OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYRIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON THE EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS, NEEDS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

WIEBKE HOHBERGER

March 2018
**Wiebke Hohberger, 2016/17 Mercator-IPC Fellow**

**About Istanbul Policy Center**

Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) is a global policy research institution that specializes in key social and political issues ranging from democratization to climate change, transatlantic relations to conflict resolution and mediation. IPC organizes and conducts its research under three main clusters: the Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative, Democratization and Institutional Reform, and Conflict Resolution and Mediation. Since 2001, IPC has provided decision makers, opinion leaders, and other major stakeholders with objective analyses and innovative policy recommendations.

www.ipc.sabanciuniv.edu

**About the Mercator-IPC Fellowship Program**

The Mercator-IPC Fellowship Program is the cornerstone of the IPC-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative. The program aims to strengthen the academic, political and social ties between Turkey and Germany, as well as Turkey and Europe, by facilitating excellent scientific research and hands-on policy work. It is based on the belief that in an increasingly globalized world, the acquisition of knowledge, and an exchange of ideas and people are the preconditions for meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

* The interpretations and conclusions made in this report belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC’s official position.
# CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**1. INTRODUCTION**
1.1 OVERVIEW: THE SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY
1.2 STATE OF RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY
1.3 METHODOLOGY

**2. HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY**
2.1 THE TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM
2.2 SYRIAN STUDENTS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES
   - Access to Higher Education for Syrians
   - Arabic Programs
   - Scholarships
   - Initiatives Supporting Syrians’ Higher Education
   - Alternative Higher Education Programs

**3. SYRIAN STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE ON THE CURRENT CONDITIONS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES: NEEDS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**
3.1 INTERVIEW RESULTS
3.2 STUDENTS’ WORKSHOP RESULTS
   - Syrian Students’ Positive Experiences at Turkish Universities
   - Identifying Syrian Students’ Needs and Solutions
   - Improving Access to Higher Education
   - Scholarships and Students’ Financial Situation
   - Academic Concerns
   - Social Life and Interaction
   - Online Education and Associate Degrees

**4. CONCLUSION**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to say a big thank you to the Mercator-IPC Fellowship coordination team, Çağdem Tongal, Gülçihan Çağdem Okan, Seray Pulluk, and Derin Tufan, for their great support throughout my fellowship year. Many thanks also to my other colleagues at IPC for making it a great workplace. Special thanks to Megan Gisclon for editing this report. Moreover, I am very grateful to my dear 2016/17 Mercator-IPC Fellows, Tuğba Ağacayak, Kristen Biehl, Magdalena Kirchner, Sarah L. Nash, and Emre Üçkardeşler, for sharing ideas, expertise, and humor. Many thanks also to Mercator-IPC Senior Fellow Gerald Knaus for his recommendations concerning policy research as well as to all the supportive alumni of the Mercator-IPC Fellowship program.

For their helpful assistance in doing research, I would like to thank IPC interns Alara Adalı, Yasemin Bitlis, and Francesca Paganucci; and Serra Savran and Jacopo Franceschini for their assistance during the two-day workshop with Syrian students.

Many thanks also to Hande Gürdag and Carsten Walbiner of the HOPES project for their fruitful contributions and support in convening the workshop.

Last but not least, I am especially grateful to all the students who shared their stories and experiences with me and who contributed to the very fruitful workshop discussions and made this meeting successful due to their high engagement, openess, creativity, and ambitious goal of making the higher education system in Turkey more accessible for their fellow Syrians.
RiANS INTO THE TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES
- Language issues
- Academic stress
- Poor support

ACCESS
- Online education
- Vocational training
- Scholarships and economic opportunities
- Clear processes for applications

EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS
- More explanation about the system and applications
- Lack of academic support
- Adaptation to the new environment

SOCIAL LIFE
- Networking with locals
- Cultural sharing
- Language problems

DAILY QUESTIONS
- Are you planning on staying long?
- Have you found a job?
- Do you have classes?

THINGS TO LEARN
- Language
- Culture
- Academic rules

Illustrated by Man Truc
1. INTRODUCTION

Ahmed, 23, was born and raised in a small town close to Damascus. He finished high school and started to study architecture at the University of Damascus in 2012. He had not even finished his first semester when the civil war broke out, and he was forced to stop studying and move to his family’s small town outside the city. In 2013, he finally left the country and crossed the Turkey-Syria border with his mother and two little brothers; his father decided to stay in Syria. After having settled in Istanbul, Ahmed worked in several jobs, always informally without any security: sometimes it turned out that he was not even paid at all. Ahmed wished to continue his university studies to become an architect or maybe a bioengineer, but it was hard to find all the necessary information on requirements to be able to apply to different universities. In the end he managed to send a few applications to different universities in various subjects, and at the same time, he heard about the governmental scholarships for Syrians and applied. He was one of the lucky students who got accepted to the national scholarship program; and, since he only received a study place in Isparta, which is 600 km away from his family in Istanbul, Ahmed decided to reject the scholarship and enroll at a university in Istanbul. He was accepted into an English-medium program in bioengineering but without any financial support. Although he faced several barriers—including one year of compulsory language courses, a feeling of not being desired by some Turkish students and teachers, financial uncertainties, etc.—he had met some very motivated Syrians in summer school and was able to get past the depression he had been suffering for years. His more positive outlook on life even led him to start volunteering in two different NGOs working with refugee children. In sum, he was relieved and able to be optimistic and hopeful again about his future.

Ahmed’s story is only one out of many stories of young Syrians who were forced to leave their hometown in war-torn Syria, fled to safety in Turkey, experienced difficulties in orienting themselves, and finally managed to access a Turkish university in order to continue their education after a gap of two or three years. Some got useful recommendations and information from friends who had been enrolled. Some others needed more time and energy to get all the necessary information on how to start or continue higher education. However, they are all connected by the challenge of facing several barriers and forms of mental stress, among them financial uncertainty, language problems, a feeling of rootlessness, traumatic experiences in Syria, separation from families, and not least, uncertain futures.

This report examines the educational conditions and needs of Syrian university students in Turkey. It is based on a research project that was conducted by 2016/17 Mercator-IPC Fellow Wiebke Hohberger at Istanbul Policy Center (IPC). It combines an analysis of the policies and programs offered by national and international actors in the field of higher education for Syrians in Turkey with an investigation into the students’ perspective on their educational conditions and needs. Out of the interviews and conversations with a total of about 60 students, the following became clear: the moment in which these students no longer felt stuck and became enrolled at a university was a moment that had changed their lives. It gave them hope, motivation, and optimism for their future. Therefore, not least, it is important
to facilitate access to higher education for more Syrians inside Turkey. To examine how to accomplish this end, this research project, furthermore, aimed to develop policy recommendations for state and non-state actors involved in this field based on the students’ own perspectives.

1.1 Overview: The Situation of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

More than 3.5 million Syrian refugees were registered in Turkey as of February 2018; globally it is the largest number of Syrian refugees in a country in absolute figures. With the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Turkey’s open door policy enabled Syrian refugees to enter the country easily. Since 2016, however, the border has been closed, and it is hardly possible to cross. Today, less than 7% of refugees live in one of the 21 camps across 10 provinces in the southeast of Turkey that offer a functioning infrastructure and access to health and education services. More than 93% are spread across Turkey, mostly in urban areas, and hardly receive state assistance.

As Turkey has limited the geographic scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention to European asylum seekers, non-Europeans do not gain regular refugee status. Instead, they are generally classified as “conditional refugees” obtaining fewer rights. With the new Law on Foreigners and International Protection that entered into force in April 2014, however, Turkey introduced new legal regulations specifically for those having fled from the Syrian war. Accordingly, Syrian nationals, as well as

Source: UNHCR Turkey.

