

## **INTEGRATION POLICY FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES' ACCESS TO TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION: INCLUSIVE ENOUGH?**

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### **Abstract**

*Opening its door to 3.8 million Syrians, Turkey is host to the largest refugee population today (UNHCR, 2019). In addition to providing them with humanitarian aid, Turkey has made academic and financial reforms to enhance Syrian refugees' access to higher education (Ergin and de Wit, 2019). Thanks to these reforms, over 27,000 Syrian refugees have accessed Turkish universities up to now (CoHE, 2019). Appreciating this humanitarian effort of an emerging country without abundant resources, this study questions how the government policy of enhancing Syrian refugees' access to Turkish universities could be more inclusive. In this respect, using available official statistics of current Syrian students in Turkish higher education, this study reveals who has accessed higher education and what should be done to enhance the access of others who are left behind.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusion, inclusive internationalization, forced internationalization, refugees in higher education, Syria, Turkey.*

### **1. Introduction**

Forced displacement has been a "tragic destiny" of humanity (Ergin, 2016). Even the first human beings, Adam and Eve, experienced it when they ate the "forbidden fruit", according to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions. Since then it has repeated itself on the Earth in the forms of individual and mass movements from a place to another, such as the cases of early sophists in Ancient Greece, European tribes in the Migration Period and German Jewish scholars in Nazi Germany.

History is repeating itself at the moment and the world is witnessing a historic case of forced displacement. As the recent statistics of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) indicate, 37,000 people a day are forced to displace from a place to another due to persecution and conflicts in their home countries (UNHCR, 2019a). This number is a result of the ongoing conflicts around the world, such as the fight between the government and opposition forces in South Sudan, everlasting internal instability in Afghanistan since the U.S. intervention in 2001 and economic crisis in Venezuela.

Beyond any doubt, the global displacement crisis has become more "catastrophic" with the recent conflict in Syria which has led to "the largest displacement crisis in the world", recorded since World War II (UNHCR, 2018:3). Due to this, the world has witnessed the murder of more than half a million people, internal and external displacement of over thirteen million, dead bodies of babies by the Aegean Sea, who were trying to arrive in Europe with the hope for "a better life" with their families, and endless political discussions about how to manage the huge refugee crisis until the conflict comes to an end (Ergin, 2019a; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Ibrahim, 2018).

Much attention has been given to the challenges of developed countries in receiving refugees from developing countries, as in the Syrian case, where the refugees who have been able to enter countries like Germany were closely followed by media reports. But it is a fact that the large majority

of refugees are not only coming from the developing world, but also are hosted in the developing world, in particular neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2019a). The same as a result applies to the challenges of refugees to access higher education in these countries (Unangst et al., 2020). Developing countries still are in the process of massification with a higher demand than supply for local students, and as a result refugee students have more difficulty to enter higher education and face resistance from local students and communities, fearing that they take their places and decrease quality. Their harsh struggle for getting the right to higher education in developing regions mostly remains far from the center of attention.

As most forced displacement cases do, the conflict in Syria "poses an unprecedented challenge for neighboring countries" (Balsari et al., 2015: 942). Being one of the neighboring countries, Turkey has become a destination for 3.7 million Syrians, which has made it host to the largest group of refugees (UNHCR, 2019). With a welcoming open-door policy, Turkey has provided the Syrian refugees with humanitarian aid, the right to education, residence and work permits (Ergin, 2016). It was recently reported that the government spending on the Syrians in Turkey has already exceeded USD 40 billion (Euronews, 2019).

The unceasing war in Syria and long stay of the "unexpected" Syrian guests "forced" Turkish government to make academic and financial reforms to enhance their access to Turkish higher education, which is introduced as 'forced internationalization of higher education' in the literature (Ergin, de Wit and Leask, 2019). These reforms included establishing Arabic-taught programs, providing scholarships and developing facilitative admission processes special to the Syrians in order to foster their access. The reforms have so far enabled over 27.000 Syrians to enroll in a study program at Turkish universities (Council of Higher Education, 2019). This has made Turkey host to one of the largest groups of refugee students in the world (Ergin and de Wit, 2019).

