

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



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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 teachers and higher education students in Turkey. 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 might help design new data-based policies.

Although the research focused on two target groups in the higher education Syrian teachers and students, this paper will only focus on the students’ results. The main question of the survey was “how do the Syrian higher education students adapt to the Turkish higher education system and in the Turkish society?” More specifically, the research tried to find out what their academic and social profile was, what challenges they faced and what expectations they had so that some recommendations for the new policies could be suggested. As Turkey has a young population, and accessing higher education is highly competitive for all high school graduates, the young group of Syrian refugees needs to be dealt with delicately.

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They have potential to be mediators between their community and the Turkish society since the majority of refugees in Turkey have a lower educational background. Secondly, Turkish higher education system is already the second largest 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.¹ Therefore, this research was aimed to contribute to better understanding the profile, qualifications, and expectations of the Syrian students already admitted into the system. A survey was conducted with 497 Syrian higher education students, out of which 395 respondents qualified to be evaluated, which makes this survey the most extended one done with Syrian students so far in Turkey.

Syrian Refugees in Turkey²

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 a serious conflict and later into a civil war (Fig. 1).³

Number of Syrians fleeing from this hostile environment, initially to neighboring countries, has exceeded six million people between April 2011 and July 2017. In Syria, which had a population of 22.4 million in April 2011, at least 465,000 people were killed, hundreds of thousands of people were injured, more than six million people left Syria, and 7–8 million were forced to move within the country.⁴ 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 was over 3.5 million in November 2017, which makes up 4.5% of Turkey’s 80-million-population.⁵ The majority of refugees live all around Turkey as it can be seen from the map below, and only 8% live in the camps established in the region.⁶

¹See AlAhmad (2016), de Wit and Altbach (2016) and Watenpaugh et al. (2014).

²This study uses the concept of “refugee” for Syrians in Turkey, regardless of the legal-administrative context in Turkey, acknowledging they are not legally “refugees”, and as a concept reflecting the situation better in a sociological sense. The legal framework in Turkey and the reasons for this use are addressed in the section titled “Legal and Administrative Regulations on Refugees”.

³Erdoğan (2018), p. 11.

⁴The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (London) (<http://www.syriahr.com/en/>) and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 14.04.2017) and see Brookings Institution and USAK (2013)

⁵Erdogan (2017).

⁶Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) (http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/duzensiz-goc_363_378_4710_icerik/) See also Brookings Institution (2015).

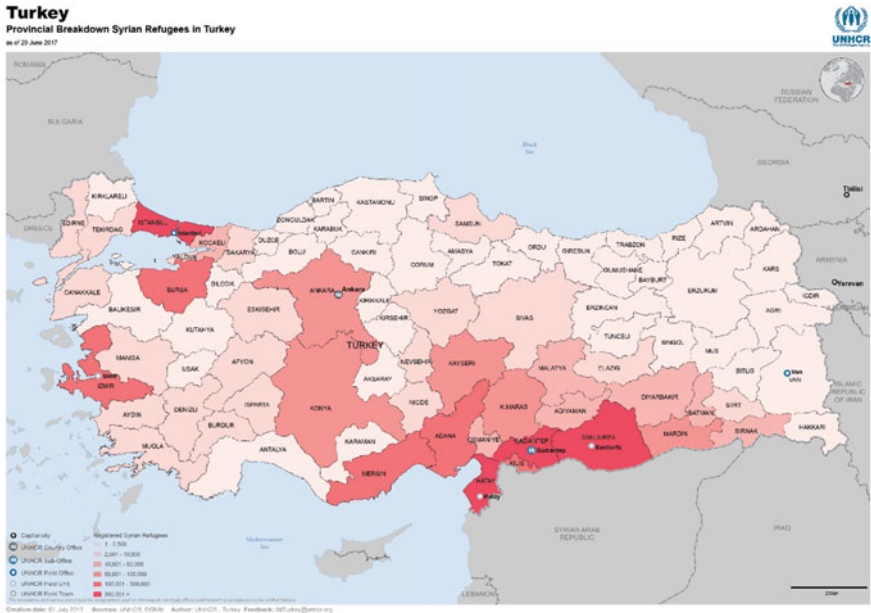


Fig. 1 Provincial breakdown of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Source <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (access: 2 July 2017)

