Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

# Inclusive Approach of Türkiye on Access and Integration of Refugees to Higher Education[*]

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## Abstract

Türkiye stands at the forefront of countries that have embraced a considerable number of refugees and asylum-seekers, making it a prominent host for displaced populations worldwide. In recent years, Türkiye has developed a novel and inclusive approach designed to facilitate the access of refugees to higher education. This article endeavours to examine Türkiye's policy framework and intricate challenges that arise during its implementation, with a keen focus on how top-down policy interventions interact with institutional bureaucracies and the socio-cultural context. The study postulates that while Türkiye boasts a national inclusive policy, the effectiveness and outcome of its implementation lie within the realm of decentralization. The success or failure of the policy hinges on the institutional capacity, willingness of the higher education institutions to accept refugee students and the sociological dynamics between locals and refugee students. For the policy to genuinely thrive, it necessitates addressing institutional disparities and variances among higher education institutions.

## Keywords

Internationalisation, higher education, refugees, integration, recognition, Türkiye.

## Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental right for everyone, irrespective of their nationality, civic or migration status. The right to education is codified in many declarations and international laws, most notably the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention refers to the right to education in Article 22 and invites states to offer the same educational opportunities to refugees as they offer to their nationals with regard to compulsory education. However, higher education (HE) is not explicitly addressed by the Convention and is not necessarily seen as part of the universal right to education. Thus, refugees' access to HE is left for the discretion of host countries and states are merely being advised that refugees will receive a treatment no different than other foreigners. In other words, states have the authority on how to manage access and integration of refugees to higher education which results in different treatment and practices across the world.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pledged to ensure "no one is left behind" and such purpose is intrinsic to the fourth SDG which targets to ensure that "by 2030 all women and men will have equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (United Nations). More specifically, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) aims that by 2030 at least 15 percent of the university age refugees will have access to higher education (UNHCR, *Refugee Education 2030* 7). However, as of 2022, only 6 percent of eligible refugees have equitable access to higher education (UNCHR, *UNHCR Education Report* 6), far from that target.

The significance of integrating refugees into HE is rarely addressed by states as a policy issue (Al-Haque; Gidley et al.). Only few countries plainly address the access of refugees to HE; for example, Germany, Türkiye, Norway, and Portugal (Eurydice; Abamosa). Moreover, since refugees' access to HE is not perceived with the same urgency as their access to compulsory education, it is an under-researched field with somewhat limited literature (Reinhardt et al.; Streitwieser et al.). This article aims to contribute to this limited body of research by examining the inspiring and challenging aspects of the inclusive approach developed by Türkiye enabling refugee and refugee-like populations[1] to enrol into HE institutions. The analysis in this study focuses on how policy

intervention to include refugees in HE, is complemented or challenged by institutional bureaucracies and the socio-cultural context as well.

Forcibly displaced students encounter several obstacles concerning their access and integration to HE. Among these obstacles, it is widely observed that legislative frameworks defining the statuses and rights of refugees and complex administrative procedures put forward by host states, leave refugee students caught in a bureaucratic cycle that denies or delays their access to HE. In some cases, the access of refugees/asylum-seekers to HE depends on receiving an official status which might take several months and even years (Streitwieser et al. 238). In other cases, refugees are asked to provide the same documents and fulfil the same conditions as other international students who are voluntarily mobile and have different means. Refugee students often lack documents such as diplomas, certificates, transcripts and are not able to prove their previous qualifications (Houghton and Morrice). Even if they have documents, validation of such documents constitutes another obstacle since communicating with the institutions in their country of origin might be difficult or even impossible. Further challenges include lack of proficiency in the local language (Morrice), the need for scholarships (Dryden-Peterson and Giles), lack of academic/career counselling (Unangst and Crea) and unfamiliarity with the university culture and the academic system (Joyce et al.). Finally, financial insecurity is one of the biggest challenges that refugees face (Unangst). Students might not be able to pay tuition and afford the high costs of attending university (Anselme and Hands). Moreover, young refugees often need to work to self-sustain, thus they stop or relinquish their higher education aspirations. Accordingly, while attending HE determines refugee youth's career path, facilitates their employability and supports social cohesion by expanding both their and host society's social capital (Yıldız, *Integration;* Colucci et al.), lack of necessary supportive mechanisms of social inclusion led to their under-employment, unemployment but moreover social and economic alienation.

Türkiye, in recent years hosts the world's highest number of refugees and asylum-seekers including more than 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection status and additionally 318,000 holders of international protection status and asylum-seekers from diverse nationalities (UNHCR). Türkiye also hosts 260,151 international students from different regions in particular Asian, Middle East and African countries (CoHE, *Higher Education*).

