

According to the data at hand, educational backgrounds of Syrians in Turkey⁵ 33.3% of Syrians in Turkey are illiterate, and 13% are literate without a school degree. 25.6% of Syrians chose not to make any statements on their educational backgrounds. 16.5% of Syrians in Turkey are primary or equivalent school graduates, 6.5% are secondary or equivalent school graduates, and 5.6% hold high school diplomas or higher degrees. The “unknown” 26.6% in this table will probably be added to lower education level. There is serious doubt on the reliability of this information gathered during the registration process executed by DGMM.

⁴ The 1951 Refugee Convention: <http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>

⁵ Ministry of Development (March 2016) Turkish Ministry of Development Ministry, “First Stage Need Assessment Covering 2016-2018 Period for Syrians with Temporary Protection Status in Turkey” March 2016, p.7

Syrians uTP in Turkey according to their Educational Statuses (%) March 2015



Source: Turkish Ministry of Development Ministry, “First Stage Need Assessment Covering 2016-2018 Period for Syrians with Temporary Protection Status in Turkey” March 2016, p.7

RESEARCH ON SYRIAN STUDENTS IN TURKISH UNIVERSITIES

The main goal of the “Elite Dialogue” project is to understand the evaluations of Syrian college students regarding their education programs, social and economic surroundings, integration attitudes and future expectations. How do they like their universities? What kind of challenges they were faced with when applying and registering? What are their main difficulties at the moment? What are their plans for the future in terms of preferred location and their economic and political expectations from their home and host countries? What are their integration attitudes or their interest in becoming citizens? What are their relations with Turkish students in terms of social distance or inclusion? These are some of the questions we sought answers in this study.

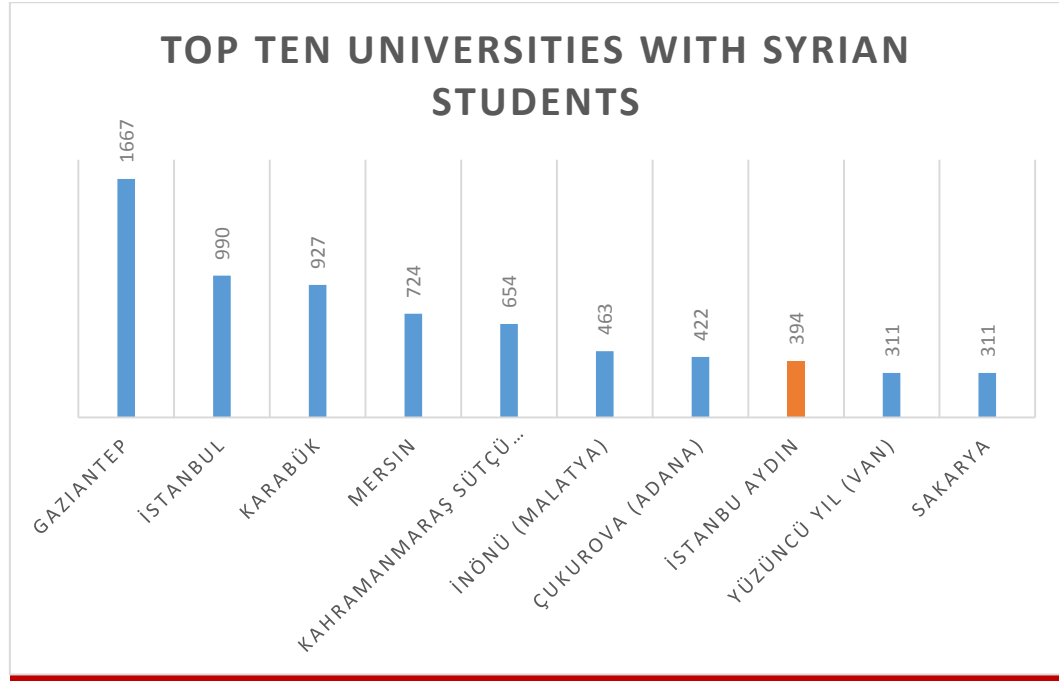
An online survey was designed to be implemented through a SurveyMonkey module. The survey was announced mostly through social media i.e. facebook, twitter, whatsapp. Syrian student group page admins of several universities were contacted to reach the individual students. A snowball sample with several interventions were used in order to approximate the actual distribution of Syrian college students across Turkey. For these interventions, a multitude of methods were employed including asking assistance of Syrian and Turkish students and professors at these universities. Also, several NGOs such as SGDD and Hilalder and language schools such as DILMER assisted with announcing the survey to a variety of student groups.

SYRIANS STUDENTS IN TURKISH UNIVERSITIES

According to data from November 2017 provided by YÖK number of Syrian students studying in 140 public and foundation universities in Turkey is 15.000 (9700 Male, 5300 female).⁶ Actual ratio of Syrians in Turkey who has studied at a university or graduated from one is expected to be under 2%. This is critical in terms of future projections and integration policies. It is understood that 86.7% of these

⁶ Council of Higher Education (YÖK): www.yok.gov.tr & <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

students study in public universities, whereas 13.2% study in private foundation universities.⁷ Although there are Syrian students studying in 140 universities, 46.4% of these students are studying in only 10 of these universities, and 65% are gathered in only 11 cities. Gaziantep University alone hosts 11.2% of these Syrian students, and İstanbul alone hosts 21.8%.



