

**INTEGRATION PROCESS OF SYRIAN MIGRANTS FOLLOWING THE EU-TURKEY READMISSION AGREEMENT: CASE OF SYRIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN İZMİR\*****Assist. Prof. Dr. Zühal Ünalp Çepel\*****Res. Assist. Sinem Abka\*****Res. Assist. Tuğcan Durmuşlar\*****Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the current challenges and integration prospects of Syrian university students in İzmir. Methodologically it is based on a case study through the questionnaire results of 22 Syrian students of 2017-2018 academic year in İzmir and 3 interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with experts from public institutions. The article evaluates how the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement has influenced Turkey's integration policy over the Syrian migrants. It is argued that Syrian university students in İzmir are directly influenced from the comprehensive policies of public institutions and universities. However they still face with educational, socio-cultural and economic challenges. Generating certain solutions to those challenges can be possible through solid coordination of the institutions.

**Keywords:** Syrian migrants, Syrian university students, the European Union, Turkey, İzmir.

**AB-TÜRKİYE GERİ KABUL ANLAŞMASI'NIN ARDINDAN SURIYELİ GÖÇMENLERİN ENTEGRASYON SÜRECİ: İZMİR'DEKİ SURIYELİ ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ ÖRNEĞİ****Öz**

Bu çalışma, İzmir'deki Suriyeli üniversite öğrencilerinin karşılaştığı sorunları ve entegrasyon beklentilerini analiz etmektedir. Metodolojik olarak araştırma, İzmir üniversitelerinde 2017-2018 akademik yılında kayıtlı bulunan 22 Suriyeli üniversite öğrencisinin anket sonuçları ve kamu kurumlarında çalışan 3 uzman ile 2018 ve 2019 yıllarında gerçekleştirilen görüşmeler ile desteklenen bir örnek olay çalışmasına dayanmaktadır. Makale, AB-Türkiye Geri Kabul Anlaşması'nın Türkiye'nin Suriyeli göçmenlerin entegrasyonu politikasını nasıl etkilediğini değerlendirmektedir. Makalede İzmir'deki Suriyeli öğrencilerin kamu kurumlarının ve üniversitelerin uyguladığı politikalardan doğrudan etkilendiği tartışılmaktadır. Ancak öğrenciler halen eğitim, sosyo-kültürel ve ekonomik alanlarda engellerle karşılaşmaktadır. Söz konusu engellere yönelik kesin çözümler üretilmesi kamu kurumlarının devamlı koordinasyonu ile mümkün olabilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriyeli göçmenler, Suriyeli üniversite öğrencileri, Avrupa Birliği, Türkiye, İzmir.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Turkey has the highest number of Syrian migrants worldwide, hosting almost 4 million Syrians\* under the national regime of *temporary protection* (“Çavuşoğlu: Geri Kabul”, 2019). Higher education opportunities are part of the educational services Turkey offers to the Syrian migrants. According to the data by Council of Higher Education (CoHE), a total of 20.701 Syrian students had been enrolled in Turkish higher education institutions (HEIs) during the 2017-2018 academic year.\* Several funding opportunities have been facilitating the Syrian migrants’ access to higher education largely consisting of the European Union (EU) funds and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı-YTB*) scholarships along with civil society initiatives and other contributions. It is suggested in this article that, following the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement in 2014, Turkey has begun to evolve into a final destination rather than a temporary shelter or a transit country for the Syrian migrants. Article 4 of the Agreement obliges Turkey to readmit citizens of third countries that illegally entered the EU territory following their stay on or transit passage via Turkish soil.\* The deal has significantly reduced illegal human trafficking in the border regions. However, the limited quotas for migrants provided with a legitimate opportunity to enter Europe have augmented the number of Syrian migrants in Turkey (Şimşek, 2019).

The burden of hosting a large amount of migrants required Turkey to introduce and develop migration related policies including the higher education for Syrian migrants. Integration issues related with Syrian students have been analyzed in the literature from several aspects (Erdoğan, 2014; Aras and Yasun, 2016; Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2018; Yıldız, 2019). This article contributes to the rapidly developing literature on Syrian migrants in Turkey by focusing on the Syrian university students in İzmir which has not been analyzed within the existing literature. It is also aimed to reveal the challenges and future perspectives of Syrian university students enrolled in HEIs in İzmir\* which are Dokuz Eylül University, Ege University, Katip Çelebi University, İzmir Institute of Technology and Democracy University.

Methodologically this article is based on a review of the existing studies on Syrian university students in Turkey; the original data gathered from the responses of 22 Syrian students in

\* According to the official statistical data provided by the Turkish Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Turkey hosts 3.674.588 Syrians as of October.2019.

\* Council of Higher Education, Information Management System, Student Figures Based on Nationality 2017-2018 Academic Year, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (Accessed 18.07.2019).

\* Council of Higher Education, Information Management System, Student Figures Based on Nationality 2017-2018 Academic Year, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (Accessed 18.07.2019).

\* 5 out of 9 universities that are located in İzmir have Syrian students enrolled in their programs.