---


5 “Syria Regional Refugee Response,” UNHCR.
stateless persons and refugees from Syria having entered the country after April 28, 2011, are provided with Temporary Protection (TP) by the Turkish government. Apart from protection that will not allow Syrians to be sent back to Syria, beneficiaries of TP gain certain rights, services, and assistance, such as access to health, education, social assistance, psychological support, and the labor market under certain circumstances.

It is to be expected that a large number of these so-called “guests under temporary protection” will turn into long-term citizens. Therefore, national and international actors are increasingly making efforts not only to satisfy their basic needs but also to integrate them into Turkish society. Public Education Centers (Halk Eğitim Merkezi) that are organized by the municipalities, for instance, provide Turkish language courses free of charge. These centers also offer skills training courses for adults in order to enable them to enter the labor market and become increasingly self-reliant.

Since January 2016, Syrians under TP may apply for a work permit. However, certain barriers explain the very low number of applications as well as the number of issued work permits (some 1% of the working-age Syrian population). For example, the employer has to apply and pay for a Syrian’s work permit, the number of workers under TP may not exceed 10% of the overall workforce at a particular workplace, the employer has to prove that there is no Turkish citizen with the same qualifications that can fill the vacancy, these workers then have to be paid at least the minimum wage, and people under TP can only work in the province they are registered in.

Therefore, the informal labor market remains dominant. The only exceptions in which Syrians under TP are allowed to work without work permits are the sectors of seasonal agriculture and animal husbandry; or they can start their own business.

Integration in the field of education is thus of the utmost importance to avoid a “lost generation” of Syrians, as UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations has been arguing. Almost half of the Syrians under TP are children; around 60% of those of school age go to school, with some 40% being out of school. Only one-third of the enrolled students go to Turkish public schools, the other two-thirds visit so-called Temporary Education Centers (TEC). These schools were built in emergency situations, first in the camps in the Southeast, increasing to some 350 TECs in

---

6 Applications for TP, as any asylum procedure, are managed by the DGMM. The TP legislation was published as well as entered into force on October 22, 2014.


urban areas. They operate with a modified form of the Syrian curriculum, offer education in Arabic, and are staffed by Syrian volunteer teachers. Since 2016, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has been placing greater emphasis on Syrian children’s enrolment in Turkish schools in order to achieve greater social cohesion and a better education for everyone. The MoNE also increased the extent of required Turkish language teaching at TECs to 15 hours a week and has announced that TECs will no longer take new students with the aim of closing all TECs in the medium term and include all refugees in the national education system. Recently, the MoNE further revealed that it will be compulsory for Syrian children to register for kindergarten and primary school and that they will get additional courses in Arabic language and culture in order not to forget their heritage.  

With regard to Syrians’ integration process into Turkish universities, the early inclusion of children into the national education system is important in order to avoid potential accreditation barriers regarding high school diplomas and ensure that students are receiving a quality education that will prepare them for a university degree program.

1.2 State of Research on Higher Education for Syrians in Turkey

The number of research projects on the situation of Syrians in the Turkish higher education system is so far limited. The first research report on the subject titled “We Will Stop Here and Go No Further: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey” was published in October 2014 by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the University of California, Davis Human Rights Initiative, authored by Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, and James R. King. It presents the results of qualitative research on the national and international policies concerning education for Syrians in Turkey that were implemented in 2014 and aimed to facilitate Syrians’ inclusion into the Turkish higher education system as well as on Syrian students’ and scholars’ perspectives on the educational conditions and needs at Turkish universities. This report on Turkey is part of a broader regional study; it follows similar policy-oriented reports on the situations in Lebanon and Jordan. Since 2014, some of the policy recommendations in the
report have been successfully implemented, such as establishing collaboration between the Turkish government and international partners to scale up and expand its scholarship program, or efforts by the international humanitarian community to recognize young adults and the subset of university students as a specific category in need of humanitarian analysis and support.

A second report titled “Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Turkey” was published by the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States – Beirut, and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, in March 2017. The focus of this research, conducted by Başak Yavcan and Hana A. El-Ghali, is also on the legal frameworks and policies implemented by key actors in the field and examines, again using a qualitative approach, the challenges and opportunities for Syrians in accessing Turkish universities. It furthermore provides policy recommendations to decision- and policy-makers, both governmental and non-governmental, and national and international institutions.

In addition to these two works, the independent Research Center on Asylum and Migration (IGAM) and Hacettepe University, Migration and Politics Research Centre (HUGO) have been working on a research project in cooperation with the British Embassy in Ankara that focuses on Syrian students and academics titled “Elite Dialogue,” which is headed by political scientist Murat Erdoğan. The results of this quantitative and qualitative research, which is comprised of workshops and interviews with Syrian academics and a survey of 470 Syrian university students, were published in April 2017 (in Turkish). The ongoing project “Elite Dialogue II” specifically focuses on Syrian academics and post-graduate students.

Finally, the British Council in Turkey has conducted a qualitative interview-based comparative research project on Syrian university students in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan; however, the results have not been published yet.

1.3 Methodology

To identify the current policies, regulations, and programs concerning Syrians’ access to the national education system within the scope of this project, 20 informal interviews were conducted with representatives of both public and private Turkish universities and of international institutions active in this sector. Half of these interviewees were employed in universities’ administration including international student offices. The others represented international actors, governmental as well as non-governmental, that are part of the circle of support mechanisms to facilitate young Syrians’ access to higher education in Turkey.

Since the core of this study was to focus on the students’ perspective, as a second round, individual and group interviews with a total of 51 Syrian students from different Turkish universities were then carried out. These interviews are the center of this report.

The interviews with Syrian students were semi-structured and focused on questions about the time before they enrolled at a Turkish university, about their lives in Syria before they fled and their arrival and first months or years in Turkey, their access to

---


Turkish universities, scholarships and their financial situation, educational barriers they have faced so far, their social interaction with Turkish students on campus, any challenges in their daily social life, and their future plans. Some also talked about their families’ overall situation and about personal experiences that had a substantial impact on their lives.

All of the interviews were conducted between February and July 2017.

The interviewed students were all either displaced or had fled from the war in Syria, be it from the Syrian regime or terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State (ISIS), as well as the extremely difficult conditions in war-torn regions. The majority of those interviewed were legally registered under temporary protection; some others held a residence permit based on their international student status. They had arrived in Turkey between 2012 and 2015, predominantly in 2013 or 2014, and had grown up in different Syrian regions and cities.

With 25 out of the 51 interviewed students I conducted a group interview: this included the whole of the first class of Syrian students at the Turkish-German University in Istanbul. They were the pioneers of a special scholarship program implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Turkey in order to react to the Syrian crisis in the field of higher education. In this class, there were only three female students. The other 26 students were interviewed individually and face-to-face. Twenty-five were enrolled at Turkish universities while one other was applying for a scholarship to be able to study for a Master’s degree. Out of these 26 individually conducted interviewees, eleven were female and 15 male; 21 studied at state universities and four at private foundation universities. They were enrolled at different universities in the cities of Gaziantep, Karabük, and Istanbul: Gaziantep University, Karabük University, Istanbul University, Marmara University, the Turkish-German University, Yıldız Technical University, Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul Aydın University, and Sabancı University.

Since this qualitative research project is based on a rather small number of interviews, the results are rather indicative than definite. However, the interviews gave new insights into Syrian students’ perspective and revealed some common needs.