Legal and Administrative Regulations on Refugees

The UN defines a 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 the international context was mainly due to the human tragedy experienced in World War II. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights used 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 the international arena is determined by the 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 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”.⁷ With a declaration in 1961, Turkey, one of the

⁷The 1951 Refugee Convention: <http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

first countries to sign the Geneva Convention, stated that “geographical limitations” will be applied, meaning that whatever the reason, Turkey will not accept people coming from outside of Europe as “refugees”. Many signatory countries of the 1951 Convention used this exemption for a while and afterwards ceased this practice by choosing “situation” over “country of origin”. The national legislation amended after the Syrian crises, “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” (2013) which constitutes Turkey’s legal framework on migration and refugees and Temporary Protection Regulation (2014), adopts this geographical limitation principle. This means that, under the current legal regulations in Turkey, regardless of the situations they are in, people who are in Turkey and are in fact defined as “refugees” by international law are not considered officially refugees in Turkey.⁸ The legal status of Syrians in Turkey is “temporary protection” under the latest “Temporary Protection Regulation”.⁹ The Regulation translates into “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 (Fig. 2).

According to the current data, educational backgrounds of Syrians in Turkey are as follows: 33.3% of Syrians in Turkey are illiterate; 13% are literate without a school degree¹⁰; 25.6% of Syrians chose not to make any statements on their educational backgrounds, which should probably be added to lower education level; 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.¹¹ There is serious doubt about the reliability of this information gathered during the registration process performed by Directory General of Migration Management (DGMM).

⁸See: Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2013) Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), (http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/law-on-foreigners-and-international-protection-lfip_913_975).

⁹See: Temporary Protection Directora (2014), Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), (http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/_dokuman28.pdf) Article 91—Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2013) *(1) Temporary protection may be provided for foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and temporary protection. (2) The actions to be carried out for the reception of such foreigners into Turkey; their stay in Turkey and rights and obligations; their exit from Turkey; measures to be taken to prevent mass influxes; cooperation and coordination among national and international institutions and organisations; determination of the duties and mandate of the central and provincial institutions and organisations shall be stipulated in a Directive to be issued by the Council of Ministers.*

¹⁰Ministry 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.

¹¹For the educational conditions of Syrian refugees see also, Bircan and Sunata (2015).

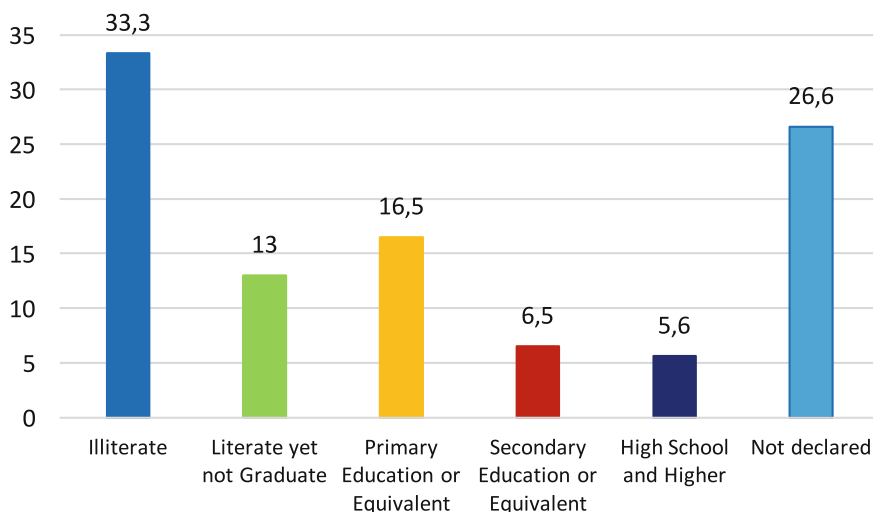


Fig. 2 Syrians uTP in Turkey according to their Educational Statuses (%). *Source* Turkish Ministry of Development Ministry, “First Stage Need Assessment Covering 2016–2018 Period for Syrians with Temporary Protection Status in Turkey” March 2016, p. 7

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 educational programs, social and economic surroundings, integration attitudes and future expectations. How do they like their universities? What kind of challenges were they 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 the research team sought to answer in this study.

