

Syrian University Students in Turkish Higher Education: Immediate Vulnerabilities, Future Challenges for the EHEA

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Armağan Erdoğan¹
Director for the Centre for Higher Education Studies
Social Sciences University of Ankara, TR*

*Prof. Dr. M. Murat Erdoğan
Director for the Centre for Migration and Integration
Turkish-German University, TR*

Abstract

Since 2011, millions of Syrian people have been displaced and have had to drop out of their studies due to civil war. They had to leave their country and seek shelter in neighboring countries and in Europe. On the one hand, in their new lives in these countries, they have had vulnerabilities, but on the other hand they have searched for a safer future. Higher education is one of the main ways that refugees and displaced people cling to hope for a better life. Their access to and participation in higher education has been a challenging route for many reasons both for themselves and also for the higher education systems and universities in their host countries.

Turkey has a unique place in regard to Syrian refugees. It hosts the largest refugee population in the world with 3.6 million Syrians and 500,000 asylum seekers from other countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey has a young population with the 5-17 age group comprising 21 % of the population, but the Syrian population is much younger as its rate is 30%. Turkey is also the country with the largest student population in the European Higher Education Area.

Turkey has been suffering from some challenges, such as a supply and demand imbalance in higher education. It should be stated that demographic factors, shortcomings of the higher education system and the unemployment rate among university graduates have been some long-term challenges for Turkish higher education. Moreover, a common misconception in public opinion that Syrian refugees are admitted to Turkish universities without fulfilling the requirements adds new challenges for future policies. In a country like Turkey, where there is high competition between students to pass the nationwide university selection exam each year, encouraging Syrian students' higher education seems to be an area for discussion. Both the sheer number of migrants and also the emergency of the situation during this migration flow necessitated some action to be taken in the area of higher education.

This paper will be based on the fieldwork of research conducted in the context of Hopes-MADAD project entitled "Elite Dialogue II- Dialogue with Syrian Refugees in Turkey through Syrian Academics and Students" in 2019. The main research subject is which types of vulnerabilities Syrian university students face and how they can integrate into society in Turkey. New approaches and definitions are needed to touch the actual needs of the refugees to be actively involved into society. Nevertheless, research on the higher education practices of vulnerable groups in general, and of Syrian students in particular, is largely missing.

Key words: Turkish higher education, Syrian refugees, EHEA, access to higher education

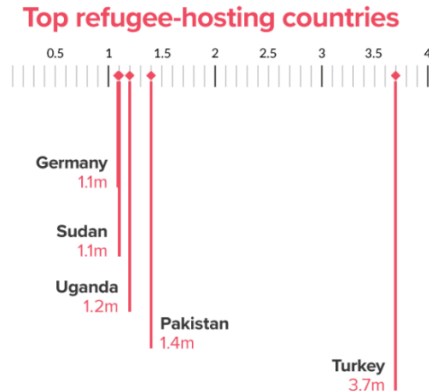
¹ Corresponding author.

I. Introduction

The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships.

Article 22 on Public Education in the 1951 Refugee Convention clearly states the importance of education for refugee populations. Although the Convention does not clearly discuss higher education, we know that social and economic developments in the world now directly affect higher education. Higher education systems cannot remain indifferent to these developments and are in search of solutions. According to UNHCR data, 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced on the global scale due to war, conflicts, violence and persecution. Around 25.9 million of them are categorized as refugees. Statistics show that 80% of displaced people are hosted by neighboring countries, which are also under development and have their own socioeconomic problems. In 2011, the Syrian civil war created a massive influx and 6.7 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced outside of their country. This is true for Syrian refugees as a majority are being hosted by neighboring countries, such as Turkey (64.3%), Lebanon (16.4%), Jordan (11.8%), and Iraq (4.4%) with relatively low numbers able to reach Europe (1.4 million) (UNHCR, 2019). Turkey is now the country hosting the highest number of refugees in the world and has 500,000 people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan who also seek shelter. Moreover, these numbers are increasing on a daily basis due to ongoing conflicts in the region.