The analysis of the regulations and programs that had been implemented as well as interviews conducted resulted in the recognition that it was of the utmost importance to include Syrian students in the process of developing policy recommendations for state and non-state, national and international institutions active in this sector. As a result, 21 students were invited to participate in a workshop at IPC in September 2017 in order to exchange their positive and negative experiences, discuss any needs and barriers, and finally create ideas on how to improve the conditions for Syrians at Turkish universities. Out of the 21 participants, 12 had been interviewed before, and nine others were friends of theirs who were also Syrian university students. Some of the participants were not fluent in English, so other students translated the plenary sessions; the discussions in small groups were held in Arabic.

In addition to the interviews, additional information and data on regulations and support programs was primarily collected from the official websites of Turkish state institutions, civil society organizations, and international organizations. Statistics were mainly gathered from the websites of the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM).

16 The program at the Turkish-German University is presented in more detail below.

17 Thus, in total 60 students (51 interviewed students (12 of them were also workshop participants) plus nine new workshop participants) made their voice heard and contributed to the final recommendations of this report.
2. HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY

2.1 The Turkish Higher Education System

Turkish universities are regulated through the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). YÖK is a fully autonomous national institution that is responsible for the coordination and governance of Turkey’s higher education system."With the Higher Education Law (No. 2547) in 1981, the Turkish higher education system became centralized. Turkish universities offer bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and PhD programs as well as two-year associate degree programs. By law in 1984, foundations were allowed to establish private universities, if still under the control of YÖK. The most recent figures (2016/17) report that there are 183 higher education institutions in Turkey: 112 state universities, 65 foundation universities, and six foundation vocational training schools. The main language of instruction is Turkish, with some exceptional programs in English, French, and German, and since 2015/16 also in Arabic. At state universities higher education is free of charge (except some administration fees). Tuition fees at foundation universities can be very high and depend on each university. State universities are mainly financed by the annual state budget, which is about 60% of a university’s total income. Other than that, universities generate their own income.

Turkish students can apply for financial support at the Higher Education Loan and Dormitory Authority (YURTKUR), which manages the centralized state grant and loan system. Apart from that, there are various merit-based scholarships and fellowships available to both Turkish and international students.

In order to gain admittance into higher education institutions, Turkish citizens are required to pass the Student Selection Placement System (ÖSYS), which is a standardized two-stage examination comprised of the Higher Education Entrance Exam (YGS) and the Undergraduate Placement Exam (LYS). The first exam determines the placement of associate degree candidates; to enter the second exam one needs to have good results in the first exam, which then determines undergraduate placements. These centralized multiple choice tests are administered by the Measuring, Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) every year. The placement into undergraduate degree programs at each university and faculty is also made by ÖSYM based on the students’ scores in the exams and their high

---

18 YÖK consists of twenty-one members: one-third are directly appointed by the President of the Republic of Turkey; one-third are selected by the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) from among distinguished, high-ranking civil servants; one-third are selected by the Inter-University Council. The selection of members by the Council of Ministers and the Inter-University Council are subject to approval by the President of the Turkish Republic. See Higher Education System in Turkey, Council of Higher Education (Ankara: Council of Higher Education, 2014), accessed December 12, 2017, http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10348274/10733291/TR%27de%2CP%25C3%25BCksek%C3%B6%C4%9Fretim+Sistemi2.pdf/9027552a-962f-4b03-8450-3d18f8d56ccc.


20 These Arabic courses will be introduced in more detail below.

21 For more information see the website of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Higher Education Loan and Dormitory Authority, http://yurtkur.gsb.gov.tr/. According to Yavcan and El-Ghali, the number of Turkish students receiving state loans as of 2015 was one million, and the number of students receiving grants was 350,000; see Yavcan and El-Ghali, Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students, 9.

22 The different scholarships for international and especially Syrian students are presented below.
opportunities in higher education for syrians in turkey

2.2 Syrian Students at Turkish Universities

In the 2016/17 academic year, more than 15,000 Syrians were enrolled at Turkish universities.

Even though the number of Syrian university students has increased by about 5,000 students each year over the last two years, the current number of enrolled students still only represents less than 3% of Syrians in Turkey aged 18-25. In pre-war Syria, in contrast, about 20% of university-age Syrians attended higher education institutions.\textsuperscript{26} In neighboring countries with high numbers of refugees such as Jordan and Lebanon, the rate of university-age Syrians at university is a little bit higher, with 8% in Jordan and 6% in Lebanon, but still far from that in pre-war Syria.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{syrian_students.png}
\caption{Total Number of Syrian Students at Turkish Universities}
\end{figure}

Source: Statistics website of YÖK.

school grade point averages (GPA).\textsuperscript{23} For graduate programs, Turkish students are required to take an exam called ALES, which is also administered by ÖSYM; GRE or GMAT can also substitute for ALES.

A supporting factor for Syrian students’ access to Turkish universities is the ongoing internationalization process of academia. Accordingly, YÖK has gradually increased the quotas of international students in the last years until it finally decided to allow the universities to determine the number of international students being accepted each year by themselves, while stating that the number must not exceed 50% of the number of Turkish students.\textsuperscript{24} In the 2016/17 academic year, approximately 7.2 million Turkish and 108,000 foreign students were enrolled at Turkish universities in total.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Yavcan and El-Ghali, Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{25} All of the figures on (Syrian) students in the Turkish higher education system are taken from the statistics website of YÖK.
\item \textsuperscript{26} For both figures, see “UNHCR’s Education Update Turkey May 2017,” UNHCR, accessed November 28, 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/57330.
\item \textsuperscript{27} See “Action Document for EU Trust Fund to be used for the decisions of the Operational Board,” European Comission, October 12, 2015, accessed November 28, 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/near/pdf/enlargement/sites/near/files/nearhub/20160526-ad-1st-board-he-ares.pdf, 3. These numbers, however, refer to the end of 2014. On the situation of Syrian students in Lebanon and Jordan, see the articles in footnote 11.
\end{itemize}
In the 2016/17 academic year more than 87% of the 15,000 Syrian students were enrolled at state universities; only some 13% attended private foundation universities. The percentage of Syrians at state universities compared to private ones has constantly increased in the last years, from 64% (2013/14) to 80% (2014/15) to 85% (2015/16) to finally 87% (2016/17). This increase, not least, can be traced back to the diverse measures of the Turkish state as well as the international community in supporting affordable access to higher education for Syrians. These efforts are even more important when bearing in mind that the next generation of interested students is already in high school in Turkey, with some 290,000 Syrian students aged 15-18.

The university with the highest number of Syrian students is Gaziantep University, with some 2,000 enrolled Syrians, followed by Istanbul University and Karabük University, with about 1,000 each. In contrast to the cities of Istanbul and Gaziantep
in southeastern Turkey, where huge numbers of Syrians reside, Karabük has not been a common destination for Syrians.\textsuperscript{30}

Approximately 35\% of the Syrian students at Turkish universities are women, while 65\% are men. In contrast, in pre-war Syria half of the students were female.\textsuperscript{31} Even though the percentage of female university-aged Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey is a bit less than their male counterparts (approximately 42\% vs. 58\%), this indifference still does not justify the existing gender imbalance.\textsuperscript{32} That is why several Turkish and non-Turkish stakeholders in the field of higher education take gender issues into account when trying to bring more female Syrians to universities. In UNHCR’s DAFI scholarship program, for instance, the gender balance is listed as one of the selection criteria.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, at an international conference on how to improve the attendance of Syrians at Turkish universities, which was held by the Turkish Council of Higher Education in Hatay in March 2017, the issue of an existing gender imbalance was emphasized and became part of the final declaration of the conference.\textsuperscript{34} Although the imbalance has become smaller over the years—in 2013/14 the rate of female students was only 21\%—the reasons for this gender gap should be considered further. As Watenpaugh et al. frame it in their report on Syrians in the Turkish higher education system, several factors may contribute to this discrepancy. Possibly, families may prefer to allocate resources to their sons rather than their daughters due to strategic, economic, and cultural reasons. Families may differentiate between their sons and daughters. If not being able to continue their studies, young men may be expected to potentially return to Syria.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{syrian_students_by_gender.png}
\caption{Syrian Students by Gender, 2016-2017}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{30} The province of Istanbul hosts the most Syrians under temporary protection (TP) in Turkey, with some 540,000 as of February 2018. Gaziantep is ranked as number four with some 360,000 Syrians under TP after Şanlıurfa (470,000) and Hatay (460,000). See DGMM’s statistics, Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King, We Will Stop Here, 12.

