

The Role of Higher Education in Refugee Integration: The Case of Syrians in Turkey

Begüm Dereli

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Director de la tesi: John Rossman Bertholf Palmer

DEPARTEMENT DE CIÈNCIES POLITIQUES I SOCIALS



To the memory of my grandfather Teyfik Dereli who was a migrant child once

Acknowledgment

As a student when I was walking through the South Campus of Boğaziçi University, I was fascinated by the view of Bosphorus, which always amazed me with the beauty of Istanbul. I was an undergraduate student with lots of dreams and hopes. But I have never imagined myself doing a PhD and writing this acknowledgment as a part of my thesis one day. I guess this journey started with my master fieldwork, where I realized that I enjoy conducting research in the field. It was an outstanding experience in my life. It was not only about creating knowledge and contributing to the academic literature, but also about using every single moment to learn something new, witnessing different lives, and seeing the world from their windows. I felt I was in the right place. My master supervisor Evren Yalaz was the first person who believed in me and my skills. She encouraged me to see what I could do.

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Abstract

This thesis is a compilation of three articles that aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of higher education in refugees' integration by focusing on urban refugees' experiences who settled in a neighboring country, studying the case of Syrian university students in Turkey. The research is based on a qualitative case study conducted during the fall of 2019 in Gaziantep, a Turkish city on the Syrian border that hosts almost half a million Syrian refugees. This qualitative analysis of the refugee experiences aims to tackle a new perspective of their integration process by providing new insights into the refugee youths' diverse experiences. Each article contributes to the academic literature from a different perspective. The first article uses the capability approach as a framework to explore the relationship between gender and their experiences focusing on their decision-making process while accessing higher education, the gendered nature of these experiences, and their aspirations after graduation. The second article aims to understand the factors that form refugees' sense of belonging and the degree to which the contextualized experiences of refugees influence their sense of belonging in the university. And the third article contributes to the literature on the acquisition of Turkish citizenship by shedding light on the perspective of highly educated young refugees.

Resum

Aquesta tesis està formada per tres articles i té l'objectiu de contribuir a la comprensió del rol que l'educació superior juga en la integració dels refugiats. Per a fer-ho, es centra en l'experiència de joves refugiats ubicats en entorns urbans d'un país veí; concretament, estudia el cas dels refugiats sirians a Turquia. La tesis es basa en un cas d'estudi qualitatiu dut a terme durant la tardor de 2019 a Gazantep, ciutat turca a la frontera amb Síria que acull vora mig milió de refugiats sirians. L'anàlisi qualitatiu de les experiències dels refugiats té com a objectiu aportar una nova perspectiva en el seu procés d'integració proporcionant noves dades sobre les diverses experiències dels joves refugiats sirians. Cada article contribueix al debat acadèmic des d'un angle diferent. El primer article utilitza la teoria de les capacitats (*capability approach*) per a explorar la relació entre el gènere i les experiències dels joves refugiats, centrant-se en el procés de presa de decisions previ a l'entrada al món universitari, en la seva experiència

universitària i en les seves aspiracions futures. El segon article estudia els factors que formen el sentiment de pertinença dels refugiats i el grau en que les seves experiències contextualitzades influencien el seu sentiment de pertinença a la universitat. El tercer article analitza l'experiència d'adquisició de la ciudadania turca per part de joves refugiats altament qualificats.

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1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

‘Studying gives my future back to me. I did not have any hope about my future, now I have a future.’ (23 year-old male, conducted in 2018)

Formal schooling gives young refugees a belief in a ‘better future’ (Clark-Kazak 2011), as the above words of a 23-year-old Syrian student would attest. However, only a very small percentage of the university-aged refugee population worldwide are able to access higher education: 3 percent compared with the 37 percent enrollment rate of global youth overall (UNHCR, 2019a).

The globalized world is currently facing its highest level of forced displacement on record (UNHCR 2019b). Approximately every three seconds one person is forcibly displaced as a result of conflict or persecution (UNHCR, 2019b). While people find themselves as displaced across borders as refugees unexpectedly, the increasing refugee flows over the past years have brought challenges for the host countries as well, mainly countries neighboring conflict zones, and they are not well-equipped to meet the needs of the newcomers. Since 2011, 6.6 million Syrians have sought safety abroad. The Syrian civil war has created the largest humanitarian crisis of our time, making Syria the world’s top refugee source country, and Turkey the world’s top refugee hosting country (UNHCR, 2020).

Since the first arrivals of Syrians, Turkey has applied an open-door policy and the non-refoulement principle; however, Turkey’s policy and discourse have been marked and shaped by temporariness, treating Syrians as ‘guests’ from the beginning (Yıldız and Uzgören 2016; Kirişçi 2014; İçduygu 2015). While the hope of returning to their home country has been fading fast for displaced Syrians, their arrival and protracted stay has led to changes in the Turkish regulation regarding foreigners, temporary protection, and integration. As resettlement or voluntary return are not the prevailing options, local integration has taken on increased importance. There are now over 3.6 million Syrians, mostly children and youth, living in Turkey (DGMM, 2021).

The high proportion of children and youth and their protracted situation makes education one of the key elements for protection, integration, and empowerment in Turkey. Education explicitly offers capabilities and competencies to promote future careers, allowing individuals to become more constructive and engaged members of society, and schools are seen as the most important place of interaction for refugee children with members of the host communities, forming connections that facilitate integration (Ager and Strang 2008). Studies show that higher education remains a low priority that comes after basic needs in a refugee situation (Dryden-Peterson 2012; Zeus 2011). Higher education gives refugees more power to make decisions about their lives, and expand their possibilities and options (Gateley 2015; 2014; Zeus 2011; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). According to Zeus (2011), higher education is critical for shifting the paradigm of the refugee from ‘passive victim’ to ‘individual agent’ who does not need any assistance to sustain her/his life; and higher education does not only make refugees self-sufficient and give agency back to their lives, but also accelerates adaption to new surroundings, and facilitates integration into host communities.

Even though the proportion of refugees in higher education increases yearly, it is still far behind the worldwide attendance rate for this age group (UNHCR 2019a). In Turkey, in the 2019-2020 academic year, 37,236 Syrian nationals enrolled in 180 Turkish higher education institutions, 120 public, and 60 private ones (Turkish Council of Higher Education 2020). The number represents, slightly more than 4 percent of the Syrian population between 19 and 29 years old in Turkey. Even though the number of Syrians attending universities in Turkey increases, still it is far behind the pre-war situation (Buckner and Saba 2010).

The refugee experience is a fluid, ongoing and productive process of negotiation between different social and cultural value systems (Hatoss and Huijser 2010). Indeed, the experiences of young adults are not the same as that of older adult refugees, but these experiences are often overlooked in studies (Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero 2018). Considering the high proportion of youth among the Syrian population in Turkey, and their low participation rate in Turkish higher education despite supportive policies, greater attention to Syrian integration through higher education is needed.

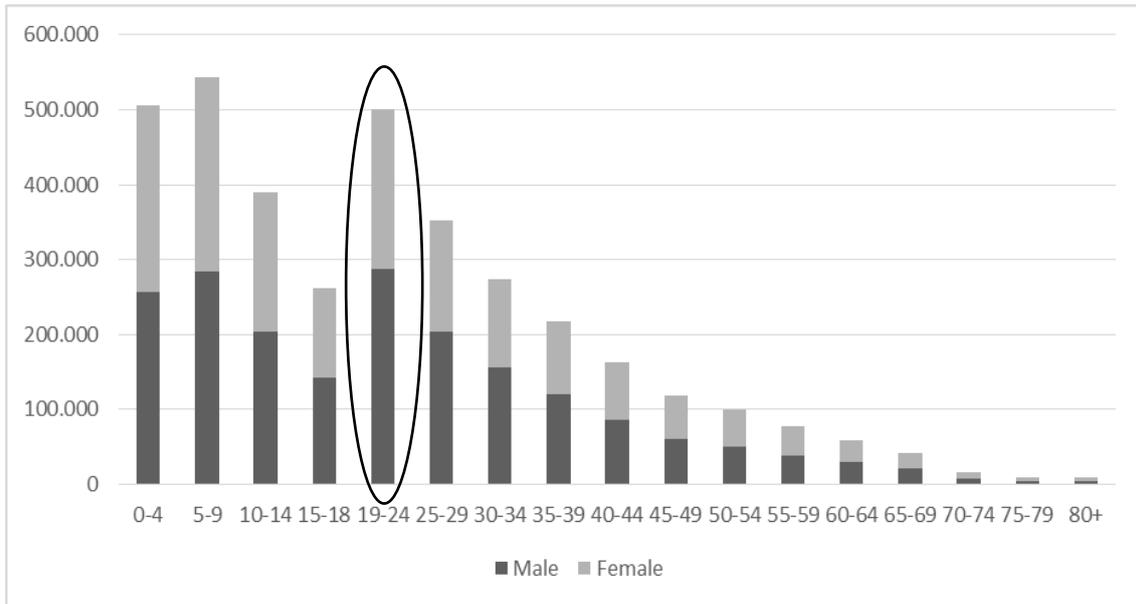
The research in this dissertation contributes to the general discussion of refugee integration, specifically integration of refugees through higher education by exploring

as a case study of Syrians in Turkey. Syrian youth who can access tertiary level education in Turkey are at the center of this thesis to understand their integration process and the role of higher education in it, based on different perspectives and experiences.

1.2. The Aim of the Research

The starting point of the thesis is the research gap in studies addressing the diverse experiences refugee/migrant youth (Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero 2018; Valentine, Sporton, and Nielsen 2009)– specifically- through education (Oikonomidou 2007) and the role of higher education through their integration process in a neighboring host country with gendered dimensions (Jack 2012). While research on refugee students in higher education concentrates on refugees (re)settling in the global North (see Le Espiritu 2001; Pacheco 2011; Mosselson 2007; Sirriyeh 2010; Hatoss and Huijser 2010), there are less studies that focus on refugees in other regions of the world or in protracted refugee circumstances (Ramsay and Baker 2019). The studies in the Turkish context generally investigate Turkey’s higher education policies for refugee youths by examining their experiences (Arar et al. 2020), especially challenges and opportunities they faced in accessing education (Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Erdoğan 2017; Yıldız 2019). Fincham (2020) also suggested there are research gaps in regard to refugees' experiences accessing higher education facilities, their aspirations, and experiences within higher education. Some gender sensitive studies specifically focus on the topic (Fincham 2020), but the majority only put the perspective of one gender in focus (Ensor 2014; Jack 2012; Mosselson 2007). This thesis tries to respond to the gap of gender sensitive research on the topic and covers all stages of the higher education experiences from different perspectives. The research aims to answer the questions addressing various stages of the integration process of Syrian refugees in Turkey through higher education, in order to understand the role of higher education in the framework of the integration process into a host society.

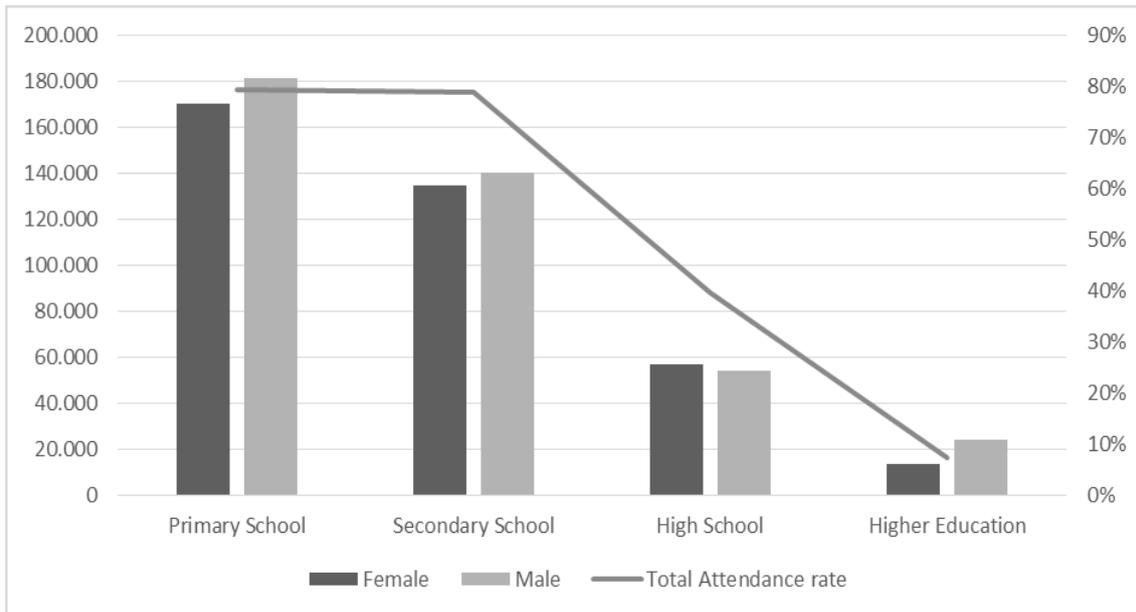
Figure 1: Syrians under TP in Turkey, by Gender and Age



Source: Directorate General of Migration Management, Statistics, 2020. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

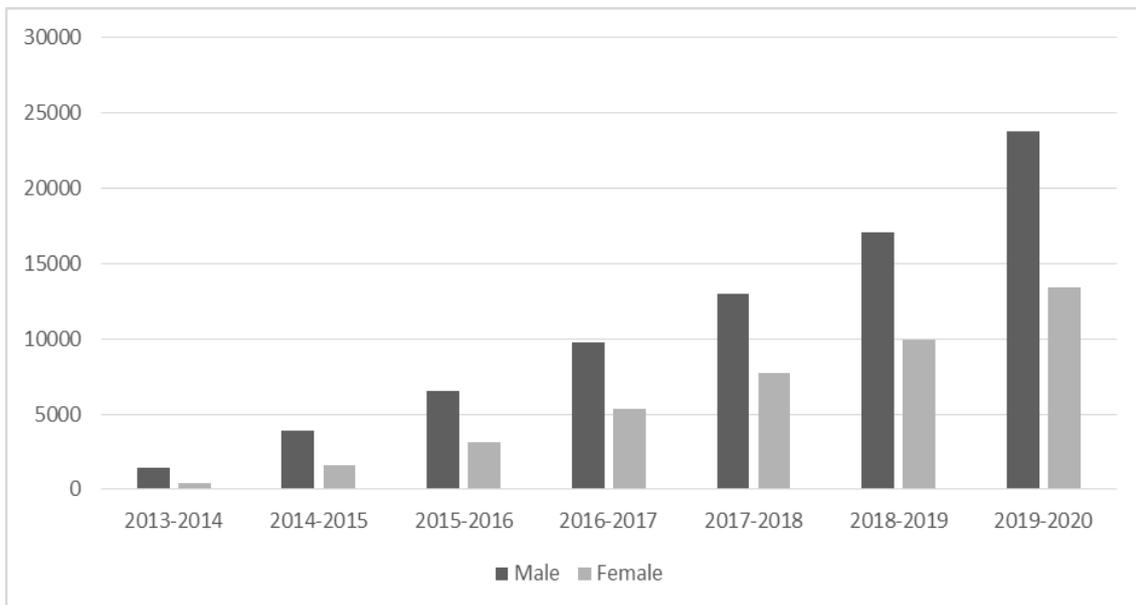
Above all, taking into consideration the large and young Syrian population in Turkey - the average age is 22.6 (Mülteciler, 2020) - creating space to explore the experiences of these young people is important. In the uncertain situation, the young people represent the chance for a more sustainable livelihood for their families; and their integration and social cohesion are essential for the stability and security for both their home and their host countries (TBMM, 2018). Yet, there are more specific reasons to focus on this topic. First of all, every year the participation of Syrian Nationals in higher education is increasing, in the 2019-2020 academic year around 4 percent of the Syrian young population in Turkey attended tertiary education; of which almost two-thirds are male and only one third are female (Turkish Council of Higher Education 2020). In other education levels, the gaps in attendance rates between genders are less significant, however, when they reach higher education, the gap is widened with a much lower rate for females. Moreover, the gap has remained over the years. Comparing to the pre-war enrolment rate in Syria which was 20 percent with no significant difference in the educational achievement and enrolment rate between males and females (Buckner and Saba 2010), the university enrolment rate of Syrian students in Turkey is far behind the pre-war situation and the gap between male and female students' attendance rates is even wider.

Figure 2: Syrian students' attendance in Turkish education system by education levels, by gender



Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education- Directorate General for Lifelong Learning, 2020 & Council of Higher Education Council, 2020

Figure 3: Female & Male Syrian University Students in Turkey



Source: Council of Higher Education Council, 2020. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

Secondly, one of the myths that creates a negative discourse about Syrians among the locals in Turkey is ‘Syrians enter university without exams’ while Turkish students have to pass through a hard examination process (Erdoğan 2020). Erdoğan, (2020) shows that locals have a better attitude towards young, well-educated Syrians, and Keleş et al. (2016) suggest locals with higher education in Turkey have a tendency

to show less prejudice toward Syrians and to value cultural diversity more. However, some studies mention that Syrians face prejudice and some tension with local students on campus (Ertong Attar and Küçükşen 2019; Arar et al. 2020). Universities as spaces allowing students to navigate in wider communities (Lefever 2012), can be tolerant and diverse or discriminatory and exclusionary (Hopkins 2011). Morrice (2013) emphasizes that the meaning of being a refugee in higher education might be related to both belonging and exclusion depending on their diverse experiences. These discourses make one wonder about the impact of being a ‘university student’ on their everyday practices in the host society, and how they differentiate their experiences within the campus from outside the campus, and how they navigate between belonging and exclusion in the campus space.

Lastly, the exceptional citizenship option in Turkish Citizenship Law has opened the door to citizenship for Syrians, who live under temporary protection, have either economic or cultural capital (Şimşek 2018). Thus, receiving higher education in Turkish universities might open the pathway to citizenship for Syrians. The aim of providing citizenship to those with cultural capital is to make highly educated Syrians stay in Turkey, instead of moving to Europe (TBMM, 2018). The population of this study is one of the groups targeted by the policy about giving Turkish citizenship. The previous studies claim that many Syrians consider settling down in Turkey, rather than moving to a European country (Müller-Funk 2019; Rottmann 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Düvell 2019; Kaya 2017; Yıldız and Uzgören 2016). However, these studies focus on the general population of Syrians, not emphasizing the population who can obtain citizenship. For this reason, it brings attention to their meanings of citizenship, and whether or not having Turkish citizenship affects their future decision of staying in Turkey or moving on to a third country.

To sum up, three dimensions of the refugees’ experiences- which are the gendered nature of their experiences, the impact of being a ‘university student’ on their everyday practices, and the meaning of citizenship- are explored in three different articles.

1.3. Qualitative Case Study and Research Context

The dissertation relies on a qualitative case study approach, closely examining data within a specific context. It takes a refugee-centered approach that focuses on the refugee experiences through higher education to tackle a new perspective of their integration processes. The objective is not to generalize the findings, but to provide an insight into the diverse experiences of Syrian refugees studying in higher education.

1.3.1. Preliminary interviews

Before starting the main fieldwork of this thesis and going more in-depth with a case study, I conducted interviews with 25 Syrian refugees studying/studied in different Turkish universities of ten provinces and from various departments to picture the Syrian students' integration experiences before, during, and after accessing Turkish higher education. The interviews were conducted, face-to-face and via video-calls during the first half of 2018. The objective of this preliminary qualitative research is to understand the most significant challenges Syrian refugees face through their integration into higher education and the most noteworthy positive sides of being a university student in Turkey. The interviews were important to give a general picture of Syrians' experiences throughout the university entrance and studying process; some of the main points coming out from these interviews defined the questions of this thesis, and in the light of them the fieldwork location was decided.

1.3.2. Case study: Syrian students in Gaziantep

This case study approach enables me to closely examine the data within a specific context, allowing the exploration and understanding of complex issues (Zainal 2007). The objective of this study is to understand the transition period of entering higher education for Syrian refugee students in Turkey, the role of higher education in their integration; how they have experienced the process, and the differences in their experiences related to their gender identities in the specific context. The city of Gaziantep was chosen as the location of the case study for the thesis.

The main reasons for choosing Gaziantep for the fieldwork activities are (1) the high number of Syrian citizens (22% of the city population), (2) the highest number of Syrian students studying in the city university (Gaziantep University) in Turkey, and (3)

the characteristics of the city university. I conducted the fieldwork activities in Gaziantep, Turkey, during the fall of 2019. The period was critical for this study because shortly afterward the face-to-face education and access to the campus spaces have started to be limited or restricted because of the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances.

Gaziantep is located in the western part of the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey, next to the Syrian border. Because of its geographical proximity, Gaziantep has become one of the main transit and destination towns for Syrian refugees. In 2021, 449,677 Syrians under temporary protection live in Gaziantep, the city hosts the second biggest Syrian population in Turkey after Istanbul, but with a higher percentage regarding its local population (DGMM, 2021). In Gaziantep one out of five people is from Syria; almost 90 percent of the Syrian population in the city comes from Aleppo, a city with historical ties to Gaziantep during the Ottoman times (Gültekin 2018). The case of Gaziantep is attention-gathering not only because of the high Syrian population but also because of the cultural, geographical, and historical proximity to Syria. In addition to the Syrian newcomers, Gaziantep has been attracting internal migrants especially from the region due to job opportunities, as it is one of the major industrial cities of Turkey, and the most important one in the Southeastern Region (Geniş, 2011).

According to official data (Turkish Council of Higher Education 2020) in the 2019-2020 academic year, 2,147 Syrians studied at the Gaziantep University. However, official numbers do not take into account Syrian students enrolled in the Arabic programs of the university, Syrian students studying in Gaziantep University campuses located in Syria, and Syrian students who have acquired Turkish citizenship. Adding these students, the total number rises to 3,139 (Gültekin, et al. 2019). Compared to other universities from different regions of Turkey, due to their knowledge of the Syrian education system, which is a product of geographical proximity and historical links, Gaziantep University is identified as well-equipped to cope with the increasing demand and need caused by the system's complexity, and the university has developed an 'inclusive and cooperative' implementation scheme (Ateşok, Komsuoğlu-Çıtıptıoğlu, and Yürür 2020).

1.3.3. Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings of participants' everyday lives by exploring their behavior, roles, feelings, and attitudes (Adler and Clark 2014). To give the process of interviews a more flexible approach, interviews were focused on topics rather than on specific questions. The structured part of the interview was divided into five main topics: (1) demographic and background questions; (2) education histories of participants in Syria and in Turkey; (3) personal experiences in the university space; (4) personal experiences in their daily lives; and (5) their future prospects. To ensure the cultural awareness of the study, both the preparation of the questionnaire and the planning of the fieldwork were conducted with the collaboration of people from the target group.

Despite the lower attendance rate of female Syrians in higher education, in the interviews, a balance regarding gender was tried to be achieved. Therefore, while giving space to young people's voices, it is essential to give space to young women to reveal their experiences (Reinharz 1992). The target group of the research is comprised of Syrian youths between 18 and 30 years of age who arrived in Turkey seeking refuge more than one year before the interview and who, at the moment of the interview were pursuing tertiary education in a public university. Throughout the thesis, 'youth' and 'young people' are used interchangeably to define university-aged population, including graduates and postgraduates.

The participants were chosen through non-random snowball sampling; purposive sampling was used to interview Syrian refugees who belong to the target group. To increase the diversity within the target group, different channels were used to reach them. Two participants are postgraduate students above 30 years old, they were not excluded from the study in order not to overlook the particular dimensions of their experiences as older students. The average age of the participants, excluding these two cases, is 23.8, and the average years living in Turkey is 5.5. All of the participants arrived in Turkey between 2011 and 2016.

49 interviews (26 male, 23 female participants) were conducted with Syrian students. I concluded that saturation point had been reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967) when it appeared that new information was not coming from new interviews. In addition

to these interviews with the main actors, 9 interviews were conducted with university and scholarship program staff members who have been closely interacting with Syrian students.

Ten interviews were taped. Right after the interviews the voice records were transcribed, and the records deleted; notes were taken during the other interviews. During the preliminary interviews, I realized that whenever voice recording stopped, the participants talked much more comfortably, and provided longer answers. Voice records were only used when participants openly showed their willingness to be recorded, in the other cases, voice recording was not proposed in order not to create any mistrust.

Interviews were conducted in Turkish (36) and English (11), also in Arabic (2) with the help of translator, the participants chose the language of the interview. 26 of them enrolled in programs with Turkish as the instruction language, 17 studied in English, and 6 in Arabic. Most participants (33) identified themselves as Arabic, the others identified themselves as Turkmen, Kurdish or Palestinian.