Fig-1: Top refugee hosting countries. (UNHCR, 2019)



Migration is one of the most important social phenomena in the global context. In the globalized world, people move from their birthplace to other places to obtain better living conditions, better employment, and educational opportunities. It is happening more intensely and faster than ever before in world history. However, forced migration occurs due to crises and in the form of influx in emergent situations. Forced migration and its reflections on higher education is a situation that needs to be addressed in a very different way. In many parts of the world, large masses of people are forced to leave their hometowns and places of living because of war, hunger, violence, the danger of death, or other threats. The situation for these people differs legally, politically, socially, economically, and psychologically from those who migrate voluntarily. Starting from the most basic needs, they have different disadvantages, even fragilities, and sensitivity. The majority of this group consists of young people and children; that is, they need education. Unfortunately, although international agreements

are in place to guarantee the education rights of displaced people, UNHCR data show that refugees' access to higher education remains only 3% (UNHCR, 2016). This ratio shows that young people exposed to compulsory migration face barriers in accessing higher education that cannot be easily eliminated. Therefore, responses to this emergency need to be multidimensional from immediate action to mid- and long-term policies for integration, cohesion, and inclusion.

Higher education plays a crucial role both for individual capacity and for the social and economic development of the countries. Therefore, it has been one of the areas that new policies have developed according to the needs since the Syrian crisis in 2011. Higher education institutions, governments, international associations, UN agencies and private funders have invested in facilitating access for refugees. In the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Targets: "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (Goal 4.3) in line with the "no one is left behind" commitment of the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development. In 2016, in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, all Member States the UN agreed that protecting those who are forced to flee and supporting the countries that shelter them are shared international responsibilities that must be borne more equitably and predictably. In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees defined four key objectives to "ease the pressures on host countries, to enhance refugee self-reliance, to expand access to third-country solutions, to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity". The new policies were developed around global acceptance that education is a right and all measures ought to be taken to preserve human dignity. Host countries take responsibility for facilitating their participation and taking measures for a holistic integration framework, but rest of the world has a responsibility to share the burden. In December 2019, the first Global Refugee Forum took place in Geneva, aiming to create the conditions for "global support for the education of refugees and host communities", complimenting both GCR and SDGs 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030. However, global figures show that only 3% of refugees (which was only 1% in 2016) have access to higher education in the world. UNHCR plans to ensure that 15% of refugees have access to tertiary learning by 2030.

The refugee crisis became more visible after more than a million refugees crossed the borders into the EU in 2015. Collective measures were taken by the EU, EHEA, EUA and other institutions or NGOs for those who were about to start post-secondary education or who dropped out of their higher education. Similarly, the EU initiated new programs, funds, and strategies in its actions for the refugees both within and outside of Europe. EUA, representing 800 universities and 17 million students enrolled in those universities, developed some tools to support universities and refugees as well as to support peer-learning collaboration between them. Bologna action lines, such as social dimension, recognition of prior learning and Lisbon Recognition Convention, have been a principal key for new action. Although the social dimension always called for action to represent the diversity of the population for higher education, the first and clearest reference of the refugees was mentioned in the Yerevan Communiqué in 2015 where EHEA ministers stated that "making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as our populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes." Similarly, in the Paris Ministerial Declaration in 2018, the critical role of the social dimension of higher education was repeated without mentioning refugees or migrants by the ministers "in order to meet our commitment that the student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations, we will improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups. Therefore, we mandate the BFUG to take this issue forward by the next EHEA Ministerial conference." The next Ministerial Conference is on the way, and now it is time to investigate the action taken since 2018. We hope that this paper will contribute to the future of EHEA through Turkey's experience with the policies and practices developed and implemented for the refugee students since 2011.

II. Syrian Students' Access to Higher Education in Turkey

As many researchers have stated, the Syrian crisis can be categorized in three phases. The first phase is the emergency status after the first influx of refugees to neighboring states in 2011. Due to its open-door policy, millions of refugees entered into Turkey and settled in the camps built in border cities. The second phase can be defined as when these refugees started to head for Europe through Turkey or some other countries after 2015. It created a larger impact on the global agenda. The third phase is after the Turkey-EU deal, in which integration policies started to be implemented in order to stop refugees' movement towards Europe. While education in general is planned and coordinated by the ministries, higher education planning is the responsibility of the HEIs. In Turkey, the Council of Higher Education is the authority responsible for planning, governing, and supervising higher education. Therefore, in response to refugee youth in need of access to higher education, the CoHE implemented new tools and policies immediately after the influx in 2011.

Turkey has made some significant adjustments to enroll Syrian students who previously had to quit their university education in Syria. Firstly, on September 3rd, 2012, the CoHE approved a new regulation for the 2012-2013 academic year for Syrian students and Turkish citizens who had to interrupt their education while studying in Syria. According to this regulation, seven state universities (Gaziantep, Kilis 7 Aralık, Harran (Şanlıurfa), Mustafa Kemal (Hatay), Osmaniye Korkut Ata, Çukurova (Adana) and Mersin), mostly all close to the border region, were given the opportunity to accept Syrian students as special students. In order to prevent students without documents, the statements of students were taken into account. Article 2 of the *Regulation on the Principles of Transfer Between Associate and Bachelor's Degree Programs in Higher Education Institutions, Double Major and Minor Programs and Transfer of Credit Between Institution*, states that "Students studying in countries identified by the Council of Higher Education where education is unsustainable due to violence and humanitarian crises can apply for transfer to the higher education institutions in Turkey. The procedures and principles regarding this issue are determined by the Higher Education Council." In this context, Syrians must have been studying in Syria to enroll at a university in Turkey via transfer student. However, this regulation has caused controversy in the domestic public as higher education is highly competitive for Turkish students.