In 2013, various measures were taken by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) regarding the students from the countries in which education cannot be pursued due to violence and crisis. The following decisions were taken regarding transfer/recognition of undergraduate degrees for those students who attended undergraduate programs (except for Medicine and Dentistry programs) before 2013-2014 academic year in Syria or Egypt:

1. If students present documentation required for recognition unit, they can be transferred to the Turkish HE institutions
2. Undergraduate applications shall be assessed and admitted by the higher education institutions (provided that such applications do not exceed 10% of ÖSYS quota of the applied department in the respective year to protect the balance of the national students)
3. Students, who cannot present documentation shall take courses as **special students** at the 7 universities in the region (Gaziantep, Kilis 7 Aralık, Harran, Mustafa Kemal, Osmaniye Korkut Ata, Çukurova, and Mersin).⁹

⁷ Information regarding the numbers of students studying at universities in Turkey holding “Temporary Protection” and “Residence Permit” could not be found. Soon, “denizens” will be added to these categories. Distinguishing these categories is critical in planning the future. Systems in universities and YÖKSİS should be structured in a way to reflect this distinction.

⁸ Council of Higher Education (YÖK): www.yok.gov.tr & <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

⁹ See: Council of Higher Education Announcements http://yok.gov.tr/web/guest/anasayfa/-/asset_publisher/64ZMbZPZISi4/content/suriye-ve-m%C4%B1s%C4%B1r-ulkelerinden-yurdumuzda-bulunan-yuksekokretim-kurumlar%C4%B1na-yatay-gecis;jsessionid=190E403FCFECAAFCAF9DAE4647F3CA99?redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fyok.gov.tr%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fanasayfa%3Bjsessionid%3D190E403FCFECAAFCAF9DAE4647F3CA99%3Fp_id%3D101_INSTANCE_64ZMbZPZISi4%26p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_state%3Dnormal%26p_mode%3Dview%26p_col_id%3Dcolumn-3%26p_col_count%3D1 (Last access: 25/10/2016)

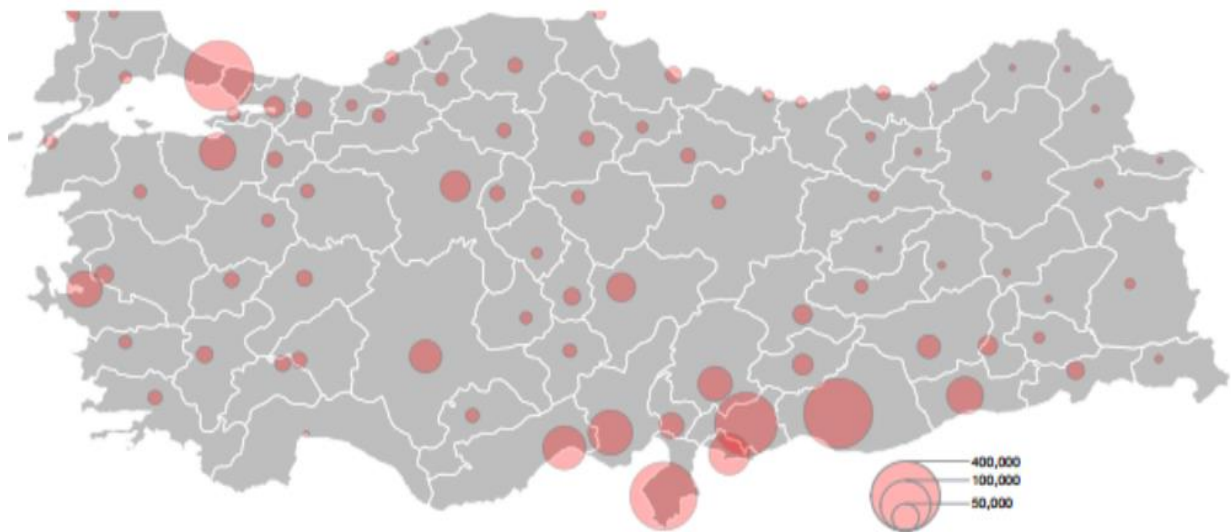
It is decided that programs in Turkish and/or in a foreign language can be opened in the above-mentioned universities. It is also decided that students who cannot present the required documents but applying for the second or third years can be accepted according to the results of proficiency tests held by these universities.

In Turkey since 2011 tuition fees for Turkish citizens were removed. Council of Ministers decided that for 2012-2013 academic year, tuition fees for Syrian students enrolling to an institution through application to foreign student quotas shall be covered from the budget of the public institution called Turks Abroad and Related Communities Presidency budget. For the later years the tuition fees of the Syrian students "Decree on Determining Student Contributions to Current Service Costs in Higher Education Institutions and Tuition Fees for 2014-2015 Academic Year" titled Council of Ministers decree published in 27/09/2014 dated Official Gazette state that in accordance with principles determined by Council of Higher Education, tuition fees to be paid by Syrian students who continue their education within the period of the program or shall enroll to daytime education and open education programs shall be covered from The Public Institution called "Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities" budget.

Survey and the Key Findings

The survey started was implemented between January and March 2017. As already stated 497 students across the country participated, of whom 395 took the online survey and the remaining 102 took the hardcopy survey the researchers conducted in Istanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep and Mardin during the workshops. The demographic features of the participants are consistent with the actual distribution of Syrians across universities, 35% of the participants were female and 65% male. The resulting sample was highly representative of this distribution, as evidenced in the following graph.