\textsuperscript{32} These calculations are based on the numbers of Syrians aged 19-24 under TP in Turkey, published by DGMM as of December 2017 (297,611 male and 213,698 female Syrians); see “Temporary Protection,” DGMM.


to fight; daughters, in contrast, alternatively could marry at an early age and leave the economic responsibility to their husbands.\textsuperscript{35} As some interviewees reported, another factor that keeps families from sending their daughters to university refers to the security situation and the related fears of parents leaving their daughters living alone in unknown areas—specifically, the areas or cities in which they were accepted at a university. Although the reasons in Watenpaugh et al. are a good start for continuing the discussion on the gender imbalance amongst Syrian university students in Turkey, in-depth research is necessary to further understand the reasons for the gender imbalance in order to implement constructive measures.

In 2016/17, for the first time, Syrian students made up the largest group amongst international students in Turkey. The total number of foreign students was about 108,000, that is, about 1.5\% of the 7.2 million total students at Turkish universities. In previous years, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan—both countries with traditionally close ties to Turkey (and a similar language)—headed the table, with Syria being the third leading country of origin amongst students.\textsuperscript{36}

### Access to Higher Education for Syrians

Syrians have always been able to enter Turkish universities as international students. The admission process for international students at Turkish universities is complex and decentralized, and international students must apply at universities individually. Unlike other international students, however, since 2013/14 Syrians do not have to pay tuition fees at state universities as a result of the Turkish state’s recognition of their specific status as displaced persons. Each university sets its own admission criteria for international students. Generally, to apply for an undergraduate degree, Syrian students need a valid high school diploma and a transcript as well as an equivalency certificate obtained by the MoNE or a Turkish embassy or

\textsuperscript{35} Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King, We Will Stop Here, 12.

\textsuperscript{36} According to the statistics website of YÖK in 2015/16 the top five countries of origin for international students was: 1. Azerbaijan (12,504), 2. Turkmenistan (9,903), 3. Syria (9,684), 4. Iran (5,661), 5. Iraq (4,414).
consulate. As a second option, in case students fail to receive equivalency for their diploma or if they were enrolled at a Temporary Education Center, Syrians can attend the “TEC High School Profi- ciency and Equivalency Examination.” According to Yavcan and El-Ghali about 5,000 Syrian students are reported to have taken the exam in 2015 and 7,000 were registered in 2016. MoNE conducts the exam once a year at the 15 TECs in cities with the highest numbers of Syrians (Adana, Adıyaman, Ankara, Batman, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Konya, Malatya, Mardin, Mersin, Osmaniye, and Şanlıurfa).37

An identification number issued by the DGMM and, depending on the respective requirements of each university, proof of language proficiency in the language of instruction is required. Turkish courses are also offered at universities to those with insufficient Turkish proficiency. Many universities also ask for other examinations such as the SAT, or they conduct their own Foreign Students Exam (YÖS, Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı). Since 2011, according to new regulations concerning international students in Turkey, every university can decide on its own admission criteria including its own version of YÖS.38

Students who started their university studies in Syria and wish to transfer to a Turkish university may ask universities to recognize the credits that they have earned in Syria. The decision whether to recognize courses passed in Syria is made by each university and may differ from one department to another.39 To facilitate transfers and enrollment for Syrians, reacting to the exceptional circumstances of refugees, YÖK introduced a guest status called “special student” (özel öğrenci) status. As a result, Syrian students were allowed to register at seven universities close to the border and later also at other public universities across the country without needing to obtain the whole package of original documents. Students were given the prospect of being allowed to transfer as regular students as soon as they were able to provide all the necessary documents.40

Arabic Programs

Another of YÖK’s regulations focusing on Syrian students has allowed universities to establish study programs in Arabic language. As a consequence, in the 2015/16 academic year, Gaziantep University offered its first undergraduate programs in Arabic, partly with Syrian academic staff. In response to the fact that students have to pay tuition fees for these particular courses—between 1,750 and 2,500 USD per year—the Dutch NGO SPARK has provided scholarships for students in engineering and business administration (in total 56 in 2016/17). At the end of 2016, some Syrian students in different departments took the initiative and started an evaluation among their fellow students to find out the strengths and barriers of Arabic courses at Gaziantep University and were part of the decision-making process. They evaluated educational aspects of the courses, from structure to content, teaching skills and relations between Syrian and Turkish students. As positive points students particularly appreciated the convenience to be able to study in Arabic, with courses taught by predominantly Syrian teachers; as challenges they mentioned the expensive tuition fees, the lack of an Arabic library,

40 See Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King, We Will Stop Here, 26 –27.
41 Interview with an employee at Gaziantep University in correspondence with the author, Gaziantep, May 2017.
and an unorganized attendance schedule.\textsuperscript{42} Two of the interviewed students that were enrolled in programs in Arabic language at Gaziantep University, apart from these points, reported that another negative consequence was being more socially isolated from the Turkish students than the Syrian students in Turkish and English courses were. In addition to Gaziantep University, universities in Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin also offer study programs in Arabic language.\textsuperscript{43}

**Scholarships**

In sum, current figures indicate that in the 2016/17 academic year an estimated one-third of the 15,000 Syrian students in Turkey studied with a scholarship.\textsuperscript{44} Given that most young Syrians, including their families, face a more difficult socio-economic situation in Turkey than their Turkish peers—for example, due to some barriers in receiving work permits that often result in illegal underpaid jobs as well as financial responsibilities towards family members living in Syria—Turkish and international institutions have responded by providing scholarships for Syrian university students. Nearly 3,500 full scholarships are delivered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) within the scope of \textit{Türkiye Bursları} (Turkey Scholarships), funded by the Turkish state and international stakeholders. Türkiye Bursları is designed for all foreign students; however, in 2014, due to the emergency situation of Syrians, the Turkish government launched a specific program for Syrian students covering 5,000 full scholarships over five years. These scholarships cover all university fees and include a generous monthly stipend in line with the level of study, health insurance, and Turkish language courses for one year if students do not already hold C1-level knowledge.\textsuperscript{45}

In partnership with YTB, the scholarships of the UNHCR’s DAFI program (818 in 2016/17), mainly funded by the German Foreign Ministry, and those of the EU-funded HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians) project (90 in 2016/17) are implemented complementarily.\textsuperscript{46} These three scholarship programs are managed by YTB and also serve as opportunities for Syrian students to earn a place at a university; thus, it is not necessary that students be enrolled already before applying. In this case, however, it is not certain that the student will receive a scholarship for one of his or her 10-12 preferred universities.