On October 9th 2013, the Council of Higher Education made a new regulation on special students and also provided the opportunity to "transfer" to those who had relevant documents. It was stated that students who did not have the required documents could study as "special students" in the seven universities mentioned above. Accordingly, before the 2013-2014 academic year, those who started associate, undergraduate and graduate programs (except in Medicine and Dentistry) in Syria and Egypt could transfer to higher education institutions in Turkey:

- Students are able to transfer to the first year and the final year if they have all the necessary documents for the transfer,
- Higher education institutions should ensure that the transfer applications do not exceed 10% of the OSYS quota of the department applied to by the students in the relevant year,
- It was decided that the students who did not have the required documents for transfer could take courses in Gaziantep, Kilis 7 Aralık, Harran (Şanlıurfa), Mustafa Kemal (Hatay), Osmaniye Korkut Ata, Çukurova, and Mersin University as "special students", and those who provided their documents could transfer horizontally.²

In the press release of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) on 9 November 2015, "It is decided that universities (above mentioned seven universities plus Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University) can open programs in Turkish and/or foreign language with the approval of the Executive Board of Higher Education for the students coming from Syria." Thus, it was made possible to open programs in Arabic

² See Higher Education Council http://yok.gov.tr/web/guest/anasayfa/-/asset_publisher/ (Retrieval Date: 25/10/2016)

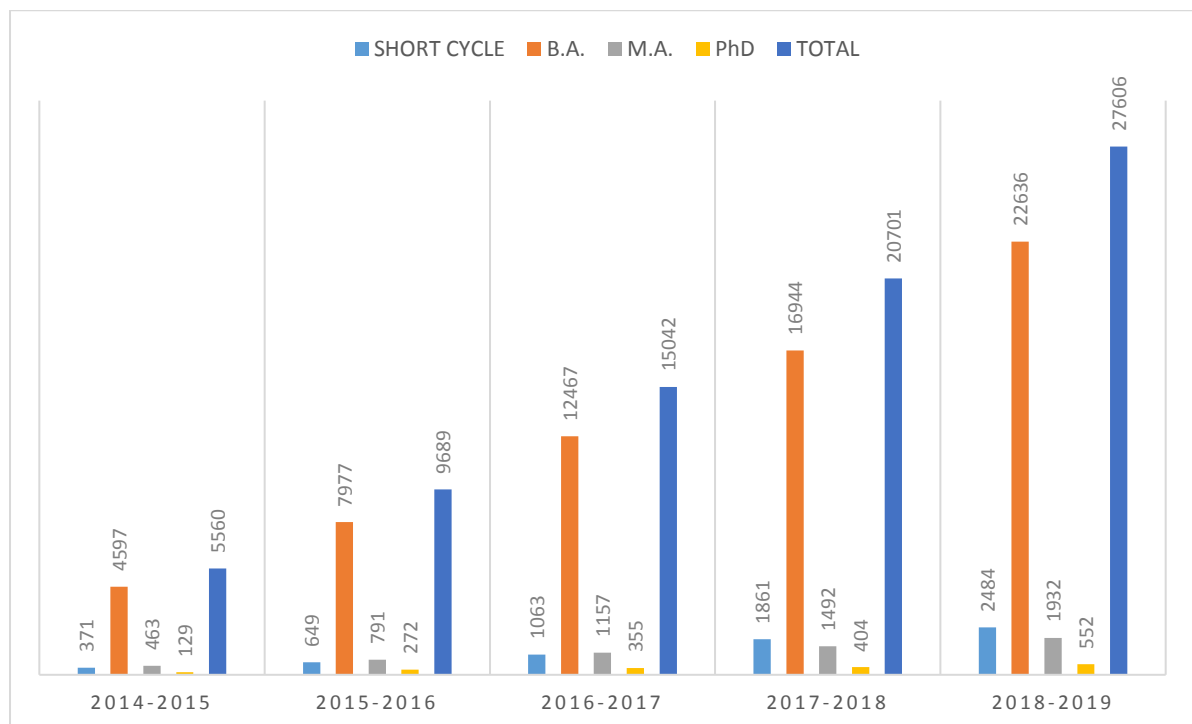
or other languages in accordance with the needs and suitability of Syrian students in these universities. Some of the universities have also been given initiative for students to be admitted to such new programs, while some universities make entrance examinations, and some decide on the documents at hand. It creates different practices for each student at different universities and needs to be more transparent (Yıldız, 2019).