Ensuring access to education for everyone at all levels, starting from primary to higher education, is a significant issue for Türkiye. Türkiye's inclusive approach to refugees, which facilitates their access to higher education as quickly as possible and sets procedures for the recognition of their previous qualifications, deserves special attention. The approach that has been evolving since 2012 offers valuable insights that other countries hosting refugees might learn from. Nevertheless, it also raises various challenges which highlight the significant need for collective action and active engagement at the institutional and social levels. In this respect, Türkiye exemplifies a case for how top-down policy approaches for the integration of refugees into higher education should be accompanied by actions taken at institutional and social levels, such as initiatives taken by student and teaching staff in order to realize an actual inclusive education that encourage social cohesion.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the higher education system in Türkiye with specific reference to the different procedures of access to higher education for Turkish citizens, international students including refugees. The second part reviews the inclusive policy purposefully developed for refugees. It focuses on the supportive mechanisms, legislations and pathways established for refugees in order to facilitate their access to higher education. It also describes the special procedures in Türkiye devised for the recognition of refugees' qualifications and diploma equivalencies. The third section critically discusses the challenges posed by HE institutions to the implementation of the inclusionary policy over the last decade. The study concludes by some reflections that goes beyond the particular case of Türkiye and addresses some research directions and policy suggestions for the broader international context.

## The Turkish Higher Education System and Admission Procedures

The higher education system in Türkiye has three levels: associate degree (at least two years); undergraduate degree (at least four years); and graduate degree (master, PhD, and expertise in arts and proficiency in art). The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) is the central and autonomous public authority, which is responsible for planning, coordination and supervising higher education institutions (HEIs). Currently, there are 208 HEIs in Türkiye, of which 129 are public universities, 75 are non-profit private universities and 4 are non-profit higher vocational institutions established by foundations

(CoHE, *Higher Education*). In the academic year of 2021-22, a total of 8.2 million students were enrolled into higher education institutions in Türkiye (CoHE, *Higher Education*).

In the last decade, following the global trend of internationalization of higher education, Türkiye also initiated a reform of internationalization of higher education. The impact of the Bologna Process and the Europeanization of Türkiye's HE was influential in pushing Türkiye's efforts to harmonize and internationalize its HE policy as a full member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Türkiye's participation in the EU's flagship programmes such as Socrates, Erasmus (2004-2013), Erasmus+ (2014-2020) and Erasmus+ (2021-2027) had also significant impact on triggering internationalization reforms of HEIs particularly in terms of encouraging students and teaching staff mobility. Additionally, these programmes primarily paved a way for Turkish HEIs to increase their institutional cooperation agreements, revise their curricula so it will fit the Bologna process and moreover use the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to facilitate mobility and recognition of previous credentials.

In 2017, Türkiye adopted the "Strategy Document of Internationalization of Higher Education for 2018-2022" which is based on three pillars: increasing access to higher education, quality assurance and strengthening the internationalization capacity of both the CoHe and HEIs (CoHE, *Strategy Document*). Initiatives such as offering new scholarship opportunities to support and attract national and international students (Budak and Terzi), participation in various exchange programmes and increasing collaboration with many HEIs abroad have made international mobility emerge as one of the prevailing components of this strategy. Consequently, the number of international students and researchers in Türkiye has increased remarkably from 16,656 in 2000 (CoHE, *Strategy Document*) to 260,151 in 2022 (CoHE, *Higher Education*). Bulut and Kondakçı mention that growing number of refugee students has also been one of the primary reasons of this increase in number of international students.

Following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in March 2011, the mass arrival of Syrian refugees to Türkiye raised the need to address the access of refugees to HEIs. The unexpected experience of hosting high number of Syrian refugees has obviously pushed Türkiye to incorporate a specific section in its internationalization strategy, addressing the integration of refugees into