Apart from these governmental scholarships, some foreign NGOs offer scholarships, such as SPARK in cooperation with Gaziantep University and the Al-Ghurair Foundation for Education (STEM program) as well as the Institute of International Education (IIE) in cooperation with Koç University in Istanbul.\textsuperscript{47} The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), moreover, has implemented a scholarship program for Syrians at the Turkish-German University in Istanbul. In September 2016,  


\textsuperscript{43} Some students who were interviewed at Gaziantep University talked about Arabic programs in Mardin, which were much less expensive. For more information about Arabic programs in Hatay and Şanlıurfa, see Yavcan and El-Ghali, \textit{Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students}, 29.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 43.


the first cohort of 25 students started with a one-year intensive German language course (and some Turkish lessons if necessary) to be prepared for their studies, either in Mechatronic System Engineering or Industrial Engineering, both instructed in German. This year’s new cohort was also able to choose from Computer Engineering.48

Apart from scholarships for university degrees, Turkish and international actors (e.g., YTB, UNHCR, and UNICEF) provide scholarships for one-year Turkish language courses to prospective students, since a C1-level language certificate is required to access higher education in Turkey in most cases. Several interviewees underlined the importance of learning proper Turkish—both to be able to follow the seminars and to become familiar with Turkish people and culture in general. One student, while reflecting about his years at a Turkish high school and the effect his fast language improvements had on his social inclusion, concluded, “[With knowledge of the Turkish language] you get into the society, that’s it. You learn how Turkish people think, how they feel, how they express themselves.”

**Initiatives Supporting Syrians’ Higher Education**

One of the most comprehensive initiatives with the aim to facilitate Syrians’ access to higher education is the HOPES program. Apart from full scholarships for university studies, HOPES provides support in the form of academic counseling, English language courses, and short-term higher education courses. It also organizes both regional and country-based stakeholder conferences to develop joint strategies addressing the educational needs of refugees. The program became operative in April 2016 as a direct response to the Syrian crisis with the aim of improving prospects for young Syrians as well as young people in host communities affected by the high influx of refugees: namely, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. The project is funded by the European Union’s Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the “Madad Fund,” and is implemented by the DAAD together with the British Council, Campus France, and the Dutch institution EP Nuffic.49

In addition to HOPES, there are further opportunities for students to receive academic and professional assistance outside the university. UNHCR coordinates a technical working group for higher education scholarship providers and is reported to assist in the establishment of a higher education working group with the co-leadership of government counterparts.50 InnoCampus, a project of the company InnoMate, provides entrepreneurship and innovation trainings in which young people together with professional mentors work in teams to develop business ideas, empowering university students in entrepreneurship. In cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), InnoCampus initiated a special program bringing together Syrian and local university students giving them space and training to establish their own business. The first programs at Gaziantep University from February to May 2017 and in Urla/Izmir from July to September 2017 were reportedly very successful, and several teams were eventually awarded grants to allow students to bring their ideas to life. InnoMate has reportedly targeted Şanlıurfa and Hatay as the next locations.51

48 On details concerning the application process of the DAAD scholarship program, see “Engineering Education with Scholarship for 25 Syrian Citizens,” Turkish–German University; http://www.tau.edu.tr/syrian_scholarship.de.

49 For details on the various programs of the HOPES project, see https://www.hopes-madad.org/.

50 “Education Update, Turkey,” UNHCR, 2.

Several civil society organizations support young Syrians who are willing to study by providing counseling regarding all the needed (but hard to find) information on how to apply for a study place. NGOs such as the Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants (ASAM; in Turkish SGDD), the International Middle East Peace Research Center (IMPR) Humanitarian, and Hilalder, a local NGO in Kayseri, hold information sessions to clarify the process of applying, the time and content of high school equivalency exams offered by the MoNE, and scholarship opportunities.52 Several interviewed students emphasized how helpful some NGOs had been with providing information on how to access higher education in Turkey. One Syrian-led initiative, pioneered by a Syrian student at Gaziantep University, established an NGO called the Syrian Student Office for University Services (SSOUS) in 2014 with the aim to provide consultancy for interested university students coming from Syria and to empower young Syrians to continue or start higher education at a Turkish university. Since its foundation SSOUS has expanded and become an important source of information and support center for young Syrians.53

Currently, the Human Development Foundation (INGEV) is preparing the creation of a structure that will guide and support Syrian students of post-secondary age to access higher education. As part of the project, a so-called Help Desk in the form of a call center will provide any relevant information for Syrians on how to be admitted to higher education institutions in Turkey, from application procedures to scholarships as well as Turkish language course opportunities.

Alternative Higher Education Programs

Overall, the number of interested students is much higher than the current number of those enrolled, and it is expected that the demand for enrollment will increase with new high school graduates every year. Thus, it is crucial that Turkish and international stakeholders search for alternative ways of providing higher education for Syrians. Two thinkable solutions that are currently being discussed are to invest, first, in distance learning programs and, second, to promote associate degrees. Currently, 83% of Syrian students in Turkey are enrolled in undergraduate programs. However, there are several open spaces in two-year tertiary education programs, i.e., associate degrees and vocational training, whereas study places in undergraduate degrees are limited for certain fields of study and not sufficient in number. This situation as well as the demand for technical training on the Turkish (and possibly a future Syrian) labor market has resulted in considerations on how to increase the number of interested young Syrians in this form of post-secondary education.

Syrian Students per Level, 2016-2017


53 Interview with the founder of SSOUS in correspondence with the author, June 2017. Currently, SSOUS is not operating.
With regard to online education programs, these ideas range from using international platforms such as Coursera or edX to other specific open education programs offered by Turkish universities. The pioneer of open education in Turkey, the Faculty of Open Higher Education at Anadolu University, has provided open and distance learning since 1982 and has enlarged its range of study programs over the last decades with several new programs in associate and undergraduate degrees. These courses range from economics and business administration to social sciences and humanities. Anadolu University is currently offering open higher education to 1.4 million students in total.\textsuperscript{54}

Another supportive initiative, Kiron, a German NGO, was founded in 2015 to enable refugees to access higher education. It provides online courses in cooperation with different universities primarily in Germany, France, and Jordan. It is currently also operating in Turkey in cooperation with Istanbul Aydin University and Yaşar University in Izmir with the aim to provide programs with 80\% online and 20\% offline courses as well as a common certificate.\textsuperscript{55} Under which circumstances the Syrian students that participated in the workshop conducted at IPC evaluated online education programs and associate degrees as alternatives is discussed below.


\textsuperscript{55} For details on Kiron’s different programs of open higher education, see https://kiron.ngo/.
3. SYRIAN STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE ON THE CURRENT CONDITIONS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES: NEEDS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Interview Results

The interviews with Syrian students at Turkish universities revealed, firstly, the positive effects the opportunity to study in Turkey had on their lives—on their mental health, on their way of looking into the future, and their overall motivation and drive.

The students differed in respect to their field of study, their educational background (in terms of having received a high school diploma in Syria or Turkey), their current level of study, as well as their socio-economic situation. In the mid or long term, the majority wished to be able to return to Syria. Specific inquiries on the motivation and how realistic they thought it would be to return revealed different reasons students would chose to return and how this would affect their choice of study in Turkey. Some students aim to be an active part of (re-) establishing a Syrian state and had therefore chosen a specific field of study, such as engineering or economics and also peace and conflict research or sociology. Others solely wished to live in their home country again but had not aligned their choice of study with the purposes of reconstructing Syria through their skills and knowledge. There were also students among this group who could also imagine staying in Turkey in the long run. Others, again, could imagine moving to another country after graduation; and some, in turn, emphasized that they did not want to spend time with making plans for an unsecure future based on their experiences of being forced to stop any plans they had and to migrate to another country all of a sudden.

Whether some will be able to return to any kind of Syrian state or whether they will stay in Turkey or migrate to another country, it is clear that any form of higher education will be useful both for Syrian students personally and for the society they will live in. In addition to the advantages a higher education degree has in the labor market, the stories of many interviewed students showed that working toward a degree also has a psychological impact. Some students complained of mental illnesses such as depression before having been accepted at a university. The situation of being enrolled at a university helped them to recover and to become more optimistic about their future. One student stated, “Without being at a university, I would be hopeless.”