An online survey was designed to be implemented through a Survey Monkey 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 was used in order to approximate the actual distribution of Syrian college students across Turkey. For these interventions, a multitude of methods was employed including asking for the 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 in announcing the survey to a variety of student groups.

Syrians Students in Turkish Universities

According to data from November 2017 provided by YÖK, the number of Syrian students studying in 140 public and foundation universities in Turkey is 15,000 (9700 males, 5300 females).¹² The actual ratio of Syrians in Turkey who have studied at a university or graduated from one is expected to be under 2%. This is a crucial rate in terms of future projections for education and integration policies. It is observed that 86.7% of these students study in public universities, whereas 13.2% study in private foundation universities.¹³ Although there are Syrian students studying in all 140 universities, 46.4% of these students study in 10 of these universities, and 65% are grouped in only 11 cities. Gaziantep University alone hosts 11.2% of these Syrian students, and Istanbul alone hosts 21.8% (Fig. 3).

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 on the transfer/recognition of undergraduate degrees for those students who attended undergraduate programs (except for Medicine and Dentistry programs) before the 2013–2014 academic year in Syria or Egypt. To ease the recognition of the qualifications of the refugees UNESCO and Council of Europe developed “Recommendation on the Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications under Lisbon Recognition Convention and Explanatory Memorandum”, Paris/Strasbourg, 14 Nov 2017:

1. If students present the documentation required for the recognition unit, they can be transferred to the Turkish HE institutions
2. Undergraduate applications will 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 will undertake courses as special students at the seven universities in the region (Gaziantep, Kilis 7 Aralık, Harran, Mustafa Kemal, Osmaniye Korkut Ata, Çukurova, and Mersin).¹⁴

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

In Turkey, since 2011, tuition fees for Turkish citizens were abolished. Council of Ministers decided that for the 2012–2013 academic year, tuition fees for Syrian

¹²Council of Higher Education (YÖK): www.yok.gov.tr & <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>.

¹³Information 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.

¹⁴See YOK. (2017).

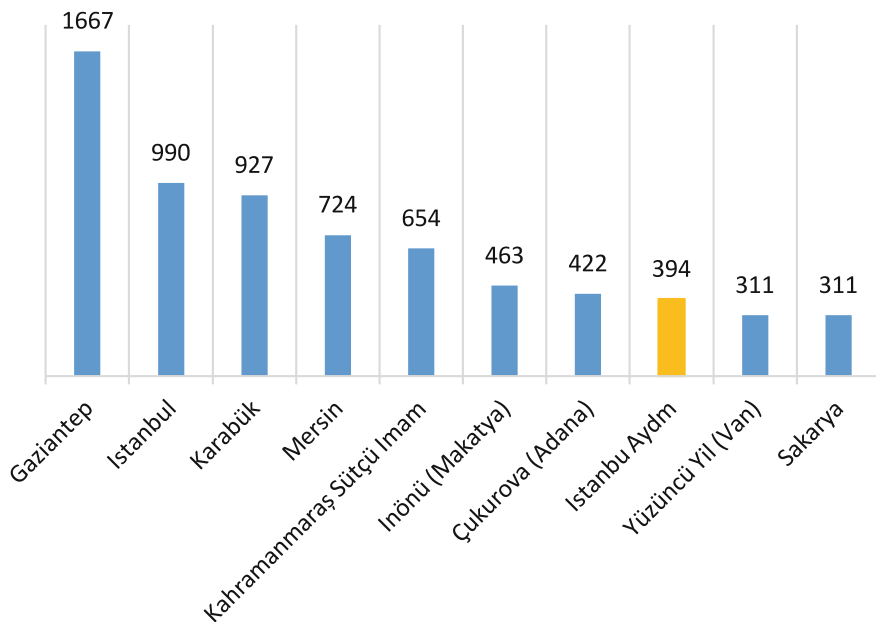


Fig. 3 Top Ten Universities with Syrian Student. *Source* Council of Higher Education (YÖK) www.yok.gov.tr; <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (accessed: 10 July 2017)

