

AN EVALUATION OF REFUGEES' ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: CASE OF TURKEY AND ISTANBUL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This article underlines the challenges refugees experience in accessing higher education in both first-asylum and resettlement countries. It focuses specifically on Turkey's higher education system, and the policies and practices in place to respond to the educational requirements of Syrian refugees. Our analysis reveals that accommodating the influx of Syrian higher education students into the Turkish system presents a huge challenge for policy makers and higher education institutions. The case study conducted at Istanbul University further emphasizes the common barriers that refugees face when trying to access higher education in host countries – financial hardship, language issues, non-recognition of prior learning and a lack of information or guidance. Restrictive regulations and legal precarity, on the other hand, tend to be less of a challenge when it comes to accessing higher education. Our findings support that central regulating body's immediate action and its commitment to provide higher education for refugees are crucial to prevent a short-term crisis. However, we also argue that despite the flexibility introduced for refugees in the legal and regulatory framework, implementation depends on institutional policies and practices that are mainly constrained by their capacity and resources.*

Keywords: *Education, Higher Education, Refugees, Forced Migration*

Introduction

Until recently, access to higher education for asylum seekers and refugees, and research on the subject, had been neglected in the educational provisions of refugees. Most studies tend to focus on providing access to quality and inclusive basic education and often overlook higher education (Zeus, 2011; Dryden-Peterson, 2010). However, access to higher education can be a vital lifeline for refugees as it not only provides internationally recognised skills and qualifications but also prevents isolation, marginalisation and waste of human capital (Morrice, 2013b). In addition to contributing to the success and well-being of an individual, higher education is also the driving force to develop the welfare, stability and security of the society in which they are currently living and the one that they hope to go back to (Milton and Barakat, 2016; Morrice, 2013b; Wright and Plasterer, 2010; Dodds and Inquai, 1983). Higher education does not only directly benefit young people by empowering and making them self-reliant, but it also benefits the wider refugee community as youths often go on to become role models and agents of change for themselves and their community (Zeus, 2011; Wright and Plasterer, 2010; Morlang and Stolte, 2008). This is further backed up by a United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report on education, which highlights that graduates of its higher education scholarship programme – DAFI also known as the Albert Einstein German Academic

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Refugee Initiative– choose careers as teachers and community workers, and become role models and voices for their communities (UNHCR, 2018b, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

Access to HE for refugees was recently included in The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 September 2016, thus recognising its importance. Article 82 of the Declaration states that:

“In conflict and crisis situations, higher education serves as a powerful driver for change, shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women by maintaining their hopes for the future, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination and acts as a catalyst for the recovery and rebuilding of post-conflict countries.”

The 2016 report on education – *Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis* – UNHCR (2016) focuses on higher education programmes; stating their importance as an integral part of its mandate and committing to increase opportunities and access as their priorities. Although in its latest report – *Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis* – UNHCR continues to attribute great importance to higher education, the demand cannot be met and access to higher education for refugees remains the exception, not the rule. In the last three years, only 1% of the 25 million refugees globally have had access to higher education, compared to an average of 37% of the world’s youth (UNHCR, 2018b).

The war in Syria has created the largest refugee crisis in recent times, with over 5.6 million people fleeing to safety in neighbouring countries and beyond (UNHCR, 2018a). As indicated by the Action Document of the European Union Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, before the war, an estimated 20% of Syria’s young people were enrolled in higher education. As war continues and more people flee the country, Syrian youth face barriers accessing higher education in the countries in which they seek refuge (EU, 2016). While every country has responded to this new wave of refugees within its own political and social contexts, the challenges are enormous even in countries where higher education systems are stronger with higher capacities. Despite the crisis, an obsession with numbers, and restrictive policies and practices still dominate the political response, which in turn also affect the higher education policies for refugees. This is the case in the largest and oldest resettlement countries (Loo, Streitweiser and Jeong, 2018; Jungblut and Pietkiewicz, 2017). The majority of displaced Syrians reside in neighbouring countries within the region such as in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; while only 10% have sought asylum in Europe or other third countries (World Vision, 2018). This places more pressure on the HE systems of the regional countries to meet the needs of Syrian youth. Since 2015, Turkey has been the largest refugee host country and is currently home to more than 3.6 million of the total 5.6 million Syrian refugees. The inflow of millions of displaced people in a relatively short period has urged Turkey to take legal, regulatory and institutional measures in order to cope with the rising educational needs of refugee children and youth.

This article highlights the challenges refugees face in accessing higher education in this kind of protracted crisis situation in the world, both in first-asylum and resettlement countries. It focuses specifically on Turkey’s higher education system, and the policies and practices in place to respond to the educational requirements of Syrian refugees. The aim is threefold: to evaluate the various pathways of Syrian students to higher education in Turkey; discuss the related barriers and opportunities by analysing the measures and practices of the different refugee receiving countries; and define the varied and common issues based on the related literature. An evaluation of existing literature and reports on higher education systems globally and their responses to the influx of refugees is presented first in order to provide an analytical framework based on common challenges. Turkey’s higher education policies and provisions for Syrian refugees and their implementation at institutional level are then analysed, with specific reference to Istanbul University which currently has more than 1,200 Syrian students enrolled.