Distribution of the students in the sample



The average age of the participants is 23.15 which also indicates that most of these students dropped out of their higher education before coming. When we asked them if they attended to a university level in Syria 45.47 % answered yes.

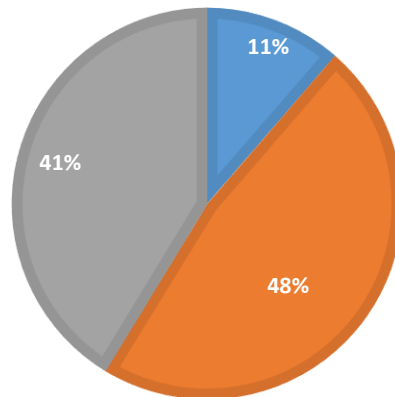
The survey questions have been divided into four parts namely to search about post-war vulnerabilities, family background, academic qualifications and socio-economic conditions and expectations.

- **Post-war vulnerabilities:**

To start with the findings about their post war vulnerabilities, we asked them how often they feel depressed remembering the war in Syria about 60% indicated that they still suffer from these complaints.

FEELING TRAUMA AFTER WAR

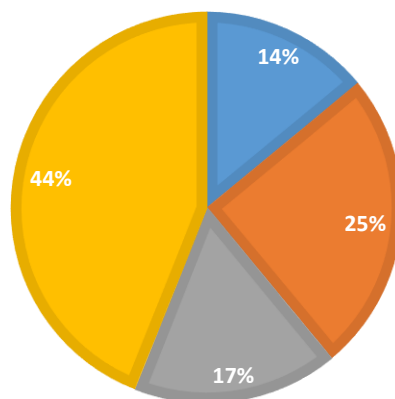
■ Frequently ■ Sometimes ■ Never



In order to have an idea about the substance of this trauma, we asked them about their losses in war. Only 14% of our respondents did not loss anybody around them during the war, while 60% lost either a distant or a close relative, and 25% lost a friend. This makes the student population represented in the survey highly vulnerable in terms of their memories during the war.

LOSS OF FAMILY/FRIENDS DURING WAR

■ Noone ■ Friend ■ Distant Relative ■ Close relative



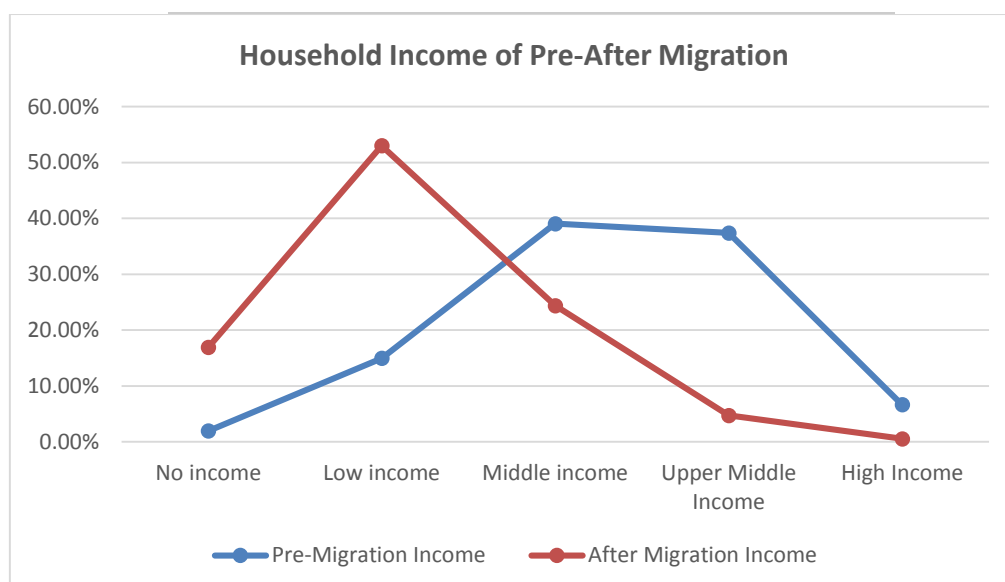
- Family background:**

When we asked them about the location of their family members we get a result indicating a very dispersed family diaspora. Accordingly, 89% of those in our sample still have family in Syria and 78% of the participants stated that any member of the family live outside of Turkey and Syria.

In order to understand whether there is a relation between educational statuses of parents it appears that 21.3% of students have parents having higher education degrees. Percentage of men (fathers) (30.87%) is higher than that of women (mothers) (7.65). No family members with higher education

degree is quite high 40%. Educational statuses of siblings paint a similar picture. Approximately 54% of siblings of Syrian college students participating in the research have attended to higher education.

Answer Choices–	Responses–
Both parents went to college	21.37% 81
Only mother went to college	7.65% 29
Only father went to college	30.87% 117
None of them	40.11% 152
Total	379



- Academic qualifications**

37.75% of Syrian students participating in the survey stated that they can speak Turkish at an advanced level, and 41% of them at intermediate level. The high percentage of this result has two reasons; one is that they attended TOMER (Turkish language) course after their enrollment, the other is that some participants are from the Turkmen origin for whom Turkish is a native language. Students who can speak advanced English is 31%, French is 4.6%; and about a quarter of the students indicated that they can speak other languages such as Kurdish, German, Russian etc.