Eight of them already held a bachelor's degree in Syria, and four were studying in the university when their study was interrupted because of the war. 34 participants studied high school in Syria, but among them, six could not get their diplomas because the conflict started before they finished. 15 of the interviewees studied high school in Turkey. Interviewees started university between the academic years 2013-2014 and 2019-2020. 40 participants were studying undergraduate programs, while 9 of them were in postgraduate programs. Among these post-graduate students, 4 of them held their previous degrees from Gaziantep University. At the time of the interviews eight declared their marital status as married, the rest were single.

1.3.4. Participant observation

In addition to the interviews, participant observation in the city, the neighborhood, and especially inside the university campus was used to enhance the interpretation of the collected data. Participant observation provides an opportunity to interact with the students in their everyday lives in order to investigate complex and diverse experiences (Jorgensen 2015). The observation of their everyday life gives a deeper understanding of the gendered and belonging dimensions of their experiences. During the fieldwork period, I have been in the campus as a visiting researcher and I stayed in a student

residence, thanks to which I could access campus areas – including classes, conferences, faculties, cafes, dining hall, library, bookstore, and green areas. Moreover, participant observation allowed me to enrich my understanding of the context through informal talks with local, international, and Syrian university students at the campus.

1.3.5. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed on a daily bases during the fieldwork, and the initial stage of data analyzing started during that period to decide if the saturation point was reached. I analyzed the materials using the manual coding, following the principles of inductive analysis which refers to methods that mainly use comprehensive readings of raw data to infer patterns, ideas, or a model through a researcher's interpretations of the raw data (Thomas 2006). After the fieldwork, the core meanings through the data were defined to identify the codes, later categories and themes most relevant to the research objective came out from the codes. In this study the theories emerged from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

1.3.6. Ethical considerations

Prior to starting field work I applied for ethical approval from UPF's Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP-UPF)¹ and took the permission for the research from the rectorate of Gaziantep University. The participants were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study, their role, the full anonymity they would receive and the voluntary nature of their participation. Interviews were conducted only based on informed consent and personal information was omitted from research records for anonymization. Records are securely stored in encrypted folders.

1.4. Contextual Framework

1.4.1. Syrian refugees in Turkey

Throughout the dissertation 'refugee' is used to define the Syrians in Turkey, but it is important to mention that they do not have the formal status of 'refugees' in Turkey.

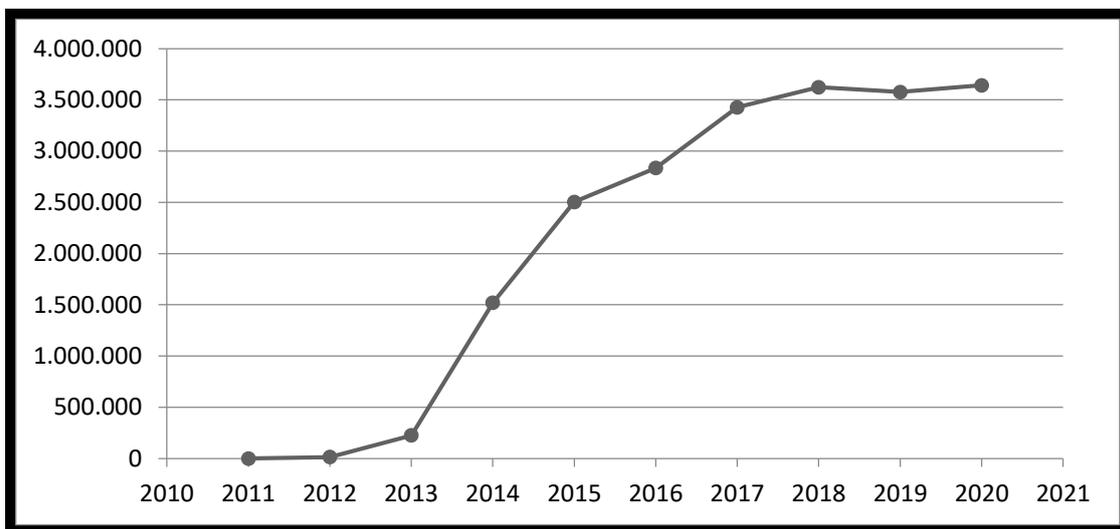
¹ The Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra Approval no: 126, 27.09.2019.

Rather, they are under Turkey’s Temporary Protection regime. A refugee is defined by the 1951 UN Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as:

A person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

Turkey became a party of the Geneva Convention as one of the drafters and first signatories but with the geographic reservation; applying the definition only to people coming from European countries. In other words, Syrians are neither refugees nor asylum seekers under Turkish national law; rather, they have special status. Turkey has been known as a country of emigration for decades due to its guest workers, skilled migrants, and refugees; but since the beginning of 2000 the profile of Turkey has changed from an emigration or transit country to a destination country (Kirişçi 2003), the change especially became dramatic after particularly the presence of Syrian refugees. The legal framework has been revised and special regulations aiming to provide protection and rights to the Syrian displaced population have become an urgent need.

Figure 4: Number of Syrians under Temporary Protection in Turkey

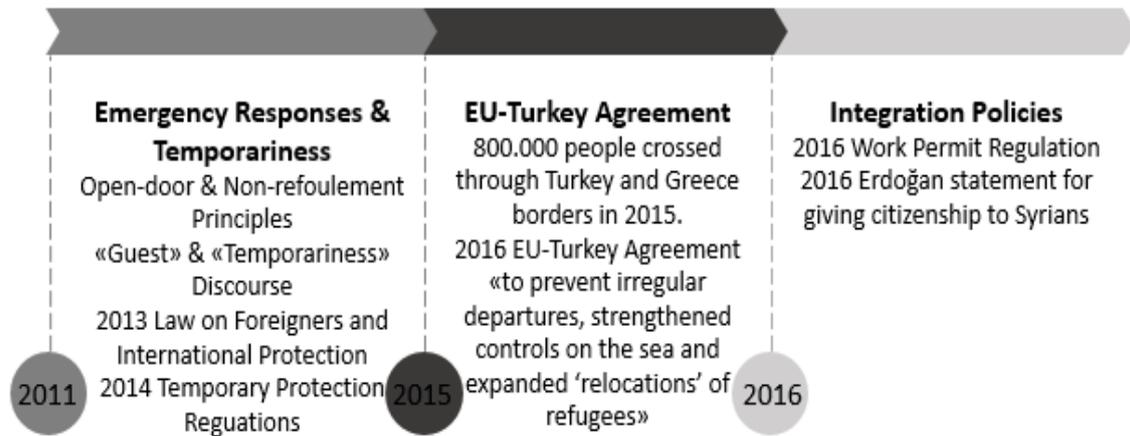


Source: Directorate General of Migration Management, Statistics, 2020. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

The timeline of the legislative process can be divided into three periods regarding the trends in Syrian refugee flows (İçduygu and Şimşek 2016). The first

period has been between 2011, the first flow of Syrians, and 2015 when the movement reached its highest level, the second period was highlighted by the EU-Turkey Deal, and the third one can be named as the period of integration policies.

Figure 5: The timeline of the legislative process



Source: based on İçduygu and Şimşek (2016)

The first period is highlighted by the discourse of temporariness by representing Syrians as guests. As their prolonged stay could not be foreseen; the government responses remained limited to the emergency level. After the first years, Turkey started to focus on making several regulations aiming to ensure that foreigners, especially Syrians, can have access to basic rights and services. The ratification of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) on 4 April 2013 was seen as a major and the first step in Turkey's migration management by intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, and academicians, who have been profoundly involved in its drafting process (Açıkgöz and Ariner 2014). The purpose of this Law (LFIP, 2013) is defined as follows:

...to regulate the principles and procedures with regard to foreigners' entry into, stay in and exit from Turkey, and the scope and implementation of the protection to be provided for foreigners who seek protection...

And with this Law, the Directorate General of Migration Management was established under the Ministry of Interior. In the following year, Temporary Protection Regulation was introduced as a response to the Syrian mass influx in order to exclude the problems caused by geographic limitations and to strengthen the non-refoulement principle (Ineli-Ciger 2014). Syrians who registered in Turkey have started to be under

temporary protection, in other words, Syrians are neither refugees nor asylum seekers under Turkish national law, but have a special status (Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban 2018). The regulation on temporary protection defines the scope of “temporary protection” (Temporary Protection Regulation 2014) which broadly covers access rights; access to health, access to education, access to social assistance, and access to the labor market, social assistance, interpretation, and similar services.

The second period was marked by the EU-Turkey Statement. During that period thousands of people have suffered at European borders and some of them lost their lives while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016). In 2015, over 800,000 people, the majority of them Syrian nationals, crossed to Greece from Turkey². As of 2015, Turkey started to implement visa restrictions for Syrians entering the country. On 18 March 2016, the European Union made a deal with Turkey to control, deter and return irregular arrivals (EC 2016). According to the statement, Turkey committed to increasing its efforts to prevent irregular migration flows and to strengthen controls on the sea and the land borders (EC 2019).

The third period of the legislative process can be named as the period of the integration policies (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016) when refugee integration in Turkey has started to be at the center of policy and social debates (Huddleston and Tanczos 2017). Work Permit Regulation for the beneficiaries of temporary protection (2016) regulated the labor market accession to prevent illegal labor force. Even though there are some restrictions for Syrians on the work permit regulation, such as the percentage of Syrian workers have to be maximum 10 percent of the total number of employees in a workplace, it opened the legal path for them to be able to work, becoming an important step towards their integration into Turkey (WPR, 2016). According to the latest statistics of the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Security, in 2019, 63,789 Syrians (59,406 male, 4,383 female) had a work permit in Turkey³. On the other hand, the study of ILO (2020) shows that, as of 2017, 930,000 Syrians were part of the labor force out of 2 million working age Syrians. Thus, it reveals that even though legal framework provides Syrian access to the labor market with work permit, they work largely

² UNHCR: ‘Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015’, 30 December 2015. By Jonathan Clayton/Hereward Holland. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html> (accessed April 2021)

³ From Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services’s recent statistics on work permits for foreigners, see: <https://www.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/istatistikler/calisma-hayati-istatistikleri/resmi-istatistik-programi/yabancilarin-calisma-izinleri/> (accessed April 2021)

informally. Moreover, during this period, some of the temporary shelter centers (camps) were closed, and the temporary education centers were started to be dismissed with the aim of integrating Syrian children into Turkish education system.

Their temporary protection status does not provide them the international framework of refugee rights or open the way to the state system based on citizenship rights; the precarity of status, together with their connection to other types of precarity, places them in vulnerable positions and places them in ambiguous circumstances in terms of security and rights, daily life, and mobility (Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban 2018; Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). In 2016 President Erdoğan announced that some Syrians would be granted Turkish citizenship (Hürriyet, 2016); it was a very important step because offering Turkish citizenship to Syrians confirms that some of them will stay in Turkey for long term or even permanently (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). However, the priority is given to the ones who have cultural and economic capital (Pace and Şimşek 2019). Even though their ad-hoc status does not lead to a citizenship right, some Syrians are naturalized under the article of exceptional citizenship of the Turkish Citizenship Law (2009). According to the Article-12 (exceptions in acquiring Turkish citizenship) of this Law (2009) ‘those persons who bring into Turkey industrial facilities or have rendered or believed to render an outstanding service in the social or economic arena or in the fields of science, technology, sports, culture or arts’ can acquire the citizenship.

Considering the sociological reality that millions of Syrians would stay permanently in Turkey (Erdoğan 2017) and given the high percentage of young Syrians among the Syrian population in Turkey, focusing on the integration experiences of the young people is essential, and indeed, education becomes fundamental for their integration.

1.4.2. Syrians’ Integration to Turkish Higher Education

Article 28 of the Temporary Protection Regulation declares that people under temporary protection have the right to access pre-school, elementary and secondary education, higher education, language education, vocational courses, skills training, and hobby courses addressing all age groups (TPR 2014).

In Turkey, refugees are treated similar to any international students regarding university admission applications. Syrian refugees wishing to enrol in a Turkish university need to submit their identity card, a proof of having completed high school, the results of the Foreign Student's Examination (YOS) taken by the university in which they want to enrol and a proof of language proficiency depending on the instruction language of the program where they are applying. If they do not have proficiency in the instruction language, they can access language courses during the first year. Each university defines its own criteria for each department, and they have their own examination process. If Syrians fulfil the requirements, which are the same for all international students, they can apply for their university of choice.

Since 2011, when the first Syrian groups entered Turkey, new regulations started to be implemented due to the increasing number of young Syrians who wished to enter higher education. For the 2012-2013 academic year, Council of Higher Education Council (CoHE) decided to accept Syrians who could not present their documents as guest students in seven selected Turkish universities⁴ located next to the Syrian border. The guest student status keeps them on the education system but does not let them get a diploma after their studies. If, afterwards, they can provide their missing documents, they can get their diploma. In 2014, enrolment as special students was extended to all universities to facilitate their accession to higher education, but the number of students who have this status is very few compared to the overall number (Yıldız 2019; Yürür et al, 2018). The regulation on transfer students have also changed in the interests of students who had to interrupt their education due to conflicts in their country of origin⁵.

Since the 2013-2014 academic year, taking into consideration the economic hardship of Syrians, Syrians have been exempted from paying tuition fees, in contrast to the rest of international students and there are many scholarship opportunities specifically targeting Syrian students (such as DAFI, Türkiye Bursları, Spark, and university-based ones). With the aim of eliminating the language barrier for the Syrian students, it was decided to open new programs with Arabic and English as the

⁴ Gaziantep University, Kilis 7 Aralık University, Harran University, Mustafa Kemal University, Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, Çukurova University, Mersin University

⁵ <https://www.yok.gov.tr/ogrenci/ek-madde-2-uyarinca-misir-ve-suriyeden-yapilabilecek-yatay-gecis-islemlerine-iliskin-esaslar>

instruction language⁶. For instance, currently the Arabic Program of Gaziantep University accepts students for various departments.

Syrians' participation into higher education in Turkey creates debates among locals and in the media. A belief among the locals in Turkey that 'Syrians enter university without exams' creates negative attitudes towards Syrian (Erdoğan 2020). Syrian university students emphasized this discourse as the main reason for the negative attitude coming from locals towards them (Sezgin and Yolcu, 2016). Turkish students think that the admission of a large number of Syrians to Turkish universities is unfair to them and that it will reduce their future job opportunities after graduation; they also argue that Syrians go through a considerably easier process to get in universities compared to Turkish citizens (Ergin 2016). Similar controversial discourses were brought out in other studies (Ertong Attar and Küçükşen 2019; Dereli 2018).

1.4.3. The preliminary study: Challenges and opportunities faced by Syrians to access higher education

The preliminary interviews – which consist of 25 semi-structured interviews- showed that education is an important step for the integration of refugees and for them to get a sense of normality back. Despite the problems caused by being a refugee, Syrian students studying in Turkish higher education look at the future with hope (Ertong Attar and Küçükşen 2019). Free higher education is always highlighted as the most positive Turkish policy aiming to facilitate the university attendance of refugee-like students (Dereli, 2018). In spite of the positive and supportive policies of the Turkish government to promote the integration of refugees into the Turkish education system - from primary school to higher education-, Syrians face several challenges through their educational experiences. Financial problems, lack of knowledge on the application process, difficulties on the preparation of the application documents, and academic barriers are the main challenges they face to enter to universities (Erdoğan 2017; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Hohberger 2018, 2017)

This preliminary study (see Dereli 2018) suggests that language is an important keystone in their integration to and through higher education because of the importance

⁶https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Yayinlar/Yayinlarimiz/turk_yuksekokretiminde_suriyeli_ogrenciler_uluslararası_konferansı_hatay.pdf

of getting a Turkish language certificate to enter university, learning academic Turkish to be successful in class, and having good Turkish communication skills to become friends with local peers. Thus, language is the main challenge. They overcome the language challenge in years, however, prejudice and the negative stereotypes that refugees experience in their daily interaction with locals are harder to overcome. They face negative discourses shaped by false facts and by the image of marginalized Syrians appearing in the media, negatively affecting their capability to create and to strengthen their social bridging with the host society. The higher education field is a space that provides great and diverse possibilities of interaction between newcomers and locals which, on one side, might accelerate their integration process; but, on the other side, might (re)construct their *otherness*.

1.5. Integration as an Umbrella Term

The main question of this thesis is: *'To what extent does being in the higher education field affect Syrians' integration process in Turkey?'*

Integration is used as an umbrella term while focusing on their higher education experiences to explore the effects of higher education fields on Syrians' integration process in Turkey. The point of origin for this dissertation is to contribute to the seldom asked questions about how individual migrants experience integration (Castles et al. 2002). When taking into consideration the high proportion of children and young refugees, education as a marker and means of integration has become more important. Education provides a location where refugees can increase their social connection and they can learn how to negotiate a new culture (Mosselson 2007). The bottom-up research allows us to see the perspective of the refugee youth on their integration process, and how they understand the integration through their everyday life in a host country, but especially in the specific university context which is one of the locations where real interactions between locals and refugees take place.

Integration is a vague and chaotic concept (Robinson 1998); it can be understood differently by different actors depending on their perspective, interests, assumptions, and values (Castles et al. 2002). Integration is a term that refers to the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that comes after immigration (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). Research does not give enough

attention to questions how migrants individually experience integration and in what society they integrate (Castles et al. 2002). Notwithstanding the different perceptions on integration, integration as a linear or as a multidimensional process; in the last decades, the integration process has been explored as a multidimensional process in which migrants, refugees, host society, and institutions have a role (Ager and Strang 2008; 2004).

Refugees' ability to integrate is strongly determined by policies that form their social and material contexts (Hynie 2018). However, the nation-state is centered as the principal actor of integration analysis rather than considering the aspirations and experiences of refugees; the concept of integration should be revised from 'methodological nationalism' to 'methodological individualism' (Şimşek 2018). It is important to understand how the experiences of refugees are affected by the integration policies and to understand their impact on them on the refugee-actor level (Lacroix 2013). This study adopts a refugee-centric, bottom-up approach that sees refugees as actors and agents, rather than the state-centric perspectives (Voutira and Doná 2007).

1.6. Research Questions: Three Dimensions of Syrian Students' Integration Experiences

The thesis consists of three articles, each of them focusing on a different perspective of the Syrian youths' experiences in Turkey through higher education. The first article uses the capability approach as a framework to explore the relationship between gender and the experiences of refugee students in the university; the second one uses the sense-of-belonging framework to explore experiences through higher education, and the third contributes to the literature on the acquisition of Turkish citizenship by illuminating the perspective of highly educated Syrian refugees. Each article aims to answer the main questions from a different dimension.

(1) The first article, 'Gendered Nature of Refugees' Experiences in Higher Education', explores the relationship between gender and the integration experiences of refugee youths in university, it aims to answer the following questions:

How do Syrian refugees access higher education with their resources?

To what extent does gender affect their decision-making process while entering higher education?

To what extent does gender define their experiences through higher education and their aspirations?

This article contributes to filling a gap in the literature on how gender impacts young refugees' experiences by providing both women's and men's perspective in a specific way shaped by gender (Ramsay and Baker 2019). Most studies using mixed samples do not explicitly address gendered perspectives (Pritchard et al. 2019), and some gender sensitive studies only present women's or men's viewpoint (Ensor 2014; Jack 2012; Mosselson 2007). The article explores the integration processes of Syrian refugees *into* higher education using the capability approach to understand the effect of their family resources, the social norms, their motivations, and the decision-making processes on their capability to access higher education, and to what extent their gender defines their capabilities during the accessing process, afterwards, during the study period in the university, and lastly in shaping their future plans. The diverse stories of the participants show that the gendered nature of their experiences was strongly present while accessing higher education and during their studies, but, generally, it became less distinct for their prospects owing to their increased capability sets.

(2) The second article, 'Belonging through Higher Education', takes one step further, contributes to the research gap by trying to understand how refugees' experiences within the university have an impact on integration into higher education and how student identity facilitates their belongingness beyond the borders of the campus by empowering them, using the framework of 'belonging', the word used by the participants to explain their integration experiences. To understand the factors that shape refugees' sense of belonging and the extent to which the contextualized experiences of refugee youth affect their overall sense of belonging, the article is based on two questions:

What are the main factors affecting refugee students' sense of (un)belonging in campus space?

How is being a 'university student' reflected in refugee students' everyday practices?

Scholars give more space for the politics of belonging by focusing mainly on identity and citizenship, instead of the less frequently analyzed notion of place-belonging (Antonsich 2010). The article contributes to the discussion on refugees' sense of belonging by showing how belonging is multifaceted, multilayered, and relational, and it is associated with their lived experiences in a host country (Chow 2007; Huizinga and van Hoven 2018). The experiences do not only depend on refugees themselves but also on the structure of the spaces where they interact with locals.

(3) After exploring the sense of belonging, the third paper focuses on the politics of belonging to provide a very unique perspective in this specific context. The aim of this paper is to delineate the variety of the aspirations of highly educated Syrian refugee youth in the case of having Turkish citizenship by answering two questions:

What meanings do Syrians studying in Turkish universities attach to Turkish citizenship?

To what extent does having Turkish citizenship shape the future aspirations of Syrian youths?

The paper contributes to the citizenship discussion, exploring the question regarding Syrian refugees' aspirations to stay in Turkey, to move on from Turkey to a third country, or to return to Syria. There is little research on the issues of refugees and citizenship policy exploring the perspective of refugees and immigrants, and their meaning of citizenship and experiences of naturalization (Birkvad 2019; Stewart and Mulvey 2014). In Turkey, some studies have looked at the opinions of refugees related to citizenship (Erdoğan 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Rottmann 2020), but a research gap remains in the meaning of citizenship for the target groups with the possibility to acquire the citizenship. The article carries the discussion one step further to contribute to the gap by focusing on one of the target groups of citizenship policies, Syrian students who (re)acquire cultural capital in Turkish higher education.

On one hand, the article suggests that Turkish citizenship is seen as a more valuable passport that gives the possibility of moving on from Turkey (generally to Europe) using legal means, especially with the aim of studying a postgraduate degree. On the other hand, they believe that a future in Turkey with Turkish citizenship will provide stability, and legal and socio-economic security with more employment

opportunities. Generally, the first intention of the people I interviewed was to settle in Turkey rather than starting from zero in another country.

In sum, these three articles aim to cover various dimensions of Syrian young people's integration *into*, and *through* higher education, going one step further to consider their aspirations in the line of citizenship discussions.

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2. GENDERED NATURE OF REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

The overall aim of this article is to better understand the experiences of Syrian refugee youths through higher education in Turkey. The research is based on a qualitative case study conducted during the fall of 2019 in Gaziantep, a Turkish province on the Syrian border that hosts almost half a million Syrian refugees. The article uses the capability approach as a framework to explore the relationship between gender and the experiences of refugees in the university. It examines their experiences and their decision-making process while accessing higher education, the gendered nature of these experiences, and their aspirations for the future after graduation. I argue that the diverse stories of the participants show that the gendered nature of their experiences was strongly present while accessing higher education and during their studies, but, generally, it became less distinct for their future prospects.

2.1 Introduction

In 2018, the proportion of refugees accessing higher education around the world increased dramatically from 1 to 3 percent of the total young refugee population (UNHCR, 2019). Nevertheless, the number remains very low compared with the 37 percent enrolment rate of global youth, suggesting an urgent need to identify and remove the obstacles refugees face (UNHCR, 2019). Refugee women and girls face particular obstacles to access education because of social and cultural norms (UNHCR, 2019). Turkey currently hosts the most refugees in the world, including 3.6 million Syrians with temporary protection (DGMM, 2021). The significant numbers of the refugees who are enrolled in higher education worldwide study in Turkey. In the 2019-2020 academic year, 37,236 Syrian students were studying at Turkish universities (YÖK, 2020).

Since the beginning of the Syrian refugees' arrival to Turkey, Syrians have been able to access higher education like any other international students or as special students who are given access to tertiary education with some missing documents. As it has become clear over the years that Syrians would face a protracted need for

international protection, Turkey's higher education policies moved from short term responses to long-term integration policies. Several steps have been taken to overcome the barriers that Syrian young people have been facing while trying to access higher education, including regulations on transfer students, the extension of special student status and a regulation on tuition fees (Yıldız 2019). Refugees take the examination for foreign students (known as YÖS), which is not a centralized exam, but rather one given by each university. Since the academic year of 2013-2014 Syrians have been exempted from paying tuition fees to help them overcome economic barriers. In addition to positive policies aimed at increasing the opportunities for Syrian students who want to continue tertiary education, various scholarship opportunities (YTB, Spark, DAFI etc.) increase their capabilities to continue their education in Turkish universities. Syrian refugees' educational aspirations and lived experiences are shaped in the context of these policies (Schneider 2018).