The research shows that the increasing demand of Syrian students on Turkey's higher education system poses a serious challenge for policy makers and higher education institutions (HEIs). Our findings support that central regulating body's immediate action and its commitment to provide higher education for refugees are crucial to prevent a short-term crisis. However, the Turkish case also shows that despite the flexibility introduced for refugees in the legal and regulatory framework, implementation depends on institutional policies and practices that are mainly constrained by institutional capacities and resources.

Research and Methodology

Education for refugees, despite some similarities, is very different from that of international students and therefore warrants more specific research. Refugees have experienced displacement, loss, the feelings of uncertainty and temporariness, and the traumatic transition into a new environment, culture and language. These specific circumstances must be carefully considered when providing basic and higher education. Refugee education therefore requires holistic, intersectional, multi-level research facilitating a comprehensive framework for the wide range of factors (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen and Frater-Mathieson, 2004). In order to capture this intersectional and multi-layered environment, a qualitative approach combined with quantitative data has been deployed during the research. A detailed review of document and literature was undertaken in order to map international practices. Furthermore, publicly available documents relating to higher education for refugees in Turkey were analysed to identify national regulations and practices while documentary evidence was collected from first and secondary resources and key experts.

Fieldwork for the research was carried out between August 2017 and July 2018. In total, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrative staff at the University of Istanbul, who are responsible for student applications and admissions. Two focus group discussions were organised involving Syrian academics and students from the university together with representatives of voluntary organisations working in the field of refugee education. In total, 25 people participated in the focus groups including: 5 Syrian researchers, 10 Syrian students, 2 unemployed Syrian researchers and 8 representatives of voluntary organisations. They brought with them diverse experiences, opinions and insights on the provision of higher education for refugees in Turkey. Questions during the sessions mainly focused on the obstacles and challenges in accessing higher education. A final workshop involving 13 administrative staff responsible for refugee applications and admissions was organised. During this workshop participants had the opportunity to discuss the preliminary findings of the research, which maps the national and institutional framework, and clarify any obstacles to higher education for refugees.

Due to the sensitive nature of this research and to mitigate any risk, ethics approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Council together with signed consent forms of those participating. In addition to written consent, all participants were informed of the consent procedures and assured that all data would be anonymous. Permission was also obtained before recording interviews. Participants representing institutions could be slightly biased and therefore to avoid this in the research, data in the form of verbatim transcripts and on-site observations was collected. For example, different faculties were observed during the applications process and informal conversations with students took place in order to cross-check data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data (O'Donoghue and Punch, 2003).

Finally, considering the inherently political nature of the refugee context, the potential risk of stigmatisation and the vulnerability of the refugees, researchers were very aware of the sensitive nature of their research. Distinguishing sub-groups among the participants based on class, ethnic and religious identities was deliberately avoided during the interviews. However, this is a shortcoming of the research given the interplay between identity, and power relations in accessing higher education.

Thus, additional voices of refugee youth would have further enhanced the research but was difficult to reach and obtain, particularly those prospective students who could access to higher education. Despite voluntary organisations working with refugees being aware of the challenges, there is an apparent need for future research to draw more on the experiences, aspirations and expectations of refugee youth during access and participation to higher education.

International Context: Main Barriers to Access

Countries hosting large numbers of refugees requiring basic and higher education respond to this demand according to their political and social context, and education systems (Loo et al., 2018). Despite the normative human rights framework and ever-growing consensus on the benefits of higher education, there are still enormous barriers and challenges as documented by a number of first-asylum and resettlement countries (Berg, 2018; El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Watenpaugh, Frickle and King, 2014; Zeus, 2001; Joyce, Earnest, De Mori, and Silvagni, 2010; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Thus, opportunities for refugee youth are still very limited, with huge obstacles and the gap between aspiration and reality is widening (AlAhmad, 2016; Sherab and Kirk, 2016; Watenpaugh, Fricke and Siegel, 2013).

Based on this expanding literature, we have identified the main barriers and obstacles for refugees' access to higher education both in first-asylum and resettlement countries. In order to collate and condense these various barriers and provide an analytical background for our research, we have grouped these obstacles into four distinct themes; restrictive legal and regulatory framework, legal and financial precarity, language barriers, non-recognition of prior learning and lack of information and guidance. These commonalities derived from primary and secondary research, have provided a good starting point for discussions on the Turkish higher education system's response to the increasing demand from prospective Syrian students in the wider international context.

Restrictive Legal and Regulatory Framework

A restrictive legal and regulatory framework in a host country can have a direct effect on a refugee's access to higher education. This is especially true in first-asylum countries where capacity and quality are a concern or where restricted quotas prioritise nationals over refugees thereby limiting their access (Dryden-Peterson, 2010). Quota restrictions do not just happen in first-asylum countries though; they are also used in developed countries, which have highly competitive application and admissions requirements for international students (Berg, 2018; Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017; Streitwieser, Brueck, Moody and Taylor, 2017). The hostile political climate, perceived increased burden and general compassion fatigue in host countries can also result in more restrictive policies that curb civil rights and/or provisions including access to higher education (Watenpaugh et al., 2014).