The Council of Higher Education also provided access to Syrian students at universities other than the eight universities in the region who have granted special status for Syrian students or who have special circumstances in terms of transfer. However, these regulations have been implemented in the framework of the conditions required for international students in Turkey. In other words, it was announced that the obstacles in front of Syrians to enter different universities like other international students were removed, and they could register to all universities fulfilling the conditions of the university. Tuition fees have been determined by the Council of Ministers annually; and for Syrian students are paid for by the Turks Abroad and Relative Communities Presidency (Official Gazette: 2014). It means that, unlike other international students, Syrian students are exempted from tuition fees, and this is an important practice in facilitating Syrian students' access to higher education.

For the Syrian students studying at state or foundation universities in Turkey, international student admission procedures are applied within the framework of both central examinations and the Foreign Student Examination (YÖS). Universities are making decisions on a case by case basis. It is a flexible process to facilitate access for the Syrian students on the one hand, but different practices in different institutions or even in the same university make the transfer and recognition process complicated (Yıldız, 2019).

Even though Syrian students are enrolled in 153 different Turkish universities, 46.4% of these students are registered at 10 universities and 65% in 11 cities in the region. While Gaziantep University based in the border city hosts 11.2% of all Syrian university students, Istanbul as a city hosts 21.8% of them.

Fig-2: Numbers of Syrian University Students in Turkey



Source: CoHE statistics.

III. Elite Dialogue Project Findings:

What is the experience of Turkey as the country hosting the largest refugee population and also with the largest refugee student population in higher education? Based on the findings of our Elite Dialogue projects in two phases in 2017 and 2019, we can share the good practices, experiences, and challenges.

Starting from this point, our research team started Elite Dialogue research in 2016 and conducted two sets of the project, because ED research aims to collect data and also to monitor the changes with the previous dataset. The main objective of the ED project is to draw attention to the shaping of integration policies based on the views of refugees and to highlight the critical role of qualified groups in the integration process. The Elite Dialogue-II (ED-II) project was carried out from January 2018 to March 2019 based on the experience and positive feedback from the initial research of ED-I. ED-II followed Elite Dialogue I "Dialogue with Syrian Refugees in Turkey through Syrian Academics and Postgraduate Students" and was funded by EU Hopes-MADAD.

The research had three main aims:

1. To present the conditions, challenges, and expectations of the Syrian university students and academics among the Syrian refugees (under protected status) in Turkey.
2. To make policy recommendations for the future through the opinions of the qualified groups among Syrian refugees for comprehensive and long-term policies, starting from the idea that the tendency of Syrians to remain in Turkey has increased
3. ED-II project also aimed to identify the tendency of immigrating to other countries among the qualified Syrians and to prevent this through the motivating policies for them to remain in Turkey.

The research was designed with the following hypothesis and framework:

- The Syrians increasingly tend to remain in Turkey,
- Education, particularly higher education, seems to be the key strategic field for the Syrian refugees to live in harmony with Turkish society,
- Syrian "elite" groups are crucial as "role models", "leaders", and "bridges" for future integration policies,
- It is necessary to create opportunities to continue their careers both for the academics and university students for their personal development as well as community development;
- It is important to understand the qualifications, perceptions, and expectations of this "elite" group which has the ability to establish bridges between Turkish and Syrian communities,
- For inclusive decision-making mechanisms, it is necessary to get their opinions.
- One of the main aims of the project is to provide data-based information instead of the prejudices based on false information about Syrian students.

Syrian students were chosen as the target groups. Syrian students' access to higher education in Turkey has increased each year. The number of Syrian students in around 100 public and 50 foundation universities in Turkey was 14,747 in the 2016-2017 academic year; 20,701 in 2017-2017 and reached 27,606 in 2018-2019. However, there is a lack of information about the academic fields, backgrounds, success rates, life conditions, integration with students and other members of Turkish society, and future perspectives. ED-II Project aimed to make modest contributions to overcome the lack of data in this topic.