students enrolling in an institution through application to foreign student quotas will be covered from the budget of the public institution called Turks Abroad and Related Communities Presidency budget. For the later years, the tuition fees for the Syrian students were regulated by the “Decree on Determining Student Contributions to Current Service Costs in Higher Education Institutions and Tuition Fees for 2014–2015 Academic Year” issued by the Council of Ministers and published in 27/09/2014. The decree states that, in accordance with the principles determined by the Council of Higher Education, tuition fees for Syrian students who continue their education within the period of the program or enroll to daytime education and open education programs should be covered from the public institution “Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities” budget.¹⁵

Survey and the Key Findings

The survey 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

¹⁵See: Council of Higher Education Announcements (No: 57802651) <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2014/09/20140927-6-1.pdf>.

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 shows.

The average age of participants is 23.15 which also indicates that most of these students dropped out of their higher education program before arriving in Turkey. When we asked them if they attended a university in Syria, 45.47% answered yes (Fig. 4).

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

- Post-war vulnerabilities:

To start with the findings of 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 this (Fig. 5).

In order to have an idea about the level/impact of this trauma, we asked them about their losses in the war. Only 14% of our respondents did not lose anybody close 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 (Fig. 6).

- Family background:

When we asked them about the current location of their family members, we got a result indicating a much dispersed family diaspora. Accordingly, 89% of those in our sample still have family in Syria and 78% of the participants stated that at least one member of their family lives outside of Turkey and Syria.



Fig. 4 Distribution of the students in the sample of Elite Dialogue Survey

Fig. 5 Feeling trauma after war

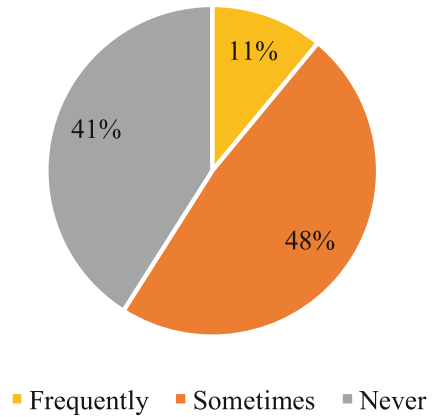
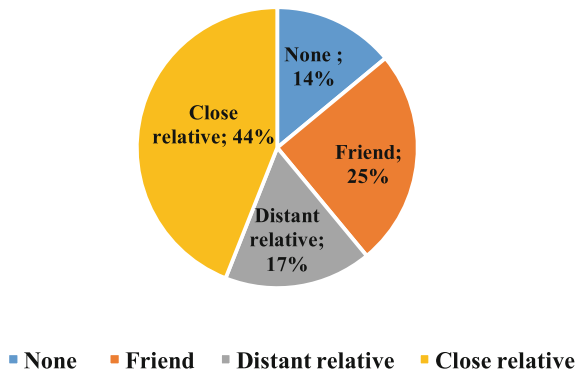


Fig. 6 Loss of family/friends during war



In order to understand whether there is a relation between educational statuses of the parents, it appears that 21.3% of students have parents with higher education degrees. The percentage of men (fathers) (30.87%) is higher than that of women (mothers) (7.65). The share of people with no family members with a higher education degree is quite high at 40%. Educational statuses of siblings paint a similar picture. Approximately 54% of siblings of Syrian college students participating in the research have attended higher education institutions (Fig. 7, Table 1).

- 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 the intermediate level. The high percentage of this result has two reasons; one is that they attended the TOMER (Turkish language) course after their enrollment, the other is that some participants are of Turkmen origin for whom Turkish is a native language. The share of 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.