Around 4 percent of the Syrian young population in Turkey attends tertiary education, but only 36 percent of this group are female. That enrollment gap between Syrian women and men remains unchanged over the years. Before the Syrian civil war in terms of both educational achievement and enrolment rates in Syrian universities there were no big differences between women and men; and more than 20 percent of Syrian youths were studying at university (Buckner and Saba 2010). Thus, Syrian students' university enrolment rate in Turkey is far behind the pre-war situation in Syria and a clear gender imbalance has emerged. Despite similar prewar enrollment rates, several studies focusing on Syrian youths in the pre-conflict period emphasized the different role in men's and women's lives of higher education, and the different dynamics related to their education level to enter the labor force (Buckner and Saba 2010; Buckner 2013; Alissa 2007). The studies show that work was a top priority for the majority of young men who perceived higher education as a way to achieve better employment opportunities and to meet their breadwinner roles. On the other hand, marriage and having a family were considered young women's main priorities; social norms seemed to be playing a role in reducing the demand of education among women, especially when compared to men (Buckner and Saba 2010; Buckner 2013; Alissa 2007).

It is essential to address the gendered nature of Syrian refugees' experiences during the application process and the university period in Turkey because of (1) the

significant gap between the enrolment rate of men and women among Syrian refugees in Turkey compared to the pre-war period and (2) the gendered social norms defining higher education and their employment opportunities. Experiences are different for each person involved and depending on where and under what circumstances they are practiced (Whitworth 1994). Gender adds a layer of complexity to migrants' experiences with immigration, settlement, and adaptation, particularly based on gender norms and expectations within origin and host community (Chuang and Tamis-LeMonda 2013).

There are research gaps in regard to the provision of higher education for refugees, refugees' access to these facilities, refugees' aspirations, and their experiences within higher education (Finchman, 2020). Research to date on refugees in higher education within Turkish context has mainly focused on the barriers and opportunities faced by Syrian youths and the policies pursued by the Turkish government to increase their opportunities in the education system (Hohberger 2018; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Arar et al. 2020; Yıldız 2019). However, there is a lack of studies exploring the capabilities of Syrian refugees to access higher education or looking through a gendered lens. This article explores how Syrians access higher education with their motivation and resources, and to what extent gender plays a role when entering higher education, during the study period, and in shaping their future plans.

While exploring the relationship between gender and the integration experiences of refugee youths in university, the article uses the capability approach to provide a theoretical framework in order to answer the following questions: (1) how do Syrian refugees access higher education with their resources?; (2) to what extent does gender affect their decision-making process while entering higher education?; and (3) to what extent does gender define their experiences through higher education and their aspirations? The gendered nature of the refugee students' experiences at university is explored including the gendered discourse of prejudice, their coping mechanisms, and the difficulties of balancing family, work and student lives. Lastly, their aspirations for their futures after graduation are discussed.

2.2. From Victimized Refugees to Empowered Youths: The Key Role of Higher Education

Education strengthens agency and tends to make people more informed, skilled and powerful in decision-making by adding force to their agency through independence and empowerment (Sen, 1999). Higher education is in itself ‘a process of change’ away from disempowerment; the experiences through education foster refugees’ power in decision-making about their lives, enhance their opportunities and choices and make them actors of their own lives (Gateley 2015; 2014; Zeus 2011; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010).

Even though barriers negatively affect their motivation, refugees, as individual agents, have diverse aspirations to continue higher education (Morrice et al. 2020). These aspirations can be based on a lack of (quality) education in their pre-migration contexts; positive experiences of learning provided by host educational institutions; the expectation and realization that education can lead them to good jobs and a better future (Shakya et al 2010); the means to prove their capability for success (Harris and Marlowe 2011); and the desire to increase their decision-making power in their households and communities (Clark-Kazak 2011). Along with their agency defining their aspirations, the educational background of parents and siblings and their former cultural environment are important factors to access higher education and increase their capacity for decision-making (Grüttner et al. 2018; Abada and Tenkorang 2009). Refugees are not a homogenous group; age, gender, faith, ethnicity, culture and educational background are some of the variables impacting their capabilities to access and succeed in higher education (Morrice 2013). More attention is required to explore their diverse experiences (Harris et al, 2013) and reasons to value higher education (Grüttner et al. 2018).

In the host country, refugee young adults find themselves in a situation where family responsibilities increase (Shakya et al 2010), creating challenges and struggles on their education experiences due to increased family obligations falling on women and the undertaking of the breadwinner role by men (Grüttner et al. 2018; Mangan and Winter 2017; Crea and McFarland 2015; Harris, Chi, and Spark 2013; Joyce et al. 2010). Despite challenges related with their refugee status, the life-changing experience of education gives them hope, strength, stability, more freedom, and more options; it

empowers and transforms refugees with a specific set of skills and an expanded view of the world (Mangan and Winter 2017; Crea and McFarland 2015; Harris, Chi, and Spark 2013). However, young refugees find themselves in a double bind through their experiences in higher education; between vulnerability and empowerment (Shakya et al. 2012; Student, Kendall, and Day 2017).

Gender is a social relation that refers to the conditions and understanding of relationships and roles shared between women and men (Freedman 2015). Gender is in no way a stable identity (Butler 1988). Gender is the activity of controlling one's placed behavior in terms of conventional perceptions of attitudes and activities suitable for one's sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987). Individuals “do” gender in one way, but only in the virtual or real presence of others; doing gender means establishing distinctions between men and women that are not natural, necessary, or biological (West and Zimmerman 1987). How we define ourselves through gender is a cornerstone of how we see others and ourselves within society, and interaction with others reshapes the meaning of gender at a particular time or in a particular setting (Boyd and Grieco 2003).

A change of setting and time due to displacement questions and transforms the gender dynamics and it causes unique challenges and opportunities that depend on gender and that make the experiences more diverse (Ensor 2014a; 2014b). Despite the obstructions such as increased responsibilities and limited freedom (Le Espiritu 2001; Nawyn 2010), they may also find new opportunities in the host country and space for positive changes to increase their capabilities and to empower themselves (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014; Parrenas 2008). Tertiary education enables refugee women, in particular, to gain knowledge, skills and a voice, which leads to better employment opportunities and hence advances their empowerment and freedom, indeed, education provides a context to make visible changing gender roles and norms (Harris, Chi, and Spark 2013; Jack 2012). My research does not aim to focus on changing gender identities of Syrian refugees (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacioglu 2017; Harvey, Garwood, and El-Masri 2013), but to shed light on how their experiences through higher education differ depending on gender in order to contribute to the largely unexamined general gendered dynamics on refugee experiences during displacement.

Previous research, mostly, do not specifically discuss gendered experiences even when they use mixed samples (Pritchard et al. 2019), in other cases, some gender

sensitive studies put forward only the perspective of one gender (Ensor 2014b; Jack 2012; Mosselson 2007). This study contributes to the research gap by focusing on the experiences of urban refugees to explore gendered dimensions of their experiences in higher education by giving space to the voices of both women and men.

2.3. The Capability Approach

While exploring the relationship between gender and the integration experiences of refugees in university, the capability approach, that offers a flexible framework, is chosen in this paper to give a space to individual agency, to understand which capability sets are important for their admission into higher education, to explore the social factors affecting their experiences through higher education, and to understand the diversity of their experiences. As an interdisciplinary approach, the capability approach is not an explanatory theory (Robeyns 2005; Okkolin 2016), but it provides a heuristic for the conceptualization and evaluation of empirical phenomena in a qualitative way (Grüttner et al. 2018). The framework of this approach highlights agency (Sen 1999) and human diversity (Sen 1992) allowing the exploration of refugees' agencies and capabilities while addressing their experiences through higher education.

The capability approach refers to the potential of people to live the lives they want, achieving valued ways of being and doing (Sen 1985b; 1985a). Capability has a central role in the evaluation of a person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do what he or she values (Sen 2009). Thus, capability is a combination of functionings reflecting a person's freedom to lead one type of life or another (Sen 1992). Functionings do not only depend on individual conditions, but there might also be personal, social or environmental conversion factors determining the degree to which people can transform a resource into a functioning (Robeyns 2003; 2005; 2017). Moreover, structural constraints - such as discrimination - might have an essential role in shaping people's capability sets (Robeyns 2017). Factors differ for each person; hence each person needs different amounts and different kinds of resources to reach the same level of advantage (Robeyns 2005, 2005). The approach allows for discussions about how gender-related societal mechanisms and expectations compel certain choices (Robeyns, 2003).

Furthermore, the three dimensions of choices defined by Kabeer (1999) are used to examine the process of accessing higher education: (1) resources (preconditions) such as economic, human and social resources; (2) agency which is the sum of meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activities; and (3) achievement, which is determined by the combination of the resources and the agency. Kabeer (1999) focuses on the possible inequalities between people's capabilities to make choices rather than their differences in the choices. Kabeer (1999: 436, 438) defines power as the 'ability to make choices'; and agency as 'people's capacity to define their own life-choices and pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others'. Women's ability to exercise power not only makes their life manageable, but it also allows them to resist power used as dominance and to empower themselves (Allen, 2000). Kabeer's theory focuses on the inequalities in people's ability to make choices with a perspective of women's empowerment.

In this research, by agent-oriented views, the capability approach is conceived as a framework and its core elements and concepts are applied to develop an understanding of refugees' educational experiences and the differences that arise due to their gender. The reason for using this approach is to comprehend various dimensions through refugee experiences; the availability of opportunities, and the resources, decision-making processes, structural constraints, power relations, and social structures influencing capabilities and functioning.

2.4. Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative case study to closely examine the data within the specific context. I conducted the fieldwork in Gaziantep (Turkey), a border town hosting more than half a million Syrian refugees, during the fall of 2019. In the 2019-2020 academic year, more than 3000 Syrians studied at Gaziantep University (Gültekin, et al. 2019). Gaziantep University has developed several strategies to increase opportunities for Syrian students and it has departments in three instruction languages: Turkish, English and Arabic.

Due to my identity as a young person, and as an international student who experiences migration, my impression was that interviewees saw me as a non-judgmental researcher or as a peer who is interested in their experiences. Comparing my

observation between the city and the campus, university students are more open to share their experiences with a researcher, independently of students' and researcher's gender. Some of the male respondents mentioned that they communicate much easier with female students from Turkey, due to the cultural norms, whereas their interaction is more limited with Syrian female students. In this aspect, I did not experience any barrier during our interviews because of my gender. This might be a reflection of my national identity as Turkish. During one interview with a male participant, I felt he was uncomfortable to conduct the interview without the presence of a third person. I suggested doing a walking interview to overcome this issue, and during our walk he became more comfortable to share his experiences with me. However, my gender identity as a woman was generally an advantage to create a more comfortable atmosphere in the interviews with female participants, especially when they were explaining their gendered experiences.

Forty-nine semi-structured interviews (twenty-six male and twenty-three female) were conducted with Syrian university students. The participants were chosen through non-random snowball sampling through various starting points. The goal was not to have a representative sample, but one that included sufficient men and women of different backgrounds to really focus on their experiences. In order to represent the diversity in my sample, I took into consideration the following criteria: ethnic identity, gender, age, degree level (undergraduate, master or PhD), department, and language of instruction of their studies.

Both the preparation of the questionnaire and the fieldwork's planning were done with the collaboration of people belonging to the target group to increase the cultural sensitivity of the research and to see the context with an inside point of view. Several factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, region of origin and identity, make Syrian young people a very diverse target group making the generalization of their experiences inaccurate (Buckner and Saba 2010).

In addition to the interviews, participant observation during two months in the city, the neighborhood, and especially inside the university campus was used to enhance the interpretation of the collected data. Moreover, during the fieldwork I stayed at a female student residence located on the campus. Being 'there', witnessing the patterns of daily life close to the students within the campus and staying in the field are used as

secondary data to understand the meanings, practices, and mutual interactions in the space (Boccagni, and Schrooten 2018). The observation of their everyday life specifically provides an in-depth understanding about the gendered dimensions of their experiences, such as how gender shapes the interactions between students, and their interactions with/in the space.

Following the approval of my research project by the Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP-UPF) and the permission for the research by the rectorate of Gaziantep University, I collected my data. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their role, and the voluntarily of his or her participation. Research records contain anonymized personal information; and this information is securely stored in encrypted folders.

2.5. Capabilities to Access University

2.5.1. Resources

Their downward economic situation might shake their capabilities and opportunities to access education. In Turkey, Syrian refugees are exempted from university fees and they can access several scholarship opportunities, hence institutional opportunities increase their chances of accessing higher education. Scholarships were mentioned as a considerable factor to increase their opportunities to continue tertiary education. According to the information provided by the international student office of the university, approximately 40 percent of Syrian students had a scholarship; in the case of the interviewees, this percentage was, slightly higher, 50 percent. More male participants in this study mentioned having scholarships and highlighting their poor economic circumstances as the reason of importance for having a scholarship. Economic hardships increase the pressure of the breadwinner role, which made it more common for male interviewees to work before entering university causing some gap years without education. On the other side, male students had more opportunities to work in different sectors, including unskilled and seasonal jobs, to increase their economic resources allowing them to continue their study; on the other hand, female students, generally, more relied on their families' resources. Thereby, the breadwinner role puts pressure on Syrian males, many men are obliged to take any available work;

on the other hand, cultural norms discourage women from entering the labor force (Fincham 2020).

The educational background of parents and siblings are key factors to increase their capacity to access higher education, as other studies suggested (Grüttner et al. 2018; Abada and Tenkorang 2009), but especially for female students, who more often defined their parents as more educated (university or high school graduates) and with a better economic situation. For those students with an educated family, studying at a university was considered a normality rather than a possibility. However, it was more common to hear from the male students that they were the only one and/or the first one in the family to study in university.

The educational history of the siblings offered a clearer understanding of the attitudes and strategies of refugee families to share their resources between their sons and daughters in the field of schooling. The siblings of female students were often studying or had a bachelor's degree; on the other hand, the educational stories of male students' siblings revealed disparities.

Gender and age of the siblings were significant factors determining their opportunity to access higher education. One male interviewee did not count his sisters as siblings who could study in university while explaining the education stories of his siblings:

‘My siblings are all here and they are all studying. I am the oldest one. One of them graduated from the history department. Others are much younger and study in high school and primary school. We are nine siblings with me. I have two sisters, they dropped out of school. My father, my little brother and I are working.’ (25, male)

Therefore, in the case of interviewees from families with a lower educational level, gender was an important factor to define their capabilities, affecting negatively to refugee women’s capability sets. It appears that women who are able to access higher education tend to depend more on family resources. Within my sample, gender related social factors define the way of sharing the resources that are restricted because of the refugee situation, moreover, gender defined the differences between peoples’ need of some resources to reach the same levels of advantage (Robeyns 2005).

2.5.2. Social factors

Social conversion factors, which include social norms, practices or power relations related to gender, are discussed to understand family decision-making mechanisms to decide who can go to university and who cannot. In some families, especially the ones with more limited resources and/or more crowded ones, investing in the education of sons rather than in the education of daughters was preferred because of the understanding that the education of a son created more value for the family, but the education of a daughter did not.

‘In our culture (...) education of girls is not as important as education of boys.’ (25, male)

‘It is troublesome when the number of siblings is high. You can school one, but not the other one. (...) As a culture, we, the families, take care of the sons more (than the daughters). They can support sons to make them highly educated, even till the end of a PhD. They think that the girl will marry and go, her husband has to meet her needs.’ (28, female)

The study of Fincham (2020) also indicates that Syrian refugee families prioritize their sons’ higher education, especially when family resources were tight, because it will allow them to fulfil their role as providers. However, in some cases, the gendered role of a breadwinner notably decreased the opportunities of male students to follow their higher education dreams. This situation was very common because parents faced some barriers to find a job because of a lack of knowledge of the Turkish language, a lack of work permit or an advanced age; or in some cases because parents lost their lives during the war. Often, eldest sons substituted their parents, and took the role of breadwinner. It was common to hear that the oldest brother had to drop out to provide for the family and to increase the education opportunities for his younger siblings.

The enrollment rate in higher education in Syrian urban areas was more than twice the one in rural areas (Buckner and Saba 2010). The participants coming from rural areas mentioned that in their cultural norms educating children was not an essential part of life and sending girls to school was uncommon. For them, becoming urban refugees, living closer to a university, increased their capability sets to go to university due to a

diminution of the social factors that traditionally limit their educational opportunities. Several stated that social pressure could be very strong in their places of origin and that the decision to send a daughter to university did not depend solely on the parents but also on the support or opposition of other male relatives in the family, even in the families with higher socio-economic status. In Syrian society, individual decisions to pursue higher education are frequently evaluated by family members, especially household heads (it usually means fathers) (Fincham 2020). In the cases with strong social pressure and the opposition of other relatives, the role and the attitude of parents became crucial to create opportunities for their daughters. A female participant who migrated to Turkey to join to her siblings with the aim of continuing higher education, coming from a high socio-economic family of a rural area highlighted her father's role on her education:

‘There is a thought in there, not to send girls to school. But my father did everything for our education, my uncles were against it. He said to them ‘no matter whether you are angry or not, I will enroll my girls.’ My father is my angel.’ (21, female)

A male participant also coming from a rural area stated:

‘I am the youngest of eight siblings - I have four brothers and three sisters - and the only one who studies. No one in my family has received a formal education. (...) In our culture it is not common for girls to go to university. My sisters studied primary school but not high school. One of them wanted to move from 9th grade to high school, but my uncles opposed it and at the end she could not be schooled.’ (28, male)

Social factors were not only limited to Syrians coming from rural areas. One of the interviewees (21, female) from an urban area was able to access higher education despite the strong opposition of her family. Moreover, she was the only female interviewee who worked before entering university, because of the economic hardship that her family faced. She arrived in Turkey when she was thirteen and since that moment, she worked several jobs to economically support her family. Whenever she mentioned her desire to study and to go to university, the family, especially her father and her brothers, deprecated her will. While she was working, she followed Turkish

language courses and the classes in an open high school, sometimes without informing the parents. At the end she could enter university and continue studying with a strong agency in spite of the strong opposition of all family members. When she became a university student, she finally felt free: “*After all the struggle, finally I was in university. I was free. I felt very enthusiastic*”. Her case is an example of the possibility to question the social order and to increase ones’ capabilities of making decisions to live a valued life. Working outside of home and earning money somehow provided freedom and opportunities to improve her skills and raised her awareness about her rights and about the education possibilities making her capable to enter higher education. But the most important point in her story was the resilience and the strong motivation that made her take up the challenge. Her disempowerment evolved to empowerment providing her the ability to make her own choices (Kabeer, 1999). She could exercise the power to choose what she valued to make possible to strengthen her resistance to domination. While resources are important, the opportunities each person has to convert their resources into valued beings and doings are what matters at the end (Zeus, 2011).

2.5.3. Agency: Motivation to study in higher education

‘We had to start from scratch. When I came here, I came only with the clothes that I was wearing at that moment and a couple of my books. Because I wanted to continue my studies.’ (23, male)

After discussing the interplay between their resources and social factors, it is essential to understand their agency through their individual motivations, and the meaning of achieving for them to get over the barriers. This section discusses the agency of the young refugees in their decision-making process while entering higher education.

First of all, given that many of the participants migrated in a young age, the decision to migrate was mainly taken by parents. Nevertheless, most of them mentioned that the possibility of getting an education was one of the primary factors in the decision-making processes. One Palestinian-Syrian student explained that she moved to several countries because her parents were looking for a place where their children could access education, that is why they ended up settling in Turkey. The majority of the participants were well-aware of the importance of their previous diplomas to enter university. During the war, some of their schools were closed and their families had to

move internally (within Syria) so their children could continue their education safely. In other cases, they had to go through dangerous journeys alone to enter exams to get their secondary or high school diplomas in Syria.

‘I couldn't go to school for two years because of the war. There was no school, there was only war. I changed the city to find an open school and I continued my education there. I had to take the exam to finish high school. I had no place to stay there. I was studying and sleeping in parks. The area was not safe. I finally got my high school diploma.’ (24, male)

Some of them came to Turkey alone to continue their studies; the combination of leaving their families in a war zone and not having any kind of support while trying to pass an exam made this period an especially arduous struggle. In addition to their parents' effort into seeking a safe place, interviewees' eagerness to continue education - itself was one of the main factors in deciding where to migrate:

‘I finished my first semester at the university. I wanted to leave Syria because we were not safe. My mom called me, and she said that ‘I packed your stuff, and I am sending you to Turkey with your siblings’. (...) I came here, I had nothing with me. I left everything. I could not speak any Turkish. (...) I came here, and I started to ask about universities.’ (24, female)

Most of them lost a couple years while trying to enter higher education because of the barriers they faced and the failing of exams; a few male interviewees explained that they had to prioritize finding a job and economically support their family over entering university.

2.5.4. Agency: Individual or community-based motivations

Their aspiration and motivation to access higher education in a host country was shaped by individual and community-based intentions. In addition to the main motivations of having a valuable university diploma to access the labor market, the other themes on their motivations were (1) to prove the refugee community's capability to success, (2) to contribute to the Syrian community, (3) the lost years without education, and (4) the support given by their community.

The first motivation, mostly mentioned by female participants, was to change the ‘Syrian refugee image’ characterized by being victimized, marginalized, and oppressed. Their intention was to show to the host society that Syrians with their strong agency could also achieve their objectives. For the ones who had this motivation, academic success was very important:

‘My main motivation to continue my education in the university was to show myself and others that people coming from a war can also achieve something.’ (21, female).

In Syria, for women, higher education was seen as a way to gain respect, while for men it was a way to a well-paid employment opportunity (Buckner 2013). The gendered roles in their community had an effect on their motivation to access higher education; this study also shows some parallel findings.

The second motive to contribute to the Syrian community was a motivation shared by both genders. However, there were some differences in individual stories; the motivation of female participants mostly focused on helping the women and children while some male participants focused on filling the places of the educated people who lost their lives during the war.

‘There have been many martyrs in our country, so we have to contribute to our country. (...) Our people have to improve themselves; we have to fill these gaps.’ (28, male)

‘I chose my department to help people from my community. I want to do something for Syrian children. Because they are our foundation, our future.’ (24, female)

The third motive was originated by the lost years without any education. This motive was used mainly by male students who had to work before having the possibility to study. These lost years helped them realize the value of education and encouraged them to enter university:

‘I worked for 2.5 years and I was away from education. Studying at the university was a dream for me. I was working for 12-15 hours a day. Now I

am studying at the university, I dreamed about this for a long time.’ (21, male)

The last motive was the support from their community members, and it was mentioned generally by male participants who explained that friends and other community members who did not have the chance to study encouraged them to do it. In these cases, the motivation of their friends and siblings became a keystone on their entrance to tertiary education, they would not have achieved if it was not because of their help and encouragement. Their motivations to continue higher education are frequently shaped by community-based intentions; hence, gender-related societal mechanisms and expectations have an impact on framing them.

2.5.5. Agency: Decision making process

This section discusses to what extent Syrian refugees have freedom ‘to achieve valuable functioning’, in other words, to be able to choose the department and the university they want. In educational achievements, agency achievement refers to the level of education (such as master), the attainment, and the subject choices (medicine instead of engineering) refer to the educational aspects that a person has a reason to value (Okkolin 2016; Vaughan 2007).

According to the international student office of the university, Syrian students generally choose medicine, engineering and the faculty of economics and administrative sciences, due to the prestige of these departments. This approach focusing on prestige was more noticeably mentioned by male interviewees, showing a clear parallelism with the pre-war situation in Syria (Buckner and Saba 2010). Choosing those departments perceived as prestigious was not only a decision made by Syrian students; their parents played an important role by encouraging them to choose departments that could act like tools to increase the status of the family. The interviewees stated that they felt free to make their own decisions regarding the department they wanted to study. Even in the cases where there was a clash between their opinion and their parents’ they chose their departments by themselves due to the lack of knowledge of the parents about university entrance procedures in Turkey. One of the female participants stated that:

‘My father wanted me to study medicine or engineering. I enrolled in my department without telling him. I decided to choose what I wanted. When he

learned it, he asked me how he could say my department to others when they asked about me. I told him that this is my choice. I have the right to study whatever I want.’ (20, female)

Three themes, apart from academic reasons, came to the forefront of the decision process of choosing the university: (1) lack of freedom of movement, (2) lack of economic capability and (3) difficulties to change their residence. Lack of freedom to move to another city to study was mentioned by female participants. In fact, in this study only 2 of the 23 female students moved to Gaziantep to study while their families lived in another city. The main reason why most female participants chose to study in the same city where their families live because living apart from the family is not a socially, or economically accepted option for them. As a result of this, some of them, instead of trying to pass the exam of another university in another city, even if they failed in the exam of the university, they waited to try again the following year. In addition, traveling alone to do the entrance exam was not easy either. In the case of male students, if they could not move to another city to study, it was because of a lack of economic capabilities. 12 male students out of the 26 interviewed lived in Gaziantep without their family. They stayed in student residences, shared flats with other students or in their own rented flats. Fincham (2020: 345) suggested in Syrian society ‘females needed to have a male guardian’, and being financially dependent on males within the family, as reasons that Syrian females have less control over their decision to enroll in university in a host country.