2.1 Methodology of the Research

ED-I and II Surveys tried to have a representative sample for the research. The content of the questionnaire to be applied to students was inspired by EUROSTUDENT projects aiming to determine the socioeconomic profiles and academic achievements of university students in the European Higher Education Area.³

In Turkey, 27,606 Syrian students are enrolled in 150 universities out of 207 university in total. A total of 1,058 students in 46 cities participated in ED II survey and 747 students answered more than 70 percent of the questionnaire.⁴ The results of 747 students who completed the whole questionnaire have been evaluated in our finding. Gender distribution is parallel to their population in the universities; 185 students (25%) were female and 562 (75%) were male. The actual rates of Syrian students in Turkish universities are 63.23% male and 36.76% female. We also tried to reach all levels: 88% of the students were undergraduate and 10% were postgraduate. This is consistent with the Syrian student distribution in Turkish universities. The questionnaire was designed to obtain data regarding the following topics:

1. Basic Demographics, Educational background
2. Immigration Background: Support Network, Diaspora, Duration of Stay, Secondary Education
3. Satisfaction with Different Aspects of Education in Turkey
4. Vulnerabilities: Trauma, Housing, Income
5. Livelihoods: Scholarships/Work
6. Economic Integration Attitudes/Future Prospects
7. Social Integration Attitudes: Prejudice, Social Distance, Institutional Trust
8. Policy Recommendations

The research was carried out using quantitative and qualitative research methods on three main axes: examining reports, official documents, conducting thematic workshops with academicians, and surveys with students. Following the preparation of the questionnaire, it was tested in a pilot scheme. A mixed field model was applied. The questionnaires were prepared on paper and given to university students in the provinces visited for the workshop, and they were also invited to participate online with "SurveyMonkey" by using students' communication groups and the snowball survey method. In the sample selection, quota-based interventions were made considering the real distribution of the participants, according to the cities and universities. As a result, a highly representative sample was obtained. The survey allowed for the collection of valuable data on Syrian students and the observation of trends. However, although a part of the survey was delivered to the students in print, it should be mentioned that it was generally carried out via "SurveyMonkey". The error rate of the survey is estimated to be about 5%. Therefore, our evaluations and analysis should be taken into consideration with these limitations.

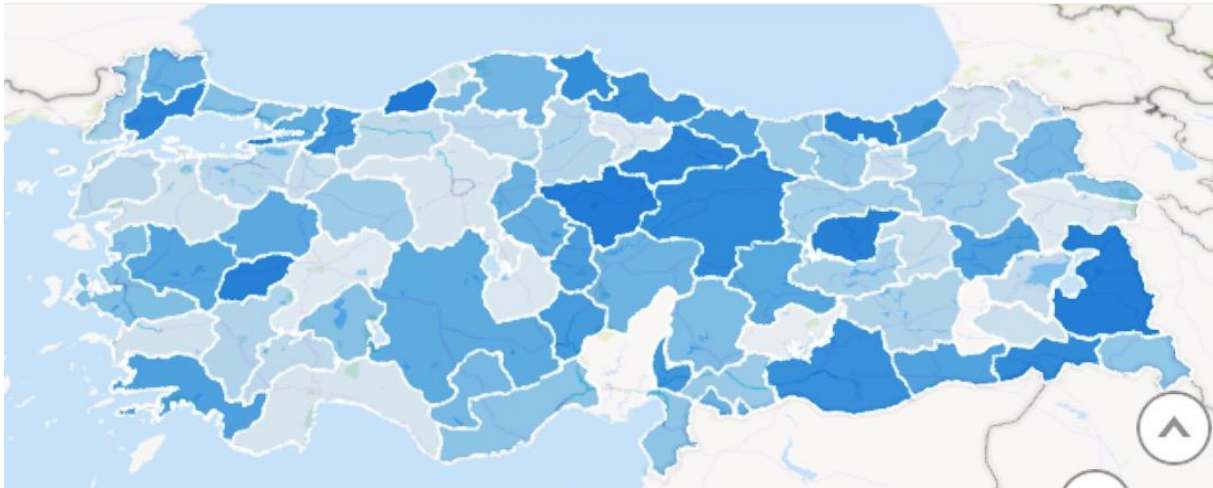
In order to ensure that the sample is representative, a stratified quota sampling based on the number of Syrian students in different provinces was adopted. Furthermore, throughout the field study period, the sample was regularly crosschecked against the actual distribution of students across the different provinces where the universities are located. Data for this was obtained from the Higher Education Council data and a high level of overlap is targeted. To this end, where the sample falls short of the actual share of the Syrian students, academics, students, and NGOs were mobilized to assist with the offline interventions and the project's social media account was promoted in these target provinces using online interventions. Figure 3 illustrates the level of overlap between the actual number of

³ For Euro-student projects: <https://www.eurostudent.eu>

⁴ The number of surveys conducted in the ED-I study was 470 students in 36 provinces.

students and those in the sample where lighter colors indicate an underrepresentation and darker colors demonstrate an overrepresentation. For instance, in the district of Şanlıurfa, as indicated by the dark color, the share of our respondents in the total sample is higher than the actual share of Syrian students compared to the total number in Turkey as a whole. Nevertheless, as seen, there are no major discrepancies or overrepresentations of the data in a systematic way suggesting a representative sample, hence no weighting of the sample was found to be necessary.