Highly regulated policies on asylum or residential status at different levels of government may also result in repressive and restrictive living conditions. Although there are no legal restrictions to access higher education, asylum seekers and refugees may be challenged by complex and contradictory regulations, and "a multitude of bureaucratic requirements" (Berg, 2018; AIDA, 2017; Perry and Mallozzi, 2011). Encampment policies in first-asylum countries, for example, (Zeus, 2011) and dispersal regulations restricting mobility in resettlement countries can further hinder access to higher education (Berg, 2018; Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017; Morris-Lange and Brands, 2016; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Different provisions and entitlements attached to a different status can further complicate access and even be abused (Houghton and Morrice, 2008). Student support, preparatory or language classes, for example, that are crucial for access to HEIs can be subject to an accepted refugee status or limited to a particular region (AIDA, 2017; Berg, 2018; Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017; Morrice 2013a).

Aside from these restrictive or contradictory regulations, the regulatory framework is not particularly supportive of refugees' access to higher education; a fact that could be attributed to the rise of anti-immigration and asylum policies and discourse in both first-asylum and resettlement countries. For instance, as asylum and immigration policies and public debates become more controversial and restrictive in the US, the highly decentralised higher education system becomes even more fragmented and uncoordinated, therefore lacking a supportive regulatory framework for refugee access. Even in Canada where the government has long been appreciated for its commitment to multi-culturalism and diversity, the efforts of HEIs are mostly scattered and not directly related to higher education access (Loo et al., 2018). In the European Higher Education Area, despite the widening participation in order to mirror the diversity of society, there is no formal national action plan or regulation specific to refugees' access to higher education. No coordinated action, therefore, exists among HEIs (Vukasovic, 2017, p. 23). Initiatives such as the "Integra" programme of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research for providing support to HEIs to set up support structures for refugees, is a good example of a supportive regulatory framework on a national scale (Berg, 2018).

Legal and Financial Precarity

Recognised refugee status is a prerequisite for enrolling in higher education (Jungblut, 2017; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Obtaining that status, however, is not easy considering the lengthy bureaucratic procedures, that is without mentioning the uncertainty of the application outcome (Vukasovic, 2017; Morris-Lange and Brands, 2016; Morrice, 2013a; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Suspension of student visas, restrictive regulations such as residency requirements and the high cost of renewing residency permits are common obstacles in accessing higher education in first-asylum countries (Watenpaugh et al., 2014), and especially in politicised countries or those in turmoil (Berg, 2018). Asylum procedures, uncertain legal status and a precarious financial situation all have a significant impact on a refugee's access to higher education. In the majority of European countries, financial aid is granted on the basis of an accepted refugee status (Berg, 2018; Morris-Lange and Brands, 2016; Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017). Temporary status and residency permit renewals also act as barriers to HE due to high costs involved (Bloch, 2007; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Despite there being no explicit legal barriers for prospective students with different humanitarian statuses, their varying entitlements to fees and funding schemes can prevent their access and participation in higher education (Stevenson and Willott, 2007).

According to a significant number of studies both in third and first-asylum countries, high tuition fees and living costs are the biggest challenges for refugees wanting to attend higher education (El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Watenpaugh et al., 2014). Most asylum seekers and refugees lack financial security or family support, and struggle to meet even their basic needs so tuition fees are seen as a luxury (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori and Silvagni, 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Kanno and Varghese, 2010; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). In many countries even public funded HEIs demand from foreign students fees that are as expensive as those of private institutions (El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Watenpaugh et al., 2013; Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010). Even when higher education is free and student loans are available, the preparation and application period still incur costs that are financially a burden for many.

Language Barrier

Language proficiency is another key and well-documented challenge in gaining access to higher education, as many courses are in the local language (Berg, 2018; Kanno and Varghese, 2010; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Despite the awareness and commitment to diversity in higher education, linguistic diversity and multilingual approaches are often neglected (Joyce et al., 2010;

Kanno and Varghese, 2010). Refugees usually lack the necessary proficiency level required for university entrance due to their unpredicted displacement and migration (Berg, 2018, p. 223; Doyle and O'Toole, 2013). Language classes in preparation for entrance to university do exist in many countries but they are generally under-funded and require an accepted refugee status (Matthews, 2008; Stevenson and Willott, 2007).

Language skills and proficiency are very much linked to structural and social aspects of life. While inadequate language skills hinder access to higher education, poor language skills can mean isolation, marginalisation and financial insecurity. A more holistic approach is therefore required to tackle the issue and provide the possibility for language learning (Berg, 2018; Kanno and Varghese, 2010). Support for language learning should also be linked to other aspects of adaptation and cultural awareness (Morrice, 2009).

Non-Recognition of Prior Learning

Refugees qualified to attend university may not only lack official identification documents, but they may also lack the necessary proof of their academic studies such as certified diplomas, transcripts, official attestations, which are often hard to obtain from embassies in host countries (Watenpaugh et al, 2013; Elwyn, Gladwell and Lyall, 2012). Despite the expanding legal framework such as Lisbon Recognition Convention, recognition of prior learning is still one of the main challenges for refugees trying to access higher education and employment. Failing to recognise a person's prior learning can result in 'de-skilling' and downward social mobility (Berg, 2018; Jungblut and Pietkiewicz, 2017; Pietkiewicz, 2017; Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Guo, 2009; Batalova and Fix, 2008).

