

SYRIAN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Zeynep Özde Ateşok
Ayşegül Komsuoğlu
Y. Yeşim Özer Yürür



Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Istanbul University:
Improving Capacity and Knowledge Sharing (WESREF-IU)
Project has received funding from the European Union's
Horizon 2020 EU Framework Programme for and Innovation
under grant agreement No. 78724



SYRIAN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Zeynep Özde ATEŞOK

Istanbul University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey

Ayşegül KOMSUOĞLU

Istanbul University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey

Y. Yeşim ÖZER YÜRÜR

Istanbul University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey



Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Istanbul University:
Improving Capacity and Knowledge Sharing (WESREF-IU)
Project has received funding from the European Union's
Horizon 2020 EU Framework Programme for and Innovation
under grant agreement No. 78724



İSTANBUL
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Published by
Istanbul University Press
Istanbul University Central Campus
IU Press Office, 34452 Beyazıt/Fatih
Istanbul - Turkey



www.iupress.istanbul.edu.tr

Syrian Students' Participation in Higher Education in Turkey: An Institutional Perspective
By Zeynep Özde Ateşok, Ayşegül Komsuoğlu and Y. Yeşim Özer Yürür

ISBN: 978-605-07-0759-5
E-ISBN: 978-605-07-0740-3

DOI: 10.26650/B/SS11.2020.010

Istanbul University Publication No: 5267

Published Online in November, 2020

It is recommended that a reference to the DOI is included when citing this work.

This work is published online under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



This work is copyrighted. Except for the Creative Commons version published online, the legal exceptions and the terms of the applicable license agreements shall be taken into account.

Printed by
İlbey Matbaa Kağıt Reklam Org. Mük. San. Tic. Ltd. Şti.
2. Matbaacılar Sitesi 3NB 3 Topkapı / Zeytinburnu, İstanbul - Turkey
www.ilbeymatbaa.com.tr
Certificate No: 17845

First Printing, 2021

CONTENTS

About the Authors	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction.....	vii
CHAPTER 1	1
Refugees' Access to Higher Education	3
1.1. Higher Education for Refugees: Global Normative Context.....	3
1.2. Literature Review: Challenges in Refugee Access to and Participation in Higher Education	8
1.3. Concluding Remarks	19
CHAPTER 2	21
Syrian Youth's Access to Higher Education in Turkey	23
2.1. Background	23
2.2. Research Design and Methodology	26
2.3. Syrian Students' Access to and Participation in Higher Education in Turkey	34
2.4. Findings and Discussion	58
2.5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions	63
CHAPTER 3	67
WESREF-IU Project: An Evaluation of the Pilot Support Programs, Awareness Raising and Knowledge Sharing	69
3.1. Application and Admission Support	70
3.2. Orientation Program	76
3.3. Academic Language Support Program	81
3.4. Venues for Broader Cooperation, Engagement in Awareness Raising and Dialogue	86
3.5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions	89
CONCLUSION & FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS.....	93
REFERENCES	98

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Zeynep Özde Ateşok

Zeynep Özde Ateşok is Assistant Professor in Faculty of Political Sciences at Istanbul University holds an M.A in European Studies from Boğaziçi University and a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations Department from Istanbul University. She has published on migration, refugee integration, education and EU politics. She has contributed to several projects on refugees' integration and access to higher education and is currently researching on international refugee regime, asylum policies, integration and education.
zoatesok@istanbul.edu.tr

Ayşegül Komsuoğlu

Ayşegül Komsuoğlu is a Professor of Political Science in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul University and currently the Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences at the same University. She holds a Ph.D. from İstanbul University and her main research interests are the politics of inequality, education/higher education, migration and Turkish politics. She has several works on Turkish politics and society and migration, published in both international and national peer reviewed journals
komsu@istanbul.edu.tr

Y. Yeşim Özer

Y. Yeşim Özer completed her Ph.D. in European Union Politics and International Relations at the University of Marmara European Union Institute, her MAs in Women's Studies at the University of Istanbul and Human Rights Law at the University of *Bilgi* and her BA in International Relations at the University of Bilkent. She is working on European Union – Turkey relations, European Union migration policy and refugee education. She has successfully completed two EU projects on Syrian students' access and participation to higher education institutions in Turkey.
yozer@istanbul.edu.tr

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Beyan Ahmad, Haya Alsaife and Mohammad Ahmad Khalaf for their insightful assistance and support during the research and pilot programs. Without their valuable contribution and dedicated assistance the project entitled “Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Istanbul University: Improving Capacity and Knowledge Sharing” (WESREF-IU) and this book would be incomplete. We are very grateful to the WESREF-IU project team including: Dr. Mehmet Ali Ertürk, Assoc. Dr. Metin Ünver and Senem Ay Tunaboğlu, as well as staff at the Istanbul University Language Center including: Dr. Mehmet Yağın Yılmaz, Cengiz Çakmak, Eren Özkaralı, Gözde Demirel and Gözde Orhan for their committed partnership and solid support throughout the project.