Fig-3- Level of District Coverage of the ED II Survey Sample



A. Profiles, Vulnerabilities and Challenges of Syrian Students:

In our research, 48 percent (507 students) of the respondents that participated in our survey were enrolled in higher education in Syria. Of these students with past university enrollment, 12.2% (62 students) attended for one year, 16.3% (83 students) finished two years, 13.2% (67 students) completed three years, and 15.5% (79 students) completed 4 years of studies in Syria. Among these students, 70 percent indicated that they could not transfer any of their credits, while 20 percent said they partially transferred their credits, and 10 percent stated that they fully transferred their credits.

With regard to the types of programs enrolled in, about 3 percent of the Syrian students in our sample were enrolled in 2-year associate degree programs, 88 percent of the students in undergraduate programs, and the remaining 9 percent are pursuing graduate studies either in MA or PhD programs. Regarding the distribution of their chosen field of study, about 40 percent are enrolled in various engineering programs with civil and computer engineering being the most popular departments within this field. About 30 percent are enrolled in administrative and social sciences, including political science and international relations, and 18 percent are enrolled in health sciences, including medicine, dentistry, and pharmaceuticals departments.

With regard to marital status, about 20 percent of the respondents indicated that they were married while the remainder is single. This is a rather high percentage compared to Turkish university students and may result in more responsibilities for running a household with a potential impact on their success in higher education.

The first wave of the ED survey in 2017 yielded the finding that about half of the students were enrolled in a higher education institution before their current enrollment in Turkey. In light of this finding, this wave of the ED survey incorporated a separate questionnaire section in order to gather more information about students' past education. To this end, questions on the duration of their past

studies, their ability to transfer credits, and perceptions of comparisons between the two contexts were inquired on.

Table-2: Former Higher Education in Syria		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Previously enrolled in HE in Syria	507	47.92%
Not Enrolled in HE in Syria	551	52.08%
Total	1,058	

Almost 48% of the respondents of this wave of the ED survey were enrolled in higher education in Syria. Of these students with past university enrollment, 62 finished one year, 83 finished two years, 67 completed three years, and 79 completed 4 years of studies in Syria. Among these students, 70% indicated that they could not transfer any of their credits, while 20% said they partially transferred their credits, and 10% stated that they fully transferred their credits. This data indicates once more the crucial importance of the recognition for the transfer of the credits.

In order to note any problems encountered while they were trying to access higher education, they were asked a specific question. According to their answers, only 20% of the students in our sample have not experienced any difficulties accessing education, whereas 29% had problems meeting the costs associated with higher education, 19% faced issues due to the language barrier, 14% in securing documentation required for application or admission, and 10% had issues accessing information regarding different universities and their programs. This result points to the need and importance for scholarships and language courses for their access to and participation in higher education and society. The following table not only illustrates the distribution of different challenges but also compares them across the two waves of the ED Project. Accordingly, for both waves, the financial costs still constitute the most important challenge regarding access followed by obtaining required registration documents as well as language barriers. The information deficit seems to have lessened but other problems persist.

Table -3 Important Problems/Challenges Accessing to HE		
Category	ED I	ED II
None/ No problems	19.00%	20.85%
I could not access information on universities and programs	14.25%	10.29%
I had difficulty in paying for the expenses related to higher education	24.80%	28.74%
I had difficulty preparing application and registration documents	15.04%	14.43%
I had difficulty because of the language problem	18.85%	11.61%
Other	10.82%	15.30%

One of the most important indicators is to discover the routes they followed in their admission process. Significantly, 53% applied for the international student quotas offered by universities, which have increased after the mass influx of Syrian refugees in Turkey, following a regulation implemented by the Council of Higher Education, and almost 29% took the more competitive Foreign Student Exam (YÖS) prepared by the universities they applied to, 12% directly transferred from their institution in Syria, and about 5% started as special students. This data clearly indicates the diversity of access procedures