Despite an increasing demand among refugees to recognise their qualifications, lack of documentation, authenticity, incomplete education or qualifications, lack of knowledge about the education systems in their countries, as well as inefficient, lengthy procedures and staff shortages make the recognition process very difficult (Jungblut and Pietkiewicz, 2017). Assessing foreign credentials is a very complex and time consuming task that requires specialisation and experience, and evaluating qualifications without documents is even harder (Berg, 2018; Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017; Streitweiser, Miller-Idriss and De Wit, 2016). Research carried out in the UK revealed that while only 15% of qualified refugees had gone through a recognition process, only 16% of those had successfully managed to have their qualifications recognised in the UK (Bloch, 2007). The process and possible refusal to recognise can be very frustrating for the applicants (Perry and Mallozzi, 2011; Joyce et al, 2010; Morrice, 2009). To speed up the process and remove the bottlenecks, some countries such as Germany and Jordan for example, are looking at centralising the recognition procedure (Berg, 2018; El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Sherab and Kirk, 2016).

Lack of Information, Advice and Guidance

Lack of available information, advice and guidance on the multiple institutions and complex regulations for access to higher education are among the most documented challenges for refugees (Berg, 2018; Jungblut and Pietkiewicz, 2017; Morrice, 2013a, 2009; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). General confusion about admission criteria, recognition of prior qualifications, required documentation cause additional difficulties (Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2009; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Mixed and conflicting messages or misinformation that results in the wrong choice of HEI or the failure to gain entrance to their chosen university are also common (Morrice, 2009; Stevenson and Willott, 2007).

Many young refugees are not aware of their rights and entitlement regarding access to higher education. Having to deal with unfamiliar systems in a language that is not their own and without proper information, advice or guidance can affect their chances of gaining a university place (El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017; Elwyn; Doyle and O'Toole, 2013; et al., 2012; Joyce et al., 2010).

Asylum seekers and refugees tend to rely on personal interactions and community connections to gather information and advice rather than formal communication tools such as university websites, regulations and guides (Baker, Ramsay, Irwin and Miles, 2018; Berg, 2018; Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Kanno and Varghese, 2010). This limits their chances as they often do not receive the support they need, given that their families and friends are also unfamiliar with the system with very few role models around (Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Navigating an unfamiliar system can be both challenging and frustrating so access to clear information and support services are highly appreciated. Discussions, networking opportunities, mentors, peer support and visiting speakers are also valued by asylum seekers and refugees (Morrice, 2009).

Refugee's Access to Higher Education in Turkey

Since the outbreak of war in Syria the total number of refugees seeking asylum in Turkey has reached 3.6 million. As of 2019, the number of Syrian youth aged between 19-24 under temporary protection in Turkey stands at 544,310 (DGMM, 2019). Add this number to the 15-18-year olds (271,009) and we begin to see the large number whose education has been interrupted by Syrian civil war and who are directly impacted by higher education policy. Of those Syrian students under temporary protection, 20,701 were enrolled in 153 of Turkey's 206 HEIs for the 2017-18 academic year. The majority of them (87%) attended 104 public HEIs while the remaining students were enrolled in private ones (YÖK, 2019). The increasing number of Syrian youths with higher education aspirations is mirrored in the gradual increase in enrolment rates starting in the first years of the displacement. The academic year 2013-2014 marks an important turning point both in terms of regulatory decisions and enrolment rates as discussed below.

Legal and Regulatory Framework

The Turkish higher education system has witnessed a rapid expansion in international students in the past decade as the policy focuses on internationalisation. A new dimension, however, has been added to that internationalisation policy – namely the large and unforeseen influx of Syrian refugees. The legal status of Syrians in Turkey is not straightforward. They are not eligible for refugee status, as Turkey signed the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees with “geographic limitation”, which legally grants refugee status only to Europeans in Turkey. Syrians are granted a legal temporary protection status, which is based on the “Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)” and the “Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR)” issued by the authorities in 2014 in direct response to the onset of the refugee crisis. The Law and Regulation include – along with other basic human rights – the right to education.

The Council of Higher Education (CoHE), a central government agency, is responsible for higher education administration, standards and planning policy; it also oversees the policy on refugee students. According to the TPR, Article 28, Section 2, authorises the CoHE to determine principles and procedures for associate, undergraduate, Masters and Doctorate degrees for Syrian people under temporary protection. In setting the regulatory and institutional framework, the CoHE coordinates all efforts to improve access and participation for refugee students, researchers and scholars (YÖK, 2017).

Higher education is often neglected in emergency situations but in this case the CoHE was quick to respond to the influx of Syrian refugees. In the early stages of the crisis, the CoHE promulgated a series of Circulars and Decisions to facilitate and speed up access and participation for Syrian youth in Turkey's HEIs. The first major Decision passed on 3 September 2012 allowed students, even those without academic or identification documents, to enrol as “special students” for the academic year of 2012-2013 at seven HEIs on Turkey's southern border. Since “special student” refers to a student who is able to continue their education in another HEI who is enrolled and reserved to keep their registration in another HEI, credit and diplomas for these students were only available after regular admission and registration, which also required official documentation. The Decision attracted

negative public attention and was not only criticised for its inconsistent application (Seydi, 2013), but also for the misinformation concerning the stipulated unlimited and unconditional access of Syrians to higher education. The rationale behind the Decision was to protect Syrian higher education students and enable them to continue their studies in Turkey and to allow them to return to their country without their education having been interrupted.