HEIs. In this respect, Türkiye's approach can be seen as "reactive policy" which is defined as the formulation of a policy in response to an event or a crisis (Bovens et al., *Success and Failure*). Over time, through consecutive legislations, Türkiye pursued a de-centralized approach which aims to stimulate integration of refugees into HEIs by reinforcing a flexible admission procedures and practices. Through these initiatives the number of Syrian refugee students has increased from 608 in 2011 (CoHE, *Strategy Document*) to 53,097 students in 2022 (CoHE, *Higher Education*). As of 2022, Syrian students constitute 20 percent of all international students in Türkiye. The number of Syrians refugees between the ages 19 and 24 in Türkiye is 392,097 (PMM) which means that 13.5 percent of them enrolled into HEIs in Türkiye. As the initiatives were extended to other nationalities who has fled to Türkiye due to violent conflict in their countries, the enrolment of students from Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen has also increased progressively.
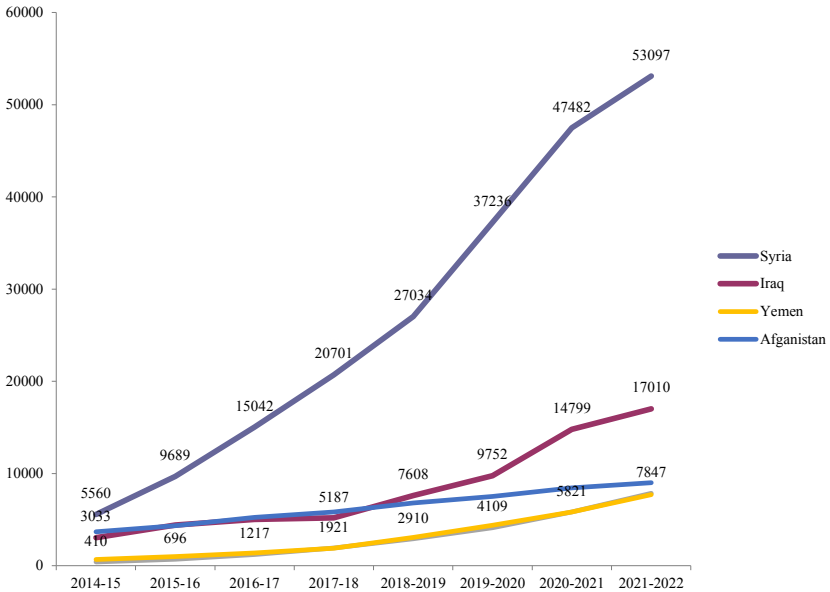


**Figure 1**. *Number of Students from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan Enrolled at HEIs in Türkiye* (Data compiled from CoHE higher education statistics database, 2023)

Access to higher education in Türkiye is managed differently for Turkish students and international students. Turkish citizens are required to succeed

at a nation-wide, competitive Central Placement Exam (YKS) by which they are ranked according to their overall scores. The overall scores are calculated as a combination of scores they received at the central exam and the student's high school grade point averages. Then, the students receive a placement through a centralized system based on their own choices within the constraints of limited number of offered quotas at each HEIs. According to YKS 2022 results, 3 million students took the exam, however only 915.549 (30.5 %) were placed at a HEIs (ÖSYM). The competitive placement system for Turkish students and Syrians' access to HE is one of the factors that militates the growing anti-migrant sentiments and misperceptions in Turkish society. Despite having different quotas for the allocation of Turkish and international students and different admission procedures, Syrians are misperceived as accessing HEIs without any assessment process and taking the limited available quotas of Turkish students.

For international students, the admission criteria, specific procedures and available quotas are set individually by the HEIs themselves through a decentralised system that is in line with the general legislative framework set by the CoHE. Some HEIs might ask for a Foreign Student Exam (YÖS) which mainly includes questions in mathematics, geometry, and basic learning skills. International students applying to Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Law, Teaching and Engineering programs must take YÖS which is organized centrally in six languages (Turkish, English, German, Arabic, French and Russian) by CoHE. It should be noted that CoHE decided to organize YÖS centrally for the aforementioned study fields in order to ensure standardization. Previously YÖS was being prepared and held by the HEIs themselves. Some other universities might also ask for achieving a minimum score in an international standard exam such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Others might admit students with minimum grades they received on an international diploma such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the French Baccalaureate. HEIs might also ask for a national diploma grade such as the *Diploma Debirestan* from Iran. Applications are evaluated on academic merit by faculty and acceptance is given individually by each HEI. As a significant development, especially for Syrian youth in Türkiye, CoHE has decided that international students who have enrolled in secondary education institutions in Türkiye during the 2022-2023 academic year and onwards will be admitted only through the YÖS exam as of 2026.

The admission procedure for first time applications of refugees or other people in a refugee-like situation is not entirely different than any other international student in terms of assessing their prior academic qualifications. Refugees are free to apply directly to the HEI of their choice given that they satisfy the admission criteria set by the HEI for all international students. The approach ensures non-discriminatory practice between refugees and other international students. The only difference being that there are supportive mechanisms in place (tuition fee waiver, scholarships, Turkish language support, YÖS preparation courses) offered only for refugees. For example, Syrian students were for a long time exempt from paying international student fees at state universities and their fees are covered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). Cin and Doğan (301) highlight that fee exemption and scholarship support were significant factors that made Syrian students' access to higher education possible. However, in the tenth year of Syrian refugees' arrival to Türkiye, with the Presidential Decree July 1, 2021, the fee exemption for newly registered Syrian students was abolished (Official Gazette). The new regulation does not apply to those who registered at the HEI before 2021-22 academic year. The abolishment of the fee exemption might be due to the prolonged stay of Syrians in Türkiye which is no longer seen as emergency in need for specific intervention. However, a focus group discussion held by UNHCR with graduate students at the Gaziantep University, reveals that the majority of these students reported that they struggle to continue their education due to the cancellation of the fee waiver policy (HEWG). Meanwhile, refugee students are being supported through various scholarship programmes such as "Türkiye Scholarships" by YTB, Hopes-Madad by the EU, the UNHCR DAFI Programme and assistance provided by some international NGOs such as SPARK.