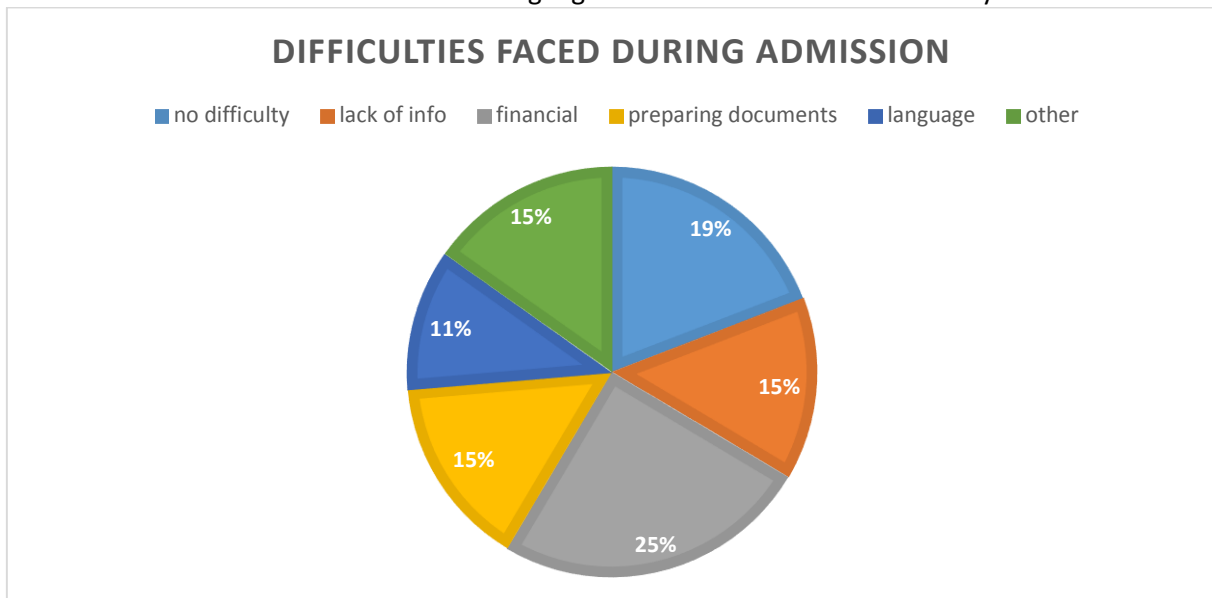
How well do you speak these languages?

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	TOTAL
Arabic	0.49% 2	1.72% 7	97.79% 398	407
Turkish	21.25% 85	41.00% 164	37.75% 151	400
English	20.55% 82	47.87% 191	31.58% 126	399

French		81.09% 193	14.29% 34	4.62% 11	238
Other German Japanese	Kurdish Ottoman	33.33% 35	20.00% 21	46.67% 49	105

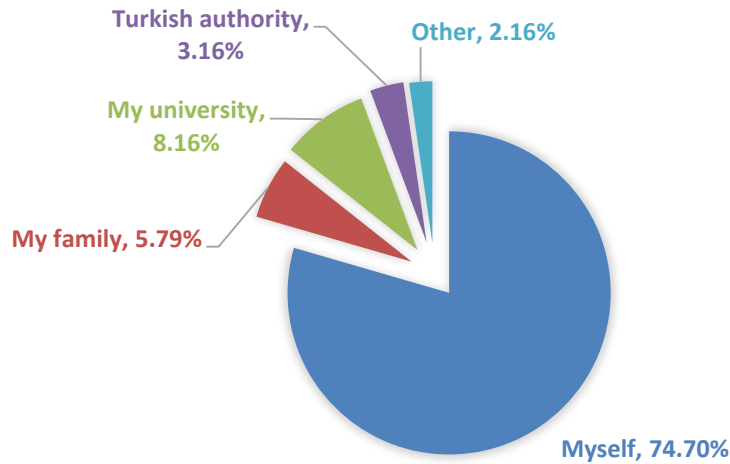
There is a very visible income gap when pre-and after migration household income is compared. The welfare level of Syrian refugee students has dropped dramatically after migration indicated by the high income skewed normal distribution of their household income has heavily shifted towards lower income levels. As a result of this many students find themselves in the labor market either to support their families or their studies.

Syrian college students participating in the research were asked about the kind of difficulties they encountered when registering for colleges in Turkey. Only 19% of these students stated that they did not encounter any difficulties, however, it is understood that there are two main problems regarding this process, one is paying tuition fees and the other is gathering the required documents. Again, we see that lack of information sources and language barriers as other difficulties they face.



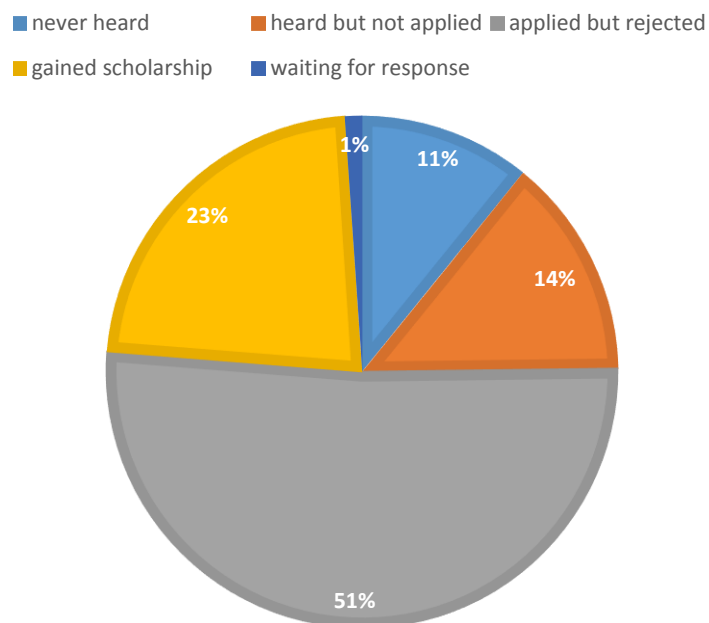
When we asked the students 74% of Syrian students participating in the research chose their field of study based on their own decisions. This is very important and positive in terms of student's motivation. 8.1% of these students stated that the university chose their field of study, which is due to the student and field quotas of certain universities.