On the 21 September 2013, the CoHE passed an Amendment to the existing Regulation concerning transfer between HEIs to further define the special conditions for the transfer process to Turkish HEIs. According to the Amendment, students coming from countries where education is interrupted due to war or humanitarian crisis can apply to transfer to a Turkish HEI. In addition, the Amendment stipulated a maximum 10% quota, subject to the relevant HEI's decision, and allowed students without documentation to be enrolled as "special students" until they could provide the necessary documents. Originally promulgated for the 2013-2014 academic year, the scope of the Circular was later extended to include subsequent academic years and other countries. On 9 October 2013, the CoHE ruled that these procedures be followed for students who started higher education in Syria and Egypt before the academic year 2013-14. While regulating the transfer procedures for refugee students, the CoHE leaves the implementation and admissions criteria to the HEIs. Recognition of qualifications and skills of the required documents are assessed and evaluated by ad-hoc Recognition Committees established by the HEIs within the various faculties.

A subsequent Decision in 2013 introduced free tuition for Syrian undergraduate students who are admitted to Turkish public universities (YÖK, 2013). Tuition fees of all Syrian students are now financed by the YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) who is responsible for coordinating and improving the scholarship efforts for international students studying in Turkey, on behalf of the Turkish Government. In addition to the education fees, Turkish Scholarships Programme implemented by the YTB offer supplementary support covering, accommodation, food and the cost of Turkish language courses for students entitled to study at public universities. The Decision aims to reduce some of the financial burden on students who have already enrolled for higher education.

As discussed in the previous section, a restrictive legal and regulatory framework is one of the main obstacles to accessing higher education in both first-asylum and third countries. In that regard, the revised Regulations and Decisions, support Syrian students' access and inclusion to higher education system and institutions in Turkey. The new framework introduced a considerable degree of flexibility and convenience to ease accessibility to higher education for refugees. During the various interviews conducted, participants rarely took issue with any bureaucratic challenges or restrictive regulations concerning higher education admissions procedures. On the contrary, the rules taken to improve access were highly appreciated. Only the equivalency procedure for high school diplomas, under the jurisdiction of Ministry of National Education, was sometimes mentioned as being too lengthy but then students pointed out that in the end issues were resolved and they received the relevant papers for registration.

According to CoHE data dating back to the academic year 2013-2014, the impact of this regulatory framework has resulted in an upward trend in higher education enrolments. Between the years 2013-2018, enrolments of Syrian students in higher education have increased from 0.8% to 3.8%. Although 3.8% is above the global average 1% of the refugees globally (UNHCR, 2018b), it is still very low and requires a further boost. Moreover, it has not all been plain sailing and it would be misleading to assume that political debate and media coverage of the Regulation and its implementation have been without issue. While increased efforts aimed at providing basic education are widely accepted, Regulations on access to higher education for Syrians have come under public scrutiny in which concerns have been raised over security, financial burden on the State and transparency of the admission procedures (Kahvecioğlu, 2012; TBMM, 2012-2014). Since places for higher education are highly competitive in Turkey, this new trend and the increasing demand for places from eligible local students puts additional pressure on an already strained higher education

system. Although public debate and media coverage on the matter have thus far not caused any tensions between locals and Syrians, it nevertheless came up on a few occasions during the interviews and focus group discussions. Students generally felt uncomfortable talking about it and moreover were reluctant to complain. Some administrative staff who were interviewed, on the other hand, raised their concern with some stating: "...we are very much aware of the situation, we understand the importance of these children having access to a university education. But our system is heavily oversubscribed. We already have a lot of students and not enough staff, and we are afraid that may cause a problem". These findings point to a need for greater transparency, additional support, better communication, more research and advocacy for increased access and participation in higher education for Syrian youth.

The findings also require a better understanding of the institutional framework for Syrian students' access to higher education. Despite a centralised test-based admissions procedure for Turkish students, admissions for international students is decentralised. Under the coordination of the CoHE, each HEI decides on its criteria for international students' application and admission procedures which are announced on the HEIs' websites. These requirements may include "Foreign Student Exams" (YOS), language proficiency examination results, national or international Baccalaureate results, diplomas, transcripts, passports and/or residency documents. Although the regulatory framework seems effective in supporting their access and participation, the implementation of the Regulations strictly depends on the institutional policies, decisions and practices. In that regard, this paper continues with an analysis of the current system, its problems, responses and implementation based on a case study at Istanbul University, which is among the biggest refugee receiving HEIs in Turkey.

The Case of Istanbul University: Institutional Challenges and Responses

Istanbul is home to 546,326 registered Syrian refugees, making it Turkey's largest refugee host city. Besides being the country's biggest city, Istanbul is also the capital of higher education with over 10 State-funded and 44 privately funded universities. There are some 35,725 international students, among which 4,343 are Syrians, and over a quarter of these attend Istanbul University in the academic year 2017-2018. Of the total 7,448 international students at Istanbul University, 1,241 are Syrians, making the university second biggest HEI hosting Syrian students after Gaziantep University which is located in the border region (YÖK, 2019).

For international students, including Syrians, admission to Istanbul University is through an institution-wide "Foreign Student Exam" (IUYOS). After an online application, eligible candidates must submit the required documentation only during registration. The examination is available in Turkish, English and Arabic, which removes the language barrier for students with inadequate language skills. Apart from first year students, in accordance with the CoHE decision, Istanbul University has accepted a 10% quota for the transfer of students already enrolled to HEIs in Syria, Egypt and Yemen before the 2013-2014 academic year. Finally, in coordination with the CoHE and YTB, Istanbul University also offers places to students awarded Turkey scholarships.