Turkey's long-lasting humanitarian efforts for enhancing Syrian refugees' access to higher education is undoubtedly admirable and a good model for other countries. It is promising that there is an increasing local and international research interest in this. Nevertheless, it is disappointing to state that most of the available research lacks a systemic questioning to what extent this long-lasting government policy of enhancing Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Turkey is inclusive. In this respect, taking a critical perspective, this study will examine who has been granted access to higher education and who has been left behind by this policy. Using the local and international official statistics, it will discuss the distribution of the Syrian university students in Turkey by gender, associate degree/undergraduate/graduate level, public/private university type, geographical region of the university, type of sponsoring for their higher education and higher education attainment of their parents. Following this discussion, the study will end up with possible recommendations for making the eight-year-old policy more inclusive, equitable and non-discriminative.

## **2. The Syrian Conflict and Its Impact on Turkey**

In 2001, a pro-democracy group started protests against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. The group asked him to stop his authoritarian practices and move to a more democratic regime, which they missed since 1971, when the Assad family came to power. Bashar Al-Assad regarded these demonstrations as a real threat. He suppressed them by military, paramilitary and police forces. The resistance of the anti-regime demonstrators increased with the extensive use of power by security forces. This led the small-scale demonstrations to turn into a civil-war between the two parties (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019; Cousins, 2015). However, due to external interventions of other countries, such as the U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations, it is considered as a real conflict, no more a civil fight between local forces (Ghaddar, 2016).

However named, the conflict in Syria caused an ongoing tragedy which includes the death of over 400,000 people (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019) and internal displacement of almost seven million (UNHCR, 2019b). More than 13 million people in Syria are now in need of humanitarian aid and over half of the public institutions including hospitals have been destroyed or they function partially (UN News, 2019). The conflict has not only caused a chaos inside Syria but also across the region. Up to now, it has forced over 5.6 million Syrians to move to another country, mostly a neighboring one.

Accepting 3.7 million Syrians, Turkey has become a host to the largest group of refugees across the world (UNHCR, 2019b).

It is possible to observe three stages in Turkey's integration policy for Syrian refugees. In the first stage between 2011-15, the Turkish Government established tent cities in the south of Turkey and provided Syrian refugees with humanitarian aid. In the *Temporary Protection Regulation* issued in 2014, Syrians in Turkey were identified as "guests under temporary status". This reveals Turkish Government's assumption that Syrian refugees' stay in Turkey would not be a long one. The second stage started in 2015, when the refugee influx from Turkey into Europe started. The European Union (EU) asked Turkey to make a deal in order to prevent the refugee flow into European countries. A *Joint Action Plan* was signed by the two parties in November 2015. Accordingly, both parties agreed on the need for more collaboration in order to prevent irregular migration. The second stage proved that European countries were not and would not be willing to share the burden of hosting Syrian refugees and Turkey would remain to be a final or permanent destination for refugees. In the third stage beginning from 2016 and continuing up to now, the Turkish Government has been working hard to help Syrian refugees integrate into Turkey by enhancing their employment, access to education and even providing some of them with citizenship. (Erdogan and Erdogan, 2018; Ergin, 2016; Ergin and de Wit, 2019; İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016).