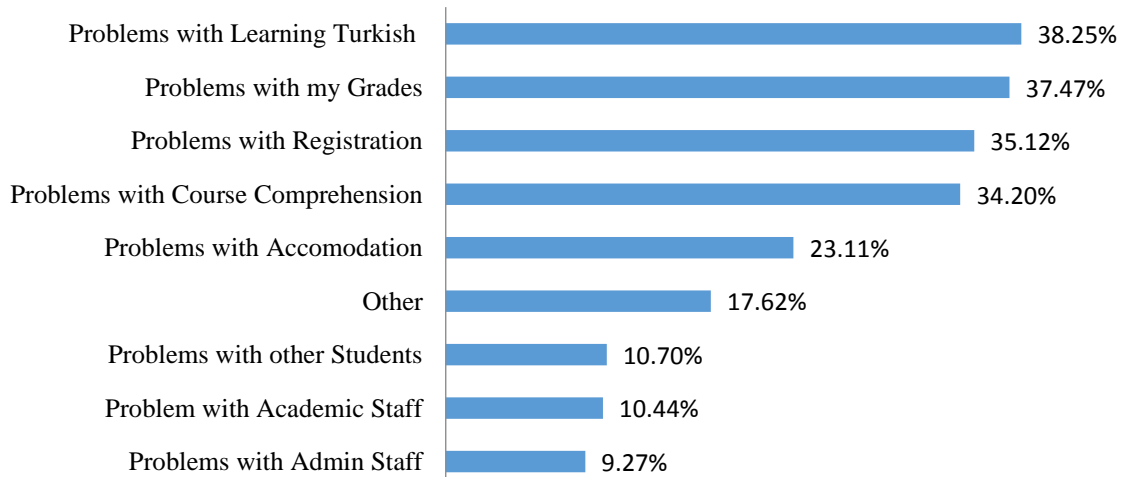
implemented by the Syrian refugees and the positive impact of the facilitating regulations centrally planned by the CoHE and implemented by the universities.

Table-4: Paths to Access Higher Education

Path	Number of Respondents	%
Direct transfer from my HE Institution in Syria	92	12.43%
Applied to the University Quota	391	53.11%
Took the YÖS Exam	211	28.65%
Entered as a Special Student	34	4.59%
Other	47	15.41%
Total	740	

Students were also asked about their experiences during their studies and the particular problems they had to solve. According to ED-II, 38% of Syrian students faced difficulties with learning Turkish. Considering that this is an obstacle for both the academic and social adaptation of the students to their new environment, it is no surprise that it comes out as the most important challenge for Syrian students where they need assistance. This challenge is followed by grades, the registration process, and course comprehension. Areas where the students faced the least amount of challenges are administrative staff, academic faculty members, and fellow students, which demonstrates that students have comparatively low challenges with their social environment despite the language problem.

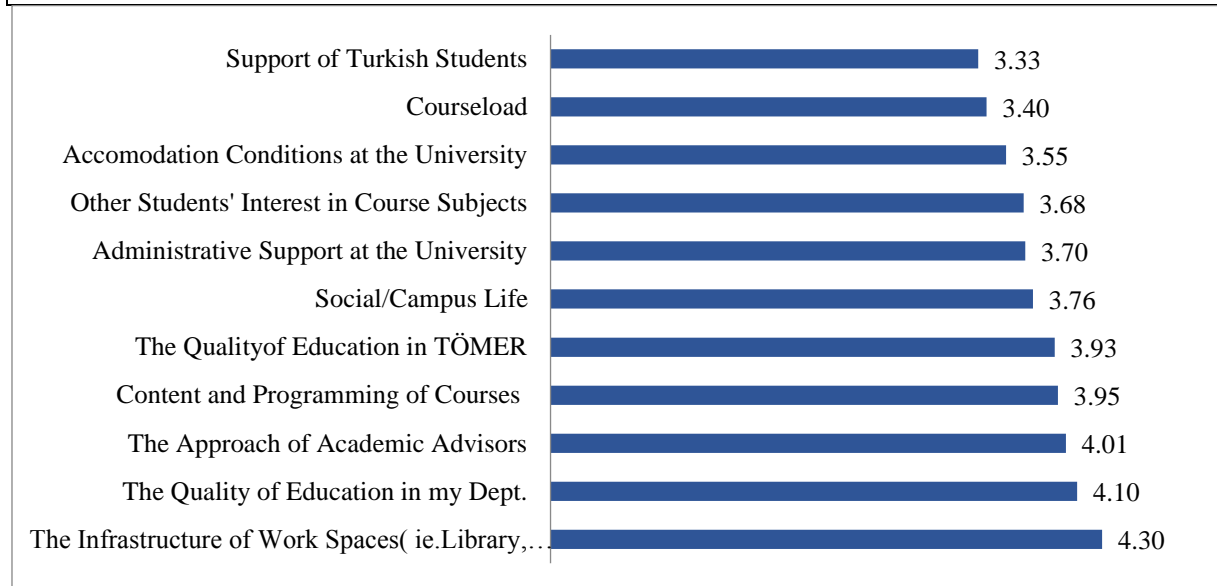
Fig-4: Problems Faced During Studies



The Elite Dialogue II Project aims to locate the perceptions of Syrian students among other international students in other contexts, comparatively. Therefore, a module on students' satisfaction with various aspects of life and education at their respective institutions has been incorporated into the student survey. The results regarding their perceptions of their universities are displayed in the