The difficulties to change their residence city is a theme mentioned by the few of them who work while studying because work permits are linked to the company, so if they changed the city, they would lose their work permit. Thereby, the limited mobility inside of Turkey has also an impact on their decision to choose the university.

2.6. Experiences at the University

Higher education increases refugees’ opportunities and choices beyond vulnerability (Zeus 2011; Gateley 2014; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). However, structural constraints might have an essential role in shaping people’ capability sets; for example, if people face discrimination, they might not use the same sources to generate the capabilities (Robeyns 2017). University becomes a bridge between local and refugee

young people where their interaction increases; at university refugees can learn how to negotiate a new culture, while at the same time they are more aware of their otherness (Mosselson 2007). Refugee young people find themselves in a double bind through their experiences in higher education; between resistance as a coping mechanism to the discrimination and empowerment (see, Shakya et al. 2012; Student, Kendall, and Day 2017).

2.6.1. Prejudice and coping mechanism

Syrian students in this study frequently mentioned that they faced negative attitudes and prejudice discourses shaped by false facts and by the image of marginalized Syrians. In the university space, besides the cultural or ethnic prejudice just for being Syrian, three main prejudice discourses shaped by gender were emphasized: (1) refugee students are seen as competitors to access academic opportunities; (2) woman refugees are perceived as a threat by local women; and (3) refugee young men are accused of cowardice.

Before explaining the gendered shaped prejudices mentioned, it is important to explain how headscarves were a marker of identity for Syrian female students. The study conducted in Gaziantep by Sevlü (2020) highlights that Syrian women, whose way of tying their headscarves and clothing differ from local women, are easily identified by locals; Syrian women started to dress like Turkish women to decrease the discrimination by making their differences invisible. Inside the campus, according to my observations, the headscarf style of Syrian women makes them also more visible and separates them from the locals. A couple of interviewees mentioned that they changed their headscarves' style not to be labelled as Syrian and to feel more comfortable and respected. The ones who did not use a headscarf and who used 'Turkish style headscarf' highlighted that they looked like locals. Clothing as a marker of their otherness has added another complexity to the experiences of Syrian women, which affect their social functioning in the campus.

Being seen as competitors to access academic opportunities (Arar et al. 2020) was most mentioned by female students. The reason could be more importance given to be successful by them, which encountered them with locals to access educational opportunities providing by the university.

Female students very often mentioned receiving more negative attitudes from their local female peers than their male peers. Child marriage and polygamy are more accepted among the Syrian refugees, even though they are legally forbidden in Turkey (Barin 2015). These practices create the fear of 'Syrian women will take away our husbands' among local women (Ucar, 2020). The marginalized image of Syrian women shapes the discrimination they experience when they interact with locals in Gaziantep (Ucar 2020). Some suggested that the reason they faced more discrimination from the female peers was due to the highly marginalized feminine image of Syrian women in the city:

‘There is a constant discourse: “*They took our men, took our jobs, and took our schools...*” (20, female)

The prejudice discourse targeting Syrian men was basically shaped by masculinity, and the duty of fighting for one’s country. Militarism is a core ideology of Turkish nationalism, and a military-nation is one of its fundamental myths (Altınay 2004). This myth might have an influence on how locals viewed the gendered role of Syrian men; one of the patterns of masculinity can be seen in the ability to sacrifice oneself for a cause greater than himself (Mosse 1998). Some male participants faced prejudices and were blamed for “escaping from their country instead of fighting for it as cowards”:

‘We were sitting with friends both boys and girls. They said to me: "Why did you run away from your country? Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you fight?"’ (25, male)

Thus, their gender identity might have been shaped by the prejudice discourses that they have encountered during their daily lives, including at university.

As discussed above, one of the most mentioned themes of their motivation to study was “to prove the agency of refugees”, to prove that not only they could access higher education but also be academically successful. For the participants in the study, this was also a coping mechanism to overcome the prejudice discourse generalizing Syrians as victimized, marginalized, and powerless refugees. Being successful in their courses and participating in extracurricular activities were mentioned as tools to break stereotypes and prejudices. For these young people higher education means the

possibility to prove their capability for success (see, Harris and Marlowe 2011) in order to diminish ‘the image of refugees’.

‘I don't want people to say that the foreigner (the Syrian) couldn't achieve it. Oppositely, I would like them to say that she is very successful even though she is a foreigner. I don't like to use this word, but I don't want to be in a loser position.’ (19, female)

When talking about the most unforgettable moment in their university life, most female students mentioned the memories associated with success moments, such as getting a good mark or publicly receiving a good comment from a lecturer:

‘Whenever I get high points, this is the best moment for me. After working on the project, they gave me a certificate of appreciation. It made me very happy.’ (21, female)

It was very common that interviewees entered the labor market while completing higher education, during the fieldwork period, 34 of the interviewees (22 male and 12 female) were working. Mainly they worked highly skilled jobs, but in some cases, especially in the case of male interviewees, they worked in unskilled seasonal jobs to cover their educational expenses or to provide for their families. Most male students mentioned other responsibilities that forced them to arrange their time at university, so proving their success was not one of their top concerns. Due to their other time-consuming responsibilities, regardless of gender, students that were married and/or working had difficulties to achieve academic success, especially in courses which attendance was compulsory. The lack of time was the most mentioned concern while balancing family, work, and education.

Studying at university had a double effect, it empowered them, and it helped them empower other members of their community. Some interviewees, especially female ones, are volunteering in activities focusing on the overall refugee population, especially children and/or women, in some cases their role is to act as a bridge between refugees and the host community due to their knowledge on the Turkish language. Some of them tutor Syrian children and help them with their classes and their language skills; or help their peers for their university enrollment processes.

2.7. Future Prospects

Regardless of the gender, they were well-informed about future opportunities and they had a clear idea about what they wanted to do in their future. The themes of future objectives after graduation were mainly focusing on: (1) working to earn money, (2) following a career path (relevant or non-relevant to their studies), and (3) doing a master or a PhD abroad or in Turkey (especially in Istanbul). Although they were aware of the obstacles they would face, they were confident about their future due to the acquired skills through higher education.

There were a few exceptional cases (four interviewees) who emphasized differences between woman and man regarding their futures after graduation. The theme was shaped by the cultural norm that ‘a woman can choose not to work, but for a man it is not an option’. One female participant said that she did not plan to work after graduation and added:

‘Girls get a diploma, but it is her own choice to work or not.’ (21, female)

This cultural norm was mentioned as an inequality by a male interviewee, who stated that the possibility to choose between working and not working was a woman’s privilege:

‘I work to maintain my family. Women are luckier in our society; they don’t have such a duty. First her family will take care of her and later her husband will.’ (25, male)

Despite those exceptional cases, the future objectives of females and males were focused on the same themes. The participants showed a strong agency to create their own opportunities through higher education independently of their gender for their future. Therefore, higher education provided them the freedom and empowered them to dream about different possible futures.

2.8. Discussion and Conclusion: Diverse Experience through Higher Education

This paper sheds light on the capability of Syrian refugees to continue higher education in Turkey and to what extent their gender affects their capabilities to succeed. The capability approach provides the framework to explore the gendered nature of their experiences through higher education; before accessing university, while studying and after graduation. The diverse stories of the participants show that the gendered nature of their experiences was strongly present while accessing higher education and during their studies, but, generally, it became less distinct for their future prospects due to the widening capability set of Syrian young women and men.

Firstly, I try to answer how Syrian refugees access higher education with their resources and to what extent does gender affect their decision-making process when entering higher education. Female participants emphasized that they were more dependent on the family resources to access higher education than male participants who could have more opportunities to access the labor market, allowing them to increase their capability set by themselves. Social factors, shaped by gender norms, have impacts on both sharing the family resources between siblings because of the different roles of women and men in their society; and also on their motivations, and decision-making process to choose what and where they want to study. Frequently, sons' education was prioritized in Syrian households, easing the male participants' enrollment to higher education. However, the breadwinner role put pressure on Syrian young men, limiting their access. In some cases, being a refugee had an effect on decreasing the resources available for both woman and man to access education, especially due to the economic hardships. In other cases, because of migrating from a rural place to an urban place, their opportunity to go to university increased.

The findings show that their agency which is the sum of motivation and their power on decision-making processes (Kabeer 1999), was not free from the social factors. For instance, the lack of freedom on their mobility limited the choices of most female participants to decide in which university they wanted to study. Functionings do not only depend on individual conditions, but social conversion factors also determine the degree to which people can transform a resource into a functioning (Robeyns 2003; 2005; 2017). In general, the capability sets of female participants were smaller than

those of male participants, suggesting that their freedom, in terms of their actual ability to continue studying, to decide what they want to study and where to study (Sen 2009), are defined by their families, and designated by social factors characterized by gender norms. In fact, their freedom to choose what they value is more limited compared to the male participants. These findings support the argument that gender is not the sole factor when defining Syrian refugees' capabilities and opportunities to access higher education, but it clearly is a core one.

Secondly, I focus on their experiences within higher education, showing that discrimination plays an essential role in shaping people's capability sets (Robeyns 2017). It clearly shows how gendered discourses shaping the discrimination are creating barriers especially for social functioning –such as having a social network- (Robeyns 2003) of the students during their studies. On one side, the discourse of being a coward for men –based on the notion of masculinity accommodating with sacrificing ones' lives to his country; and, on the other side, the intra-group competition among women, which are per se marginalized in both cases. More female participants mentioned that they emphasized their effort to empower themselves and to prove themselves as a successful person to cope with the discriminative discourse that affect their socialization and relationship with local students. Higher education empowers both men and women, however women participants put more effort on their own empowerment and on the empowerment of others in their community. Moreover, this paper does not focus on parenthood and maternity as factors that play a role in the different ways in which family duties are constructed by men and women, further studies are needed to contribute to this gap.

Lastly, this study supports the theory that higher education empowers refugee 'women and men' to make strategic choices for their own lives (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Kabeer 1999). Even though most female participants depended on family resources (economic or cultural) to access to higher education, when they think about their future, they rely more on their own resources (university diploma, economic possibilities due to their higher education) thanks to their enlarged capability sets. While talking about their future aims, all the participants stated that they were informed of their opportunities and how to achieve them. Their, especially woman participants', capability sets had been enlarged by the empowerment through their higher education studies; it means that their combination of functionings reflecting their freedom to

choose one type of life or another (Sen 1992) was less affected by gender norms when they talked about their future prospects.

In conclusion, higher education contributes to diminish the inequalities in these young people's ability to make choices. How they pursue their future dreams and how they shape their own aspirations show us that higher education strengthens their agency. The capability sets of female interviewees were more affected by social and environmental factors while they accessed higher education. On the other hand, when talking about their time in higher education and their future aspirations, personal factors gain importance. It is crucial to note that the factors to shape the capability of refugee young people change for each individual, so it is essential to highlight the human diversity and to give place for personal stories of both woman and man while analyzing their achievements.

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3. BELONGING THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

Dereli, Begüm. 2021. Belonging through Higher Education: The case study of Syrian youth in Turkey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. doi:10.1093/jrs/feab055

Abstract

This article uses a refugee centered approach to explore experiences of belonging through higher education. It is based on fieldwork conducted during the fall of 2019 in Gaziantep, Turkey. This paper aims to understand the factors that form refugees' sense of belonging and the degree to which the contextualized experiences of refugee youths influence their sense of belonging in the university. Interviews with participants suggest that various autobiographical, relational, cultural, and legal factors can foster in refugees a sense of belonging through campus experiences. At the same time, some participants indicated adverse experiences and a weaker sense of belonging due to the same factors. The university campus offers them relatively equal status as local students in a home-like, comparatively diverse, and welcoming place where their interactions with locals and peers increase. For some participants, their student identity facilitates their belongingness beyond the borders of the campus by empowering them. For others, university is another space where they experience a feeling of otherness. The results suggest that their experiences of belonging are relative, complex, and multidimensional.

3.1. Introduction

Since the so-called Syrian refugee crisis started, Turkey has become host to more refugees than any other state in the world. Its refugee population includes 3.5 million Syrians, who are refugees as a matter of international law, but are not recognized as such in Turkey as Turkey accepts only a limited interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Instead, Turkey affords Syrians temporary protection status based on the non-refoulement principle, giving them legal residence, access to services, and other basic rights. The Turkish temporary protection regime marks Syrians as objects of

humanitarian assistance rather than political agents; in the ninth year of displacement, being neither refugees nor guests brings insecurity to the lives of the Syrian urban refugees (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). In addition to this insecurity, Syrian refugees are presented as others by the media with a discourse that creates the image of Syrians as victims, burdens, guests, or threats, keeping them stuck in a discourse of marginalization and victimization (Goksel 2018).

The legal framework for foreigners in Turkey does not use the term ‘integration.’ Instead, it speaks of ‘the mutual harmonization of the society and of the foreigner’ (LFIP, 2013). When it comes to forced migrants under the temporary protection regime like Syrians, however, this concept of two-way mutual and voluntary harmonization in the legal framework does not include naturalization at the end of the process. Temporary protection grants the right to stay in Turkey, but it does not give the right to its holder to apply for Turkish citizenship (TPR, 2014). Even though, the integration regime does not really encompass temporary protection holders, in 2016, President Erdogan announced that some of them would be granted Turkish citizenship, especially the highly educated ones among them (Hürriyet, 2016). Since that announcement, 110,000 Syrians were granted Turkish citizenship (Refugees Association, 2020). The exceptional citizenship option in the Turkish Citizenship Law has opened the door to citizenship for all migrants, but also for Syrians who live under temporary protection and have either economic or cultural capital. The exceptional citizenship option increases the importance of having cultural capital, identified by the host country as studying at its universities.

The largest age-group of the Syrians in Turkey are children and youths, whose access to education is crucial for the two-way mutual integration. Education, as a tool for naturalization, becomes significant for Syrians to (re)gain their cultural capital. Seeing refugees as ‘ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances’ is key for mutual harmonization (Rutter 1991). Education is important to give the ordinary student identity back to them and its spaces provide opportunities in which Syrians and their local peers can interact (Zeus, 2011).

In the 2019-2020 academic year 37,236 Syrian students studied at Turkish universities (YÖK, 2020). Policies have evolved and changed since 2011, increasing their opportunities to access higher education. Some of these policies are aimed at

eliminating the economic hardships that refugees face, for example by accessing Turkish higher education through the special examination of international students, but without the tuition fees that other international students pay, or by having several scholarship opportunities specifically for them. Despite the Turkish government's policies to facilitate the integration of refugees into the Turkish higher education system, Syrian youth face a range of challenges including language barriers, financial hardship, lack of information about the application process, the complexity of the system, and academic barriers (Erdoğan 2017; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Ateşok, Komsuoğlu and Yürür 2020; Dereli 2018; Hohberger 2018). They are often exposed to prejudice on campus and spatial discrimination related to avoiding contact (Ertong-Attar and Küçükşen 2019). They also face some tension with local students due to unequal policies of support or to cultural differences (Arar, 2020). Nonetheless, higher education can give them hope to build their futures, even while facing many hardships (Arar et al. 2020; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017). Taking into account the high percentage of Syrian youth and their importance for the future of both countries, higher education is essential to give them normality, stability and hope for their own futures, in spite of their protracted situation. From an institutional perspective, Ateşok, Komsuoğlu Çıtıptıoğlu, and Özer (2020) compare various universities and reveal variations due to the characteristics of the universities and the cities where the universities are located. Every case brings its own unique challenges and opportunities for integration.

Once refugee youths are enrolled in higher education, they gain the identity of 'university student' apart from their identity as refugees. This new university membership helps young refugees to remove the stigmatized image of Syrian refugees and gives them a safe space to interact and engage with their new surroundings. It gives them the chance to just be "a student" (Mosselson 2007). Even though they still carry their Syrian identity into the higher education space, which may inhibit interaction with local students, they also become members of the higher education community as any other student. Belonging is not just about citizenship, or just about formal or informal forms of identification with the others, but also about the sense of place belongingness (Anthias 2008). Their feeling to belong to this secure place and the identity of being a student can be means to their belongingness to beyond the campus.

This study aims to contribute to the research gap on refugees' experiences within the university by trying to understand how meanings of belonging are (re)produced by

young people in the campus, and how the place-belonging in the campus extends beyond the border of the campus (Habib and Ward 2019; Morrice 2013); there is little research exploring the interconnectedness of refugees through different perspectives on experience (Phillimore 2012). Scholars give more space for the politics of belonging by focusing mainly on identity and citizenship, instead of the less frequently analyzed notion of place-belonging (Antonsich 2010a). This research focuses on place-belongingness, which includes the dimensions of the politics of belonging. The concept of belonging in the present study came to light from my fieldwork: refugee youths used this concept rather than integration to define and make sense of their experiences. For this reason, the conceptual framework of this paper is drawn by belonging, not by social integration; even though they are not mutually exclusive. The approach of this research focuses on how youths organize their experiences, (re)construct their social worlds, and create meaning through their everyday practices differently (Korac 2009).

The objective of the paper is to use a case study to respond to the following contextualized questions: (1) what are the main factors affecting refugee students' sense of (un)belonging in campus space? and (2) how is being a 'university student' reflected in refugee students' everyday practices? I suggest that experiences in university-space play an essential role in the sense of belonging of young refugees through membership and place-belonging. In this study, I found that being university students and being relatively equal members of the university in a home-like welcoming space is very important for the creation of a sense of belonging, but at the same time some participants experienced a weaker sense of belonging on campus mainly due to their limited time there, and to the image locals have of refugee.

In the following sections, I first review the concept of belonging in the context of refugees' lives. I then explain the methodological framework and the characteristics of the research location. Finally, I present the findings of the fieldwork in the lights of the refugee youths' belongings and offer my conclusions.

3.2. Belonging

Scholars generally examine the (re)gaining of a sense of home in a host country using the integration framework, although there is not a common definition for integration. Phillimore (2012) defines some themes of integration emphasizing the concept of

belonging: the development of a sense of belonging in the host community with identity renegotiation between newcomers and host community, the development of social relationships and social networks, and the means and confidence to exercise rights to resources such as education. Contrary to the top-down process of fitting refugees in the host country by defining integration policies, belonging is more related to an individual path, feeling a member of a space and a society. Although, in some aspects, the concepts of belonging and social integration overlap each other, the findings presented in the paper use the belonging framework to answer the more complex and nuanced questions from individuals' perspectives.

Belonging is about the experiences of being a member of a given environment; being recognized and being accepted as a member of the community and feeling safe within the space through membership in the community (Anthias 2008). Thus, belonging is not only about the self; but a relation to something outside the self, both socially and geographically (Anthias 2013). The concept of belonging is about more than who we are, it is about where the self fits in and with whom we feel connected with. Belonging is not just about formal or informal forms of identification with the others, but also about the social places constructed by such identification (Anthias 2008). Every spatial territory draws a barrier between the inside(r) and outside(r), but this is a relative and permeable border (Lefebvre 1992).

Belonging is not a static phenomenon, but rather a process based on a dynamic dialectic of *seeking* and *granting* belonging (Skrbiš, Baldassar, and Poynting 2007). The different dimensions - civic, social, and emotional- explicate nuances and variations in belonging across individuals, places, and time (Dromgold-Sermen 2020). Belonging has two dimensions that are inclusive of each other: place-belongingness, as an individual feeling 'at home' in a specific place; and politics of belonging, as the forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion defining 'us' and 'them' (Antonsich, 2010a). Antonsich (2010a) highlights five factors contributing to generate individual feelings of place-belongingness. First, auto-biographical factors related to memories, experiences, or narratives of belonging. Second, relational factors, which refer to the personal and social ties in a given place. Third, cultural factors consisting of language, traditions, cultural practices and expressions, and religion. Forth, economic factors that are defined by engagement in economic activities and professional life. And fifth, legal factors meaning legal status as an essential component of security. In addition to these five

factors, Antonsich (2010a) added time as another dimension, and for newcomers this can be the length of residence. For the participants of this study, this last dimension can be the time spent at the campus. Sense of space is related to developing a feeling of belonging and ultimately to identify oneself with that place (May 2011). It is generally associated with feeling 'at home' (Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011; Cuba and Hummon 1993; Antonsich 2010a; Gifford and Wilding 2013). Belonging is created by familiarity to a place, emotional attachment and connection with the people, being recognized in a place by the people, sense of shared interests and values, having a voice and creating a space to speak, expressing their identity and being accepted with it, and feeling secure and fitting in the place (Gifford and Wilding 2013; May 2011; Antonsich 2010a; 2010b; Anthias 2008; Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2003; Cuba and Hummon 1993; Valentine, Sporton, and Nielsen 2009; Yuval-Davis 2006).

Refugees, not only leave their homes behind like other migrants, but they are also forced to leave them, and (re)building a new sense of place is a challenging process. A refugee's belonging to the host country is associated with his or her lived experiences in it (Chow 2007). Dromgold-Sermen (2020) put security as a central dimension and mechanism of belonging for newcomers and introduced the concept of secure-belonging which illuminates processes of inclusion and exclusion among forced migrants. The place where refugees settle does not automatically deliver a new sense of home, a home is not just a shelter; it is a place that offers physical security, a sense of self, and inclusion (Boer 2015). The feeling of being at home consists of daily social practices and social networks that provide the feeling of living in a familiar environment (Taylor 2013).

Maintaining a sense of belonging is multifaceted, multilayered, and relational, emphasizing the importance of local contexts where belonging emerges and that daily experiences are based on (Huizinga and van Hoven 2018), at different velocities and different trajectories (Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015). Studies have shown that belonging depends on the situation, context, and time. For instance, the character of the neighborhood (Visser 2020; Isakjee 2016), or the size of a city (Liempt and Staring 2020) might affect the feeling of belonging among youths from migrant/refugee backgrounds. Moreover, the meaning of belonging for refugees can change within time (Colic-Peisker 2005). While the emotional place-belongingness may arouse a feeling of

inclusion, the politics of belonging might cause exclusion by marking the borders between us and them (Isakjee 2016). The individuals living in the space, the opportunity structures depending on the physical and social environment, and the sociocultural elements of local communities are defined as the variations in a context (Robinson 2010). Moreover, place-belongingness is also shaped by (mis)recognition and (negative) labeling by others (Liempt and Staring 2020). Thus, a place can create belonging with the feeling of comfort, ease, intimacy, relaxation, security; conversely, it might construct a sense of marginalization and estrangement (Mallett 2004).

Discourses of the university campus as a place are multiple and contradictory, a campus can be a tolerant and diverse space or a discriminatory and exclusionary one (Hopkins 2011). Morrice (2013) emphasizes that the meaning of being a refugee in higher education might be related to both belonging and exclusion depending on the diverse experiences of refugees. Universities and student status allow students to navigate in wider communities (Lefever 2012). Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020) suggested that Syrian refugee youths use the education space as a tool of navigating both their personal prospects and the expectations of an unfamiliar community to cope with the questions of belonging. Given the combination of emotional and economic burdens caused by being refugees, living in a completely different environment with different cultural norms and different academic setting, refugee youths' experiences in the university can be overwhelming (Joyce et al. 2010), and the university can be a culturally alienating place (Earnest et al. 2010; Hopkins 2011). On the other hand, the student identity provides qualifications in the host country, it helps in making friends, in advancing on language skills, and, most importantly, in having a sense of worth (Morrice 2013). Belonging or inclusion in the campus environment is related to the welcoming and comfortable atmosphere of the campus, the familiarity of the space, the feeling of being involved with activities and opportunities, the interaction with other students, and perceptions of being "a student" (Lefever 2012). When students perceive fewer differences between themselves and the others in the school place, and feel more comfort and tolerance in the place, they feel more belonging to the school community (Booker 2007).

While the majority of empirical studies on refugee students in higher education focus on refugees (re)settled in the global North, fewer studies focus on the experiences of other parts of the world or on protracted refugee situations (Ramsay and Baker 2019).

This paper contributes to the research gap by focusing on urban refugees facing protracted instability in the higher education system of a country neighboring the home country. It contributes to better understanding the multidimensional elements of a sense of belonging for refugee youths in a university context. Moreover, it attempts to remedy the lack of attention paid in much of the literature to the agency of students, by focusing on how they navigate and experience their belonging as a dynamic process in university space (Samura 2016). Belonging is a conceptual tool that allows the study of complex and dynamic connections between the self and the society (May 2011; Habib and Ward 2019), in this paper, it is used to examine how Syrian students negotiate belonging in the campus and in their everyday lives as university students. Previous studies in the Turkish context generally investigate Turkey's higher education policies for refugee youths by examining their experiences (Arar et al. 2020), especially challenges and opportunities in accessing education (Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Erdoğan 2017; Yıldız 2019). Specifically, this study aims to contribute by exploring how university spaces can provide Syrian refugee students a sense of belonging.