The majority (62%) of Syrian students enrolled at Istanbul University came via the "transfer in special circumstances" procedures, while only very few (53 students) hold the "special student" status, which is proof of the system's flexibility. The "transfer in special circumstances" which was specifically set up for Syrian and other refugee-like students, is a novelty in institutional application and admissions procedures. According to available data, the number of transferal students from Syria has risen gradually each year but should decrease from now on due to the enrolment deadline at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. On the other hand, first year admissions through IUYOS is very low (20%). Although the CoHE accepts an increased quota up to 10% for transfer students, first year students are still subject to the international quota, which means they must compete with other international students for a limited number of places. Considering the heightened

numbers of Syrian students in Turkey, this means greater competition. A more flexible quota system for Syrian students entering first year should be discussed, otherwise, as the number of transfer student declines so too will the numbers of Syrian students in higher education decrease or remain constant. Furthermore, almost half of the first year students admitted through IUYOS are placed on Open and Distance Learning courses as these require lower attainment scores compared to regular day-time courses. The situation raises questions about the quality of basic education provided for Syrians in Turkey and further reflects the need to increase the quota of Syrian students among the international students.

Considering the application and admission procedures while IUYOS is an automated online system, which is simple and easy to use, transfer procedures are more complicated which require application through an online system and delivery of documents to the officers for control and assessment. The Department of Student Affairs is responsible for planning and coordination of the transfer procedures, while faculty offices manage the applications, assessment, admissions and placement procedures after admission. During our interviews, this lengthy and complex process emerges as an obstacle both for applicants and admissions officers as it involves assessing and evaluating documents in another language and from another higher education system. One of the admission officers who experienced most of the challenges of the transfer process summarised the situation as follows:

“In accordance with the CoHE Decision, Istanbul University agreed to apply the maximum 10% quota for Syrian students allowed. We were then faced with a huge number of applications. We were not equipped to deal with that; we don’t have Arabic speaking personnel. Unfortunately, student numbers are increasing but not the personnel. This, of course, affects the service provided both for Syrian and local students but also hampers the management of the application and admissions process”

Assessing and Evaluating Foreign Credentials

Although qualifications of first-year applicants are assessed by the centralised test-based system IUYOS, assessment for students transferring under special circumstances is carried out by admissions officers through document evaluation. Since the majority of Syrian students at Istanbul University came via transfer procedures, evaluation and authentication issues emerge as the greatest challenge expressed by administrative staff especially in the faculties which receive a vast number of applications. Firstly, there is the issue of suspected fraud concerning submitted documents. The authenticity of transcripts and student certificates, which are assessed by faculty admissions staff, requires specialist training and expertise - which in this case - the staff lacks. As expressed by one of the admissions officers during the interview, the process can be very challenging:

“Sometimes, it gets really weird, same university, same faculty but official documents can be very different. But since we do not have any way to confirm we have to accept as it is...”

Apart from authentication issues, the calendar for evaluation is very short and documents can be very complicated:

“We have to finish the documents within two weeks only, it is a very hard task especially in another language. Although we request translations, not all of them can afford the cost, it is very expensive you know.... Thus we have to control them, organise them accordingly, identify the missing ones...”

It is also accepted by the admissions personnel that there is a degree of flexibility accepted while assessing documents:

“First of all there is the problem of translation of documents... we know that legally translated documents can be very costly for students, so we try to be flexible about it, if the most important translations and notarizations are not missing we accept the documents but request that they are complete within registration”

Issues regarding documents were not among the problems expressed during application and admissions procedure by the transfer students themselves. The main obstacles for them were the evaluation and credit transfer procedures after admissions. According to the students, the incompatibility between education systems and transferability of previous credits were more of a challenge. In some faculties, for example, the Faculty of Law, which has a completely different curriculum, students expressed frustration at having to start from scratch. As one student explained:

“I studied three years in Damascus. I came here, I really appreciate it... but three years of study means nothing here... zero, I now have to start in the first year again...”

Lack of Information, Advice and Guidance

Our research at Istanbul University reveals a need for clear information, advice and guidance during the application and admissions process. The admissions procedure for international students is already complicated due to the decentralised structure of the Turkish higher education system. The multitude of complex application procedures and paperwork can be quite confusing for students, especially those with poor language skills. According to the students and representatives of voluntary organisations who participated in our focus groups, even accessing information on the internet could be a challenge, since most websites and application guidelines were available only in Turkish and English. They also had to navigate through several HEI websites as the criteria and procedures are different for each one.

As one voluntary organisation representative, who supports and advises refugee students explained:

“Each higher education institution has a different system, varying procedures which I find very confusing. I, as a native speaker, am having difficulties in accessing information on web. In some cases, the necessary information is like hidden in the pages”

And another representative complained more about the lack of guidance during the procedure:

“There is no one to ask for guidance, every time a different procedure. It is even impossible to reach someone via phone, and even if you do, you cannot find the right person to answer your questions. I am a native speaker but I cannot find anyone to contact to help and advice my counselee. It shouldn't be that hard...”

Furthermore, during the workshop it became clear that while university faculties with high Syrian student numbers were very experienced and informed about the current regulations and procedures regarding Syrian students, admissions personnel from other faculties did not have a sound grasp of the issue. This also raises questions about the service and guidance they offer during the application procedure.