### **3. Integrating Syrian Students into Turkish Higher Education**

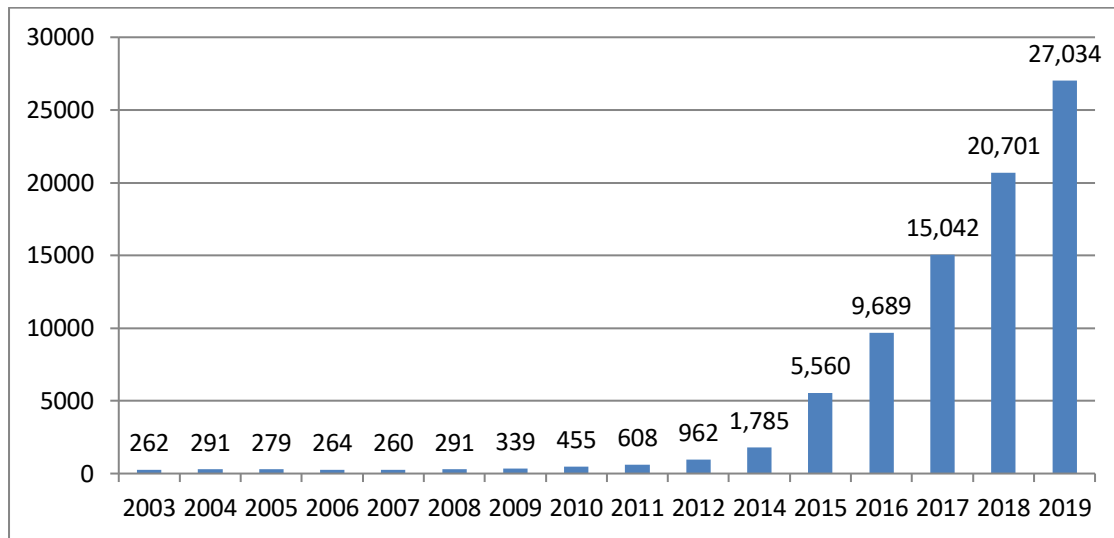
The stay of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the conflict in Syria lasted longer than expected. This forced Turkish Government to meet Syrian refugees' needs in the long run. Thus, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), a government body which plans and coordinates higher education in Turkey, has taken an action to enhance Syrian refugees' access to universities.

In order to enhance potential Syrian students' access to universities, CoHE has made several academic and financial reforms. The first academic reform in 2012 enabled Syrian refugees to get into seven universities in Turkey as a special student. The universities were especially chosen amongst the ones in the south of Turkey, where the refugee population was the highest. The second reform in 2013 allowed Syrian refugees with a proof of former academic qualifications to apply for a program at any universities in the country. The quota for the Syrian refugees was restricted to ten per cent of that of Turkish students. The third reform in 2015 allowed eight universities to establish Arabic-taught programs (CoHE, 2012; CoHE, 2015; The Official Gazette, 2013; Ergin, de Wit and Leask, 2019).

Academic reforms for Syrian refugees' access to universities were supported by financial reforms. In 2014, with a decision of the cabinet, Syrian university students were exempted from paying a tuition fee, which was expected to be paid by international students in Turkey. In addition, as of 2016, Syrian university students have been provided with government scholarships (Ergin, de Wit and Leask, 2019; The Official Gazette, 2014).

It is obvious that the Turkish Government worked hard to enhance Syrian refugees' access to higher education. Figure 1 shows the effect of this effort on the change in the number of Syrian students in Turkish higher education from the beginning of the Syrian conflict to date.

**Figure 1.** Change in the Number of Syrian University Students in Turkey \*



Source: CoHE (2019).

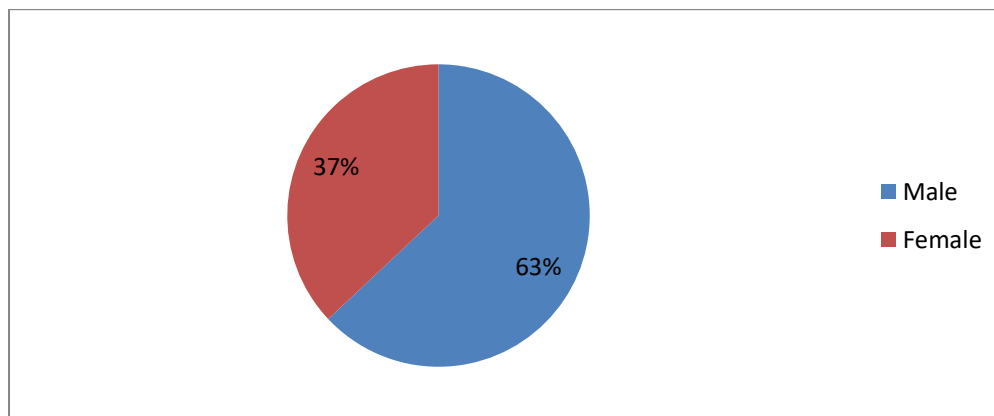
As Figure 1 illustrates, the number of Syrian university students in Turkey has increased significantly since the conflict started in 2011. Until that time, this number had not exceeded 608. It reached 5,560 in 2015, 15,042 in 2017 and exceeded 27,000 in 2019. This reveals that the government reforms discussed above enhanced refugee access to universities.