CHOSING THE FIELD OF STUDY



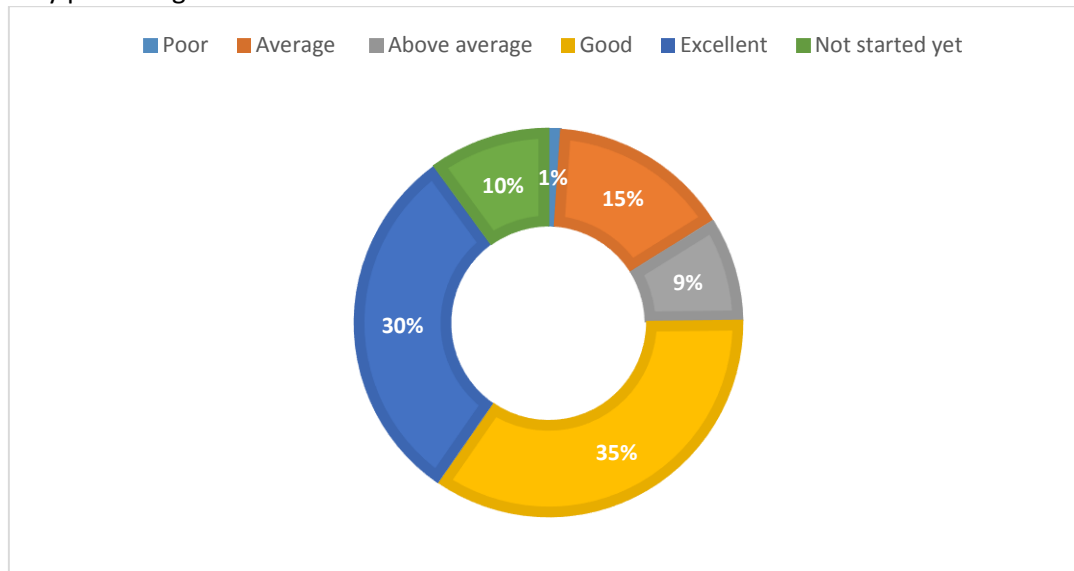
22.6% of Syrian college students participating in the research stated that they are beneficiaries of a scholarship. This ratio is consistent with the national average of Turkey. Turkish government gives approximately 3,500 scholarships using its own and international resources. With 14,740 students, this number corresponds to 23.7%. This response is critical for the reliability and representative quality of our research. 51,45% of Syrian college students participating in the research stated that they applied for a scholarship but were rejected, whereas around 23% of them stated that they never applied for a scholarship. It is very important to support Syrian students coming from Syria with no financial resources so that they can continue their education and disseminate the information regarding these scholarships.