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding for the WESREF-IU Project from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and would especially like to thank the project adviser, Simona Misti, for her unlimited and constructive support during the implementation and reporting of the project.

We would like to express our gratitude to the speakers and participants who contributed to our info sessions, workshops and seminars. The research would not have been possible without the substantial support of the university’s staff, faculty members and students. We are especially grateful to all those students and researchers who shared their experiences, insights and stories, and for their high engagement and resilience.

We should extend our special gratitude to Prof. Dr. Zeliha Koçak Tufan, Member of CoHE Executive Board, for her dedication in supporting refugees in higher education and awareness raising. We also extend our special gratitude to Gaziantep and Karabük Universities and their Rectors Prof. Dr. Ali Gür and Prof. Dr. Refik Polat for making the fieldwork possible and their commitment to providing refugees with access to higher education. We also would like to express our gratitude to our Rector Prof. Dr. Mahmut Ak for supporting us during all steps of the project and his efforts to ensure the inclusion of refugee academics and youth within the higher education system in Turkey.

The authors also would like to thank in particular staff from Gaziantep University including: Vice Rector Prof. Dr. Şehmus Demir, Migration Center Director Prof. Dr. Mehmet Nuri Gültekin, Dr. Nur İncetahtacı and Dr. Kerim Tanış from Karabük University International Relations Office for their immense support and guidance during our fieldwork. Finally, we would like to thank our language editor Tracey D’Afters for her exceptional guidance and editorial work.

We hope this book will lead to more accessible and inclusive higher education systems for refugees in search of a peaceful and sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, which triggered one of the biggest human tragedies in recent history, more than six million people have fled the country seeking asylum in neighboring countries and beyond (UNHCR, 2020a). While many governments and the international community in general have failed to respond to this emerging humanitarian crisis, millions of Syrian refugees are being hosted in neighboring countries without future prospects as the unrest continues well into its ninth year. In the face of the rising and unprecedented challenge of mass exodus and protracted displacement, each country has been confronted with growing needs of the affected populations within its particular political, economic and social contexts. As children and youth are among the displaced majority, the need for education has attracted public attention. Efforts to ensure a ‘no lost generation’ climbed high on the international agenda in a very short time span. Education has emerged as a top priority in this context as an important tool of sustainable development, and therefore refugee protection, integration and empowerment. By framing this humanitarian crisis as an education crisis, the needs and challenges of Syrian students (e.g. low enrolment rates, inclusion in education systems struggling under ever increasing pressure) have been central concerns. Higher education has only recently become part of the discussion.

Considering the estimated 100-200,000 Syrian youths (EU, 2016), who have had their higher education disrupted, and the upcoming generation providing access to higher education is one of the greatest challenges of displacement, both for the host countries and the refugees themselves. Despite being a fundamental human right, access to and participation in higher education among asylum seekers and refugees remain very low and strictly dependent on national contexts and priorities. Global average higher education enrolment rates of 3% compared with 37% for non-refugees clearly indicates the unmet demand for higher education in refugee contexts (UNHCR, 2019d). Furthermore, in the face of documented aspirations among refugee populations, knowledge and research related to higher education in refugee studies continue to be limited.

As the biggest refugee host country since 2015, Turkey has faced enormous challenges with the arrival of millions of displaced people in a relatively short period. The total number of Syrians currently under the country’s temporary protection scheme has reached 3.6 million. This figure does not take account of unregistered people nor the 110,000 who have been naturalized (Mülteci, 2020). A high proportion of this population (more than 1.6 million) is registered Syrian children under 18. Almost half a million, however, are youths aged 19-25

who are considered as university age (DGMM, 2020). Taking into consideration the relatively young Syrian population, although provision for education has long been among the priorities of the Turkish Government, meeting the demand of ever-increasing numbers has, and still does, weigh heavy on the government.

Thanks to favorable legislation and unprecedented efforts, enrolment rates in basic education reached 63%, with a total number of 684,919 Syrian students registered for the 2019-2020 academic year. While enrolment rates in primary (89%) and secondary (70%) levels are considered to be acceptable, attendance rates after secondary school continue to be very low at only 33% (MEB, 2020). Barriers preventing access to higher education, financial ambiguity, and concerns over the quality and acceptability of the education are contributory factors in the low enrolment rates in higher levels of basic education.

As an educational continuum, access to higher education continues to be a problematic policy area where further research is necessary for evidence-based sustainable policy making, implementation and assessment. The number of Syrian students under temporary protection and enrolled at Turkish HEIs (HEIs) for the 2018-19 academic year reached 27,606 or 25%, which makes them the largest group of international students (YÖK, 2020b). This number also corresponds to an estimated 5% of the Syrian university aged population, which is above the world average of 3%. In 2019, the world average, which stood at 1% after five consecutive years, witnessed a rapid increase reaching 3%. This change is partially attributed to the Turkish case along with other good practices (UNHCR, 2019d, pp. 18-19, 52). The number is still very low compared with a world average of 37% for non-refugee students, and requires further attention and improvement. Albeit the remarkable increase, the vast majority of university-age eligible Syrians are still unable to access higher education in Turkey. Moreover, considering the opportunities higher education holds for Syrian youth, access to higher education alone is not enough for meaningful participation and success. So far, little is known about Syrian students, their access, education trajectories and participation in Turkey's HEIs.