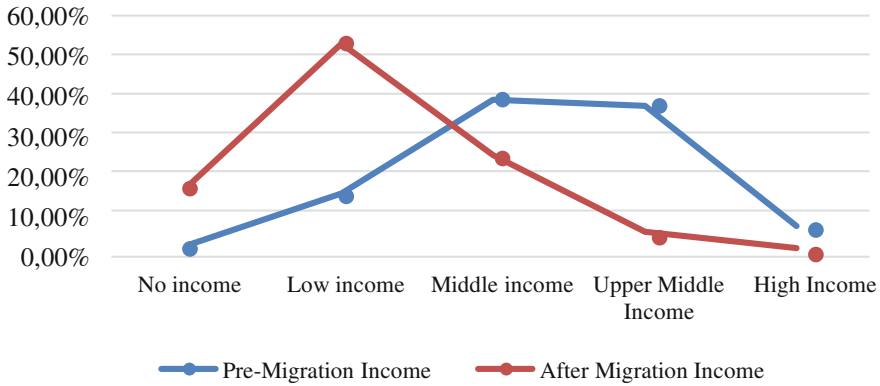


Fig. 7 Household income of before/after migration

Table 1 Higher education attainment of the parents

Answer choices	Responses (%)	Responses (no.)
Both parents went to college	21.37	81
Only the mother went to college	7.65	29
Only the father went to college	30.87	117
None of them	40.11	152
Total	100.00	379

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, as indicated by the high income skewed normal distribution of their household income that 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. Once again, it can be seen that the lack of information sources and language barriers are other difficulties they face (Fig. 8).

When we asked the students, 74% of Syrian respondents 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 (Fig. 9).

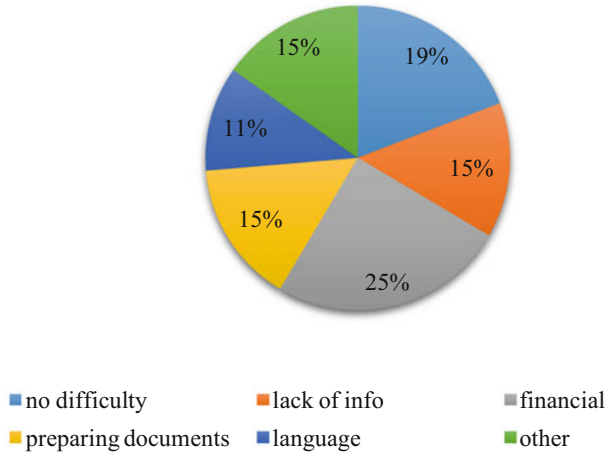


Fig. 8 Difficulties faced during admission

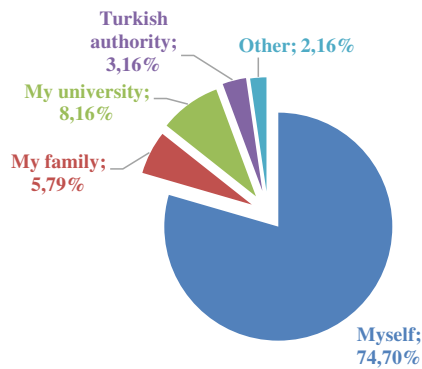


Fig. 9 Choosing the field of study

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 in Turkey. Turkish government gives approximately 3500 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 dissemination of the information regarding these scholarships (Fig. 10).

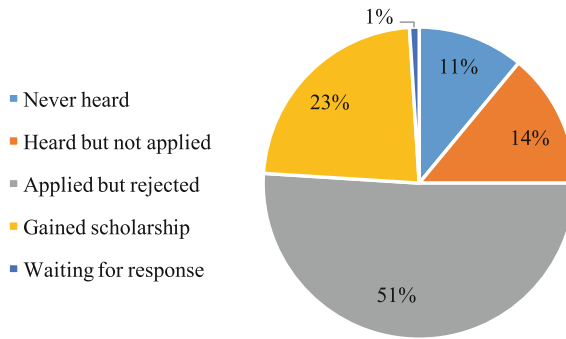


Fig. 10 Scholarships from Turkish government

Success Levels in the Courses

Academic standings of Syrian students participating in the research in the last few years are rather promising. Of all participants in the survey, 75% stated that their success levels are “average”, “good”, or “excellent”. Students considering their success as “poor” are only 1%, those saying “average” are 15%. The level of success achieved despite very difficult conditions and a serious language barrier is indeed very promising (Fig. 11).