Language Barrier

The language barrier accompanying these administrative and procedural issues further aggravates the situation both for administration and students. At Istanbul University, only first-year applicants who

apply via IUYOS, have guidelines, a specific website and announcements in English and Arabic. Transfer guidelines and announcements, on the other hand, are placed on the main page of the student affairs official website and are only available in Turkish. Language is therefore a serious obstacle especially for transfer students during the application process. Apart from some announcements and guidelines, the online system through which students have to register for transfer application is also only available in Turkish. Some students mentioned issues with the registration system during the focus group. It is not clear, however, if the problems were due to language or a more systematic failure so more investigation is required. Additionally, there is an online support service available, which most students in the focus groups were not even aware of. Furthermore after online application, students applying for transfer must submit the required documents before the deadline to the relevant faculty office which rarely has staff who speak Arabic or English.

Ad hoc solutions have, however, often been found to overcome any language barrier during the admissions process and students rarely complained about that. Staff and students interviewed indicated that those applying often attend the process together with an experienced friend or family member, and in faculties where staff speak Arabic the process goes smoothly. However earlier applicants who have entered university between 2012-2014 admit that it was very hard, they felt alone and helpless during the process, especially in faculties where staff did not speak any foreign languages:

“I came in 2013. It was very hard in the beginning, we had to find the right place and people to explain our situation. It was very new, no one knew about the transfer and the procedures. I was not very good at Turkish, I really didn’t feel comfortable while speaking to the university staff. But I learnt a lot, I mean staff and us students have learnt a lot. Now I help others, I know the procedure, and the required papers. I know who can help, who can speak Arabic. We kind of know who can help it is not always about the language”

Another student emphasized the support from experienced peers:

“Our friends tell me that it was very hard in the beginning. I didn’t have any problems, it was a smooth process. I also came with a friend and even filled out the online application form with my friend. He knew how to do it because he had done it before.”

It is also inspiring that some students have already established networks on social media and online communication groups to help newcomers. Earlier applicants who experienced the language obstacles and lack of advice the most, have now created local guidance groups to assist prospective Syrian students:

“Now we have our Facebook and WhatsApp groups, we try to help each other, if anyone faces a problem, we try to find a solution together.”

One of the Facebook groups created by Syrian students at Istanbul University, for instance, has more than 1,100 members and specifically supports Syrian applicants during the application and admissions process for Istanbul University.

It is interesting to note that language is more often a barrier for administrative staff during the application process than for students, thus underlining the extra support needed for staff. Although most staff have now gained much experience and knowledge on transfer procedures and evaluation of foreign credentials, they are not trained nor equipped with such skills. Therefore the language barrier is even more pressing in their case since they have to assess documents in another language and from another education system during a short time period.

In addition to the challenges arising from the lack of language proficiency during admission, the biggest challenge comes once the course begins. The majority of courses at Istanbul University

are in Turkish however language proficiency is not required for students to be eligible to apply as preparation classes are available after registration. These preparation classes, which are free of charge, offer an important means for Syrian students with limited Turkish to acquire the necessary language proficiency. However, as expressed by some students, preparation classes alone are not enough to follow the courses. Although most of the students in the focus group had a very high level of Turkish proficiency and expressed themselves very well, all of them stated that they had problems in the lectures either in taking notes, following the course materials or in reading comprehension. And according to these students, this is the main reason for the low success rates of Syrian students. As one student from Faculty of Law stated, this affects both their motivation and attendance:

“I cannot understand anything so I come to class and sit... but nothing else. That is why I have started working, now I cannot come to school but at least I get to earn some money. I work in a call centre in Arabic and I like my job”

Legal and Financial Precarity

Low attendance rates due to working, also brings us to the problem of the precarious legal and financial situations of refugees. According to our interviews and focus groups, legal difficulties were not considered an obstacle in accessing higher education. The precarious legal nature of their temporary status was not among their worries. Some were even considering applying for Turkish citizenship, although there is no constant scheme and procedure for applying. Some scholars and students mentioned that they had been contacted by the DGMM regarding Turkish citizenship. It is even more surprising that they were hesitant in applying for Turkish citizenship. Since they would be evaluated according to the same academic criteria for recruitment and tenure in Turkish higher education system, that means an increased competition with locals. Another issue highlighted by both academics and students was concerning their status and the difficulties they faced in making financial transactions at the banks. Since the majority had problems presenting up-to-date passports and opening bank accounts, making financial transactions were very difficult and only allowed by a few banks, which added to challenges faced by them.

Financial precarity during access to and participation to higher education was not specifically mentioned by participants perhaps because they were already at Istanbul University. As a public university, education is free of charge and application fees for Syrian students who apply through the IUYOS are low and for those applying via the transfer in special circumstances route it is free. However, this does not reduce the cost of higher education completely so most students interviewed either work or were looking for jobs. Our research further revealed that low attendance can often be attributed to low academic language proficiency combined with financial struggles.