3.3. Methodology

The findings are based on the fieldwork that I conducted in Gaziantep University during the fall of 2019. In this study, the contextualization of experiences in a university space is the key to understanding how context influences experiences, determines social positioning, and also impacts daily activities (Korac 2009). The results of a qualitative case study like this are not meant to be representative; instead of drawing generalizations, the purpose of the study is to better explain how refugee students experience (un)belonging within the campus area (Lefever 2012). Presenting a small slice of reality (Korac 2009) is very useful for comprehending the process of navigating belonging from the point of view of refugee youths.

The research is based on a qualitative case study that combines semi-structured interviews and participant observation to examine the data within its specific context. I conducted 49 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Syrian university students, 26 male and 23 female. These students were enrolled in graduate and undergraduate programs in twenty-seven different departments of eleven faculties. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and English without the need for a translator, with the exception of two participants who preferred conducting the interviews in Arabic. For

these two students, I relied on the aid of a translator, who was also a Syrian university student and friend of the interviewees, which facilitated an atmosphere of trust between the participants and the translator. In one of these interviews, the presence of the translator made the interview more structured, which may have given the interviewee less space than the others to define herself with her own meanings. In cases where both English and Turkish were spoken by the interviewee, English was usually the preferred language because some participants sought to use the opportunity to practice English. Moreover, I preferred to use English as a way of balancing the power relationships, since it is also not my native language (whereas Turkish is my native language but not that of the interviewees). Semi-structured interviews that focus on personal experiences in the university space and personal experiences in daily life with their student identity allow Syrian students to talk about themselves, their lives and their experiences (Anthias 2002). During the interviews, the concept 'belonging' often came through the interviewees' narratives.

In addition to the interviews of the main actors (Syrian youths), 9 interviews were conducted with university and scholarship program staff members who have been closely interacting with Syrian students. These interviews help fill a gap that has been noted in the literature in terms of the inclusion of voices of those involved in serving refugees (Arar, 2020). Their contribution to sharing their insights and presenting information makes it possible to provide another viewpoint related to the perspectives of the key actors in space and to deeply understand to what degree they are (not) accepted by the campus.

The participants were chosen through non-random snowball sampling. Initially, I contacted a very diverse group including Syrian, local and international university students, and academic and administrative staff to identify different channels and networks through which to reach the participants; I used those channels to start the 'snowballs', seeking diversity in the respondent selection to provide narratives. I took into consideration criteria including ethnic identity, gender, degree level (undergraduate, master or PhD), department, and language of instruction of their studies. That method allowed me to reach also those who are more invisible in the university spaces, such as those who do not spend time on campus because of their work and family responsibilities; or who do not become visible as Syrians on the campus. For instance,

with one PhD student who worked and had family responsibilities, we had to reschedule our interviews several times, because of her lack of free time on the campus.

The participants were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study, their role, the full anonymity, and the voluntariness of participation. My contact information was also attached to the consent form to give them the possibility to contact me in case any question or doubt arose after the interview. Participant observation is essential to perceive the relationship of refugee youths with space because this approach gives an opportunity to interact with them in their everyday lives, to explore their diverse experiences and to have more in-depth perspectives to interpret the collected data (Jorgensen 2015). During the fieldwork period, I was a member of the campus as a visiting researcher, and I stayed in a student residence. This provided me access to campus areas. Being part of the space helped me create a trustful atmosphere during the interviews. They did not see me only as a researcher but also as a new member of their place.

My identity as 'young' and an 'international student in another country' offers me a partial insider status, while an outsider position is induced by my national Turkish identity. Since I am not part of the region of Gaziantep (I am from another part of Turkey), but aware of the Turkish context, they were able to feel comfortable sharing their (negative) experiences with regard to the local context. In addition, not being part of the Syrian community has been a benefit. One interviewee told me it is not very common to share experiences with someone from their culture since they all face similar things. Due to the lack of contact between host communities and home communities, they were willing to explain their stories to a young person from Turkey. Most interviewees treated me as a guest or a new member in their own place. For instance, they offered me coffee or tea, they offered to show me the campus and they gave me some tips about both the campus and the city. Interviewees freely shared their experiences with me regardless of their gender, but my gender was an asset as it helped me build a more relaxed environment when interviewing female participants. Only once, when I felt one male participant was not very comfortable when we were sitting alone together, I suggested that we conduct a walking interview. After walking a while, he was clearly more comfortable, and he was willing to share his experiences with me.

Wherever the participants felt more comfortable on campus, the interviews were conducted there. This not only gave them the opportunity to feel more comfortable, it also helped me identify in which places of the university they feel a greater sense of belonging and to see the university from their viewpoint and generate more place-specific details. Thanks to the time that I spent in the campus, I observed how they use and share the space with other students.

3.4. Gaziantep University as a Welcoming Space for Refugee Youths

The main reasons for choosing to carry out the fieldwork in Gaziantep - a frontier city between Turkey and Syria - were the particular characteristics of Gaziantep University, and the high number of Syrian refugees in the city (more than half a million, representing 22% of the city population). Gaziantep is located next to the Syrian border, 97 kilometers north of Aleppo. Because of the geographical proximity and historical cultural and family ties, Gaziantep has become one of the main transit and destination towns for Syrian refugees. Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality has been described as ‘a successful example of a municipality improving migrants’ wellbeing and fostering social cohesion’ (IOM, 2018). In spite of the positive local governance approaches, there is minimal regular interaction between refugees and locals in the city where they live together (Gültekin 2019). In the research by Gültekin (2019, 2018), almost half of the Syrian interviewees claimed that they did not have any Turkish or local friends from Gaziantep, and analysis indicates that contact takes place mostly at work and in school environments.

The population of the university is approximately 45,000 students from which around 3,000 are Syrian students; this number also includes Syrian students enrolled in Arabic programs, Syrian students enrolled in the university campuses located in Syria and Syrian students who have acquired the Turkish citizenship. According to official data (YÖK 2020) there are 2,147 Syrian students; but this only takes into account Syrian students who study in Turkish or English programs at the campuses located in Turkey and whose nationality was Syrian when they enrolled. In addition to the Syrian students, approximately 900 international students from 90 different countries study in Gaziantep University.

The university has become the first in several aspects to widen the opportunities for Syrian young people who want to continue their higher education studies. It is the first university in Turkey with a campus in Syria, the first and only university that teaches in three languages, Turkish, English, and Arabic; and the first university to establish an Institute of Migration. Moreover, a group of students have started to publish a magazine in three languages –Turkish, Arabic and English- and an Arabic newspaper is being published with the support of the university. The campus landscape conveys the inclusion of Arabic, which is used as a third language in university posters, signboards, and notices. In addition to the main scholarship opportunities, the SPARK scholarship and the scholarship program of Gaziantep University provide more opportunities for Syrian students who study there. According to the international student office, forty percent of the Syrian students in the university benefit from a scholarship program. The scholarship programs not only support students with financial aid but also organize academic and professional courses, language courses and social-cultural activities targeting both Syrian and local students. Compared to other universities, Gaziantep University is described as well-equipped to cope with the increasing demand and need induced by the system's difficulty due to their knowledge of the Syrian education system, which is a consequence of geographical proximity and historical ties, and the university has established an 'inclusive and cooperative' implementation scheme (Ateşok, Çıtıptıoğlu, and Özer 2020). In the following section, I present the findings by applying the factors that Antonsich (2010a) highlights as contributing to generate individual feelings of place-belongingness.

3.5. Dichotomy Between Inside and Outside the University

Campus

The university campus as an enclosed space separated from the outside with walls and gates that can only be passed if one shows a university identity card. The spatial territory thus clearly defines insiders and outsiders (Lefebvre 1992). The space membership enables Syrian youths to be part of the university community and provides them with a space for future social connection, while at the same time empowering them with an education that improves their further prospects in the host country.

In order to be a university student and be a member of the university community, one needs to prove certain capabilities by passing examinations. Thus, starting with the

experience of physical insiderness, the sense of place belonging increases with time, and familiarity with the university environment increases.

‘I felt like a foreigner when I entered to the university for the first time. But now, after three years, I feel foreign outside, but I feel no longer as a foreigner in university.’ (25, female)

Belonging is multilayered and can be negotiated differently in different contexts; ‘the here’ has its multiple domains (Visser, 2017). When describing their life in the host city, the students I interviewed focused on the dichotomy that separates the space inside and outside the university campus. Some noted that since becoming students at the university, they have begun to feel part of the university, but not inherently part of the city, or country.

‘The university is better than the outside. I don’t feel I am a stranger here. We are very comfortable, everyone is comfortable.’ (24, male)

When they entered through the gate of the university, their otherness caused by their refugee status was getting blurred and it was substituted by their student identity. Universities are one of the educational places where the boundaries of belonging are blurred by youths from refugee backgrounds (Chopra and Dryden-Peterson, 2020). The fact that only members are allowed to enter the campus makes it a safer place, giving them a greater degree of independence, and the chance to be defined as students, blurring their refugee identities.

When discussing their sense of belonging, two dimensions emerged: (1) belonging to the university as being more accepted in the space, and (2) belonging as a result of their student identity.

3.5.1. Memories shaping the belonging to the university: ‘It is a kind of small town, our town.’

Some participants defined their feelings as anxiety or excitement the first time they entered the university, noting that everything was ‘new’ for them. Their achievement unveiled their agency and became a symbol of their capability. The feeling of controlling their own lives has an important role in how newcomers “do” belonging

(Liempt and Staring 2020) but on the other hand participants also found themselves in a place where they did not know the rules of the game. For some of the participants, the space has always been welcoming, but others have needed time to gain a practical sense of the space and enough familiarity to feel welcomed. Narratives of belonging based on personal stories and experiences have been explored in various dimensions proposed by the participants.

Belonging in the campus environment was related to the welcoming and comfortable atmosphere of the campus (Lefever 2012). The campus was experienced as more welcoming than the outside (with outside mainly meaning the rest of the city), owing to (1) the general climate of the university, more specifically its multicultural atmosphere, (2) the amount of time spent at university places, (3) the chance for friendship and being surrounded by peers, (4) 'student' identity becoming an alternative to the Syrian identity, and (5) being accepted as they are. Moreover, Turkish language skills were mentioned as an important determinant for feeling comfort and at ease.

'The climate of the university is so nice; it is like a small town where we can find everything. We take classes, study afterwards and eat dinner. We spend the whole day here, inside the campus. It is a kind of small town, our town...' (21, female)

The atmosphere of the campus gave the sense of a small town because of the ability to access lots of facilities and have the same opportunities as other students. Becoming familiar with the space appeared to be easier on the campus than outside, and this familiarity increased with time spent on campus.

'I feel belonging to university, but not to the city. (...) My home is always the university, inside the university. I only went to city center once in the one and half year, I spend my all time at the university.' (25, male)

Spending time on campus is a salient factor for generating a sense of place-belongingness. However, for the ones who had family and work responsibilities besides their studies, the time they spent at the university was limited:

‘I am working, studying and I am married and have a kid. I have no time. Whenever I come to the university, I am just studying alone in the library.’
(28, male)

Participants felt that the university celebrated diversity and that it was a space where everyone could find a place for themselves with their own identities. Feeling that they are not judged on the basis of their identities and being accepted in a diverse setting helps to increase refugee students’ sense of belonging (see Visser 2017). From my observations on campus, I could see that Arabic plays a role there, gaining more visibility on billboards and signs. Refugee students’ otherness or foreignness is blurred while passing through the campus from the outside. Participants told me they felt their otherness easily emerging in public places such as hospitals, bus stops, or markets, but not as much on the university campus. The campus was a more diverse and a multicultural space than the outside, including students from all over the world and from other cities. Thus, the student population is not divided only by Syrians and locals. An international student festival organized by the university was given as an example of how the diversity is celebrated on the campus:

‘In the University they do concerts and lots of activities. They organize a festival for international students. Dances, foods... Every country presents their own stuff. Syrian students take a part of it as well. It is so nice. Unforgettable, really! I have a lot of international friends here, from everywhere.’ (24, female)

When their Syrian identity was a part of this multicultural climate, and their voice could be heard and valued on equal terms as other students, independently of where they came from, Syrian youths felt more comfortable. The discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’ still existed on the campus, but it was not as sharp as outside. The participants almost always pointed out that university students were more open-minded and more used to sharing a space with foreigners, making interaction with Turkish students easier than in the city where they noticed that the people were not so open to diversity.

‘Inside of the university is different from outside. You feel closer to the people here (in the university). Educated people are less biased. Students are more

familiar with foreigners than other people. (...) Internally I don't feel I am foreign when I am in the university. But outside it is different.' (30, male)

3.6. Space for Social Communication: Social Ties and Cultural Dimensions

Relational factors play a central role in connecting individuals to given places (Antonsich, 2010a). The process is shaped by a dynamic dialectic of *seeking* and *granting* belonging (Skrbiš, Baldassar, and Poynting 2007). The experiences of being a part of the environment as a recognized and accepted member of the community increases the feeling of belonging (Anthias 2008), but prejudice and lack of social communication can make the university an alienating space (Earnest 2010). The value of membership in the university was discussed in every interview. Being surrounded by friends in the university space clearly contributed to a sense of belonging. Friends from students' own communities were generally defined as being closer or 'best friends' from whom they received support more often, and with whom they shared similar experiences and challenges. Friends from the local community were seen as key people for understanding the way things are done in the host society, and friends from other countries widened their world and enriched their perspectives. Participants often defined friendship and social networks as being the second most important benefit of being in the campus (the main benefit being described as learning a profession). Those who had more friends tended to feel more that the university space was their 'home', while those who struggled to make friends described a lesser feeling of belonging:

'...I don't have any memories in the university because I don't have any close friends here. I just want to finish my study to start my life.' (23, male)

University was also seen as a place where the borders between locals and Syrians could be diminished by sharing cultural similarities. Although encountering cultural proximity had a positive impact on their sense of belonging, some of them felt more belonging when experiencing these similarities with their local peers. It was used as a tool to integrate cultural and relational factors of belonging.

‘When both Turkish and Syrian students work together in group works, different and creative ideas emerge. For example, there was a group work, we were 3 Turkish, 2 Syrian students. We sang a song, half Turkish, half Arabic. In fact, it was a very good work in terms of showing similarities. Everyone liked it, they joined the song.’ (22, female)

When the students perceive less differences between themselves and the others, and feel more comfort and tolerance in the place, they feel more belonging (Booker, 2007). The definition of in and out groups have some varieties, not only for Syrians but also for locals, because the boundaries between them sometimes overlapped and got blurred in the city. For instance, a Syrian Turkmen shares the ethnic and linguistic identity with the Turkish students and might even have local relatives, but at the same time shares the nation, the homeland, and the ‘refugee’ identity with the rest of the Syrians. Religion is another element that causes this overlap. The vast majority of Syrian and Turkish students share the same religious identity which creates some similarity in their daily experiences. This stands in contrast to the experiences of Muslim migrant youths in western countries (Joyce et al. 2010; Mangan and Winter 2017; Morrice 2013). In addition, Syrians in Gaziantep find other Arabic speaking students, such as those from Egypt, Palestine, or Iraq, and thus experience some linguistic overlap. There are also other international students who have passed through the same examination and thus share the international student identity with Syrian students. As one can see, these multilayered identities make it hard to draw boundaries between in-group and out-group in this context. For this reason, the diverse experiences of creating social connections identified in this paper cannot be generalized.

3.6.1. Social connection with Syrian peers

The social network among Syrian students in Gaziantep began forming even before they entered the university, especially through social media. Social media was crucial and it was the preferable tool for them to access information and feel part of the community, sharing similar experiences in a new environment. The ones who started university more than four years ago, when there were fewer Syrian students, mentioned that they faced more problems due to the lack of this social support. Turkish language courses, activities, and trainings organized by scholarship programs targeting Syrian students

created more time and space for them to create friendships inside their community. Commonly their closest friends were Syrians, alternatively sometimes they differentiated Syrian friends depending on their ethnicity, mother language, hometown/region, or gender.

Syrian friends gave a sense of familiarity, they did not feel the need to explain who they were and where they came from. Nor, among their Syrian friends did they experience the prejudices they often experienced with locals. Commonly mentioned reasons explaining why Syrian youths have more Syrian friends were the lack of communication with local students, facing negative attitudes from the host community, and lack of need to make local friends due to the high number of Syrian students present in the campus.

‘If we didn’t have such a Syrian community here, we might have more Turkish friends.’ (24, male)

On the other hand, for some of them building trust and friendship with other Syrians did not seem easy because of their personal experiences and the polarization caused by Syria’s ongoing civil war. One interviewee mentioned the situation as an obstacle to making Syrian friends and a reason to have better relationship with Turkish colleagues at university:

‘I have both Turkish and Syrian friends. I become friends with everyone. But there can be some problems, conflicts among Syrians, because of the differences on opinions. So, it is easier for me to get on with the Turks.’ (25, male)

3.6.2. Social connections with local students

The importance of having local friends to establish their sense of belonging came up in almost all of the interviews. The main reasons participants gave for why having local friends was important were: (1) giving them the possibility to change the (generally) negative image of Syrian refugees, (2) being accepted as an ordinary student coming from an extraordinary situation, (3) improving both their language skills and cultural knowledge, (4) helping them learn how to communicate with overall Turkish society, and (5) obtaining support for classes and for their overall adaptation. University was a

space where the social distance decreased, and that was the starting point for changing the stereotyped Syrian image. Before the more functional and practical aims of having local friends, the first motivations or positive outcomes were changing the image of Syrian refugees and being accepted as a friend without emphasizing their identity as a Syrian refugee.

‘One of them (Turkish friends) said that ‘I used to not like Syrians, when we first met, I did not know where you were from. We became friends, when you said to me you were from Syria, you changed my ideas about those people. I am very sorry to have that idea before.’ Maybe there are some bad people from Syria here, but there are also good people. (...) Now, we are friends with Turkish students, I am a friend of them. I want to show that there is no problem, and we are also normal people. (Laughing). It is not something too strange, is it? (...) I am always smiling, trying to talk with people. Because I want to show that we are good people.’ (24, female)

They wanted to be accepted as who they were, and to find a place for themselves with their own identities. If this was not possible, they just wanted not to be visible; becoming like locals, not looking or feeling like Syrians. In their study of Syrians displaced in Lebanon, Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020) suggest that youths ‘feel forced to shift or hide their identities’ due to the boundaries that ‘allow no space for them as Syrians in Lebanon’. For the students I interviewed, feeling like a Syrian meant for them feeling as an outsider, a foreigner, or being excluded from the space; they only wanted to feel like any other university student. They had the dilemma between openly sharing their identity and making their identity invisible as Syrian refugees, which carried a victimized and vulnerable image that they did not want to be labelled with. One interviewee explained why she felt comfortable with a group of Turkish friends whom she met in a cultural activity:

‘They have never asked me: where are you from, why did you come here, or do you plan to return back? They accepted me as who I am.’ (20, female)

Belonging is about the experience of becoming part of the environment; being accepted as part of the community and feeling secure in the environment of the community's membership (Anthias 2008). They could make local friends especially in

classrooms, in extracurricular activities, and in accommodations such as student residences and shared student flats. When they shared places and they overcame the language barrier, communication started; but they frequently pointed out that each group preferred staying with their own friends (from their own community), and not taking steps to become closer to one another. This theme was also commented on to me by local students with whom I had informal talks. Once I was with a group of Syrian female students and one of them (a third-year student) said to me with a smile on her face:

‘We greet with our Turkish friends, but there is no sincerity between us. You are the only Turk who I sit and talk with, I am very happy. Such a good thing that you came and talk with us.’ (21, female)

Even though she stated that there was always friendliness between her and her Turkish peers, she affirmed that during the three years that she had been in the university, she had not had a real conversation with them. At the campus, where they shared space with their peers, small gestures were not enough for them, they looked for closer friendships.

For creating a friendship, Turkmen origin Syrian students often mentioned the shared language as a crucial advantage that differentiates their experiences from Syrians who do not have Turkish descent. In addition to language, their Turkish origin names and their appearances (not visibly different from locals) also contributed to their ease in forming friendships with locals:

‘My name is A. (a Turkish name), I am of Turkish origin. Maybe half of my class does not know that I am Syrian. (...) They were very surprised when they found out that I was a foreign student, they could not believe it. I don't feel a stranger, just the same as everyone feels.’ (19, female)

Turkish students are also a very diverse group that includes different ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities. A study that focuses on the sense of belonging of Kurdish students in Turkey's universities suggests that maintained differences or otherness in Turkish university campus spaces affects the sense of belonging because of the subtle forms of exclusion caused by these differences (Pembe, 2011). A common theme that appeared while talking about their Turkish friends was that the more

marginalized groups or “the others” among Turkish peers (such as the Kurdish students or those coming from eastern cities) were more supportive and understanding towards the Syrians; and local peers coming from more cosmopolitan cities, such as Istanbul and Ankara, were more welcoming than the students originally from Gaziantep:

‘At the beginning it was very difficult to make friends, but now I have many Turkish friends. The people who helped me the most, are those locals who also feel excluded. Especially those coming from the east, they are more sympathetic to our situation.’ (25, male)

‘There are people from different cities and different countries within the university. I have friends from other Turkish cities, they are very good and very understanding. For example, they are from Ankara and Istanbul. (...) They are looking at us as humans, we became friends.’ (28, female)

University was a space where young people from all over the country gathered together, Syrian youths interacted with their Turkish peers from other cities apart from Gaziantep, and thereby they perceived the diversity of the host country.

Social networking with locals at the university occurred both vertically and horizontally (Ryan et al. 2008). In addition to the connection with Turkish students, as a horizontal social connection, particularly graduate students often described close contacts with their supervisors or professors as friendships. That vertical relation was also essential to their feeling a part of the university community, and also helped creating other network channels to carry their sense of belonging from inside the university to outside. Even though they had some negative experiences, the overall positive and supportive attitudes of university faculty and staff towards the Syrian students, and the presence of Arabic speaking university personnel have encouraged the sense that they are part of the campus. For instance, one participant explained how her professor did not accept a discriminatory speech voiced by a local student in the classroom. The role of university personnel who are also important constituents of the university space is also a key dimension in the space.

3.6.3. Place to face 'less' prejudice

Campus was regularly described as a space with less prejudice than outside. At the same time, the campus creates a space for interactions in which Syrian students were still confronted with exclusionary attitudes and prejudice. Prior research has suggested that locals in Turkey with higher education level have a tendency to value cultural diversity more and to show less prejudice to Syrians (Keleş et al. 2016). According to the interviewees, the university students showed less prejudice than the locals of the city, which made Syrian students feeling greater belonging in the campus space.

The discriminatory attitudes they faced daily were formed by generalization and faulty assumptions. Generalization is based on thinking out-group members hold those aspects to be disliked or judged as inferior; and faulty assumptions might be the conflict between cultures or functionalist arguments that are shaped by economic burdens and competitor discourses (Bello 2017). The generalization was based on being liked or disliked because of their identity, it was very common to hear '*despite the fact that I am Syrian, they like me*' from Syrians or '*despite the fact that they are Syrian, I like them*' during the informal talks with the local students.

The functionalist arguments were shaped by images of refugees as people who depend on aids and burden the host country:

'Sometimes they mention about us as the oppressed Syrians, then I don't feel good. There are oppressed people everywhere, in here as well. I don't want to hear such things all the time. This is the first time I'm talking about my experiences with someone. I don't like talking about Syria.' (24, male)

They were aware of the perception of Syrians as victimized or marginalized others, for some participants this caused them to prefer not to be associated with Syrian refugee identity and to cover up their identity (see Colic-Peisker 2005). Also, the functionalist arguments were formed with the competitor discourse in labor market, especially targeting the university students who hold a university diploma and speak several languages. The perceived inequality on support policies by local students, for instance scholarship opportunities aiming specifically Syrian students, caused tension between students (Arar et al. 2020). Furthermore, the faulty assumptions focused on their university entrance process such as '*they enter university without any exam*' or '*all*

Syrian students have a scholarship', and Syrian students mentioned they were seen as competitors and faced subtle prejudice on a daily basis:

'You can feel prejudices inside the university, even if they do not say anything to your face, you can feel it somehow. (...) There is 'an image' that is hard to change. Once one guy told me "you are entering our universities without passing an exam and with low grades". Saçma (Ridiculous)! I said "listen, we have to do a lot of things to enter, we passed several exams". He was surprised, but I think he did not believe what I explained. The general image of Syrians negatively affects me; it seems we, Syrians, are not human beings.' (21, female)

Despite encountering negative experiences, shared identity - the new inclusive 'we' category as a university student- has a positive effect on reducing prejudice (Lazarev and Sharma 2017). However, almost all interviewees mentioned that they or their friends faced prejudices in their daily experiences both inside and outside the university. Prejudice discourses affected the relational factors of their sense of belonging negatively and made them reluctant to take steps to make local friends. On the other hand, they stated that to correct the false facts, to decrease prejudices and hence to break 'the image' of Syrian refugees, they needed more opportunities to meet and to share places with their Turkish colleagues; because some found that when they got to know each other's stories, empathy could break the walls between them.