Quality of Education

A major part of Syrian college students participating in the survey (64%) appears to be satisfied with the quality of education provided by their departments in Turkey. Still, 20% of students seem dissatisfied with the quality of education, indicating the need for assessing this lack of satisfaction (Fig. 12).

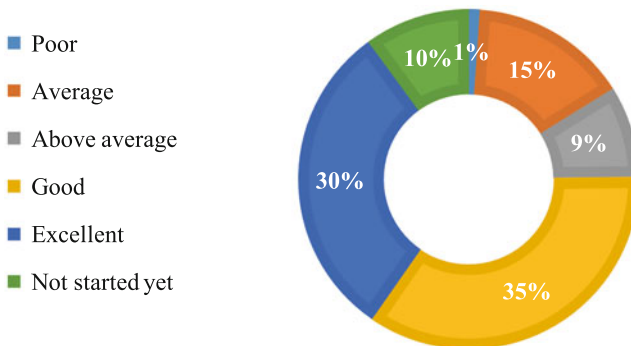


Fig. 11 Success levels in their courses

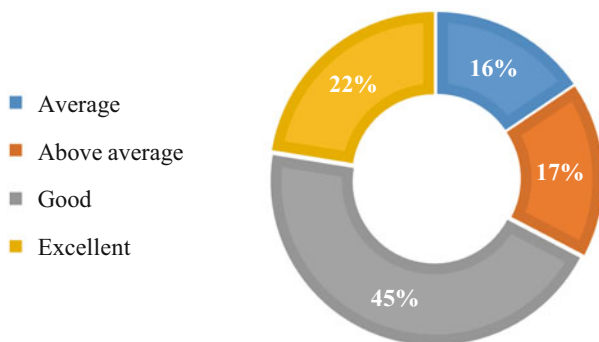


Fig. 12 Quality of education

Table 2 Social Relations

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very good
Turkish friends	19.79% 75	20.32% 77	8.97% 34	24.54% 93	26.39% 100
Arabic friends	3.43% 13	8.18% 31	7.12% 27	31.40% 119	49.87% 189

- **Social Integration and Future Expectations**

In order to discover how happy and adapted Syrian students in Turkey felt, the research tried to focus on social relations 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 of 80%, the relationships between these groups defined as bad is of 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 (Table 2).

Living/Work¹⁶

Syrian students 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 (Fig. 13).

¹⁶Syrians under temporary protection (refugees) in Turkey have work permit. But more than 90% of Syrians in Turkey work informal. See: Erdogan and Ünver (2015); and Icduygu and Migration Policy Institute (2015).

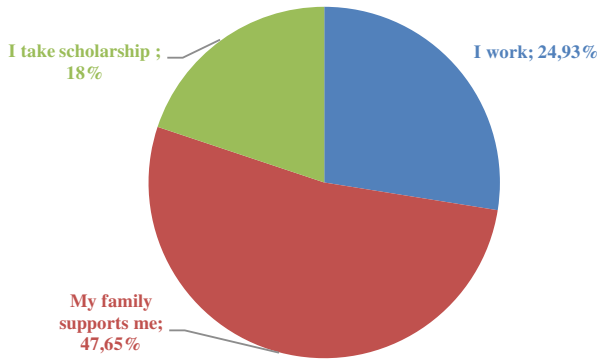


Fig. 13 Financial conditions

Future Perspectives

At this point, it is also important to explore the employment prospects of Syrian refugee students as this is one of the main reasons why they are enrolled in higher education programs. First, when it comes to their future expectations, 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 sociological 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 is the lowest, and Syrian college students participating in the research feel most hopeful about their personal lives and Turkish politics (Fig. 14).