Scholarships from Turkish government



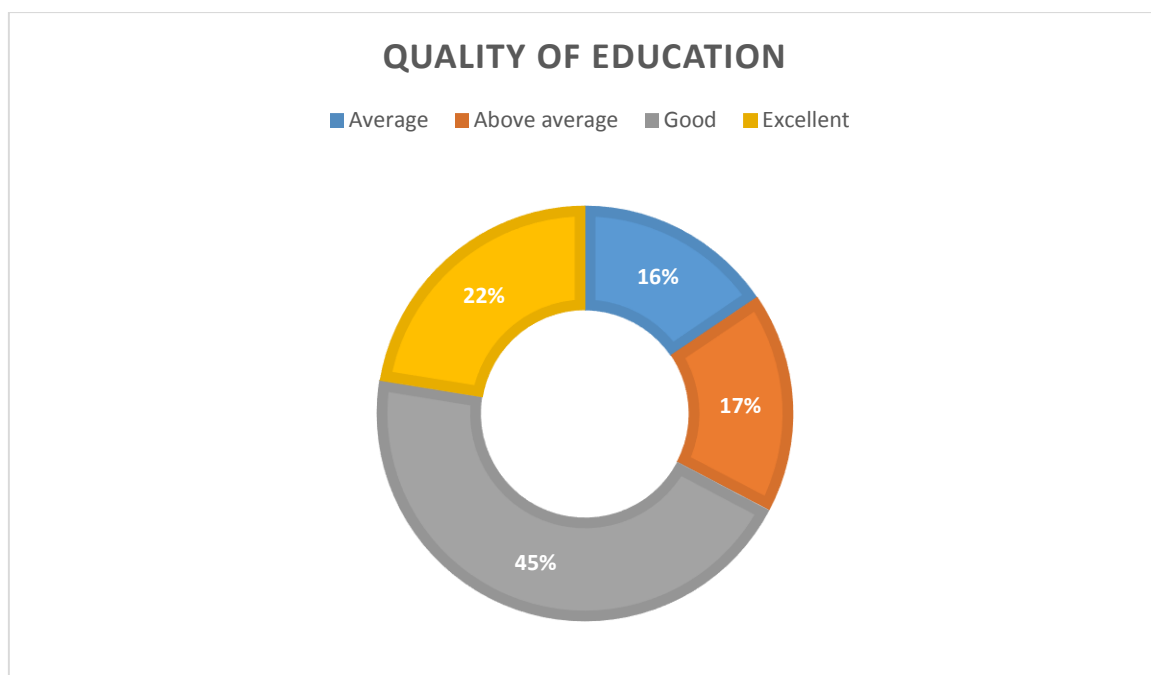
Success Levels in the Courses

Academic standings of Syrian students participating in the research in the last few years are rather promising. Of the participants, 75% of students stated that their success levels are “average”, “good”, or “excellent”. Students considering their success as “poor” is only 1%, those saying “average” is 15%. This level of success achieved despite very difficult conditions and a serious language barrier is indeed very promising.



Quality of Education

A major part of Syrian college students participating in the survey (64%) appear to be satisfied with the quality of education given in their departments in Turkey. Still, 20% of students seem dissatisfied with the quality of education, indicating the need for assessing what informs this lack of satisfaction.



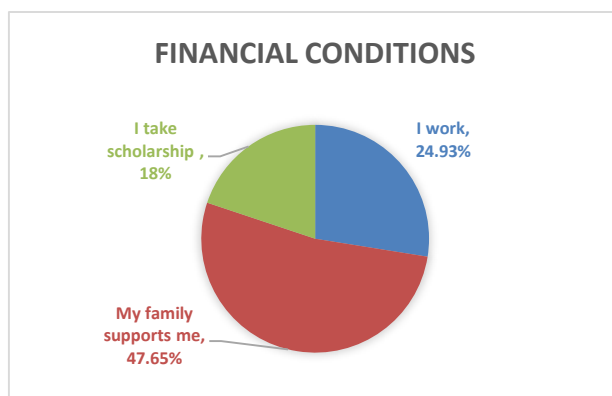
- **Social Integration and Future Expectations**

In order to discover how happy and adapted Syrian students in Turkey feel, the research tried to discover social relationships and asked the participants about their relationships with their Turkish and Arab friends. More than 50% of Syrian college students participating in the research stated that they have good and excellent relationships with Turks, and 40% of them expressed bad relationships. The “good relationships” between this same group of students and other Arabs, including Syrians is 80%, the relationships between these groups defined as bad is 11%. This might be because Syrian students have not yet socialized with Turks fully. However, language barrier and significant obstacles due to cultural differences should be kept in mind.

	SOCIAL RELATIONS					
	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very good	
How is your relationship with your Turkish friends	19.79% 75	20.32% 77	8.97% 34	24.54% 93	26.39% 100	
And Arabic friends	3.43% 13	8.18% 31	7.12% 27	31.40% 119	49.87% 189	

Livelihood / Work

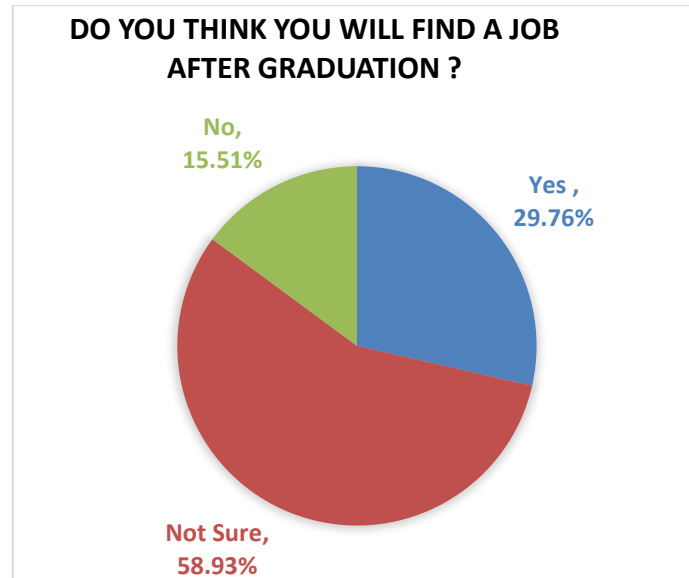
Syrian students participants were also asked how they finance their education. About 18% of the students stated that they finance their education by scholarships, 25% of them said that they work, and the rest are supported by their families.