Overall, the interviewed students appreciated the national and international efforts to facilitate access to higher education to Syrians and were lucky to be able to start or to continue a study program in Turkey. Almost everyone emphasized how grateful she/he was to the Turkish government and its former open door policy that enabled them to enter the country and continue their lives including education. Expressions such as “I am so lucky to live here” or “I love Turkey” demonstrated some students’ relief and gratitude. Even though not every student put it in such an extreme way, it became clear that the opportunity to obtain higher education was highly appreciated and had an intense influence on his or her general mood.

However, there were also some barriers many students found themselves struggling with: these were, amongst others, challenges during the application process, language problems, academic challenges in following the courses, financial problems, challenging time management due to responsibilities at home or at work, and not least experiences of discrimination on and off campus.
Those challenges that were frequently outlined by students from different universities gave reason to invite a group of Syrian students for a two-day workshop in September 2017 to discuss common needs and possible solutions. In the following sections, the results of these intense discussions are presented, with some remarks added from the interviews.

3.2 Students’ Workshop Results

How can we facilitate access to higher education for Syrians in Turkey? This was the overall question of the workshop titled “Integrating Syrians into the Turkish Higher Education System: Discussing Solutions among Syrian Students,” which was conducted at Istanbul Policy Center, September 14-15, 2017, under Chatham House Rule.56 The aim of the event was to provide a platform for Syrian students to raise their voices and share their experiences at higher education institutions in Turkey, as well as to discuss their ideas and solutions on how to improve conditions for Syrians at Turkish universities. Out of the 21 workshop participants, eight were enrolled at Gaziantep University, six at Karabük University, and six others at three different universities in Istanbul, among them Istanbul University; thus, those universities ranked as number 1 to 3 considering the absolute number of Syrian students. One participant was currently not enrolled at a Turkish university but was applying for a scholarship for a graduate degree at Gaziantep University.57

In a first step, partly in small groups, partly in the plenary, the students shared their positive and negative experiences at Turkish universities with regard to access procedures, scholarships, social interactions with fellow Turkish students, support mechanisms before and during their studies, and anything else they deemed significant.

Syrian Students’ Positive Experiences at Turkish Universities

The positive experiences the students reported can be divided into two groups in terms of the effects they had on the students: first, academic experiences resulting in personal development and growth enriching the students’ lives by broadening their horizons; second, experiences that supported them in view of organizational and educational concerns. As part of the first group of positive experiences, the students repeatedly emphasized that living and studying in Turkey was “a whole new experience” with new opportunities such as learning a new language and culture. Moreover, they appreciated having made new friendships not only with Syrian but also international and Turkish students. This helped in coexisting with Turkish people in general, they stressed. One group metaphorically characterized studying as a bridge to make living in Turkey easier. Another effect that was mentioned was the positive impact accessing a university had on their self-consciousness regarding their origin. Meeting fellow Syrian students, helping each other, and sharing similar life stories and experiences resulted in stronger self-confidence. This was expressed through the statement, “We build ourselves [at university].”


57 In addition to the student participants, two employees of the HOPES project attended the workshop and provided highly useful insights into higher education opportunities and scholarship selection procedures.
The opportunity to educate and organize themselves at a Turkish university has influenced students' personal development: as a result, the students observed that they had become more responsible persons. Since they had managed and decided on their own to study, they felt responsible for their future. Concurrently, they agreed on the fact that being a university student has improved their general motivation and time management. Female participants also emphasized that living and studying in Turkey for them also meant enjoying more freedom, since women were not as strictly separated from men than they had been in pre-war Syria.

Within the second group of positive experiences concerning external support, all of the students mentioned that they received at least some support from Turkish professors, teachers, and students with general assistance and in learning the Turkish language. How effective these helping hands had been, however, varied. In particular, the students from Karabük University emphasized that both the university staff members, especially those in the international students affairs office, and the Turkish students were very supportive when they needed help and orientation. One group of students highlighted their appreciation for their fellow Turkish students' understanding: "The empathy that was shown from our Turkish friends towards our problems and situations regarding the difficulty of the language was huge."

Apart from that, the scholarships managed by the Turkish authority YTB (Türkiye Bursları, HOPES, and DAFI, as mentioned above) were valued due to their duration—for a whole period of study—and the amount, awarding about 1,200 Turkish liras per month. Also, the DAAD scholarship program at the Turkish-German University was highly appreciated due to its length, amount, and professional support and guidance. The students further stressed the positive fact that Syrians do not have to pay tuition fees at state universities. They also appreciated the work of various NGOs, international organizations, and foreign countries' governmental organizations in the field of social and financial support specifically for university students.

Last but not least, some students were happy with certain educational conditions in Turkey. Compared to pre-war Syria, a few students assessed that in Turkey they gain more academic insights and practical knowledge through laboratory times in engineering and overall from professors with exceptional skills in transferring knowledge. A few others deemed that the infrastructure at Turkish universities is better than in pre-war Syria and were excited that they finally had the chance to study in English. Based on comparisons with friends residing in other neighboring countries of Syria, living in Turkey, according to the students, was "still one of the best of limited choices for Syrians." In that regard, independent from the higher education conditions, they referred to a more affordable cost of living in Turkey and a mentality that was "not so far from the Syrian one."

In the interviews, it became obvious that certain universities, such as Karabük University and the Turkish-German University in Istanbul, can serve as models for implementing support mechanisms and creating a welcoming atmosphere. In the case of the 25 Syrian scholarship holders at the Turkish-German University in Istanbul, the students turned out to be quite privileged. Apart from a generous financial stipend that covers their living expenses, they faced fewer barriers and appreciated the intensive support and close supervision during their preparatory year of learning German. They also described their Turkish peers on campus as generally kind and open-minded. Presumably, the fact that the university is a rather small one enabling close relationships between students and teachers/professors supports this positive atmosphere on campus.
Identifying Syrian Students’ Needs and Solutions

Out of the negative experiences put forth by Syrian students, the participants altogether identified four main challenges: (1) access to higher education, (2) scholarships and students’ financial situation, (3) academic concerns, and (4) social life and interaction. Four groups, about four to five students each, discussed and shared ideas about how to resolve each challenge and developed policy maps to solve these issues. These policy maps afterwards were discussed in a plenary session.58

Improving Access to Higher Education

With regard to access to higher education for Syrians in Turkey, the students observed a lack of guidance before and after enrolling. They noted that it is difficult to gather suitable information on what subjects were offered at what universities, how to decide upon which universities to apply, and where and how to apply. Also, after having been accepted, students claimed that it is not easy to orient oneself at Turkish universities; however, the degree of difficulty varied from university to university. Another specific challenge concerned the lack of information on transferring from associate to undergraduate degrees.

The students noted that many universities demand different tests from foreigners as every university has formulated its own Foreign Students Exam (YÖS) since 2011. In addition, some universities require the results of international exams such as GMAT, GRE, or SAT. Travelling to different places for these exams, the students remarked, is both time-consuming and expensive, especially when bearing in mind that prospective students usually apply to quite a few universities at the same time.

Additionally, Syrian students perceived the application processes as neither transparent nor fair: people with low grades would be accepted, while others with higher grades would be rejected from the same university without receiving any feedback. Another problem, according to the students, is the accreditation and recognition of high school diplomas and other certificates from Syria and abroad. They also indicated that there are often times visa problems for those who are accepted at a Turkish university while still residing in Syria.

The policy map on how to facilitate access to higher education for Syrians included the following five solutions and recommendations:

1) The introduction of a central application system:
Instead of applying at every university individually, the students pleaded for a centralized system to award study places on the basis of a centralized entrance exam. This would result in a more reliable, transparent, fair, and less complicated application and awarding process. As possible authorities responsible for this procedure, they considered the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), the Ministry of National Education, or the Measuring, Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM).