When Syrian students felt an equal part of the space through activities, events, or classes, in other words, when they did not feel the discourse of 'us' and 'them', or when they felt being a part of a multicultural settings where diversity is celebrated (such as international students festival, or multicultural club activities), they felt more belonging. On the other hand, when they faced the discourse of marginalized Syrian refugees in any events or in any interaction with their local peers, hence, when they did not feel they were an equal part of the event, they felt less belonging. Moreover, the participants emphasized that university students are also very diverse, coming from different parts of Turkey and the world, and due to that diversity, overall, they faced less prejudice in the campus.

The participants' way of defining the university campus is shaped by contradictory discourses as inclusionary and as exclusionary (Hopkins 2011), however compared with the outside campus, in general, they defined the campus as a more inclusionary place where they feel belonging. As I discussed in the previous section, contradictory discourses of exclusion and inclusion interact also in the campus, however once they crossed the gate of the university, they entered a space where they had an equal university student status in a more multicultural space that blurred the exclusive discourses.

3.7. From Refugees to University Students

In addition, besides the prejudice reduction effect of the inclusive student identity, sharing the same identity with local peers made their refugee identity less highlighted and gave their normality back (Zeus 2011; Dryden-Peterson 2012). The fact of having the same opportunities and facilities as local students, and having the same status and rights gave them the feeling of being a part of the university community.

‘Normally we are Syrian, they (local people) think we cannot make things like them. They look differently. But in the class, we are a kind of family, they do not look differently to me. I feel so comfortable, and it motivates me (smiling).’ (22, female)

The university student identity also provided other advantages outside the campus; lower living costs due to student discounts in transportation and in cultural activities, low-cost student accommodation options, more freedom of movement, and greater comfort in public places. The university identity cards which included their pictures and ID numbers were used as an alternative identity card in their daily lives in place of their temporary protection identity cards, which they found caused negative attitudes towards them. Moreover, in Turkey, Syrians with temporary protection status need official travel permission in order to travel from one city to another, but students indicated that their students' IDs helped them obtain this permission more easily.

In addition to these practical advantages, the most mentioned theme was the value of being a university student. Student identity increased acceptance and respect in their daily lives off campus:

‘Being a university student gives us more respect in the public. They see us as cultured and understanding people. Although I am Syrian, they accept me more and treat me better. They say that you are a university student, you are studying and trying.’ (28, female)

A 19-year-old female participant mentioned that she felt proud carrying her university books on public transportation. Carrying huge academic books was a way to protect herself from prejudice and to increase positive attitudes to her. The books were a symbol of her university student identity that demonstrated her capability and her effort to empower herself. She, and most of the other interviewees, explained that the image of self-sustaining individuals they created with their university student identity was very effective in order to eliminate the image of victimized and needy refugees. Locals’ acceptance towards refugee youths owing to the university student identity was emphasized as an essential factor to expand the sense of belonging beyond the university space. University and student status allow students to participate in wider communities and to establish a sense of belonging (Lefever 2012).

Finally, many interviewees saw the university as a space where they could become more equipped for their future by learning how to navigate their belonging in the host country.

‘I belong to this university because I started to understand and to belong outside of it because of the university, through its networks, experiences and friends I made in the university.’ (24, female)

3.8. Empowerment

The aim of this research is not to explore the economic factors connected with the skills gained in higher education, but it is also impossible to overlook how students understand their economic empowerment while navigating their place-belongingness. Higher Education can be both a means to refugee empowerment and a form of empowerment (Zeus 2011). The diploma was identified as the most important outcome from the university because it opens doors to the professionalized labor market. Students defined their empowerment through higher education in terms of (1) getting a diploma, which was understood as a tool to gain a place for themselves as strong agents in both home and host society, (2) developing their communication skills in the host

country, (3) improving their language skills, especially Turkish, and (4) gaining various professional skills from trainings organized by the university and scholarship programs. The sense of achievement that results from completing studies in higher education and being able to participate economically and socially can have a positive impact on sense of belonging (see Eltokhy 2020).

3.9. Legal Factors: Stability and Citizenship

The relationship between the integration process and citizenship status of Syrian refugee youths is a wider subject that I explore in a separate paper, but a few considerations are relevant to the present investigation. In particular, higher education offers an exceptional pathway for Syrian youths to Turkish citizenship. Studying in higher education serves as a proof of cultural capital and a marker of likely future contributions to Turkey, and a number of Syrian students have been invited to apply for citizenship because of their university student identity. Some of the interviewees had already obtained Turkish citizenship and some of them were in the process of getting it during the fieldwork period. Nonetheless, very few interviewees mentioned about their citizenship status or applications while explaining their education stories, and the topic did not come up until I asked specifically about it. It could be read that citizenship is not associated with place-belongingness in the campus, but it can be investigated in the more general framework of the politics of belonging in the host country.

The right to access citizenship due to student identity differentiated students from other Syrians for whom the naturalization process is largely closed. There was general agreement that citizenship enables students to better plan their future and provides stability in their lives, but the ways students understood citizenship as a tool of belonging were diverse. Apart from citizenship, student status also provides more residential security. This was mentioned by a master's student, who did not have citizenship, as an important aspect for stability:

‘Student identity is important for me. Now I will stay here until my master degree finishes. I feel safe for two years. Even if the political situation changes, I am student and I can stay here till the end of my study.’ (30, male)

Security enhances participants' belonging, while insecurity causes questioning their sense of belonging (Dromgold-Sermen 2020). In addition to facilitating access to citizenship or residential security, having the university student status is an essential dimension of Syrian youths' feelings of security and also a symbolic status that brings greater social acceptance by locals.

3.10. Conclusion

This qualitative research using a refugee-centered approach aimed to illuminate how a sense of belonging is experienced and navigated by Syrian youths in their everyday lives in campus-space. The findings suggest various factors – autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal (Antonsich 2010a) - through which experiences in the campus space predominantly facilitate their sense of belonging. However, some of the narratives indicate negative experiences and a weaker sense of belonging through the same factors. The diversity and commonalities of their belonging experience suggest, in line with previous studies, that belonging is a nuanced and complex process (Anthias 2016; 2013; 2008; Isakjee 2016; Valentine, Sporton, and Nielsen 2009; Lefever 2012).

Syrian students, for the most part, navigate their sense of belonging at the same time in and out of campus as university students. That has an effect on their belonging process on the campus. They mentioned facing negative rhetoric and discrimination most frequently outside the campus, and their exclusion as Syrian refugees is marked more strongly in the city community where the population is more homogeneous than the university. Compared to their experiences in the city, they feel more place-belonging on the campus owing to the diverse and relatively more inclusive atmosphere. Further studies are needed to provide a more in-depth interpretation of the relationships between the two spaces.

My findings suggest that time is a factor which can facilitate and impedes the sense of belonging. As they spend more time on campus, which gives more chances to have more memories, through engagement in different events and activities, forming connections and enjoying a more welcoming and multicultural environment, students become active members of the space. In this way, their sense of home grows on the campus. Nonetheless, some participants who work full-time and have more family

commitments spend less time on campus, which has a negative effect on their campus belongingness.

Campus space normalizes refugees' lives as students, and the experiences they collect of a multicultural and accepting environment make them feel emotionally and socially part of the university community (Anthias 2008; 2013). Auto-biographical factors and social experiences shaped by space (Anthias, 2013) are essential for the participants to increase their sense of belonging. Their emotional place-belongingness is shaped by the accepting and welcoming atmosphere of the campus, yet the politics of belonging, which defines who locals and Syrians are, can negatively affect their belongingness (Isakjee 2016).

Social ties on the campus, as relational factors, have a strong impact on Syrian students' place-belongingness. Their Syrian friends with whom they spend more time offer support and familiarity on campus; ties with Turkish peers are understood as a way of bridging with the Turkish community by changing Syrians' victimized profile, learning about the rules of the game in Turkey's everyday life, and also obtaining support for academic and social adaptation. The interactions between Turkish and Syrian students in this research are varied due to the diverse profiles of both groups. The diversity blurs the boundary of the politics of belonging.

Prejudice they experience on campus induced by generalization and functionalist claims hinders their sense of belonging. They did, however, note that they experience less discrimination on campus than off campus. This seems to be the result of the diversity in the space and the higher educational level of members of the space. As a result, some participants stressed the importance of making Turkish friends to eliminate and alleviate the prejudice. In this way, their sense of belonging increases.

In this diverse space, what Syrian students are largely searching for is a place for their identity rather than cultural similarity. Nonetheless, some use shared cultural attributes to find greater belonging with their local peers. Shared ethnic identity (especially among Turkmen Syrians), and knowledge of Turkish language are cultural factors that reinforce their sense of belonging.

Belonging is about formal and informal forms of identification with the others, but also about the space constructed by these identifications (Anthias 2008). Benefiting

equally from the rights and resources of both the campus and student status has been essential in the place belongingness of the Syrian students I interviewed. Moreover, student status offers practical benefits in the city, most notably, they have experienced more recognition and respect in public spaces by blurring the victimized image of the refugee with their new identities as empowered university students.

They experience a sense of achievement by accessing higher education and being empowered by learning technical and practical skills, with the possibility of further empowerment in the labor market. The participants see student status as a legal factor facilitating their residential security or opening the path to citizenship. Further studies are needed to explore how refugee youths who receive higher education in a host country navigate their sense of belonging beyond the campus, after graduation, focusing on the effects of economic and legal factors.

The Syrian youth who participated in this study have a greater sense of belonging to campus space relative to the spaces they encounter outside campus. Yet some of them also have negative experiences on campus and a weaker sense of belonging to campus. Diverse experiences depend on the time spent on campus, which is influenced by family and job commitments, the diversity of ethnic identities among Syrian youth and among locals and, ultimately, differences in their level of language proficiency. The university offers them a space to construct their sense of belonging and to feel at home, but at the same time, a space that can intensify their marginalization (Joyce et al. 2010; Hopkins 2011; Earnest et al. 2010), depending on their personal and relational circumstances and experiences.

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4. SYRIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ASPIRATIONS AND THE ACQUISITION OF TURKISH CITIZENSHIP

Abstract

The study contributes to the literature by shedding light on the perspective of Syrian refugee university students in the acquisition of Turkish citizenship. The exceptional naturalization option in Turkey's nationality law has opened the door to Turkish citizenship for Syrians who live in Turkey under temporary protection and have either economic or cultural capital. Syrian refugees who are continuing their higher education in Turkey constitute one of the main groups affected by that option to be naturalized. This article uses a 'bottom-up' strategy, focusing on the meaning of citizenship from the refugees' perspective and its relation to their future prospects. This paper asks to what extent having Turkish citizenship shapes the aspirations of Syrian youth regarding their intentions to stay in or move from Turkey. It is based on 49 interviews conducted with Syrian university students in Gaziantep during the fall of 2019. The paper shows the variety of aspirations held by Syrian refugee university students after acquiring Turkish citizenship. I find that Turkish citizenship is valued both as a source of stability to secure rights in Turkey, and as a passport that makes it possible to move to other countries (generally in Europe) through regular means. Among the people I interviewed, however, the first view predominates, as most intend to remain in Turkey.

4.1. Introduction

Turkey is an important site for studying forced migration and integration, as it is now host to the largest number of refugees in the world. The country hosts more than 3.6 million displaced Syrians (UNHCR, 2020), to whom it gives temporary protection status; in total, approximately 4.5 million migrants lived in Turkey in 2020 (DGMM, 2020). Even though Turkey has long been a country of immigration and asylum, it has been known as a country of emigration and, during the last decades, as a transit country for irregular migrants to the European Union (Kirişçi, 2003). The flow of Syrian migrants entering Turkey changed Turkey's migration profile, making it evident that a new legal framework and new migration policies were needed.

When the first Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey, they were labeled as ‘guests’ by the Turkish government, signaling the temporary nature of their stay, their exclusion from Turkey’s interpretation of the refugee definition (which Turkey applies only to people fleeing Europe), and the goal of their eventual return to their country. Syrians continue their lives in Turkey under a temporary protection regime allowing them to stay in Turkey based on the non-refoulement principle, to access services, and to meet their basic rights. Nine years have passed since they were welcomed as ‘guests’ and they are still holding only temporary status. This liminal status does not lead to either access to citizenship or refugee status, bringing insecurity to their lives. This temporary status and insecurity undermine their integration process in Turkey and in some cases makes Syrians rather risk their lives trying to reach Europe than stay in Turkey (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). Considering the sociological realities of the past nine years, the policy on Syrians has to be revisited with more permanent solutions, because this temporariness may lead to social cost in the future (Erdoğan 2020).

In 2016 the temporary status discourse started to change; President Erdoğan announced that some Syrians would be granted citizenship (Hürriyet, 2016). Announcing that Turkish citizenship would be granted to Syrian refugees was a very important step. Because offering Turkish citizenship to Syrians shows that they are no longer “guests,” they can become long-term, or even permanent, full members of the community (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). It is important to highlight that priority is given to those with cultural and economic capital (Pace and Şimşek 2019), raising concerns about a ‘class-based integration’ (Şimşek 2018). Providing citizenship for the ones with cultural capital is understood as a way to ensure highly educated Syrians stay in Turkey, instead of moving to Europe, and to secure their contribution to the Turkish economy (TBMM, 2018). In 2019, almost 110 thousand Syrians were granted citizenship in Turkey (TCBB, 2019), according to the Interior Minister half of these Syrians were children, and the other half were mostly teachers, engineers, and qualified people who could build their lives in Turkey (Euronews, 2019).

More than half of the Syrians in Turkey are children or young people (DGMM, 2020), and the average age of Syrian population is 22,6 (Mülteciler 2020). In view of developments linked to the citizenship policy and given the high proportion of young people among the Syrian population in Turkey, higher education at Turkish universities could become a road to citizenship for them. They can (re)gain their cultural capital by

studying in higher education institutions, and by gaining cultural capital they can step up their naturalization process in Turkey. As one of the major focus groups for this new citizenship policy, it is important to consider the perspectives and future plans of highly educated Syrian young people in Turkey.

There is little research on the issues of refugee and citizenship policy exploring the perspective of refugees and immigrants, the meanings they attach to citizenship or their experiences of naturalization (Birkvad 2019; Stewart and Mulvey 2014), and this research gap is evident in Turkey (Kadirbeyoğlu and Çınar 2016), albeit with some exceptions (Erdoğan 2020; Rottmann 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020). This study addresses the gap by exploring the Syrian university students' reasons for acquiring Turkish citizenship and their potential prospects after acquiring it.

Some studies suggest that many Syrians under temporary protection do not see Turkey as their final destination, and that they desire to move from Turkey, mainly to Europe, because of their liminal temporary protection status (Baban et al. 2017; Şimşek 2018); on the other hand, other studies show that in spite of all the problems they face in their everyday lives because of their in-between status, their initial preference is to stay in Turkey because of the cultural and religious proximity to Syria (Rottmann 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Kaya 2017). This may be especially true for those who have acquired citizenship (Yıldız and Uzgören 2016). It is important to understand the meaning of Turkish citizenship from the Syrian university students' perspective and how the acquisition of citizenship shapes their future plans and aspirations. This paper tries to understand their meanings of citizenship and their motivations for obtaining Turkish citizenship shaped by their future aspirations; and to answer if the acquisition of Turkish citizenship is understood or experienced as the foundation or a tool of integration in Turkey; or if it is a way to move from Turkey to Europe. The objective of the paper is to respond to the contextualized question that focuses on the case study: (1) what meanings do Syrians studying in Turkish universities attach to Turkish citizenship?, and (2) to what extent does having Turkish citizenship shape their aspirations?

The study suggests that the acquisition of Turkish citizenship brings a security and stability that helps make Turkey a country for Syrian young people in where they can seek their future, or to where they can return back after staying temporarily in a

third country. On the other hand, for some of them citizenship is not enough to make them stay in Turkey. Without more employment opportunities or the feeling of belonging to Turkey, Turkey might be solely seen as a transit country and the Turkish passport might be a ticket to a legal journey to Europe or a tool to create a safe and secure life until the day they can return back to Syria.

I briefly review the Turkish citizenship framework in light of the processes for Syrian refugees, and the meaning of citizenship from the refugees' point of view. After explaining the methodology of this study, I will discuss the findings from the fieldwork shedding light on the refugee youth's understanding of citizenship and their future aspirations regarding the acquisition of citizenship, and lastly, I will summarize a discussion.

4.2. Turkish Citizenship for Syrians

The development of a citizenship concept as a main element of the nation-building process was central to the foundation of Turkish Republic (İçduygu, Çolak and Soyarık 1999). The Turkish constitution and its concept of citizenship was inspired by the French model, meaning that Turkish citizenship is considered to be a legal and political status for Turkish residents of both Turkish and non-Turkish ethnic origin (Yeğen, 2004). Thus, the formal definition of citizenship and national identity is linked to territory, rather than ethnicity, but nonetheless the state's practices of citizenship emphasize a preference for Turkish ethnicity and language, and Sunni Muslim identity (Kirişçi 2000; Yeğen 2004). These state practices are reflected in the pattern of immigration policies in Turkey.

One important and determining factor that has shaped the pattern of immigration and refugee policies of Turkey is who the state has felt most at ease with (Kirişçi 2000). Migrants of Turkish descent and culture including Muslims coming from the post-Ottoman territories have been more welcomed than others in Turkey (Kirişçi 2000). In the 1990s, the increased visibility of non-Turks and non-Muslim identities triggered a denationalization process, which accelerated when Turkey became a formal candidate for membership of the EU in 1999 (Kadioğlu 2007). With the new policy adopted by the Turkish state, the privileged position of Turkish origin immigrants has weakened, and the discourse of 'consanguinity' has lost its visibility (Danış and Parla 2009). Turkish

citizens' notion of citizenship is also impacted by the state's practices. Approximately one-third of the Turkish population places importance on religious unity, another third views traditions and culture as common bonds of citizenship to connect people, and only one in five thinks that a bond of citizenship is formed through binding laws (Kadioğlu, Keyman and Çakmaklı 2016).

As Turkey becomes increasingly a country of immigration, the acquisition of Turkish citizenship for foreigners who settle in Turkey has become a subject of debate. Apart from the dominance of ethno-cultural notion of citizenship, the current legal framework is generally in line with relatively inclusionary policies (Kadirbeyoğlu and Çınar 2016). According to the Turkish Citizenship Law (2009), migrants who have been resident in Turkey for five years can acquire citizenship if they have the intention to settle in Turkey, speak Turkish at an adequate level, and fulfill certain other requirements. However, eligibility requires refugee status or long-term resident status, neither of which are provided by the temporary protection status Turkey affords to displaced Syrians (TPR, 2014). This cul-de-sac on the way to a more permanent status is very challenging, especially when it is recognized that some of the 3.6 million Syrians will end up remaining in Turkey permanently (Erdoğan, 2020).

In July 2016, President Erdoğan declared that Turkey would give citizenship to Syrians. Later on, the target groups for the naturalization were narrowed to those with economic and cultural capital (TBMM, 2018). Offering the Turkish citizenship to Syrian refugees shows the policy change of accepting that Syrians are no longer guests and some of them will stay permanently in Turkey (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). On the other hand, negative reactions of locals towards the naturalization of Syrians grew after President Erdoğan's statement (Atasü-Topçuoğlu 2019; Bozdağ 2019). A report prepared by the Assembly of Turkey Human Rights Investigation Commission highlights that the news of granting citizenship to a significant part of the Syrians in Turkey does not represent the reality, and that a very few percentages of Syrians can acquire citizenship based on their cultural or economic capital (TBMM, 2018). A recent survey of Turkish citizens shows that 76.5 percent of participants were against giving Turkish citizenship to Syrians, and during the past years, when over 100 thousand Syrians acquired citizenship, the negative reaction from locals increased (Erdoğan 2020). The same research (2020) shows locals have a more positive attitude towards

those Syrians who are ‘well-educated’, ‘born in Turkey’, ‘ethnically Turkmen’, ‘able to speak Turkish’, or ‘young’.

There are several ways for Syrians to acquire Turkish citizenship: 1) by birth if a child is born to a Turkish mother or of a Turkish father; 2) by marrying a Turkish citizen, 3) by having Turkish descent, and 4) through an exceptional citizenship option for those bringing economic or cultural capital to Turkey. Syrians can acquire Turkish citizenship within the ‘exceptional citizenship’ framework with ‘an invitation’ depending on their socio-cultural-economic capital such as their language, education, professional experience, and talent (Cantürk, 2020). It is important to highlight that this option is open only by invitation. This exceptional citizenship option causes a ‘class-based integration’ favoring those refugees who make investments and who are skilled; and there is much uncertainty in terms of who can apply and what are the requirements and conditions to obtain it (Pace and Şimşek 2019; Şimşek 2018). This study focuses on the meaning of citizenship for highly educated Syrian university students who are able to obtain it through the exceptional citizenship option.

This study focuses on university students whom the new Turkish citizenship policies are aimed at and most of the interviewees had already obtained Turkish citizenship or were in the process of obtaining it. This population is unique in having the option to acquire Turkish citizenship; most Syrians living under temporary protection in Turkey do not have this option.

4.3. Refugee Meanings of Citizenship

Citizenship is defined as "full membership of the community, with all its rights and obligations," according to Marshall's theory of citizenship (Marshall 1950). Marshall's understanding of citizenship assumes that modern communities are ethnically, culturally, and otherwise homogeneous; and that the only variety is that of social classes and establishing a common citizenship basis may overcome this diversity (Turner 1997; Turner 1986). Turner (1997) challenged his definition of citizenship and emphasized the importance of citizenship studies in the context of globalization and human rights. He emphasizes that citizenship regulates access to society's limited resources and citizenship maintains the solidarity in society; and he defines citizenship “as a collection of rights and obligations which give individuals a formal legal identity” (Turner 1997:

5). Thus, citizenship is a formal state membership with equal rights and duties within the citizenry (Joppke 2007).

The definition and meaning of citizenship are various because of its contextualized and contested nature (Lister, 2003). In this study citizenship represents a form of membership in a political and geographical community with four dimensions: status, rights, participation, and identity (Bloemraad 2017). Citizenship stands for inclusion within a political community, but to outsiders it means exclusion (Bosniak 2006). The boundaries of citizenship driven by the politics of belonging separate the world population into 'us' and 'them' (Yuval-Davis 2006). However, citizenship is no more than a tangle of identity, rights, responsibilities, and political activity that binds people to a single nation-state (Bauböck 2019).

For migrants, first, citizenship means the grant to access to the territory of the state as well as protection from deportation, by this grant citizenship ensures access to a specific job market, social environment, legal system, and political institutions (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). Bloemraad (2006) suggests that acquisition of citizenship in the host country confers membership, rights, and participation opportunities, and that this might encourage a sense of belonging. The notion of citizenship for newcomers is understood as a tool for promoting integration or as a reward for successful integration (Smyth, Stewart, and Da Lomba 2010), thus citizenship can either facilitate or confirm integration (Morrell 2009). Ager and Strang (2008) suggest that citizenship is the foundation and a fundamental step for the integration process of refugees because refugees should have the same rights as the people they are living with to create an integrated community. Nunn et al. (2016) states that citizenship via supporting a sense of ontological security reinforces integration. Bloemraad and Sheares (2017) mention that citizenship provides a sense of security and permanence, which may encourage immigrants to invest in human, financial, and social capital.