#### 4. A Closer Look at Syrian Students in Turkish Higher Education

Beyond any doubt, Turkey has made significant efforts and sacrifices for the sake of enhancing the Syrian refugees' access to universities in Turkey. This policy enabled a group of Syrian students to integrate into the largest higher education system in the European Higher Education Area. This rare case of forced internationalization should be sustainable and more inclusive to help more refugees access universities. Thus, it is vital to take a critical perspective to discuss its inclusivity. For this reason, a closer look at Syrian refugees who are already in the system is required.

First of all, the distribution of Syrian students at Turkish universities by genders will be presented to have a better understanding of to what extent individuals of either gender can access universities. This distribution is given in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Syrian University Students in Turkey by Gender\*

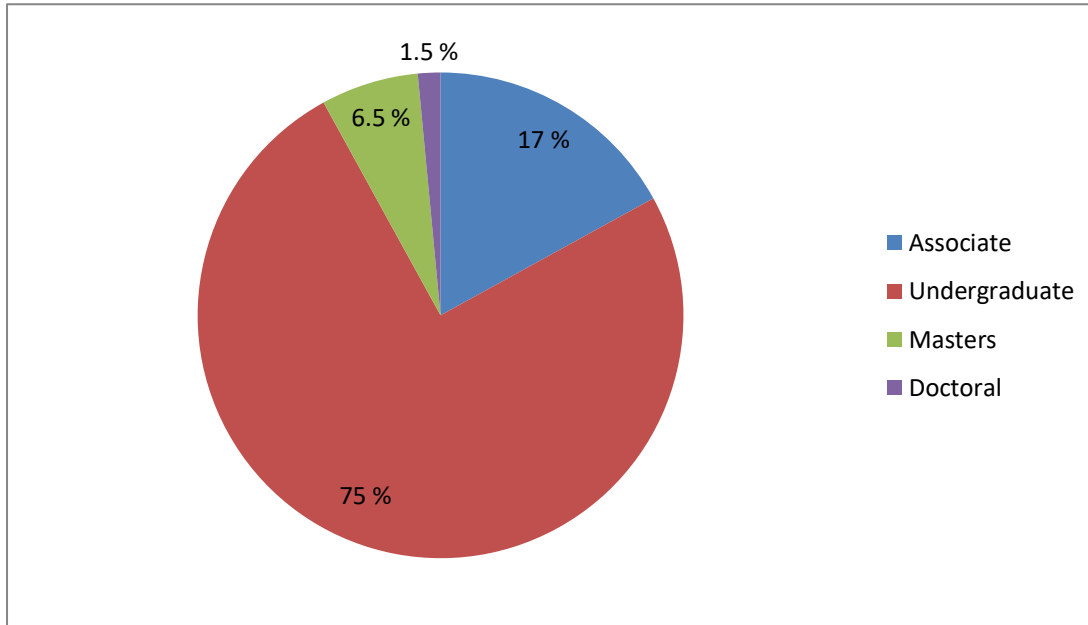


Source: CoHE (2019).

As Figure 2 shows, out of 27,034 Syrian university students in Turkey, 63 percent are male and 37 percent are female. This shows that there is no equal distribution of them by gender, which will be discussed more in the next section.

To understand the integration policy better, revealing the distribution of Syrian students by level of study programs is noteworthy. Thus, their distribution by associate, undergraduate, master's and doctoral level is provided in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Syrian University Students in Turkey by Level of Education\***