2) Transparency of the selection criteria:
As long as universities award study places for Syrians themselves, they should define their selection criteria clearly and create transparency in the whole process of application, acceptance, and rejection. In this way, the students would be aware of how to improve their chances of being accepted.

3) Information and consultancy on transferring from associate to undergraduate degrees:
Clear information on the conditions for transferring and assistance in this process is important. Clarity on

---

58 In a so-called final results session, the students presented their policy maps to a broader audience consisting of IPC researchers and employees, a representative of UNHCR focusing on higher education for refugees in Turkey, and a researcher from a university in Istanbul. The workshop participants as well as the external audience were free to give feedback on the policy recommendations so as to facilitate a fruitful discussion and exchange of ideas.
the opportunities for transferring would also result in the greater attractiveness of associate degrees.

4) Advocacy on visa concerns:
Young people living in Syria who get accepted at Turkish universities should be supported in obtaining visas. NGOs could take a leading role in advocating for this.

5) Facilitating access to Turkish high schools:
Syrian youth should increasingly be transferred to Turkish high schools to avoid any accreditation problems concerning diplomas as well as educational disadvantages. This would also help students become familiar with the language and culture.

Scholarships and Students’ Financial Situation
The problems identified by the students considering financial support concerned, firstly, the application process for scholarships; secondly, the basic conditions of scholarships; and thirdly, the financial challenges of studying without receiving a scholarship. With regard to application processes, the main issues listed were a lack of information on all the different scholarships, complex application procedures, a lack of transparency on selection criteria, a lack of knowledge about different Syrian and other non-Turkish diplomas on the part of scholarship providers, long waiting periods until receiving a reply, and a lack of feedback on rejections.

In terms of the conditions and the substance of scholarships, the students pointed to a lack of transparency of rights due to complex contracts, a lack of sustainability concerning the duration and monthly amount of stipend, and arbitrary transfers from one kind of scholarship to another (less beneficial) based on organizational cooperation between two scholarship providers. They especially stressed the importance of sustainability since otherwise, when only getting a stipend for a year or even shorter, students are in a constant state of insecurity.

Some interviewed students who were enrolled at private foundation universities, moreover, reported that some private universities officially announce 50% scholarships on the already inflated tuition fees for international students; however, these reductions are in fact much less than 50% of the total. Universities would simply use a years-old currency exchange rate and announce the fees for international students in US dollars instead of Turkish lira.

Summarized from the students’ perspectives, the three big issues considering the conditions and application procedures of scholarships were a lack of clarity, transparency, and sustainability. However, students also emphasized that the extent of these issues varied between the scholarship providers. In the end, it became very clear that there is a lack of full and sustainable scholarships and alternative ways to finance one’s study. With regard to the latter, they stressed that it is difficult to find part-time jobs. Working full-time and studying at the same time would be almost impossible; a work permit would be hard to get since there are many barriers for an employer to apply for a Syrian employee’s work permit. In general, most of the available jobs were illegal, thus without a contract or any kind of insurance and financial security.

The policy map on financial barriers was labeled under the overall philosophy of “Don’t give me a fish, teach me how to fish!”—thus, giving students the resources to help themselves was preferable to simply accepting handouts. This included the following recommendations:

1) Full and sustainable scholarships:
The amount and duration of a scholarship should enable a student to finish a university degree. However, since the students were aware of the fact that there is not enough funding for everyone and perceived that this might result in resentment on the part of Turkish students, they recommended two alternative forms of scholarships:
1a) Volunteering at universities:
Scholarships could be connected to the duty of volunteering on campus: e.g., in the library or as assistants and consultants for new Syrian and international students. Recipients of such a scholarship could assist other students in applying to university and in explaining the university education system as well as give lessons in Turkish, English, math, etc. This would also be helpful in solving social problems since newcomers would be integrated quickly into campus life.

1b) Partnerships with private business:
Partnerships between organizations providing scholarships and private business would result in a win-win-win situation: 1. The students could manage to study and afford living expenses by working part-time. 2. Companies could display themselves as humanitarian by supporting education projects. 3. Scholarship providers could increase the number of scholarships.

2) Clarity and transparency in scholarship application processes:
The students requested transparent selection criteria and procedures, a less complicated application process, and feedback on rejections. If it was not possible to give feedback individually due to high application numbers, they suggested to publish a list with some five to ten main reasons for rejection online to better understand one’s rejection and possibly be able to improve oneself.

3) Development of an online information platform on scholarships:
Aiming for more clarity, an online pool of all scholarships gathering information such as application procedures, amount and duration of the scholarship, and selection criteria would facilitate the process of the decision of where to apply.

4) Accreditation system for diplomas:
Just like the group on access to higher education, it was mentioned that an adequate accreditation system for diplomas should be created.

5) Support to Syrian students in Syria:
Lastly, the students demanded suitable application opportunities for those students still living in Syria such as offering interviews on Skype and if possible giving support for visa applications.

Academic Concerns
The negative aspects and policy recommendations on academic concerns referred both to language preparation courses, general and professional preparation courses, and the university seminars themselves. A part of the problems the students mentioned concerned general circumstances at Turkish universities that equally concerned Turkish students, as well. These were a general lack of good materials, teaching standards, and tests that were not suitable for the coursework, e.g., multiple-choice tests in math.

In addition to these general academic concerns, students mentioned the following problems that Syrian students in particular face. First, the preparatory Turkish language courses are not effective toward understanding academic vocabulary. Further, despite the fact that many programs are designed to be 100% English study programs, the students reported that teachers and Turkish students would often switch into Turkish during the class. Some compulsory courses such as Turkish history and literature are taught in Turkish and therefore decrease the grades of the students who did not have an academic understanding of Turkish. Second, due to different school curricula at Syrian and Turkish schools as well as at various Arabic schools and Temporary Education Centers in Turkey, one-year general preparatory courses—similar to the German studienkolleg system—
Turkish hazırlık—would be valuable. Currently, there are not enough existing preparatory courses for foreigners that repeat and deepen what is learned at Turkish high schools. Such extensive preparatory courses would also be helpful prior to master’s degree programs.

Additionally, the students discussed some cases where they felt discriminated against by some Turkish students and teachers during the seminars or when it came to finding internships and Erasmus places, as well as access to laboratories. The extent of experiences of discrimination varied again at different universities.

As possible solutions the students recommended the following:

1) **Inclusion of Turkish academic language into language courses:**

   The preparatory language courses should include academic vocabulary. These academic language courses should be divided into different fields such as social and natural sciences. In addition, the number of courses should be increased to create smaller class sizes in order to be more effective. Students also advocated for more homogenous groups, e.g., in accordance to age.

2) **Suitable tests:**

   Universities and teachers should prepare tests in line with learning goals.

3) **Training for teachers:**

   Professors and teachers should be regularly trained to improve their teaching skills. They should further be trained in intercultural sensibility and understand the specific challenges of Syrians and others having fled war or similar catastrophes.

4) **Raising awareness for mutual respect at universities:**

   Universities should raise awareness of the importance of mutual respect on campus (and everywhere else), for instance, with the help of campaigns and trainings. Moreover, teachers should be aware of their potential as role models.

5) **Turkish history courses in English language:**

   Concerning compulsory Turkish history and literature courses, the students clarified that it should not be the class itself but the language of instruction that should be changed. Students from Istanbul University mentioned their university as a good example in this regard since it provides these courses also in English and modifies the courses for foreigners.

6) **Advocating for internships and Erasmus places:**

   Universities should advocate for Syrian students finding internships and Erasmus places. The students also encouraged other Syrian students to be more self-confident and speak up for their demands such as accessing labs or receiving Erasmus places abroad.