With this background, the WESREF-IU project and this book evaluates Turkey's higher education system, policies and practices in responding to Syrian refugees' educational needs. In that regard, the book first provides a literature review on refugees' access to and participation in higher education globally and within the context of host country policies and practices in order to capture general trends. We aim to review the existing body of scholarship

and literature in order to identify key prominent themes and synthesize the emerging field accordingly. The literature review reveals that higher education for refugees is a recent but growing line of study. While the research is mainly focused on the issues and challenges over access, concerns over participation; diversity of refugee learning needs; their intersectionality; support mechanisms; and responses of higher education systems and institutions from different perspectives and disciplines are among the emerging themes identified. The literature reviews also identified main conceptual and analytical frameworks that are used to analyze the findings of our fieldwork. Following this conceptual background underlying key higher education policy developments and themes underpinning the analysis, we present the findings of the fieldwork conducted in three different HEIs in Turkey within the scope of the project.

The research aims to provide an evidence-based overall review of Syrian students' access to and participation in the Turkish higher education system with an intention to contribute to the current literature and discussion on refugees' integration in higher education in the region and beyond. We have sought to answer how the Turkish higher education system and institutions are addressing the challenge of improving access and participation of Syrian students and researchers in this era of massive displacements. Accordingly, in the first section we provide an overview of the current situation of the Syrian population registered under the temporary protection scheme in Turkey with the latest demographic data. After presenting the research design and methodology, the report maps the legislative, regulatory and institutional framework for Syrian students' access to higher education in Turkey through document analysis, statistical data and fieldwork, which is conducted at İstanbul, Gaziantep and Karabük Universities. In addition to providing a needs analysis based on interviews and focus group discussions with Syrian students in order to have a better knowledge and understanding, the study analyzes how three selected cases have responded to this rising demand while identifying good practices and shortcomings. The findings of the research emphasize the benefits of improved legislative and regulatory framework in order to provide Syrian youths with access to higher education in Turkey; while revealing the different ways of its implementation at institutional level depending on specific contexts, policies and strategies in order to accommodate the rising demand and participation.

The chapter summarizes the findings of the research along with identified and recommended institutional good practices, which can be transferred to other institutions and

countries. The results of the needs analysis and cross-case analysis reveal additional support for Syrian students and researchers to access and participate in higher education is required. Although there are common, cross-cutting themes such as language and academic support; lack of social interaction with local students; financial problems; gender imbalance; their importance varies in the three cases due to their institutional context and specific conditions. This degree of differentiation also exposes the need for greater understanding and more customer-tailored support programs rather than overall approaches in addressing these diverse challenges. It is against this backdrop that the following chapter continues with a presentation of the evaluation and findings of the pilot support programs specifically tailored for prospective and current Syrian students and researchers along with awareness raising, knowledge sharing and dialogue events held at Istanbul University within the scope of the project. These programs include application and admission support, orientation and preparation programs, language support for academic writing and communication. While providing a more detailed understanding of the needs of students and researchers in higher education, the pilot programs and evaluations also contributed to our general knowledge on the use of support mechanisms among students and their strategies and experiences of navigating the higher education system. In that regard, the findings aim to contribute to the debates concerning the provision of support services for refugee students in HEIs in order to meet different needs of students and to provide inclusive and responsive environments. Both the research and pilot programs serve as reference points to discuss the good practices, challenges and potential of higher education in refugee contexts.

Within that framework, in addition to bringing together the expertise and experience of different HEIs, identifying good practices in the field, sharing knowledge and establishing coordination among key stakeholders are among the objectives of this project. As acknowledged in the literature review, there are a variety of initiatives and programs established by different academic communities, civil society organizations, government bodies with regional and international organizations to support refugee integration into higher education. These fragmented but broad multi-level and multi-actor networks provide many opportunities but require good coordination and cooperation. In that regard, placing HEIs as focal points of coordination among ongoing efforts and networks for supporting refugees in accessing and participating in higher education is found to be very fruitful. Finally, beyond documenting the distinct educational needs of students and scholars at institutional level, the project aims to contribute to policy making and implementation for increased refugee participation in Turkish HEIs and wider society. Based on the results of the research and pilot

programs, the book therefore concludes with a series of recommendations for improving access to and participation in higher education for refugees in the region.

As a final word, although HEIs cannot solve all the issues facing refugees, they can certainly contribute to increasing their participation in higher education by improving institutional structures, policy, capacity and awareness. Considering the relationship between higher education and society, HEIs can and have played an important role in responding to new dynamics and demands while taking up new societal responsibilities as venues of communication, coordination and integration, and acting as agents of change in the society.