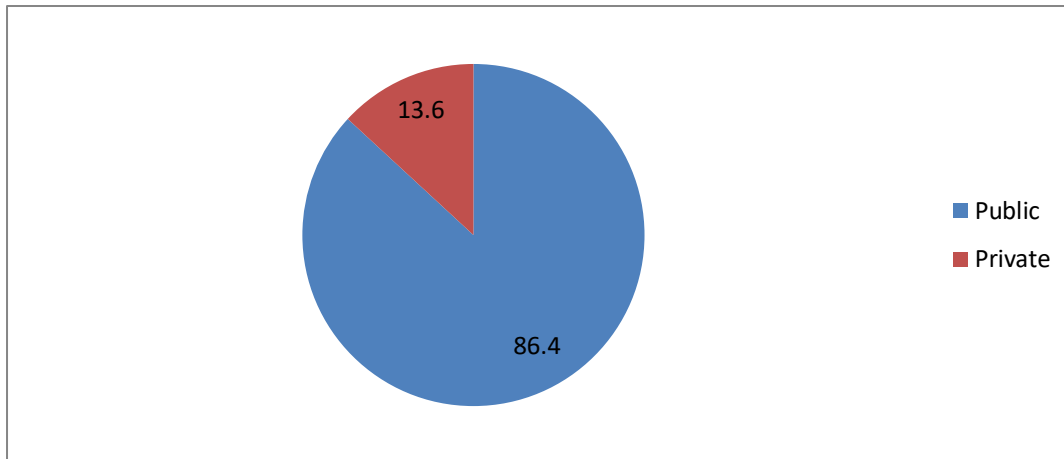


Source: CoHE (2019).

As illustrated in Figure 3, 75 percent of Syrian university students in Turkey are enrolled in an undergraduate program. This is followed by the ones in associate degree, master's and doctoral degree programs at respectively 17, 6.5 and 1.5 percent.

Currently, there are 207 universities in Turkey (CoHE, 2019). 129 of them are public and 78 are private foundation universities. The number of Syrian students in public and private universities can give us an idea about to what extent the integration policy has extended beyond both types of higher education institutions in the country. The distribution of Syrian students by types of universities is presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Syrian Students in Turkey by Type Universities\***

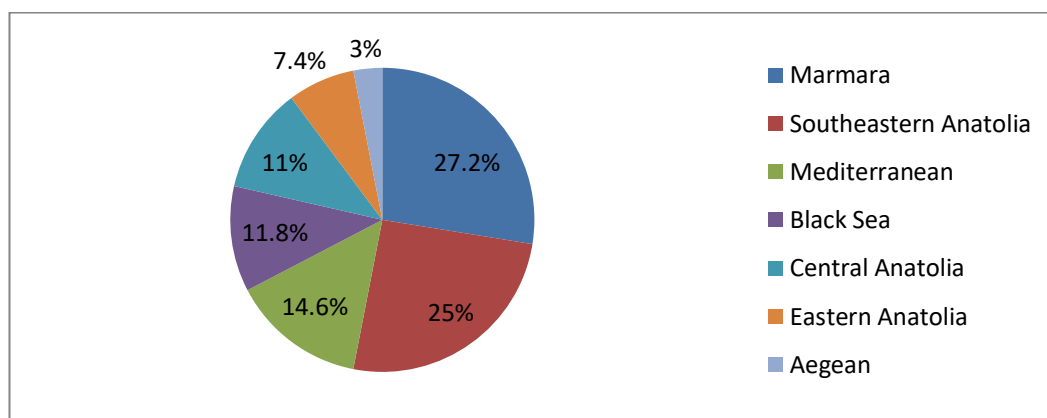


Source: CoHE (2019).

As shown in Figure 4, while 86.4 percent of Syrian students are enrolled in a public university, 13.6 percent of them study in a private one. This reveals that the government-led integration policy has not been adopted equally by public and private universities.

Turkey is comprised of seven geographical regions. As 240 thousand out of 3.8 million Syrian refugees only live in the government-run refugee camps, a vast majority of Syrian refugees are in urban areas in these geographical regions (UNHCR, 2019c). Not only the overall Syrian population unequally spreads over the country, but also Syrian university students. Figure 6 shows the number of them by geographical regions:

**Figure 5.** Syrian Students in Turkey by Geographical Regions

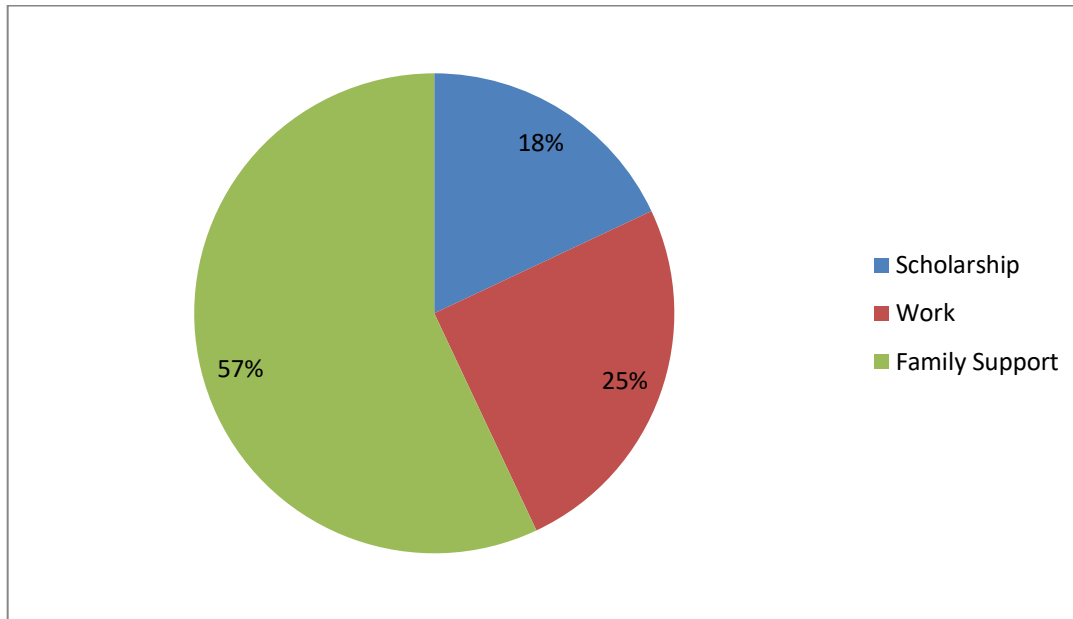


Source: CoHE (2019).

As Figure 5 shows, the highest ratio of Syrian students are in Marmara Region at 27.2 percent, followed by South East Region and Mediterranean Region, respectively at 25 and 14.6 percent. In other words, 66.8 percent of them study in a university in either Marmara Region, the most developed part of the country, or the other two, which are in the south. More capacity at universities and job opportunities for the Syrians in the developed region on the one hand and the proximity of the southern region to Syria on the other hand are the main reasons for this unbalanced distribution.

There are no available country-wide data about financial status of Syrian students in Turkey. However, Erdogan and Erdogan's (2019) survey with 395 Syrian students in Turkish universities gives an idea about it. The percentages by how they sponsor their higher education in Turkey is shown in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.** Type of 395 Syrian Students' Sponsoring Their Higher Education