“Before coming here my father was doing well in business, I was studying at university. Now it is hard for him to find a job, he cannot speak Turkish like we do. I have four siblings and except for one we are all continuing our education here. I have been accepted to the Faculty of Law and have studied a year on the Turkish preparation class and passed but courses are very hard... Everything is so different my Turkish is not good enough to follow the classes...I have tried to explain it to the professor, but you know... I tried but couldn't make it. So I'm now working. It's easier for young people to find jobs. Most of my friends work, my other sister, who has also been accepted to Faculty of Law, also works as a translator for instance. I work as a sales representative for Arabic speaking people”

While scholarships exist, they are limited in scope and numbers. For instance, by the 2016-2017 academic year the number of students under YTB scholarship programs have reached 13,873. Although the “Turkey Scholarship Programme” is attractive for talented and motivated Syrian students, our research at Istanbul University revealed that only 32 held such scholarships, which represents only 3% of the total number of Syrian students. Although there are other initiatives

providing scholarships to Syrian students, the schemes seem scattered and the exact figures were not available.

Concluding Remarks

Our research on refugees' access to higher education in Turkey based on the vast experience of staff and students at Istanbul University found that in line with the literature review, financial precarity, language barriers, non-recognition of prior learning, and lack of information and guidance were the key barriers to accessing higher education. A restrictive legal and regulatory framework, and a legally precarious status on the other hand were less of a concern.

Despite these detected obstacles, enrolment rates of Syrian students have dramatically increased and will continue to do so considering the increasing number of refugees. In contrast with the restrictive framework identified in the literature review, as the main decision maker and regulator in higher education policy, the CoHE's commitment to increasing the access and participation of Syrian students in higher education has been instrumental in this upward trend. One could argue that, revising the Regulations to make it easier for students fleeing worn-torn countries and humanitarian crisis to transfer their education and gain access to higher education has been influential. Despite the regulatory framework and responsive policies, we argue that their implementation at institutional level is determinant and requires further attention. Istanbul University offers some valuable insights regarding higher education policy and implementation at institutional level. By deciding to use the 10% quota for transferring students, the university has taken an affirmative action and increased the enrolment rates accordingly. However, its implementation has not been problem free, considering the lack of financial funds and human resources. Our research also reveals that despite this assertive framework, there is still the risk of perceived increased burden and compassion fatigue discussed in the literature review. While the administrative staff is overburdened with increasing applications amid limited resources, the students are very much aware of the public discussion and media coverage surrounding the already burdened and very competitive higher education system of Turkey.

Concerning the legal and financial problems derived from the literature review, while the precarity of the temporary status has not been an issue, the financial burden on the other hand continues to be among greatest challenges for Syrian students and their participation in higher education in Turkey. With the aim of decreasing financial burden of higher education, the decision to waive tuition fees for Syrian students at public universities was an effective way of easing the financial burden of the costs of higher education for Syrian students, and the scholarships provide additional support during their studies. Although education is free in Istanbul University, this does not necessarily reduce the high living costs discussed earlier. Our research uncovers that low attendance and participation can be attributed to the financial struggles and necessity to work which is very much the case in other countries. Additional scholarship programmes could go some way in relieving this burden.

In other respects, the flexibility introduced for prospective students in translating and submitting the required documents has been effective in facilitating the application procedure and recognition of prior learning. Despite the foreigner students' examination which is fairly simple in assessing prior learning, transfer procedures still require improvement. Assessing foreign documents and qualifications which requires very specific knowledge and expertise, has been a challenge for admissions staff who lack the necessary skillset discussed earlier. The short deadlines for applications and evaluations add to the burden on administrative and academic staff. Nevertheless, the country quotas for first-year students need further attention, as enrolment rates for higher education will continue to rise in line with the ever-increasing youth population. A further point is the attainment levels of Syrian students in examinations, which raises concerns about the quality of basic education for Syrian students in Turkey.

In line with the literature and experiences of refugee receiving countries, the lack of language support, information, advice and guidance are among the key challenges both in terms of access

to and participation in higher education in Turkey. Istanbul University's language preparation classes, which are free of charge, present an important opportunity for Syrian students, particularly considering that other such courses are usually very expensive. According to our research, however, the content of these classes does require some adjustments in order to fully prepare students in academic language and boost their engagement in their studies.

As identified in most of the refugee receiving countries, support mechanisms are also lacking for Syrian students both in accessing higher education and during their studies in Turkey. The decentralised admission system for international students was among the biggest problems that both students and representatives of voluntary organisations who are to provide information and guidance to prospective students expressed during the research. To breach these gaps and to overcome the barriers (language, lack of information and guidance) Syrian students have set up informal support schemes by themselves. In accordance with the literature review, Syrian students receive information and guidance from experienced peers and friends rather than formal communication tools. What is new is the informal communication tools such as social media networks and online communication groups that Syrian students have specifically developed to offer support to other students. Research in that regard reveals the determination, strength and resourcefulness of Syrian youths in higher education. Faced with various obstacles, they have managed to find and develop ad hoc solutions and ways around the barriers that try to prevent their access to higher education. In that regard, their agency should not be neglected in institutional mechanisms and research. Finding ways to integrate and support such schemes into the formal structures of HEIs should be discussed.

Finally, all the detected obstacles are very much intertwined with each other and are directly linked to regulatory frameworks, structural and social aspects of life, and institutional practices which require a more holistic approach as suggested. Despite a supportive regulatory framework and institutional policies, HEIs could still improve their response to the issues facing Syrian students. HEIs have a responsibility to their students to help them overcome any challenges and contribute to their empowerment, wellbeing and inclusion. This, however, requires a well-equipped, coordinated approach both from decision makers and HEI academic, administrative staff and students.

Notes

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