## A Novel Policy Approach: Facilitating Access to Higher Education

Türkiye responded to the Syrian humanitarian crisis by providing urgent protection and demonstrated remarkable resilience in absorbing more than 3.6 million Syrians over the past 12 years. Syrians, though they are not defined by Türkiye's immigration policy as refugees, are registered under the "temporary protection" scheme and are granted rights to access education, health services and the labour market.

Concerning access to higher education and recognition of prior academic qualifications, the inclusive policy approach has evolved gradually. In its initial stages, it enabled the quick access of Syrian refugees to HEIs through "special student" or "transfer student" statuses. In the academic year 2012-2013, as an emergency step, ad-hoc intervention, the CoHE decided that seven selected Turkish HEIs located close at the border, would be allowed to admit Syrian refugee students (with or without documents) as "special students" without any admission exams. The special student status does not grant a degree, however, it keeps the students in the education system and they might transfer the credits for courses they passed successfully, if they are admitted to a degree programme later on. The ad-hoc practices that CoHE carried out in 2012 aimed to ensure an immediate access to HE for Syrian refugees. This response has been progressively replaced by an evolving and inclusive approach. The initial reactive response of the CoHE aimed at preventing the education of Syrian refugees being interrupted during the period of displacement and keeping them in the education system rather than in a limbo. The "special student" policy targeted Syrian youth who were sheltered close to border cities.

Beyond facilitating access to HEIs, in 2013, the CoHE also put in place "transfer student procedures" devised for the ones without any documents or the ones in need of document validation who attended Syrian universities before 2013. This special transfer procedure was also extended to students from Yemen and Egypt. A new article was added to the CoHE's "*Regulation on Principles of Transfers Between Associate and Undergraduate Degree Programs of Higher Education Institutions, Double Major, Minor, and Credit Transfers Between Institutions*" (Official Gazette). According to the new article, except for degrees in medicine and dentistry, students who have had to interrupt their education due to violent events and humanitarian crises in countries determined by CoHE were allowed to transfer their course credits and enrol at Turkish HEIs as transfer students. The determination of the level of enrolment and the recognition of extant credits were left for the discretion of each HEIs. Again, through a decentralised system, HEIs were asked to establish committees to evaluate and decide on refugee students' admission. Students without documents continued to be admitted to HEIs using the status of special students. Yet, Syrian refugee students were able, with time, to submit and complete their missing documents such as transcripts, and gradually enrol to regular degree programmes. The number of

both special and transfer students has eventually decreased while the number of Syrian students enrolled into regular programmes has increased significantly (Yıldız, *Integration* 82). For example, Istanbul University, which is one of the HEIs that has the highest number of Syrian students, reported that 62 per cent of its registered Syrian students have enrolled through the transfer student procedure and in time they became regular students benefiting from CoHE's facilitated process (Yürür et al. 19).

Procedures set for the recognition of qualifications and diploma equivalency, constitute another aspect of this novel approach. Recognition of prior academic studies is key not only to build inclusive society but also to support the welfare of everyone since it provides access to employment. The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in European Region (Lisbon Convention) provides a legal framework for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situations. (Council of Europe). Similarly, The Global Compact on Refugees dedicates one of its 23 objectives to the facilitation of mutual recognition of equivalency of academic, professional and vocational qualifications. In 2019, UNESCO adopted the "Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications" aiming to promote a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory mechanism for higher education (UNESCO, *Global Convention*). The Convention, in article VII invites states to take necessary and feasible steps to fairly and efficiently assess and recognise partial studies and qualifications held by refugees and displaced persons even in the case of when they are lacking the appropriate documents. However, despite many efforts at the international level, many countries' recognition mechanisms remain inefficient and people's skills and potential go largely underutilized (UNESCO, *Global Education*). Consequently, most of the highly educated refugees are employed at a level lower than their qualifications or remain unemployed (Yıldız 11).