following graph where 1 indicates no satisfaction and 5 indicates high satisfaction. Accordingly, students are most satisfied with the infrastructure of their universities, the quality of education in their respective departments, and the support they receive from academic advisors. While still above average in terms of overall satisfaction, the students seem to be less happy about the accommodation conditions, the course load per semester, and the level of support they get from fellow Turkish students.

Fig-5: Satisfaction with various aspects of life and education



From the questions about their future prospects, we found interesting results. When asked students about their intentions to return to Syria –a much debated issue both nationally and internationally- 34% indicated that they have no intention to return to Syria, whereas only 6% indicated high interest in returning even if the war continues. Another 6% is interested in returning even if their desired regime is not established in Syria. Nevertheless, a bulk of the respondents, 55% indicated that they would return only if their desired regime is established, a rather difficult task to meet for every refugee. This finding suggests the need for future plans for the Syrian students not only in Turkey but also in the EHEA, since according to another survey question, they tend to have further studies in Europe.

IV. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The number of Syrians living in Turkey has exceeded 3.6 million, thus the main argument of the research team was that a large portion of this population will remain in Turkey. Moreover, the education level of Syrians living in Turkey is very low compared to both Turkish society and to the Syrians who moved to Europe. Therefore, it is important that university students and academics help with developing new policies, establish healthy communication with the Syrian community as a whole, and play a bridge role in the adaptation process in the host country. "Elite" Syrian groups are vital for future integration policies as "role models," "pioneers," and "bridges." They might also be role models for their community and good examples for the host community to develop positive communication channels.

The number of Syrian students who are studying at 153 public and foundation universities in Turkey exceeded 27,606 in 2019. Half of these Syrian students are those who had to interrupt their education

and come to Turkey, and the other half consist of high school graduates who have passed the university entrance exam for the international students (YÖS) and other exams successfully and now attend university. Syrian university students represent the largest group among the 148,000 international students in Turkey (CoHE, 2019). This is undoubtedly an important achievement and investment both for the Syrian community and for Turkey. On the other hand, since accessing higher education for Turkish citizens is a very competitive process, Syrian university students in Turkey are often the center of public opinion discussion topics.

Although ED research focused on Syrian students in Turkey, after analyzing the data, we have the following observations and recommendations to define the problem areas and challenges and to suggest possible solutions for the future in Turkey and in the EHEA since the topics and challenges have indispensable commonalities.

- Our findings indicate that one of the main difficulties Syrian students face in their host countries is to learn the language. Therefore, support for language learning is required for their academic success, for their career development, and also to integrate into society.
- Another challenge they face is the financial problems which directly affect their access to and participation in higher education in the first place. Efforts should be made to provide, diversify, and increase scholarships for Syrian students from international sources.
- The average distribution of Syrian university students in Turkey is 63.2% male and 36.7% female. Special policies should be implemented to increase the number of female Syrian students.
- Representation and participation of Syrian students in decision making processes seems to be lacking in practice. For the efficiency and sustainability of the policies and reforms, their voices need to be heard for future policies.
- It is important to provide reliable and updated information about the Syrian students not only to develop new policies but also to inform Turkish society correctly and simultaneously.
- Employment policies should be developed to motivate Syrian students to remain in Turkey. Otherwise, in a young population, as in Turkey, and with increasing unemployment rates among the university graduates, they will face further challenges while seeking employment. It is highly likely that young Syrians would go to other countries, if they cannot find jobs in Turkey after they graduate.

Research shows that the tendency of Syrians in Turkey to stay permanently in Turkey increases each day. ED Projects based on this view argue that Syrian academics and students will play an important role in establishing positive communication between the refugees and the host country. Higher education is a significant indicator for integration for newcomers for both societies and for the international community. Higher education is facing new challenges due to the changing social dynamics of Europe and around the globe. Findings of ED projects may contribute to data-based policies in Turkey and in the EHEA in the last eight years has passed since the Syrian refugee crisis began and on the 20th anniversary of the Bologna Process.

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