7) **Preparatory courses for foreign students:**

   Universities should provide more preparatory courses for foreign students to repeat and deepen what is learned at Turkish high schools. Such courses would also be useful prior to master’s degrees.

**Social Life and Interaction**

With regard to Syrian students’ social lives, including social interaction both on and off the campus, the students believed that integration problems were the result of both speaking a different language and living amongst another culture. Beyond any language difference, some perceived an emotional distance from both sides. Another problem was the
OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY

lack of guidance and social inclusion when entering a university. Additionally, in their view, Turkish students would look at Syrian students in a different way in comparison with other international students. The workshop participants traced it back to a general fear within Turkish society that Syrians would stay in Turkey in the long term, taking away their jobs, their study places, and boosting rent. With a special look at the situation at universities, the students also perceived that because Syrians did not have to take the Turkish central university entrance exam, this was another point of discrimination. The feeling of being discriminated against was reported across different aspects of life: when trying to find a job, a rental house, a dormitory, or an internship. Many landlords, for example, would charge higher rents, higher deposits, ask for many documents, insurance, etc. Especially for Syrian women, it was reported that it is difficult to find a safe and affordable space to live. Moreover, the students described the permanent existence of legal uncertainty, e.g., due to expired passports and residence permits, as a major burden in their daily lives.

With the aim to increase the social acceptance of Syrians in Turkey, both in general and on campus, as well as to facilitate their daily lives in Turkey, the students suggested the following solutions:

1) **Orientation events and buddy programs:**
For an easier start and better social integration, Syrian students and university clubs should organize more joint events such as football and chess tournaments at the beginning of every semester. In addition, older students could be assigned as advisors for first-year students. The students emphasized that, according to their own experiences, such a “buddy program” would need to be under the official umbrella of a university office in order to develop trust between students.

2) **Integration at earlier stages:**
Integration should start as early as possible, especially when children are of school age, both in and out of schools.

3) **Handbook for legal questions:**
An online handbook should explain the basic steps of living legally in Turkey, including any and all rights and duties.

4) **Support to find a safe and affordable living space:**
Universities could arrange connections with landlords and housing administrations to provide trustworthy, safe, and affordable living spaces. Also, local organizations could assist in finding living spaces for students, especially for newcomers.

5) **Partnerships between universities and private businesses:**
To fight against discrimination in finding part-time jobs and internships, universities could establish partnerships with private businesses, e.g., with the help of the chamber of commerce. Furthermore, fairs and exhibitions at universities could bring students and companies together.

**Online Education and Associate Degrees**
In addition to the above-mentioned four fields of challenges, the students discussed the circumstances under which online education and associate degree programs could become potential alternatives in higher education.

With regard to online education programs, the students first of all made clear that they are not used to online education; currently, it is still considered as an additional educational opportunity rather than an alternative to four-year undergraduate university studies. It would surely take time for universities to adopt such programs, they assessed; however, it might soon become a serious alternative, not least since online education has the
important advantage of flexibility. Students could balance family, work, and studying much easier. With the exception of some subjects that require considerable practical experience, such as medicine and engineering, the students believed that online education might become a respectable alternative form of higher education given that the following criteria are fulfilled:

1) Mixture of physical and online courses:
The students feared that purely online programs would result in a lack of students’ motivation; physical courses in regular intervals would provide additional motivation. The best solution for better attachment and motivation, according to the students, is to link these programs to physical universities. The cooperation between Istanbul Aydin University and KIRON, an NGO providing open higher education courses, was given as a good example. An online education program on business administration at Istanbul University was also mentioned positively.

2) Upgrading certificates:
The recognition of certificates, including international accreditation, should be improved. A suitable way to upgrade certificates would again be to connect them to universities and other renowned higher education institutes.

3) Increasing quality:
Improving the quality of online education programs would support further recognition of these programs and change the current image of online courses as being easy to pass.

4) Lower fees:
Similar to undergraduate university programs in Turkey, online courses should be free of charge to Syrian students or at least request low tuition fees.

5) Marketing and public advertisement:
Information on different online programs should be more accessible. An information platform with an overview of all online education providers would be desirable. The students believed that a spark just needs to be lit to spread the idea of online education: if there were some successful examples, it would be certain that some others would be motivated to follow. They referred to their initial distrust of scholarship programs and how once the students were exposed to how these scholarships operated, this resulted in greater enthusiasm. Provided that the four points listed above were considered, the present negative image of online education could be changed through advertising campaigns, they believed.

Associate degrees might become a second alternative to an undergraduate degree, the students evaluated. Important criteria in this regard are listed as follows:

1) Change of “low-level” image:
The perception that these degrees are low-level studies and only interesting for people with “bad” grades must be changed. This can be changed through the strategies mentioned in the subsequent points.

2) Raising awareness of gaining specific skills:
Higher education institutions should focus on the advantages of gaining specific skills and practical experience through obtaining an associate degree by informing students of the benefits of an associate degree on their websites and through public presentations.

3) Information on possible transfer to undergraduate degrees:
Most of the workshop participants did not know that it is possible to transfer to an undergraduate degree after two years of vocational training. This
opportunity, as well as the concrete conditions for transferring, should be clearly communicated and published.

4) Information on labor market opportunities:
The students emphasized that salary, economic security, and quality of life would play a crucial role in the decision-making process regarding their field of study. Thus, universities (and other stakeholders) should clarify the prospective opportunities for associate degree holders in the labor market.
4. CONCLUSION

As this study demonstrates, the Turkish government has implemented several regulations and measures in order to facilitate young Syrians’ inclusion into the national higher education system. Among other things, it waived tuition fees and established a specific scholarship program for Syrian students for a whole period of study as well as for preparatory language courses. Additionally, civil society organizations and international actors have contributed to an increase in the number of Syrian students at Turkish universities in the last few years by providing scholarships and language courses, as well as counseling on students’ opportunities. However, the fact that still only some 3% of university-age Syrians are enrolled in university programs shows that there are several barriers left keeping Syrians from entering higher education. This research project tried to identify the challenges and barriers in detail, and therefore focused on the students’ perspective and gave a group of Syrian students the opportunity to raise their voice and to discuss their needs. This precipitated discussion on creative ideas and solutions for how to facilitate access to higher education in Turkey and improve education and socio-economic conditions.

Through this process it became clear that a holistic approach to removing barriers against Syrian students’ access to higher education is absolutely necessary. Stakeholders must facilitate Syrian students’ transition from secondary to tertiary education, as well as their transition to the labor market. This includes the necessity to facilitate receiving work permits. Overall, the interviews and the workshop with Syrian students revealed the potential to use Syrian university students as mediators between Syrian refugees communities and the Turkish state and society.

In addition to the above listed students’ recommendations, the following strategies could help in this process. Apart from scholarships and the opportunity to work part-time, governmental loans could be provided not only for Turkish but also Syrian citizens to remove financial barriers. Furthermore, universities, and potentially also NGOs, should provide professional psychological support to help young people to cope with traumatic experiences. Last but not least, the public discourse—shaped by politicians and the media—should increasingly focus on providing data and detailed information on policies and legislation that support Syrians’ access to higher education to avoid speculation on what benefits Syrians are receiving and instead create an atmosphere of acceptance and consent within Turkish society.


OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY

WIEBKE HOHBERGER

Istanbul Policy Center
Bankalar Caddesi No: 2 Minerva Han 34420
Karaköy, İstanbul TURKEY

+90 212 292 49 39
+90 212 292 49 57
@ ipc@sabanciuniv.edu
w ipc.sabanciuniv.edu

ISBN: 978-605-2095-16-4