Türkiye is a member of EHEA with its comparable structures (degree and qualifications framework) and a signatory country to Lisbon Recognition Convention since 2004. Recognition of qualifications of migrants has been a key issue for Türkiye in terms of attracting particularly highly skilled migration, strengthening the country's economic development and human capital. The "10th Development Plan 2014-2018" targets not only to increase

number of international students but also envisages a vision to attract labour migration in line with Türkiye's labour market priorities. One of the strategic targets laid down in the "Strategy Document and National Action Plan on Harmonization 2018-2023" is to develop mechanisms to support migrants' access to higher education and take necessary steps to support the education of refugees' without documents (PMM, *Strategy Document*).

In 2017, Türkiye's CoHE initiated yet another new centralized procedure for recognition of qualifications and diploma equivalence, in a policy entitled "Recognition and Equivalence Application Processes for those from Countries where there is War, Invasion or Annexation" (CoHE, *Recognition*). Graduates from HEIs in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Crimea are allowed to benefit from this new procedure. The new procedure was put in place for those who: (1) are not able to submit diplomas or transcripts; (2) are not able to submit any documents to prove their level of education; (3) have missing documents; 4. or have the original diplomas or transcripts but are not able to validate them. While under normal conditions, it is not possible to submit application for equivalency of diplomas if the candidate (international student or Turkish citizen gained his/her diplomas abroad) does not have the required documents, the new procedure allows only refugees to have their prior education evaluated without documents. Those graduates are first requested to fill in the "Equivalence Application Form" which asks about their prior education (statement based) and any available documents such as certificates, language proficiency or job experience credentials. For each field of study, the CoHE established Diploma and Degree Identification Commissions at selected universities to assess and validate the candidates background, degree and level of knowledge. The commissions invite the applicants for a written or verbal exam to validate their qualifications. Applicants were also suggested to provide any proof of their professional work experience that may support their request, particularly when their diploma cannot be confirmed. The final decision is given by CoHE in accordance with the provisions of the Regulations. The final assessment of CoHE might grant a "full equivalence", "rejection" or the applicant might be asked to enrol in "Level and Proficiency Identification" programmes (course completion, internship, clinical practice etc.). This procedure corresponds with UNESCO's Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UNESCO, *UNESCO Qualifications*), but it offers a further academic assessment process.

It should be noted that implementing such procedures that allow refugees to have their previous studies recognised, has a direct impact on the labour market as well. In Türkiye, for most professions, recognition of qualifications and diplomas provides direct access to the labour market. This means, except some professions, access to labour market does not require any additional procedures such as being registered or certified by the relevant Turkish professional association. In this sense, Türkiye can be considered as the "first country of recognition" in the EHEA for many international graduates coming from countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt (Yıldız 12). The current policy, despite its limitation, acts as an equalizer between those gained their degrees in Türkiye and those acquired the same degree abroad irrespective of the applicants' nationality. However, in the case of some occupations and professions such as dentistry, nursing, law and veterinary only can be practiced by Turkish citizens.

**Institutional and Social Challenges for the Inclusion Policy: Admission, Attainment and Social Integration**

While at policy level, Türkiye has facilitated the access of refugees into higher education and set procedures to overcome possible barriers, it adopted a decentralised approached which left the implementation of such steps and procedures at the discretion of individual HEIs. Consequently, different HEIs have interpreted and implemented the policy differently, especially when it comes to admitting, rejecting or integrating Syrian refugee students.

At the institutional level, one of the challenges of the implementation of the inclusive policy, is the level of willingness of HEIs to admit refugee students. This has also to do with their often-limited institutional capacity to integrate large numbers of students and lack of coordinated supportive mechanisms at the HEIs that are designed to ease the integration of refugees to the academic system and culture of the HEI. These factors can also explain the variations in numbers of Syrian students enrolled at different HEIs. While the maximum quotas and general principles of admission of international students and refugees are centrally promoted by the CoHE, specific admission criteria, procedures, recognition of prior learning are decided by autonomous HEIs. Given this flexibility, some HEIs are more open to admit refugee students, others are not willing to or not able to accept any students due to their lack of infrastructure/institutional capacity. Among 208 HEIs in Türkiye, only ten universities host 40 per cent of all Syrian students; 50