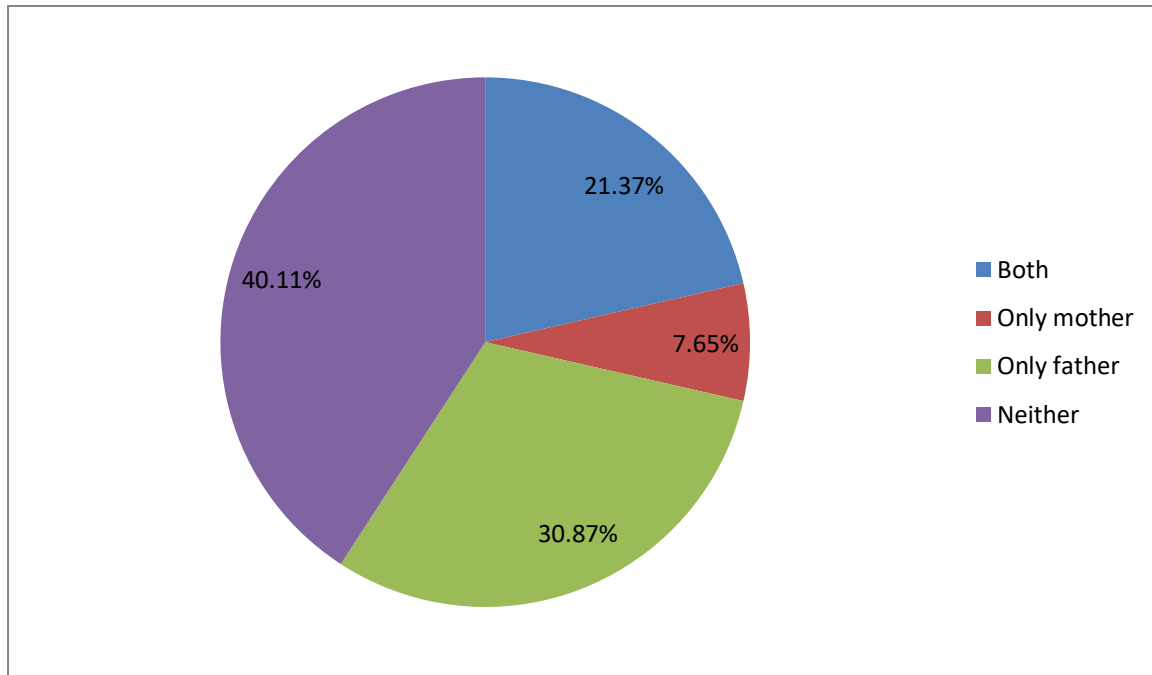


Source: Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018).

Figure 6 shows that out of 395 Syrian university students in Turkey, 18 percent receive a scholarship, 24.93 percent work and 57,65 percent's education expense is sponsored by their families. This reveals that the number of Syrian students who take a scholarship is quite low. It complies with another source which notes that the ratio of Syrian students in Turkey who take a government scholarship is 5.7 percent only (Mülteciler Derneği, 2019).

Lastly, knowing higher education attainment of Syrian students' parents can give an idea about who can provide their children with higher education under refugee status. No nation-wide social, economic, demographic or educational data are available about Syrian university students' parents. However, findings about higher education attainment of 379 Syrian students' parents in Figure 7 below can give us a clue about the profile of parents (Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2019):

**Figure 7.** Higher Education Attainment of Syrian 379 Syrian Refugees\*



Source: Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018).

Figure 7 reveals that a vast majority of this group of Syrian students' parents attained higher education. Accordingly, both parents of 21.37 percent attained higher education, only father of 30.87 per cent and only mother of 7.65 percent attained it. Neither parent of 40.11 percent, on the other hand, attained higher education.

## 5. Discussion on the Inclusivity of the Policy

As its very current definition underlines, internationalization of higher education aims to “make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit and Hunter, 2015:3). This cannot be achieved by confining higher education to an elite club who can afford to study in another country (Ergin, 2019b). By enhancing Syrian refugees' access to universities, Turkey has made a real effort to enable untraditional international students who cannot meet traditional requirements of being an international student such as a fund, proficiency in a host country's language and proof of previous academic credentials (Ergin, de Wit and Leask, 2019). Nevertheless, a closer look at the above given available official statistics reveals that an inclusivity in enhancing Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Turkey has not fully been achieved yet for several aspects.

First of all, 37 percent of Syrian students in Turkish universities are female only. Compared to that of local female students, this ratio is low as almost 50 percent of total Turkish university students are female (CoHE, 2019). This might result from societal and cultural reasons regarding women's place in Syrian society. Marriage at an early age is more common and birth rate is higher in Syrian society than in Turkish society. To make matters worse, post-war trauma and lack of income and security might force Syrian women to marry to a local man, take care of family members at home or work in order to contribute to family budget (Barın, 2015; Çakır, 2017; Erdoğan et al., 2017; Hohberger, 2018).

Next, 92 percent of current Syrian students in Turkish universities are enrolled in an associate or undergraduate level study program. It means that eight percent is pursuing a graduate degree only (CoHE, 2019). This huge imbalance between the levels of enrollment can be caused by several reasons. Firstly, Turkish universities may not be attractive enough for Syrian refugees to pursue a graduate degree. In a survey of 360 Syrian university students in Turkey, it is noted that almost half are willing to move to a third country. Western countries, such as Canada, UK, Germany, USA and Sweden, are on the top of the mostly desired destinations by this group of Syrian students (Erdoğan et al., 2017). The increase in the number of Syrian students in these countries confirms this inference. For example,



there is a high demand for higher education in German universities by Syrian refugees. The number of Syrian university students in Germany increased by 69 percent between the years 2017-18 and reached 8,618. Of the newly registered refugees in 2018/19 winter semester, 22 percent are graduate students (Trines, 2019). Secondly, Syrian refugee students might have difficulties to get access to graduate education by lack of documentation of their previous education and equivalencies, a rather general problem for refugees' access to higher education, but more so for graduate education.