Citizenship designates the equality of rights of all citizens within a political community but, nonetheless, formal equality rarely leads to equality in practice (Castles et. al, 2014). Even if migrants have a formal status as citizens of the host country, they face many informal and symbolic barriers to be recognized as true and full members of the host society (Geddes and Favell 1999). Being a formal member does not necessarily

lead to the informal acceptance as a member experienced by ordinary people in the course of daily life (Brubaker 2010). Social interaction can be differentiated by the marks of social identity (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). Migrants still may encounter prejudice because of a foreign sounding name, appearance, race and ethnicity as markers of inequality and alienage (Birkvad 2019; Erdal et al. 2018). Therefore, legal citizenship may not change everything in everyday lives of migrants (Kale, Kindon, and Stupples 2018; Nunn et al. 2016). Everyday interaction is an important domain in which citizenship is manifested and denied (Hopkins and Blackwood 2011)

An increasing number of displaced people find themselves in protracted situations (UNHCR, 2019). During their long-lasting displacement, refugees seek not only physical security but also the safety and security needed to plan their futures. Citizenship is essential for them to be seen as a part of the society and not to be identified as different (Bloch 2000; Stewart and Mulvey 2014). Empirical studies focusing on the refugees' or migrants' meanings and experiences of formal state citizenship show that for them citizenship means legal stability that protects them from the struggles and challenges caused by liminal legality, legal uncertainty, temporariness, and the fear of being deported. Citizenship provides spatial mobility, a formal recognition of equality and belongings, and acceptance by the society (Birkvad 2019; Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Nunn et al. 2016; Stewart and Mulvey 2014). Thus, naturalization has instrumental value with opportunities and rights that they would not have otherwise; on the other hand, citizenship, as an identity that they share with other citizens of that country, has also non-instrumental value (Bauböck 2019). Strategic citizenship approach emphasizes the importance of global inequality in influencing “the meaning and value of citizenship”, rather than belonging to a national identity or a territory (Harpaz and Mateos 2019).

The ‘precariousness of status’, neither refugee nor guest, makes it difficult for Syrians to equally access rights and services in Turkey (Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban 2018). Due to their in-between status, the acquisition of Turkish citizenship is an essential step for many Syrians who are seeking safety, security and proper employment opportunities to rebuild their lives (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). Research of Erdoğan (2020) suggests that almost 80 percent of Syrians demand Turkish citizenship, although not all of them are seeking ‘permanency’: some mentioned that the feeling of safety coming from having Turkish citizenship allows them to think about returning to Syria.

Studies show that many Syrians want to become Turkish citizens, not for emotional, belonging reasons, but to solve practical difficulties that are caused by their ambiguous status and to have security and stability (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018; Rottmann 2020). Even though they already have the rights to work, to access education and health care through their temporary protection status, their practical reasons for seeking Turkish citizenship include having greater rights and equal treatment (Rottman 2020). Another study with other migrant groups in Turkey highlights that the focus is on insecurity, the possibility of deportation, exclusion from political participation, and desire to own property or practice their own professions, as well as the need for a sense of belonging (Kadirbeyoğlu and Çınar 2016).

Studies show that the future prospects of many Syrians consist of staying in Turkey, not migrating to Europe. In the study of Yıldız and Uzgören (2016), respondents expressed their wish to stay in Turkey if they could be granted citizenship and thus gain access to the labor market; if not, they would try to move to Europe. The Work Permit Regulation for the beneficiaries of temporary protection has opened the legal path to the labor market (WPR, 2016) but a very small number of Syrians actually have a work permit in Turkey⁷. Moreover, due to the spatial restriction which limits their internal mobility, most of them rely on job opportunities in the cities where they are registered. Even though they have many problems in their daily experiences in Turkey such as exploitation on the labor market, discrimination, lack of access to services, and lack of social and political recognition; many Syrians consider settling down in Turkey, rather than in a European country (Kaya 2017). The sense of cultural proximity, religious similarity, social networks, proximity to Syria, similarity between their home and host towns, the fear of being excluded and the fear of facing new uncertainties in Europe are some of the reasons to stay in Turkey (Müller-Funk 2019; Rottmann 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Düvell 2019; Kaya 2017; Yıldız and Uzgören 2016). Despite the fact that some of them aspire to move to Europe, the lack of resources for another migration journey makes them prefer staying in Turkey (Düvell 2019). In addition to stressing pragmatic reasons, their desire to stay in Turkey have also emotional aspects such as a growing feeling of being home in Turkey over time (Rottman and Kaya 2020).

⁷ From Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services's recent statistics on work permits for foreigners, see: <https://www.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/istatistikler/calisma-hayati-istatistikleri/resmi-istatistik-programi/yabancilarin-calisma-izinleri/>

In addition to asking whether citizenship matters, one must also consider for whom, in what contexts, and why (Bloemraad 2017; Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). Citizenship does not matter in the same way for all migrants. There are differences in the experiences depending on age, life-course, years of residence in the destination country and future aspirations (Vink 2017). Moreover, the legal framework regarding citizenship eases naturalization for some migrant groups more than for others (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). For this reason, the aim of the paper is to picture the diverse experiences and future aspirations of highly educated Syrian young refugees, a migrant group to whom gaining Turkish citizenship is made easier because of the legal framework, to stay in or to move from Turkey in relation with the meaning they give to acquiring the Turkish citizenship by contributing to the research gap.

4.4. Methodology

The findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with forty-nine Syrian university students (26 males, 23 females) in Turkey during the fall of 2019. The findings that emerge from a qualitative case study like this do not attempt to be representative; instead, the aim of the study is to present different perspectives of the young people related to the acquisition of Turkish citizenship. The interviews consisted of questions regarding their personal and educational experiences in Turkey and specifically in higher education, their experiences in the acquisition of Turkish citizenship, its meaning, the reasons to obtain it, and how its acquisition affects their future prospects. This study adopts a refugee-centric approach rather than the more common state-centric perspectives (Voutira and Doná 2007).

The participants were chosen through non-random snowball sampling; and were reached through various channels and networks. Citizenship was not a criterion for sampling but was asked about only after selection and during the interviews. 25 of the interviewees had already acquired Turkish citizenship, 18 of them were in different stages of the naturalization process, and only 6 had not been called or applied for citizenship yet. All of them arrived in Turkey before 2016, and, on average, they had spent 5.5 years in the country. The majority of the research participants defined themselves as Arabs, but there were also Syrian refugees whose backgrounds were Turkmen and Kurdish.

This project was approved by UPF's research ethics committee before any data was collected. Interviews were conducted based on informed consent and all collected data was anonymized and encrypted prior to storage. The names to describe interviewees in this article are pseudonyms chosen randomly. The analysis aims to understand the diverse lived meanings of citizenship, not to make inferences about the population.

4.5. Experiences through the Citizenship Application Process

During the first phase of each interview, while talking about their experiences in Turkey and more specifically in higher education, the concept of 'citizenship' rarely came through in the narrative. Older students (especially graduate students) or the ones with more family and working responsibilities mentioned the advantages of having Turkish citizenship and the importance of acquiring it to improve their daily lives. It can be understood that the notion of citizenship varies regarding age, family responsibilities, and employment status, among other factors.

When they explained how their naturalization process started, they frequently mentioned that 'their citizenship came because of their university student status' and that they 'were called for the citizenship application because they are students'. Just a few of them applied for citizenship as a family unit because of their ethnic identity or family ties. According to their experiences if they apply through the exceptional acquisition of Turkish citizenship, the process finalizes faster than the family applications. They mostly mentioned that there were not specific rules and requirements for individual citizenship applications. Other studies present similar points on this regard (see Pace and Şimşek 2019; Şimşek 2018). For example, two interviewees arrived in Turkey at the same time and studied in the same class of the same university. However, one was already in the citizenship process, while the other one had not yet been called for it.

4.6. Reasons to Take Turkish Citizenship: Practical or Emotional?

Respondents' statements suggested that practical reasons were more important than emotional reasons for them in obtaining citizenship. Based on the interviews the

practical motives for obtaining Turkish citizenship included: (1) equally accessing rights, (2) greater spatial (internal and external) mobility, (3) legal stability and security, and (4) social recognition. Citizenship provides, most importantly, the right to work without needing a work permit, and this right allows Syrian refugees to compete in the labor market equally. Internal spatial mobility allows them to move or travel to other cities without any travel permission; and because of this mobility possibility, their job opportunities increase. Moreover, external spatial mobility (because of a more valuable passport) gives the possibility to travel to visit family members in Syria or in third countries (generally European countries) and to move from Turkey using legal means. Holding a Turkish passport implies the exemption from the Syrian passport renewal process which is both costly and time consuming. Legal stability and security bring protection from being deported, elude themselves from temporariness, and provide them with the possibility to foresee their future in Turkey. In addition to political recognition as citizens, the meaning of citizenship includes social recognition and being equally treated by the other members of the society facing less discrimination. And lastly, as a push factor, fear of starting from zero in another country makes obtaining citizenship a steppingstone to settle their lives.

One of the participants (24, female) clarified how the Temporary Protection Identity Card (TPID) creates inconveniences for her everyday experiences because of discriminatory actions and claims, she states that holding the Turkish citizenship would be the remedy:

‘When I show my Syrian identity card (TPID) in the government office, they look at me with different eyes and act differently. But if I give them a Turkish ID card, nothing will bother me.’

However, the words of another participant (21, female) indicate that the negative reactions of locals toward the naturalization of Syrians (see Atasü-Topçuoğlu 2019; Bozdağ 2019) may cause inconvenience even after getting the Turkish citizenship:

‘When I open my wallet [*she opens her wallet*], and when they see my Turkish ID, they say, ‘They give you (Syrians) citizenship. Who are you to share our country?’ (...) This is my legal right. I live here, after all. Sometimes I have a rough ride. Sometimes I conceal the fact that I am a citizen.’

Her experiences show that having citizenship does not translate into a complete acceptance as a true member of society (Geddes and Favell 1999, Brubaker 2010); she also faces prejudices because of her Syrian identity as a marker of alienation (see, Birkvad 2019; Erdal et al. 2018). Another participant (23, female) who holds Turkish citizenship makes a distinction between the locals who do not consider them as equal citizens and the locals who accept them as equal citizens with the same rights. Social recognition is therefore stated as a practical reason that goes hand in hand with emotional reasons for gaining citizenship, but, in fact, it does not eradicate their in-between status – being neither refugees nor citizens. A twenty-four-year-old female participant who had just acquired citizenship said:

‘Some people claim I am a refugee. No, I've been here for 8 years now. I have become a Turkish (citizen). Being a student has given me citizenship.’

The time spent in Turkey, which increases her sense of belonging, is one of the main factors motivating her to become a Turkish citizen and being labeled as a refugee can end when becoming a citizen. In addition to time spent in Turkey, the other motives of emotional reasons center upon the different reasons shaped by sense of belonging; cultural proximity, religious similarity, language proficiency, sharing the same ethnic identity or mother tongue (for Turkmen origin Syrians), historical and family ties in Turkey, and social networks. However, practical reasons outweighed for most of the participants, with some they are combined with some emotional reasons.

There are also mentioned disadvantageous outcomes of acquiring citizenship. If they access higher education as a Turkish citizen, scholarship possibilities decrease, and they need to pass through more difficult processes to enter a graduate or a postgraduate degree (such as taking the ALES- academic personnel and postgraduate education entrance exam exam). A 22-year-old female participant holding Turkish citizenship, who wants to apply for a master's degree after graduation, said:

‘Because I am now a Turkish (citizen), I need to take the ALES exam to apply for a master's program. Because they claim I am a Turkish now, not a foreigner.’

In addition, they might lose other economic aids supporting the refugees that mentioned as a reason might cause them not wishing to acquire citizenship. Moreover, they might have to do the military service (depending on their age). One male

participant pointed out that when he went to the recruitment office, he felt that he was a citizen and that he belonged here; another female participant said that when she and her brother became citizens, her brother felt more responsibility because he now has to serve in the military as any other male Turkish citizen.

4.7. Future Aspiration: Move on from Turkey or Stay in Turkey?

Research on the future aspirations of Syrian migrants suggests that Syrians prefer to stay in Turkey, rather than move to Europe, especially if they acquire citizenship (Kaya 2017; Müller-Funk 2019; Rottmann 2020; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Yıldız and Uzgören 2016). The option of exceptional citizenship acquisition targets immigrants with cultural capital, who can contribute to Turkey with their knowledge, to convince them to stay in Turkey. This study explores if acquiring Turkish citizenship is understood as a reward and/or as a tool to affect the decision of these educated young people to move from Turkey to Europe or Syria- or to settle permanently in Turkey. I select five different cases which represent diverse points of views of Syrian university students.

4.7.1. Turkey is becoming a home

Three quarters of my participants told me they would rather settle in Turkey than move to Europe or return to Syria. However, some of them mentioned moving on from Turkey might be their second option depending on the circumstances. Three cases are selected to represent three different perspectives of acquiring citizenship for those looking to permanently settle in Turkey: (1) citizenship as a tool provides a stable, secure and foreseeable future in Turkey with more employment opportunities; (2) citizenship as a tool to move to Europe for –mainly- study with the aim to return back and permanently settle in Turkey; (3) citizenship as a long-awaited right to make Turkey their officially home due to the ethnic identity.

4.7.1.1. Case I: Citizenship as a tool to settle in Turkey

Ahmad is a first-year post-graduate student around 30 years old. He has both family and work responsibilities, with children and a full-time job. He was one of the few interviewees who neither had Turkish citizenship nor had started the process; he was still waiting to be called to start the application. He highlighted the importance of

citizenship for him and his family because he wanted to settle in Turkey. He understood citizenship as a tool for his integration that would also eliminate the uncertainties and temporariness which are the barriers making difficult to see a stable future in Turkey. He emphasized practical reasons for his desire to obtain the Turkish citizenship, such as no need to take a travel permit; security and stability that will allow them to see their future and to invest in their future lives in the country. Stability would bring better solutions for his family; especially the possibility of searching job opportunities in other cities without worrying about work and travel permits, that would allow him to get a better job, which was one of his main short-term objectives. Thus, he sees legal security as a keystone for socio-economic security.

Temporariness and being in liminal status made it difficult for him and his family to make plans, there were too many uncertainties. For example, he did not want to invest time learning Turkish when there was the possibility of not settling in the country. In the case of returning back, he had worries about the reintegration process of his children. He was grateful to be in Turkey because he could work and his children could go to school, but they were living on a daily basis with the fear of deportation. Legal citizenship would provide '*peace of mind*' and '*hope for a permanent future in Turkey*'. His future aspiration was moving to another city for better employment opportunities within Turkey, he saw citizenship as the key to achieve his aspiration because he would then have the same rights as locals.

'Even though I am very grateful to be here, we cannot plan our future because we don't know anything about it. If they will send us back or not. I prefer to work and live in Turkey, but I also want to change my job. It is very complicated here because now getting a new work permit is not easy. Organizations and companies prefer to hire someone who has citizenship. The process is so difficult that I prefer not to change my job. But I am grateful with the situation that I have here, I cannot ask for more.'

Temporariness forced them to be grateful for what they had in Turkey. He emphasized the unequal treatment for Syrians (as foreigners), for example: '*They refuse to rent a flat to us because we don't have the Turkish citizenship*'. He was seeking a secure future and to have the same opportunities as local citizens. They are grateful for the physical security, basic rights and services provided to them by temporary

protection status; but their aspirations are not drawn by the borders of temporary protection status. They want to replace the forced gratefulness, which is defined by their displacement status, with gratefulness of what they can achieve by themselves without the limitations, barriers and restraints caused by their status.

Even when the temporary protection status ensures accessing rights, some rights are denied to them. This complex situation of navigating rights drives Syrians into positions of precarity (Baban et al. 2017; Ilcan et al. 2018). The majority of participants see Turkey as a permanent settlement place, especially if they hold Turkish citizenship, like Ahmad. Accessing citizenship rights is the way to disentangle this complexity and to render possible having plans for their future in Turkey. The forced gratefulness which is drawn by the precarity can be replaced by the competence of being able to have future dreams in Turkey equally as Turkish citizens.

4.7.1.2. Case II: Citizenship as a tool to access opportunities in Europe before permanently settling in Turkey

Mohammed is a postgraduate student and is above 25 years old. He migrated to Turkey to be able to study, because of the war he could not continue his education in his hometown. In order to achieve his dream of having a postgraduate degree, he first worked in a factory while he learned Turkish with a scholarship. The possibility of studying in his preferred department was seen as a great chance for him, he applied for the program immediately. He was in the middle of the citizenship process during the interview. He highlighted the importance of acquiring Turkish citizenship emphasizing the spatial mobility and employment opportunities as key advantages:

‘If you apply to a company for a job, it is easy to get it if you have citizenship. Also, for travelling, either to another country or simply to another city within Turkey.’

The immobility between cities caused some problems during his study when he would like to attend some academic meetings in other cities. He was aware that once he completes his degree, the spatial immobility would be a problem, reducing the possibilities for him to get a good job with a competitive salary. This is a very common

theme that came out in the interviews. His aspiration is moving to another country to study further in his field of study:

‘I would like to continue my study in Germany which is my first option. But now I cannot even travel to another city, how can I travel to another country? I can go to a hospital, I might get a job, I can study, and I can live here. But nothing more.’

The forced gratefulness which is drawn by their temporary protection status poses an obstacle when asking more questions regarding his future. To realize his aspirations, he needs more than what the temporary protection status provides. His main motivation for citizenship is to access rights, especially the right to mobility. He saw the Turkish passport as a more valuable passport than the Syrian one, and as a tool to go abroad to fulfil his dream of doing a doctorate study. He added that after his study, he would like to return to Turkey to start a family:

‘But in my mind, I want to start my life here, in Turkey. I don’t want to raise my kids and establish my life in Germany. It is not the way I want to raise my kids. I like people here (Turkey), I want to create my life and raise my kids here. Turkish culture is very close to our culture. (...) Now I understand the way Turkish people think. I have lots of Turkish friends. They help us.’

He sees citizenship as a tool to eliminate the barriers to achieve his dream, going to Europe for his studies, but he plans later to settle permanently in Turkey. Mohammed stressed education drivers as the reasons to go to Europe, but then he highlighted the importance of cultural proximity and social network when choosing a place to settle and to start a family. The feeling of acceptance, and a sense of being at home affect his aspirations to settle in Turkey after his study in Europe; it also suggests the importance of emotions rather than rational choices (see Rottman and Kaya, 2020). Even though some participants talked about doing a postgraduate study in a third country (Germany, Canada, UK, and generally mentioned as Europe) as their dream after graduation, only two of the participants including Mohammed had a clear roadmap to achieve it, such as attending language courses, searching the procedures of applications, and talking with professors from the universities they would like to apply.

4.7.1.3. Case III: Citizenship as a long-awaited right: Syrians with Turkish descent

Aisha is in her early twenties, and she is completing a bachelor's degree. She defined herself as a Turk and Turkish as her mother tongue. She was in the process of acquiring citizenship and she saw it as a long-awaited proof of her identity:

‘Of course, I want to be a citizen. We were unable to prove that we were Syrian citizens in Syria because of our Turkish identity, we are now facing the same situation here. We are in Turkey, and we're trying to prove that we are Turkish citizens.’

She claimed that her emotional reasons outweigh the pragmatic reasons:

‘When I was very young, my grandfather used to say that we were Turks, although we do not have its citizenship. For you to understand it, we didn't watch Arabic television channels, Turkish was always the only language spoken at home. (...) If I am a citizen, it will be an honor for me, and I will be very happy. I ask Syrians why they want to be Turkish citizens; they want it to move to other countries. I want it to live in Turkey, not to go anywhere else.’

Feeling a sense of belonging to Turkey because of the common language, heritage, or ethnic identity have been listed as the main reasons of wishing to obtain the Turkish citizenship. Her future prospect was to permanently settle in Turkey with the long-awaited proof of her identity: Turkish citizenship. Syrians are an ethnically diverse group. The participants in this study who have Turkish descent or historically family ties in Turkey have a stronger sense of belonging to Turkey and its society. Especially Syrian Turkmens who share the same mother tongue and see Turkey as their motherland due to the long-distance nationalism they see the acquisition of Turkish citizenship as their long-awaited right (Dereli 2016). As Aisha, four other participants highlighted acquiring Turkish citizenship was very important for them due to their ethnic identity as a reason for feeling belonging to Turkey.

4.7.2. Turkey is a transit or temporary settlement place

In general, participants started to see Turkey as a home country where they would like to see themselves in the future, even if they go somewhere else, they see Turkey as the country where they would end up settling. However, this is not the case for all. Even though they have to pass through the visa processes with Turkish citizenship, they understand their chance is much higher than with holding Syrian passport. In addition to the future prospects to move to a European, Northern American or Gulf Countries, the desire to return back to Syria is still alive for a few of them. In these cases, Turkish citizenship is just a tool to either move from Turkey in a legal way or to secure their lives until they return back to Syria.

4.7.2.1. Case IV: Citizenship as a tool to move through regular means: ‘The world will be open for me.’

Ali is over 25 years old, and he studies in a post-graduate program. He has a child, and he is married. He works in a highly qualified job, but not in his own profession. He applied for the Turkish citizenship with the hope of gaining it soon. He did not feel economically secure in Turkey because of its unstable political and economic conditions, and its high unemployment rate⁸. Having a good job in his profession was his precondition to stay in Turkey:

‘I can speak English, Turkish and Arabic. I have a master degree. (...) But life is getting expensive here because of the inflation. Salaries are low. The only chance for me to stay in Turkey is staying in academia, it would provide a better salary and a good status. Otherwise, I want to leave Turkey.’

He stated that returning back to Syria was not an option for him, because Syria could not give a bright future for them right now. His main aspiration was to get a good job with a good status and a good income. He would like to work on his own occupation accordingly his qualifications. Due to the lack of job opportunities in Syria and the few possibilities to have his desired job in Turkey, his future aspiration was to move to another country:

⁸ [3] The most recent statistics show that youth unemployment rate is 22.7 in Turkey (The World Bank, 2020).

‘With Turkish citizenship the world will be open for me, the US, Europe, Gulf Countries... If it is possible, I would like to go to one of these countries. Because I don’t know the kind of future waiting for me here.’

He saw citizenship as the tool to move from Turkey to find better opportunities. Research shows that if Syrians are offered citizenship or a work permit, they generally prefer to stay in Turkey, rather than migrate to a European country (Yıldız and Uzgören 2016), but in the exceptional case of Ali, as a highly skilled young person, citizenship and work permit are not enough to stay in Turkey, they are just the first step to make possible his aspirations. This makes Ali’s meaning of citizenship different from Ahmad’s, for Ali legal security does not necessarily bring socio-economic security.

4.7.2.2. Case V: Citizen but still a foreigner: ‘I don't want to stay here. I want to return back to Syria.’

Amir is a single male in his mid-twenties. The first time he arrived in Turkey, he tried to migrate to Europe, but his money ran out before reaching his destination. Later on, he decided to continue his higher education in Turkey. At the moment of the interview, he was studying for a bachelor’s degree while he studied for another degree online. His priority after graduation was to find a job. He already held Turkish citizenship because his grandmother was Turkish (he is one of the exceptional cases who acquire citizenship through descent). But he did not define himself as a Turk like Aisha and the citizenship did not create him any sense of belonging:

‘I am Arab, I do not become Turkish because of its citizenship. But I can be a person belonging to the Turkish nation. I am from Syria, but maybe one day my children could say that they are from Turkey.’

Amir questioned the link between legal and emotional bonds of citizenship (Yanasmayan 2015). Time is an important point for him to build the sense of belonging to the Turkish nation, but his notion of Turkish citizenship is based on an ethno-cultural approach. The ethnocentric practices of Turkish citizenship influence not only the locals' notion of Turkish citizenship (Kadioğlu, Keyman and Çakmaklı 2016), but also the views of young Turkish citizens of Syrian descent.

He did not experience any practical advantages of citizenship, except spatial mobility between cities. He did not have any positive expectation for his future in Turkey because of his citizenship. From his perspective legal security provides a safe waiting period in Turkey, but not socio-economic security. He stated that he would like to go back to Syria once the conflict ends:

‘When the war is over, I want to return back directly. There will be a new state, a new life. I want to start all over again. It is hard to be a foreigner.’

He acquired the Turkish citizenship, but he still felt like an outsider in Turkey, especially for a lack of social network. His case supports the argument of Geddes and Favell (1999); even if one has the formal status and rights as a citizen of the host country, many informal and symbolic barriers are challenging to be recognized as a true and full member of the host society. From his perspective, citizenship did not spontaneously make way for informal acceptance and sense of belonging which he experienced in the course of his daily life (Brubaker 2010). Only four of the interviewees shared the same prospects of Amir. However, one of the male participants wanted to return to Syria, not only because of the symbolic barriers he faced, but also he thought contributing to Syria was their duty.

4.7. Discussions and Conclusion

This paper focused on the perspectives of Syrian university students studying in Turkey to illuminate the experiences of one of the main target groups of the new Turkish citizenship policy and to understand how the prospect of obtaining Turkish citizenship shapes their aspirations. The findings are consistent with other research suggesting that Syrians prioritize settling down in Turkey, over moving to a European country due to cultural proximity, religion, similar values, and social networks (Yıldız & Uzgöre 2016; Müller-Fank 2019; Rottman and Kaya 2020; Rottman 2020; Düvell 2018). However, this study is putting forward the other perspectives, and displaying the diverse future prospects of Syrian university students in Turkey.