HEIs host less than 20 Syrian students. HEIs that host high number of Syrians students such as Gaziantep University (2,181), Harran University (1,928) and Mardin Artuklu University (1,577) (CoHE, *Higher Education*) are located close to the border with relatively high numbers of Syrians living in the city. It should be noted that these university also had many Syrian graduates, so the number of registered Syrian students were higher in the previous years. Since number of applications from Syrian students to these HEIs is high, they might have felt the need to invest in developing special admission procedures. Expert interviews conducted as part of REFREC-TR research project[2] with international officers from Çukurova University, Mersin University and Gaziantep University, confirm this assumption as the experts pointed out the high number of applications as a factor that triggered the HEIs to develop the necessary admission procedures for Syrians students. One of the experts highlighted that the response of the HEI he works at was inclusionary because they perceived Syrian refugees in Türkiye as temporary, and they just wanted to assist the refugee students to continue their education without interruption. However, he also stated that they have not envisaged this emergency response will lead to the graduation of these students from the universities in Türkiye. Another expert stated that they receive high number of applications from Syrian refugees especially for engineering programmes; however, they had to reject some of them because the university lacks infrastructure and physical capacity such as the laboratories to serve for additional students. He also mentioned the incompatibility of some curriculums in Syria such as the English Literature programmes as a reason to reject applications.

Another reason why some universities have more Syrian students is the attraction factors that make some universities more appealing to Syrian refugees than others. For example, HEIs such as Gaziantep University offers degree programmes in Arabic. Istanbul University hosts 2,233 Syrians as many Syrians also live and work in Istanbul. It offers special guidelines for Syrian students to facilitate their integration. It should also worth mentioning that there are 75 non-profit foundation HEIs in Türkiye and they charge tuition fees that refugees are not able to afford. State's support as well as international organizations' scholarships do not cover the tuition fees of foundation universities. This leads to low rate of enrolment of refugee students in foundation universities in comparison to state universities.

Hence, the decentralised system gives HEIs the freedom to shape their own inclusive policies, however, it also permits most HEIs to abstain from their responsibility and even to adopt an exclusionary policy by making refugees' admission procedures difficult or not providing them any support once admitted. For example, while some HEIs recognize and transfer the credits refugee students have from their previous studies in Syrian universities, without making the student lose any prior credits, some HEIs do not recognize their previous learning and make students enrolled as first year students. This might be because some HEIs do not perceive the quality of education in Syria compatible enough with their own curriculums. Students then choose HEIs that recognize their prior learning. Some universities deter refugee students from enrolling by not offering any information on their web sites on how to apply. Other universities take exclusionary measures such as only offering very limited quotas. Some HEIs only accept original documents for application whereas some accepts any copies of the documents for admission. One of the experts, in the study mentioned above, stated the submission of fraud documents by the Syrian applicants is very common and the staff at the HEIs are not experts in validating the originality of the documents.

All in all, although the policy level supports refugees' access to HE, all these factors play a significant role in students' decision to enrol to a specific HEI and the decision of an HEI to welcome Syrian refugees and how many they are willing or able to admit. Accordingly, the decentralised approach allows HEIs, intentionally or unintentionally, to develop different practices on how to approach the admission of refugees to their institution. One of the experts interviewed in the study quoted above has criticized the decentralised approach arguing that it results a non-standardized systems across the HEIs with huge quality differences in admission procedures.

In addition to institutional challenges, another challenge to the inclusive policy is that of social integration coupled with public discourse and perception (Kondakçı et al., 623). This refers to obstacles concerning the social interaction between local students, teaching staff and refugee students, which can often be unconstructive. Integration of refugees to HEI goes beyond admission which means students are able to continue their education, attend and follow courses, socially participate and integrate into campus life. A high number of refugee students admitted to the HEI does

not necessarily mean a successful model of integration. Institutional factors often intersect with the social environment and challenge the integration of refugees. Lack of language proficiency constitutes a significant obstacle in terms of integration once access was gained (Yılmazel and Atay). Proficiency in Turkish is a basic criterion for entering most HEIs since the medium of instruction in many programmes is Turkish. Accordingly, refugees are expected to prove their Turkish proficiency and they need to take language courses. Lack of support for language courses is an institutional challenge, but it is also a social challenge for the refugee students themselves since lack of language proficiency is an obstacle for interacting with the local students (Sağır and Aydın; Spark). Language support is key to fostering social integration and avoiding isolation, exclusion, racist bullying and difficulties in building friendships (Ager and Strang). This also affects Syrian refugee students' academic performance and their motivation (Yaralı Akkaya; Erdoğan and Erdoğan; Cin and Doğan). Indeed, such social challenges requires an institutional structure that promotes institutional inclusiveness (Ateşok et al.).