Only 13.6 percent of Syrian students in Turkey are enrolled in private universities. There are currently 207 universities in Turkey, 78 of which are private (CoHE, 2019). The above discussed academic and economic reforms for enhancing Syrian refugees' access to higher education do not include private universities. It means that – except a few individual exceptions - Syrian students in private universities have to cover their own expenses, such as a tuition fee up to USD 15 thousand a year. This inevitably divides refugee parents into two, ones who can afford their children's study in a private university and others who cannot.

In addition to the imbalance in Syrian university students' number by type of institutions, another imbalance is observed – regarding the geographical regions they are in. There are seven geographical regions in Turkey. Yet, 66.8 percent of Syrian students are enrolled in universities in three of these regions, Marmara, which is the most developed region with highest number of universities, and Southeastern and Mediterranean, which are close to Syria (CoHE, 2019).

Important to note here also is that very few Syrian university students in Turkey sponsor their education cost by a scholarship. According to Mülteciler Derneği (2019), this ratio does not exceed 5.7. As the above given survey of a group of Syrian students reveals, education cost of 57 percent of the group is sponsored by their parents, while 25 percent have to work for it (Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2018). This reminds of the risk of elitism in internationalization (Ergin, 2019b). A vast majority of today's international students are funded by their wealthy parents. If the same applies to Syrian university students in Turkey, then we have to face a risk that only the Syrian parents in Turkey who can afford their children's study in a university or Syrian students who are healthy and fortunate enough to find a job to afford their costs, are included in the system.

Last but not least, parents' awareness about the significance of higher education may play an important role in their children's access to universities. Lack of official statistics makes it unlikely to come up with a socio-economic and educational inference about parents of Syrian university students. However, as the above given data about a group of Syrian students indicate, 60 percent of them have parents either or both of which have attained higher education (Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2018). This reminds of the concept of family educational capital (Howard et al., 1996). If the policy mostly enhances children of parents who have higher education capital, then it means that children of others who do not have this capital are left behind.

## **6. Conclusion**

It should be noted here again that hosting 3.8 million Syrian refugees and providing 27,000 of them with access to higher education, Turkey has served as a model to other countries. This study does not expect an emerging country to include refugees in higher education flawlessly. However, in order to attain a more inclusive policy, it brings forward several recommendations:

- Special projects for encouraging more female Syrian refugees to access higher education should be planned and implemented. Scholarships open to application of female Syrians only, day care at universities for mother refugees' kids and raising Syrian parents' awareness about their daughters' higher education attainment could be among possible practices.
- A long-term route map should be made to enhance more Syrian refugees' access to graduate programs. Job opportunities on the campus, such as a graduate assistantship, and special quotas for Syrian students in graduate program admissions could foster Syrian refugees' access.

- Private universities should be included in the policy in a more active way. Each private university should admit a certain number of Syrian refugees with a full scholarship and without expecting a tuition-fee payment.
- In order for a more balanced distribution of them around the country, regional quotas for Syrian students should be determined.
- In order not to leave the access to higher education to those whose parents can afford it only, more scholarship opportunities should be provided.
- It is obvious that Syrian parents with higher education attainment are already aware that their children should attain higher education. In order not to ignore the others whose parents do not have this educational capital, campaigns should be organized to raise awareness of Syrian parents about the significance of higher education.

Refugees face similar challenges while they struggle to access higher education in their host countries. Wherever they are, financial restrictions, family issues, post-displacement traumatic experiences, bureaucratic problems and local tension in the host society could be counted as common barriers before their right to higher education. For this reason, the findings and recommendations of this study in our opinion are not only relevant for the case of Syrian refugee students in Turkey, but also for other countries in the Middle Eastern region and in other contexts, such as Venezuelan refugees in Latin America and refugees from Myanmar in South Asia (Unangst et al., 2020).

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