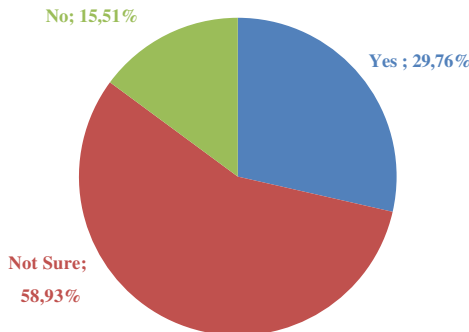


Fig. 14 Do you think you will find a job after graduation?

Plans for the 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 responses 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 (Fig. 15).

Responses 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% of them 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.

Responses 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, the first choice of Syrian students would be to go to Canada (41%), followed by the UK (25%), and then Germany (18%) (Fig. 16).

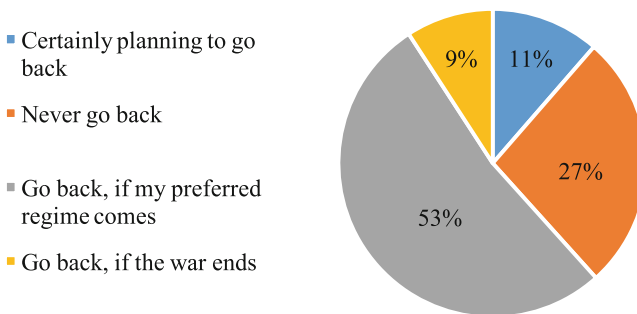


Fig. 15 Plans to move back

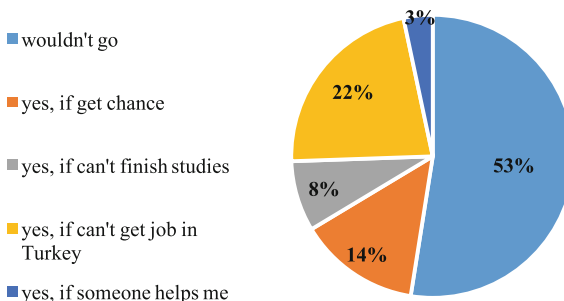


Fig. 16 Migration to third countries

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. The first one is to determine the problems of Syrian students and put forward recommendations for policies on this matter, and the second one is to understand this qualified group's contribution to the long-term adaptation process of Syrians and to provide ways and means for them to motivate themselves. We mainly believe that most of the Syrians, whose numbers are over 3.3 million as of November 2017, will stay in Turkey, which was clearly confirmed during the study. The number of university students (14,700) is very small compared to the overall Syrian population (3.3 million) in Turkey. There are around 500,000 young Syrians between 18 and 25 years old.

Higher education is highly competitive in Turkey due to the large young population and the imbalance between supply and demand in the system. Admitting Syrian students into education and particularly higher education is one of the most discussed issues and one of the main areas of social conflict in Turkey. Despite the fact that Syrian higher education students do not deny Turkish students their educational rights and enroll in universities under foreigner quotas, this has been one of the most 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 a quality education and for the inclusive integration policies, the education level of the overall 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, increasing this number of students and incentivizing policies should be structured in a manner to prevent any additional societal turmoil, and policies should be developed with support from the Turkish society.¹⁷

¹⁷This approach can be noticed in the document for the most refugee hosting countries created by the UN. See 3RP (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan). (n.d). Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015–16: Turkey. *Report, 3RP*. Retrieved from <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Syria/3RP-Report-Turkey.pdf>. For a European policy for the recognition of the qualification see Recommendation on the Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications under Lisbon Recognition Convention and Explanatory Memorandum, Paris/Strasbourg, 14 Nov 2017.

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 participants in the survey, shows that Syrian university students in Turkey:

- are traumatized young people experiencing deep psychological outcomes of the war;
- have low enrollment rates to universities;
- are academically vulnerable, having no clear perspectives and supervision;
- are not integrated socially with the local people;
- have unclear future prospects, second and more migration plans.

Our recommendations for new policies addressing 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 more study places 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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