Another social challenge is the high rates of dropouts. One of the main reasons for the high rates of dropouts is that the vast majority of refugee students need to work while studying in order to support their families (Erdoğan and Erdoğan). Others have to interrupt their education due to lack of financial resources. Scholarships for refugees are often insufficient which force them to enter into the workforce to cover their living costs. Lastly, one of the expert interviews (in the study mentioned earlier) highlighted that some Syrian students enrol at the HEIs only in order to get advantage for acquiring the Turkish citizenship, thus they do not attend classes regularly. According to Türkiye's Citizenship Law (Article 12), by means of exceptional citizenship, foreigners who provided or are expected to provide outstanding services in scientific, technological, economic, social, sporting, cultural and artistic fields might be granted Turkish citizenship. The criteria governing the naturalization of Syrians in Türkiye by means of exceptional citizenship lack clarity and transparency. However, official statements and existing empirical research suggest that possessing a profession or holding a higher education diploma are considered advantageous and serve as key factors for a number of Syrians who have been granted Turkish citizenship on an exceptional basis (Serdar 52; Akçapar and Şimşek 177).

Growing resentment and anti-migrant discourses towards refugees in Türkiye (Turhan and Yıldız 513) constitute another significant challenge for the social inclusion of refugee students in HEIs. Exacerbated by the Türkiye's current economic struggle, increasing politicization of the migration issue (Kirişci and Yıldız), competition for jobs and pressure on strained public services have led to increased social distance and decreased social acceptance of Syrian refugees. Syrians has often been portrayed in the media as economic burden and security threat. Concerning social interactions between local and refugee students, this has backlash implications. In research conducted at Mersin University (Attar and Küçükşen), Syrian and Turkish students were observed to be spatially separate on campus and even in classrooms. Another research shows that the level of social interaction between Syrian students and local students is low (Sağır and Aydın), lack of belonging and sense of alienation exists (Kondakçı et al. 628) and there is even a risk of emerging 'social ghettos' in some cities (Şahin and Kaya 21). Syrian refugees underscore facing exclusionary and humiliating attitudes by local peers and encountering negative stereotypes sometimes even expressed by teachers (Şahin and Kaya; Gül and Kaylı). Similarly, research at Harran University reveals that Syrian students are motivated to participate in society, but they experience marginalization, exclusion, and deprivation of psycho-social support (Gülerce and Çorlu). These experiences ultimately lead to feeling alienated from the university's community and the society.

**Concluding Remarks**

Despite research still being limited, in recent years, research on access and integration of refugees in higher education has emerged into a growing research field. It has also become a distinct policy area for some states developed as a response to the increasing number of refugees. Türkiye, not only being the host of the highest number of refugees in the world but also developing a state-level inclusive policy, makes an important case. While the access of Syrian refugees to HEIs in Türkiye, by and large, can be seen as a success story (Erdoğan and Erdoğan) it allows us to examine how policy implementation is challenged by institutional practices and social interactions.

At the macro level, Türkiye's reactive approach developed as an emergency response to the mass arrival of Syrians and focused on facilitating their access to higher education. Following the unprecedent level of Syrians' migration to

Türkiye, the Council of Higher Education immediately put forward policies designed to remove obstacles for enrolment in higher education, such as proof of qualifications, credit transfer and more. The rationale behind these policies was that to deny refugees entry into higher education would be an absolute loss of human capital. Later on, this inclusive approach was firmly incorporated into the government's strategy of the internationalization of higher education. However, the implementation of the national policy was to some extent decentralized, thus leading to a great variation in its implementation, where not all HEIs perceive the inclusion of Syrian refugee students as part of the internalization of HE and as an investing in human capital.

Accordingly, in contrast to the state policy's progressive and successful efforts, Türkiye also provides some insights for understanding the challenges that are likely to emerge when HEIs are left with its implementation. One of the lessons learnt from the Turkish case is that, while a de-centralized approach allows HEIs' flexibility in the admission process, it also allows them to deter and reject refugee students. Further evidence-based research is required to understand the main motivations of HEIs' admission practices; however, Türkiye's case demonstrates that state-based policy alone is not sufficient. This not only leads to unstandardized admission practices but also to unequal enrolment numbers of Syrian refugee students across different HEIs. Thus, it can be suggested that national policy will not remain declarative but will provide some standardization of the admission process along with budgetary support for HEIs in order to improve their supportive mechanisms and their capacity to include refugee students. Moreover, a central documents validation system is necessary for HEIs since they often lack the staff and means to assess and validate previous qualifications of refugee students. This too might remove some of the obstacles for admission.