The responses of participants show that citizenship does not matter in the same way for all participants (Bloemraad 2017; Vink 2017), the meaning depends on life-course, age, family and work responsibilities, ethnic-identity, gender and future aspirations. The perceptions of (not) being accepted as a real and complete member of

the host community also indicate disparities due to facing or not facing informal and symbolic barriers. From the perspectives of the Syrian university students, Turkish citizenship is either a tool for their integration and for building their lives in Turkey; or a tool to continue their migration journey. In some cases, it can be seen as a reward, or a long-awaited and deserved right based on ethnic identity, or time spent in Turkey. Moreover, the importance of acquiring citizenship was more strongly emphasized by senior students and those participants with family and work responsibilities.

Among the four dimensions of citizenship (Bloemraad 2017) rights was the most frequently mentioned, expecting equal rights with locals to provide them higher possibilities of a better life. Practical reasons are more often mentioned as the main reasons to acquire citizenship as it is supported by previous studies (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018; Rottmann 2020), in these cases citizenship provides equal rights as citizens, a foreseeable, stable, and secure future while increasing employment opportunities, eliminating the fear of being deported to Syria, and freeing them from spatial immobility. In some cases, practical reasons were combined with emotional ones. The fact that they have stayed in Turkey for several years, studied at different educational levels in the country, learnt the language, gotten used to the lifestyle, and that they have a similar culture and the same religion, makes Turkey the place where they can most easily see their future. Citizenship increases their capability to achieve their aspirations without any limitation defined by their status. Mostly participants stated that socio-economic security is conditional upon legal security, and they defined the meaning of the citizenship through this conditionality, however the case of Ali (Case IV) showed different perspective. Citizenship is either facilitating or confirming their integration (Morrell 2009). It makes Turkey a home where they can directly settle or where they can return back after spending sometime somewhere else, generally in Europe.

On the other hand, citizenship is seen as a ticket to go to a third country, usually to Europe, through regular means (such as Case II and IV). The main motivations to move to another country are (1) to gain a postgraduate degree, (2) to get a better job and (3) family reunification. The first two of these show parallels with an earlier study focusing on why highly skilled Turkish nationals moved to Germany and Canada (Ozcurumez and Aker, 2016). Similarly, a recent study of young people aged 18-29 in Turkey suggests that 76 percent of Turkish youth want to live abroad, if given a

temporary opportunity, in order to ‘search for a better future’ (Yeditepe University and MAK Consultancy, 2020). After acquiring citizenship, aspirations would be shaped as Turkish youth, rather than Syrian refugees; job and education expectations might lead them to Europe as Turkish citizens. The interviewees, highly educated and highly skilled young people, have dreams that are not based on their temporary protection status, but on their student status and youth identity. The global inequality affects the value of citizenship in these cases, they understand Turkish citizenship has a strategic importance to increase opportunities abroad (see Harpaz and Mateos 2019), however their meaning regarding the belonging to the national identity or the territory show disparities. Even though citizenship is perceived as a more valuable passport that opens the door to – mainly - education opportunities in Europe, their first intention tends to be to settle in Turkey.

Citizenship defines the border between what they can and cannot achieve in Turkey, and between being able to plan their future and having to live on a daily basis. In addition to passing through these borders, citizenship also means passing through real borders, provincial borders in Turkey and national borders from Turkey. Citizenship eliminates their liminal status and ends their stay as guests who have to be grateful for what is given to them, who cannot ask more. Citizenship eliminates the feeling of forced gratefulness and makes them grateful about what they can achieve by themselves without any limitations and restraints caused by their temporary status.

There are, of course, limits to what can be drawn from this study. Further studies might include the perspectives of local students and/or Syrians who are not studying in higher education, in order to highlight the commonalities and differences in their future prospects and their meaning of citizenship. Moreover, another interesting point could be further developed is the relationship between obligatory military service and citizenship for the Syrian young men who hold Turkish citizenship.

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5. FROM MARGINALIZED REFUGEES TO EMPOWERED, HIGHLY EDUCATED YOUNG CITIZENS

This dissertation contributes to our understanding about the role of higher education in refugee integration, illuminating various stages of the integration process of Syrian refugee students in Turkey. The qualitative analysis of refugee experiences offers new perspectives on their integration processes and provides insight into their diverse experiences.

The main results of this thesis provide answers to the overall question that frames the three articles: - *'to what extent does being in the higher education field affect Syrian refugee students' integration process in Turkey?'* The study suggests that higher education has a key role in refugee integration. It empowers and equips them 'to achieve valued ways of being and doing' (Sen 1985) while emphasizing their agency, and also (re)constructs their sense of belonging through being in the campus space and having a university student identity. Refugees empower themselves throughout higher education and the participants in this study believed that their empowerment contributes to changing the discourse about them from victimized refugees to empowered youth who can contribute to society. Moreover, studying at university proves their cultural capital, opening the path to acquire the Turkish citizenship. The main question has been explored through different stages of their higher education experience: before and after accessing higher education, and their future prospects, in order to analyze the overall higher education experiences.

In this thesis, the Syrian students' individual level of the integration process through higher education is explored through three dimensions: the gendered nature of their integration into higher education, their sense of belonging developed by their experiences at university with their student identity, and their aspirations shaped by their legal status. However, while focusing on the individual level integration, the research gives place for the dimensions of organizations that mobilize their resources and empower them as agencies; and the institutions defining the settings. It is important to understand the impact of the policies forming the social and material context on the refugees' ability to integrate in the refugee-actor level (Hynie 2018; Lacroix 2013).

Figure 6: Summary of the three articles

Integration through Higher Education		
Accessing HE	Experiences at the University	Future Aspirations
<i>Gendered nature of integration experiences through higher education</i>		
Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their working history • their parents' and siblings' educational background Social factors: social norms, practices or power relations related to gender, family decision-making mechanisms to decide who can/not go to university.	Prejudice & Coping Mechanism Volunteering	Future Prospects
	<i>The role of university space: Sense of Belonging</i>	
	'More' Welcoming Space Space for Social Communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social connection with Syrian peers • Social connections with local students • Place to face less prejudice From Refugees to University Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University student identity Empowerment Stability and Citizenship	Refuge Meaning of Citizenship
Agency Motivation to study in higher education Individual or community based motivations Decision making process (the level of education, the attainment, the subject choices and university choices)		Experiences through the Citizenship Application Process Reasons to take Turkish Citizenship: Practical or Emotional? Future Aspiration: Move on from Turkey or Stay in Turkey? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turkey is becoming a home • Turkey is a transit or temporary settlement place

5.1. Concluding Remarks: Syrian Refugees' Integration through Higher Education

5.1.1. Gendered nature of integration experiences through higher education: Capability approach

The capability of female participants to access higher education was more formed and affected by their families' human resources and social factors compared with the capabilities of males. Because of the different roles of women and men given in their society, social factors formed by gender norms influence both sharing the family resources between siblings, and their motivations, and the decision-making process to determine what and where they want to study. Female participants stated that their access to higher education was conditioned by family support. In several participants' households, sons' education was prioritized, easing their access; on the other hand, the breadwinner role placed additional pressure on Syrian young men, limiting their access. To summarize, the female participants' capability sets were smaller than those of male participants, their freedom to choose what they value (Sen 2009) is more limited, more

generally resolved by their families, and designated by social factors. It highlights the importance of focusing on the inequalities between people's capabilities to make choices rather than the differences in their choices (Kabeer 1999).

During their study period in the university, the discourse of the faced prejudice, and their coping mechanisms were also influenced by gender. The article shows that higher education empowers both woman and man refugees, even though it does not eliminate the differences caused by socio-economic factors, it thins them down and makes their prospects less affected by them. The factors shaping the capabilities of refugees are diverse for each individual; it is essential to highlight human diversity and to give place for personal stories while analyzing their achievements with both their resources and agency. More research on the gendered dimension of the refugees' integration process is needed to focus on this unequal higher education participation and understand its dimensions.

5.1.2. The role of university space for young refugees' integration: Sense of belonging

The dichotomy dividing the space between inside and outside the university campus was used by the participants while explaining their everyday experiences during the fieldwork. They feel belonging through empowerment in a welcoming space which is a space of social communication where they face less prejudice, and more acceptance. The sense of belonging at the campus with their new university student identity have a positive impact on their belonging outside the campus through their social connections, their more respected, and accepted university student image; and the stability and security that their student status brings to their lives. I suggest that being relatively an equal member of a space, and being accepted and respected, are the key elements for the sense of belonging, thus for their integration process. The university offers them a space to construct their sense of belonging and to feel at home, but at the same time, it is a space that can intensify their marginalization (Joyce et al. 2010; Hopkins 2011; Earnest et al. 2010), depending on their personal and relational circumstances and experiences. Their experiences of belonging tend to be relative, nuanced, and multidimensional, according to the findings. After focusing on sense of belonging, I carried the discussion one step further in the next article focusing on politics of belonging.

5.1.3. Future aspirations after acquiring Turkish citizenship: Refugee meanings of citizenship

The findings support other research that suggest that Syrians prioritize settling down in Turkey, rather than moving to a European country by reason of cultural proximity, religion, similar values, and social networks (Yıldız and Uzgören 2016; Müller-Funk 2019; Rottmann and Kaya 2020; Düvell 2018). However, going to Europe to receive a postgraduate study or to find better employment opportunities through regular means becomes an option for those withholding a Turkish passport. It can be concluded that most of them would like to permanently settle in Turkey where they can access the rights and services as Turkish citizens; on the other hand, others perceive citizenship as a key tool to remove the spatial barriers for moving on especially to Europe. The third option, which is returning to Syria, is strong in a few cases, citizenship provides safety and security till they return back to their home. Therefore, this article also shows that having or wanting to have citizenship cannot be directly translated to the desire to permanently settle in Turkey (Erdoğan 2020).

It puts forward that citizenship enables highly skilled young people to dream about their future as young university students, eliminating their precarity which emphasizes the forced gratefulness of what is provided for them. Citizenship is seen as a key to their empowerment to allow them being capable to be grateful for what they (can) achieve by themselves as agencies. Citizenship does not matter in the same way for everyone, there are differences in the experiences depending on age, life-course, experiences in the destination country, and aspirations (Vink 2017). However, for young refugees, citizenship is generally understood as a practical tool for their integration shaped by right-based discourse, but the sense of belonging is a more emotional tool to feel a part of and to be accepted by the host society. The politics of belonging do not directly reflect the sense of belonging.

5.2. Limitations and Recommendation for Future Research

The data of this thesis is based on the fieldwork conducted in a specific university hosting the most Syrian students in Turkey, which makes it an interesting case study. It is supported with preliminary interviews of Syrians studying in ten different provinces to gain a general picture and to define the main questions of the thesis. However, each

context has its own dimensions and structure. Because of the specific characteristics of the context and of the Syrian population in the city, the findings cannot be generalized. Similar research in different contexts in Turkey and a comparison between different countries are needed to go further and better understand highly qualified refugees' integration processes in higher education.

Further studies might also include local students to see both perspectives on integration through higher education and to compare the experiences and understandings between Turkish and refugee Syrian students. It would be very interesting to see the differences and similarities in terms of experiences and how their interactions with each other are interpreted. The experiences through higher education of both local and refugee young people might show similarities. I am not suggesting that some of the experiences are solely experienced by refugee young people, however, my aim is to put the refugee perspective on the front to see how they interpret their experiences - before entering the university, during their studies, and for their prospective future. The thesis focuses on the Syrians who can access higher education, including the perspectives of Syrians who are not studying in higher education could be very interesting to explore their experiences, especially focusing on their gendered experiences, and their meaning of citizenship. Moreover, while discussing the gendered nature of their experiences, this thesis does not focus on parenthood and maternity as factors that play a role in the different ways in which family duties are constructed by men and women, further studies are needed to contribute to this gap.

In the case of Syrian university students in Gaziantep, the boundaries between social bonding and bridging sometimes overlapped and got blurred because of the historical ties between the home and host cities/countries, and the diversity in Turkey, in Syria, and within the campus community (see chapter 3). The definition of in and out groups have some varieties, not only for Syrians but also for locals. A study focusing on how they (re)construct their social capital in Turkey might be very interesting to picture the unique case of Syrians who settled in the border cities.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I. Profiles of the participants - In preliminary Interviews

The lowercase letters (a-j) represent faculties, including social sciences, engineering, medicine, health sciences, education, architecture, arts and sciences, literature, veterinary. The uppercase letters (A-J) represents the cities of Turkey where the participants study/studied.

F/M	Faculty	Degree	Region	City
M	a	Bachelor	Marmara	A
F	b	Bachelor	Marmara	A
M	a	Bachelor	Marmara	A
F	a	Bachelor	Marmara	A
M	a	Master	Marmara	A
F	c	Bachelor	Marmara	A
F	a	Master	Marmara	B
M	a	Master	Marmara	B
F	d	Bachelor	Marmara	C
M	a	Bachelor	Black sea	D
F	e	Bachelor	Central Anatolia	E
M	a	Bachelor	Central Anatolia	F
F	a	Bachelor	Central Anatolia	F
M	a	Bachelor	Central Anatolia	F
F	f	Bachelor	Southeastern	G
F	e	Bachelor	Southeastern	G
M	f	Bachelor	Southeastern	G
F	g	Bachelor	Southeastern	H
M	c	Bachelor	Southeastern	H
F	c	Bachelor	Southeastern	H
F	h	Bachelor	Southeastern	H
M	i	Master	Southeastern	H
F	J	Bachelor	Southeastern	I
F	j	Bachelor	Southeastern	I
M	g	Bachelor	Southeastern	J

Age Group	Number of Participants
18-20	5
21-23	9
24-26	4
27-29	5
≥30	2

Appendix II. Profiles of the participants- In semi-structured interviews

Instruction Language of the Programs	Number of Participants	Interview Language	Number of Participants
Turkish	26	Turkish	36
English	17	English	11
Arabic	6	Arabic	2

Volunteering	Number of Participants	Scholarship	Number of Participants
Yes	15	Yes	27
No	34	No	22

Turkish Citizenship	Number of Participants	Working Status	Number of Participants
No	9	Full-time	17
In the process	17	Part-time	6
Yes	23	Not working	26

Age Group	Number of Participants	Degree	Number of Participants
18-20	3	Two-years program	3
21-23	18	Bachelor (4 years)	37
24-26	17	Master	7
27-29	7	PhD	2
≥30	4		

Average Age	Average years in Turkish HE
23.7	3.5

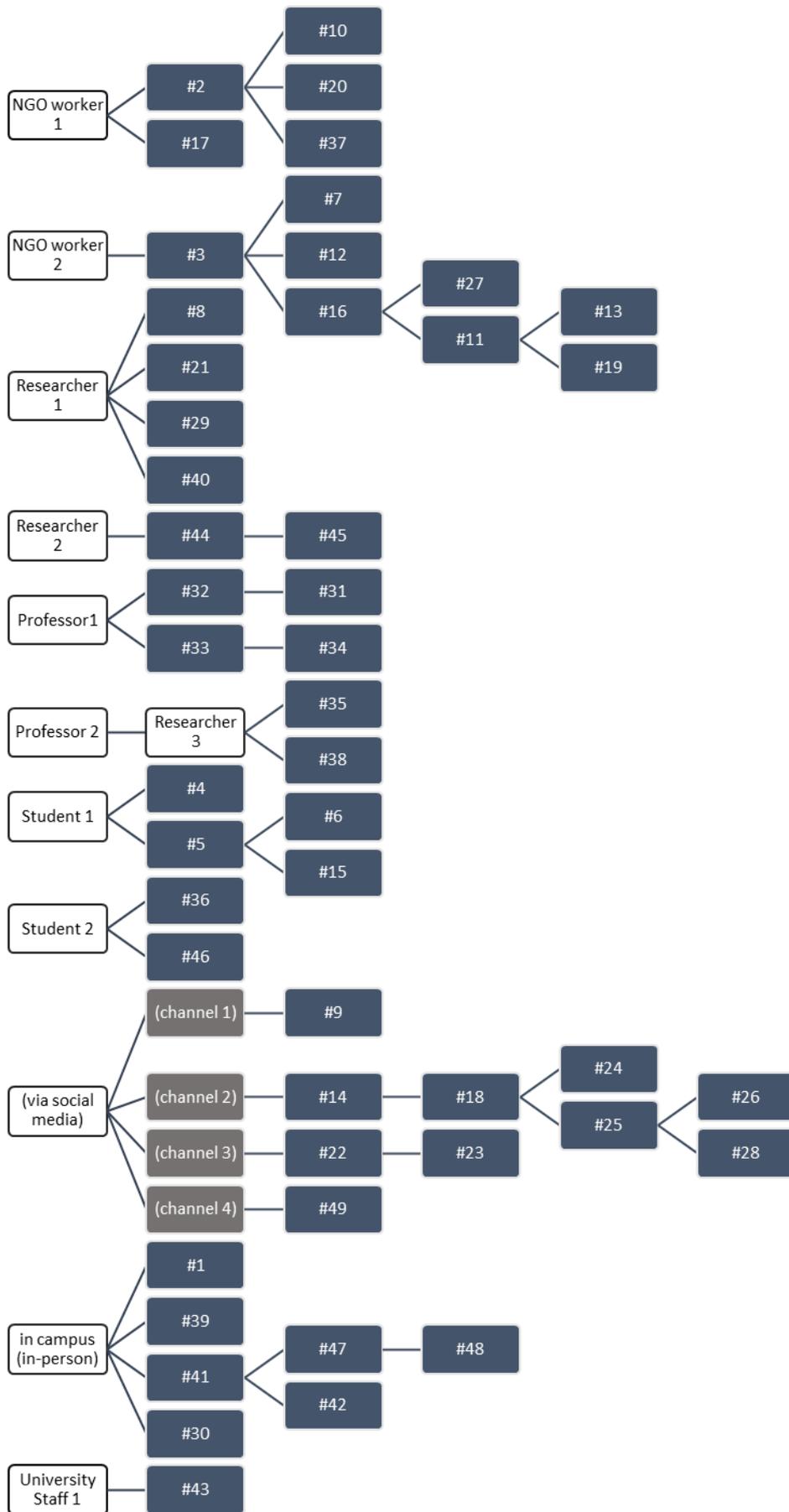
Average years in Turkey
5.5

Appendix III. Interviews with university staff members

The work-place	The position of the interviewee	Main interview topics
Scholarship Program	Project coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The framework of the scholarship programme • Activities organized by the project • Syrian students' attendances and reactions to the activities • Local students' attendances and reactions to the activities • The outcomes of the programme
Scholarship Program	Project officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The framework of the scholarship programme • Activities organized by the project • Syrian students' attendances and reactions to the activities • Local students' attendances and reactions to the activities • The outcomes of the programme
Scholarship Program	Volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian students' attendances and reactions to the activities • Local students' attendances and reactions to the activities • Volunteering experiences
International Student Office	Staff Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General informations about Syrian students and other international students (numbers, scholarhips, departments, the problems they have faced etc.) • Experiences based on their interactions with Syrian students
International Relations Office	Staff Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General information about Syrian students in the university • Experiences based on their interactions with Syrian students • The challenges and opportunities Syrian students experience in the campus
Rectorate	Staff Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General information about the university and the campus • Overall information about Syrian students • The projects and activities organized by

		the university aiming to overall student population, and specifically to Syrian students
Faculty member	Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General picture of Syrians in the city • Project focusing on Syrian and local population in the city • Specific challenges faced by Syrian students
Faculty member	Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific challenges faced by Syrian students studying in Arabic programs • Specific challenges faced by academic staff in these programs
Faculty member	Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cross-border vocational schools of the university

Appendix IV. Tree of Snowball Sampling



Appendix V. Participant Observation

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7-13 Oct							
14-20 Oct	Conference Hall	Café 1	Green area	Book store	Café 2		
	The Global Refugee and Migration Congress						
21-27 Oct	Faculty 1	Faculty 2	Café 3	Student meeting	Green area		
28 Oct - 3 Nov			Dining Hall	Green area	Faculty 3		
					Workshop on Integration of Syrian Students		
4- 10 November	Library	Attending a class	Café 4	Café 3	Café 6		
			Faculty 4	Faculty 5	Faculty 6		
11-17 November							
18-24 November							
Student residence		City		Campus		Congress, Workshop	

Appendix VI. Informed Consent Form in English

Name of the research: The Role of Higher Education Experiences on the Integration of Refugees: Case study of young Syrian refugees in Turkey

Name of the supervisor:

John Palmer
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Department of Political and Social
Sciences
Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27
08005 Barcelona, Spain
Phone: +34-645-622-124 (cell) / +34-
93-542-2346 (office)
e-mail: john.palmer@upf.edu

Name of the researcher:

Begüm Dereli
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, GRITIM
Department of Political and Social
Sciences
Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27
08005 Barcelona
Phone: +34 665 337 863 (Spain) / +90
536 403 20 42 (Turkey)
e-mail: begum.dereli@upf.edu

Research Object: The object of this research is to better understand the higher education experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey and how these experiences in higher education affect their perception of the social world around them and their integration process in the host country through higher education.

Role of the Participation: If you agree to participate in the research, I will conduct an interview with you. During the interview I will address some questions about your general education experiences; your higher educational experience in Turkey; the challenges and opportunities you have faced in the process of accessing to higher education and within higher education in Turkey; your daily life in the host country and university; your social interaction with both local and your own community; and lastly about your future plans. The interview will take approximately one hour. I would like to use a voice recorder during the interview if you give your consent. Right after transcription of the records, the records will be deleted. But we can do it without the recorder if you prefer. In the case you prefer not using a voice recorder, taking note will be used during the interviews.

Risk, cost, and benefits: There is not any expected risk during the interviews apart from what you might encounter in your daily life. There will be no cost to you except for the time that you give to interview. By participating in the interview, you will help us to understand your experiences in the Turkish higher education system and how your integration process is affected through your higher education period in a host country.

Privacy: In order to protect your privacy, we will not identify your name. Research records will contain information about you, such as age, gender, and educational background without name. In any case of data publication, we will do it anonymously. Please note that this information will be securely stored in an encrypted form on the researcher's computer in a way that is not accessible to other people. When the research is completed, all data will be transferred to an encrypted external hard drive and stored securely for four years. And after four years, it will also be deleted from the hard drive. If I use a voice recorder during the interview, these audio files will be deleted after being overwritten. The personal voice recorder device will be used and the files will not be transferred to any computer to make sure that they are fully erased.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You can skip the questions to which you do not want to respond. You can withdraw or opt-out of it any time without need to justify your decision. The consent form which will be provided one copy to you consists the contact information of both the researcher and the research supervisor.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research or would like the results of the research to be shared with you, please contact me or to my supervisor, John Palmer, at the address and telephone above.

I hereby confirm that:

- I have read the information above and I have received sufficient information about this research project.
- The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project and the future management of my data has been explained to me and is clear.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw or opt-out of the interviews at any time without any need to justify my decision.
- **I give my consent** to participate in the current interview.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date:

- I give consent to be taped during the interview.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date:

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix VII. Ethics Approval



Ethics Approval

Project:	Higher Education Experiences: Case study of young Syrian refugees in Turkey
Principal Investigator:	John Palmer
Department:	Department of Political and Social Sciences
CIREP approval no.:	126
Date of approval:	27.09.2019

The Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra has reviewed the application for ethics approval submitted for the above-mentioned project *Higher Education Experiences: Case study of young Syrian refugees in Turkey* following the procedure described in the CIREP protocol: www.upf.edu/web/cirep/procedure.

CIREP has assessed the project with respect to:

a) the internationally accepted *ethical principles in research involving humans*: avoidance of exploitation, fair distribution of benefits and burden, beneficence, respect for persons, respect for human dignity, scientific validity, social value, the rights and interests of research participants;

b) *personal data protection*, guided by Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

The project has been **approved** by CIREP as it is in compliance of the above-mentioned principles and regulations.

CPISR-1 C
ENRIC
VALLDUVÍ
BOTET

Firmado digitalmente por CPISR-1 C
ENRIC VALLDUVÍ BOTET
Nombre de reconocimiento (DN):
c=ES, o=Universitat Pompeu Fabra,
ou=Vegeu <https://www.aoc.cat/>
CATCert/Regulacio, ou=Vicerectorat,
title=Vicerector, Direcció de projectes
en l'àmbit de la recerca, sn=VALLDUVÍ
BOTET, givenName=ENRIC,
serialNumber=39855315H, cn=CPISR-1
C ENRIC VALLDUVÍ BOTET
Fecha: 2019.09.27 12:37:32 +02'00'

Enric Vallduví Botet
President CIREP
Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects
Research Service / Campus Ciutadella
Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27
08005 Barcelona
Phone: +34935422403 e-mail: secretaria.cirep@upf.edu