Future Perspectives

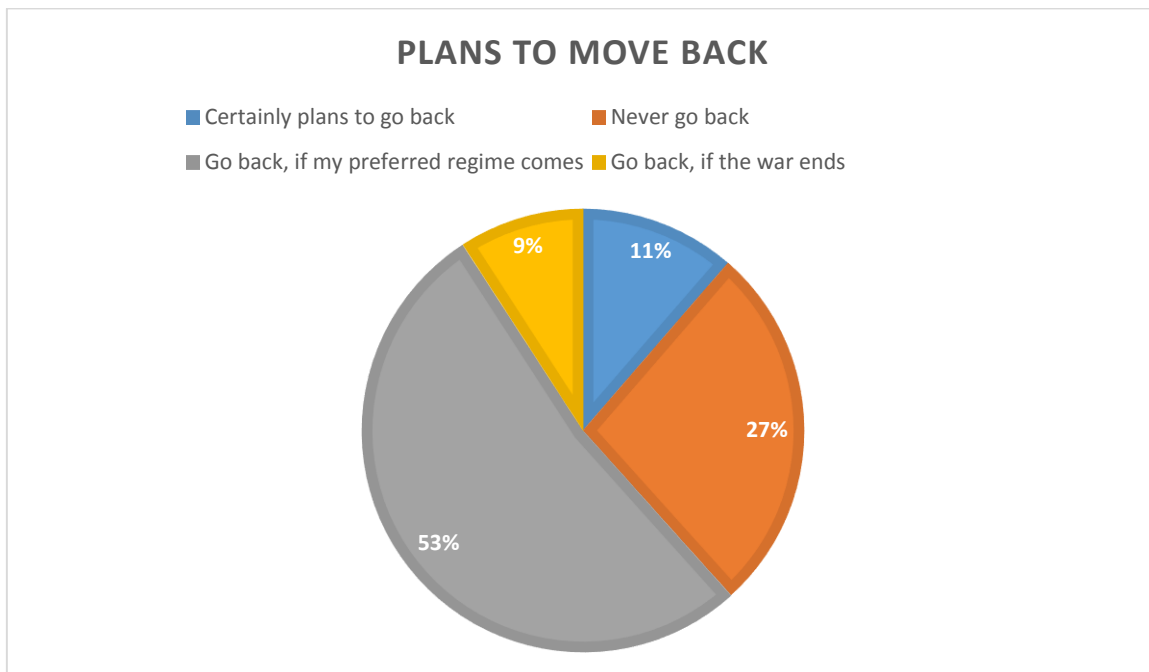
Now at this point it is also important to explore the employment prospects of Syrian refugee students as this is one of the main reasons as to why they are enrolled in higher education. First when it comes to their expectations from future the figure below ranks these with regards to different issue areas where 0 indicates no hope and 4 indicates high hopes from the future with respect to each issue area. As shown, they have the lowest levels of hope with regards to politics and economy of Syria and sociologically high hopes from both Turkish politics and economy. When it comes to personal issues, they are most worried about household finances and least worried about life in general.

As can be expected the level of hopes for Syria's future at the lowest, and that Syrian college students participating in the research feel most hopeful about their personal lives and Turkish politics.



Plan for Future

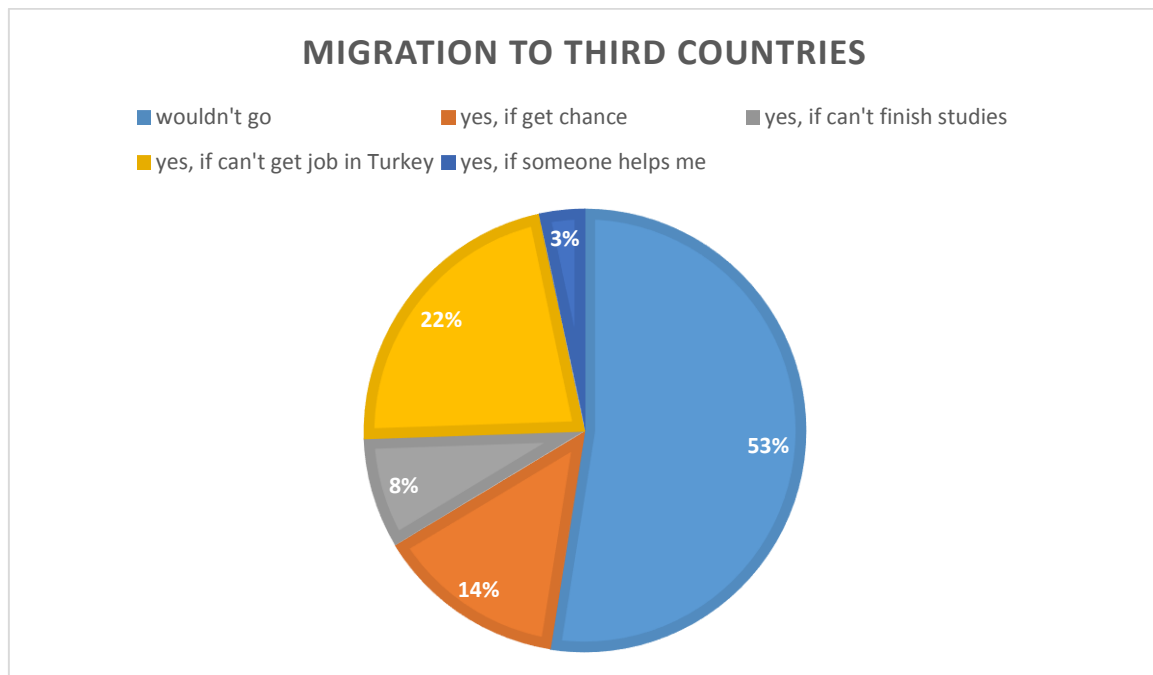
11.39% of Syrian college students participating in the research said that they would go back to Syria under any circumstances, and 9.17% stated they would go back "when the war is over". 27% of the remaining participants stated that they would never go back, and 52% is willing to go back when the war is over and their desired regime is established. However, considering their responds to other questions indicating that their hopes are rather low, it can be concluded that more than 80% of Syrian college students will not go back to their country.