Another important aspect that needs to be addressed is that ensuring access to higher education must be complemented by integration driven approaches embedded in HEIs, including the active engagement of administration, teaching staff and local students with refugee students. It should be underlined that existing initiatives predominantly focus on how to develop mechanisms to ensure access for refugees to higher education, however the ultimate aim is ensuring social inclusion (Abamosa). It requires a broader understanding that considers access, engagement and social cohesion. Thus, both the willingness

and capacity of HEIs to shape refugee students' educational pathways and to support social cohesion, are vital. Drawing on the policy level initiatives might have opened the doors of HEIs to refugees, but it is the HEIs that are required to actively integrate them. To do so, they need to expand their capacities and should also have relevant policies in place to promote social cohesion, offer language support, academic and career counselling, mentoring programmes, psychosocial support, peer learning and so on. Inclusive education should not neglect the needs of refugee students, not only financially but also by creating opportunities for them to actively engage with local students and integrate into campus life. These require HEIs to examine their organizational willingness and capacity to promote diversity and to incorporate social cohesion practices into their internationalization strategy. As Sonntag points out universities are urged to reconsider their approaches and perceptions towards refugees by moving beyond methodological nationalism. Further research is needed particularly to understand how to ensure the social inclusion of refugees at the institutional by supporting their socialization. While some research focuses on specific cases of HEIs, the broader context that is the local society's attitudes towards refugees should also not be underestimated in understanding the limitations of HEIs policies towards refugee students' integration.

The ultimate aim of integrating refugees into HEIs is to support employment, social cohesion and their welfare. Türkiye's main challenge today is no longer how to ensure access to HE as many Syrian students already have access. The main challenge today is whether their social mobility and educational attainment help them to be employed in the fields that fit their qualifications and skills. Syrian refugees who graduated from a Turkish HEI are in need of career counselling, mentorship programmes, and support on how to improve their entrepreneurial skills. Additionally, in order to really invest in human capital, Türkiye should review its procedures for granting Turkish citizenship and allow more spaces for refugees to pursue their own profession even without Turkish citizenship which will have a crucial contribution to Turkish society at large. In other words, in order for Türkiye to really include Syrian refugee graduates and make the most of their human capital, there is a need to think about their presence as permanent rather than temporary.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1 This article uses the term "refugee" in a broad and generic sense to include internationally displaced persons, asylum-seekers, and individuals with any type of international protection status such as temporary, subsidiary or humanitarian protection.

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# Mültecilerin Yükseköğretime Erişimi ve Entegrasyonu Konusunda Türkiye'nin Kapsayıcı Yaklaşımı[*]

**Ayselin Yıldız**[**]

**Öz**

Türkiye, önemli sayıda mülteci ve sığınmacıya kucak açan ülkelerin başında gelmektedir. Türkiye, son yıllarda mültecilerin yükseköğretime erişimini kolaylaştırmak için yeni ve kapsayıcı bir yaklaşım geliştirmiştir. Bu makale, geliştirilen bu yeni yaklaşımı ve uygulamada karşılaşılan zorlukları kurumsal bürokrasiler ve sosyo-kültürel bağlama odaklanarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale, Türkiye'nin ulusal düzeyde kapsayıcı bir politikaya sahip olmasına rağmen, uygulamada merkeziyetçi olmayan yaklaşıma bağlı olarak, politikanın etkili, başarılı veya başarısız olmasında yükseköğretim kurumlarının kurumsal kapasitesi, istekliliği ve yerel/mülteci öğrenciler arasındaki sosyo-kültürel ilişkilerin önemli olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Bu kapsayıcı politikanın tam anlamıyla başarılı bir şekilde uygulanabilmesi için, yükseköğretim kurumları düzeyinde kurumsal farklılıkların ele alması gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler**

Uluslararasılaşma, yükseköğretim, mülteciler, entegrasyon, tanıma, Türkiye.

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# Инклюзивный подход Турции к доступу к высшему образованию и интеграции беженцев<sup>*</sup>

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**Аннотация**

Турция находится в авангарде стран, которые приняли значительное количество беженцев и просителей убежища, что делает ее важным местом приема перемещенных лиц во всем мире. В последние годы Турция разработала новый инклюзивный подход, призванный облегчить доступ беженцев к высшему образованию. В этой статье предпринимается попытка изучить политическую основу Турции и сложные проблемы, возникающие в ходе ее реализации, уделяя особое внимание тому, как политическое вмешательство сверху вниз взаимодействует с институциональной бюрократией и социокультурным контекстом. Исследование постулирует, что, хотя Турция может похвастаться национальной инклюзивной политикой, эффективность и результаты ее реализации лежат в сфере децентрализации. Успех или провал этой политики зависит от институционального потенциала, готовности высших учебных заведений принимать студентов-беженцев и социологической динамики между местными жителями и студентами-беженцами. Чтобы эта политика действительно процветала, необходимо устранить институциональные различия и разногласия между высшими учебными заведениями.

**Ключевые слова**

Интернационализация, высшее образование, беженцы, интеграция, признание, Турция.

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