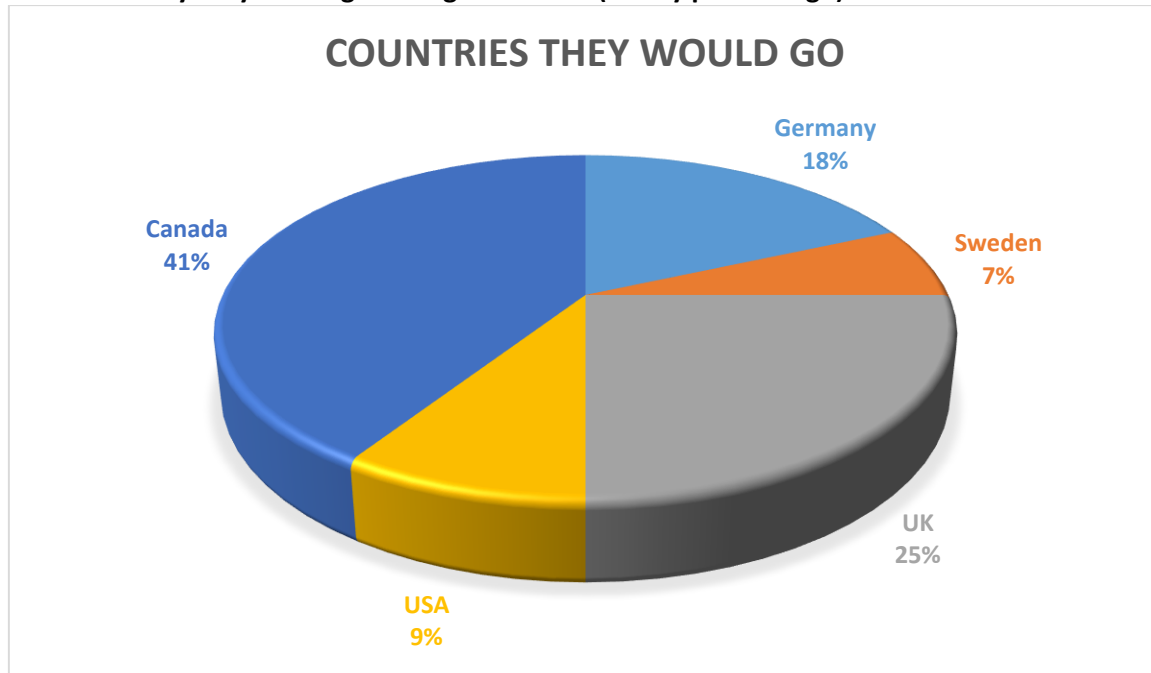
Responds to the question exploring this issue show that 52.5% of the students are not willing to migrate to a third country in the future. 30% of the students stated that they would go if they cannot

finish their studies in Turkey or if they cannot find a job, whereas 14% would choose to go if they have the chance. 52.5% of the students stated that they would prefer to stay in Turkey. Although this is very valuable, it wouldn't be surprising if these ratios would turn more to pro-migration intentions over time.

Responds of Syrian college students participating in the research to the question asking which country they would go to "if they would go" are quite interesting. According to their responses, first choice of Syrian students would be Canada (41%), followed by UK (25%), and then Germany (18%).



Which Country they would go after graduation? (If they prefer to go)



CONCLUSION

This project is the first comprehensive work on Syrian students in Turkey. A survey featuring a sample of 495 representing the 14,740 Syrian students studying at Turkish universities was conducted. The main purpose of the project was to determine the situation of higher education students in Turkey. However, there are two main objectives underlying this purpose. First one is to determine the problems of Syrian students and develop suggestions for policies on this matter; and the second one is to understand this qualified group's contribution to the adaptation process of Syrians in Turkey in long-term, and provide ways and methods for them to motivate themselves. We mainly believe that most of the Syrians whose numbers are over 3.3 as of November 2017, shall stay in Turkey, which is clearly confirmed during the study. 14,740 is a very small number in a 3.3 million population. There are around 500.000 young Syrians between 18 and 25 years old. It makes 2,9% of the age.

Higher education is highly competitive in Turkey due to high numbers of young population and to imbalance between supply and demand in the system. Admitting Syrian students into education and particularly higher education is one of the mostly discussed issues and one of the main areas of social conflict in Turkey. Despite the fact that Syrian higher education students do not revoke Turkish students of their educational rights, and enroll in universities under foreigner quota, this has been one of the mostly criticized points in Turkish society regarding the rights granted to Syrian students. On the other hand, from a right based approach these groups have to receive quality education and for the inclusive integration policies the education level of the refugee population in Turkey must be increased. In order to prevent new lost generations, to help the youth continue their education, to enable them to contribute to Turkish society, and act as bridges in adaptation processes, new effective and data based policies must be implemented. However, advancing this number and incentive policies should be structured in a manner to prevent any aggravation within the society, and policies should be developed to take support from the Turkish society.

Findings of this research:

Higher education students will play an important role in peaceful future prospects and contributions to all segments of the society including Syrian refugees. ED Project is based on this view believing that Syrians students studying at universities in Turkey will play a rather important part in the process. The current profile as gathered from the interview participants show that Syrian university students in Turkey are;

- Traumatic young people experienced deep psychological outcomes of the war.
- Their enrollment to universities is very low percentage
- Academically vulnerable; having not clear perspectives and supervision
- Not integrated socially with the local people
- Are having unclear future prospects, second and more migration plans

Our recommendations for the new policies for the Syrian students are to create data-based and more inclusive policies, to have clear, sustainable, comprehensive mid and long term migration strategies covering all areas of social integration, to determine more funding and place in higher education, focus on gender imbalance in all aspects of life and to implement lifelong education to increase their active participation in life.

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