İzmir who voluntarily filled in the questionnaire and 3 unstructured interviews with public officials. The questionnaire had been sent to the e-mail addresses of Syrian university students with the support provided by YTB İzmir Office. There are 105 Syrian students in İzmir (Interviewee 2, 2018). Even though the questionnaire link had been sent to those students for several times in 2018 and 2019, the number of the responding Syrian students could not have been increased. The authors have also contacted with Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and public universities in İzmir to reach the other Syrian university students who have not responded the questionnaire. However the authors are informed that the only public institution which has the authority to reach foreign students is YTB since it is the main institution providing Türkiye Scholarships for them. According to the interviewees and experts who deal with Syrian migrants in Turkey, the socio-cultural factors, introvert and traumatic approaches of the Syrians have resulted with reluctance to share information on themselves (Interviewee 1, 2019; Interviewee 2, 2018; Interviewee 3, 2018). The authors have also observed that the answers to the questionnaire started to repeat each other. Thus, it has become convincing that the qualitative research has achieved the saturation point. In order to shed light on the policies of public institutions and their perceptions on Syrian university students, 3 unstructured interviews were held. The authors have had the chance to interview with those officials in the workshops and meetings on Syrian migrants organized by universities and DGMM.

It is argued in the article that Turkey's policies towards Syrian university students have evolved from emergency efforts to comprehensive policies in addressing the needs of university-aged migrants aspiring for higher education. The article is based on the assumption that higher education constitutes a determinant factor that will contribute in the future perspectives of the Syrian migrants either if they remain in Turkey or return to Syria. The majority of Syrian university students in Turkey favour staying in the country rather than going back to their country of origin (Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2018: 73). Therefore, the article firstly explores the socio-cultural and economic conditions of Syrian university students studying in İzmir. In addition to that, the research deciphers the perceptions and expectations of Syrian university students with regard to the higher education opportunities in Turkey. Finally, the paper analyzes the future integration prospects of Syrian university students with the Turkish society by taking into consideration the implications of Turkey's open door policy and the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement.

## 2. THE EU'S POLICY FOR THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE EU-TURKEY READMISSION AGREEMENT

The relations between the EU and Syria date back to the “Cooperation Agreement” of 1977 which led the parties to sign the *Association Agreement*.<sup>\*</sup> However it has not been ratified yet. Syria takes place within the group of countries in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy that was initiated in 2004 with the aim of establishing cooperation between the EU and participating states to achieve political and economic stability in the Union's vicinity. The EU brought its cooperation with the Syrian government to a halt in 2011 due to the civil war and human rights violations in the country. In spite of the institutional ties between Syria and the Union, Brussels has approached the Syrian crisis cautiously since 2011. The EU applied sanctions<sup>\*</sup> against the Syrian government as a reaction to the human rights violations. European Investment Bank has ended providing loans by November 2011. Following the suspension of relations with Syria, the Union's sanctions on Syria targeted regime-loyal elites and legal figures. Besides, the EU applied sanctions on Syrian oil imports between 2011 and 2013. However, these initiatives could neither prevent nor end the civil war between the regime forces and national opposition groups (European Commission, 2018; Seeberg, 2015: 26). Furthermore, the EU's lack of engagement with the Syrian regime is considered as a factor that has diminished the bloc's capacity to end the humanitarian crisis (Turkmani and Haid, 2016: 3).

The EU's policy towards the Syrian crisis is based on the prioritization of the refugee inflow as the main security threat. Since the early stage of the Syrian conflict, the EU has provided approximately a total of €10 billion in its humanitarian support attempt. These funds have been utilized both within Syria and in the neighbouring countries as well with an aim of supporting displaced Syrian civilians' humanitarian needs including education. Through the European Neighbourhood Instrument, the Union supported Syrians financially in civil society development. *The EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis* has been transferring non-humanitarian aid to Syria's neighbouring countries with a total budget of €1.5 billion since 2015.

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<sup>\*</sup> Council of the European Union, Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Community, and provisional application of certain provisions of the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Community and its Member States and the Syrian Arab Republic. 17.08.2009, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&t=PDF&gc=true&sc=false&f=ST+9921+2009+INIT> (Accessed 27.12.2019).

<sup>\*</sup> For a complete list of EU restrictive measures in force please refer to; European Commission, European Union Restrictive measures (sanctions) in force, (Regulations based on Article 215 TFEU and Decisions adopted in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy), 7.7.2016, [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/cfsp/sanctions/docs/measures\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/cfsp/sanctions/docs/measures_en.pdf) (Accessed 27.12.2019).

Turkey is one of the contributing countries to the Fund with a 1.7% share in total (European Commission, 2018).

*The Agreement between the EU and Turkey on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation*<sup>7</sup>, known as Readmission Agreement, constitutes the legal framework between the two parties on mutual cooperation in migration related issues. As put forward in the preamble of the legal text, the agreement aims at regulating the migratory movements between Turkish soil and the EU territory. The agreement has been first offered by the Union in 2003 and negotiated between the parties since then. A final agreement has been signed on 16 December 2013 and put into force on 1 October 2014. However, in line with Article 24(3) of the Agreement, the actual implementation of the provisions on *third country nationals* and *stateless people* has been decided to begin by 1 June 2016 (Batır, 2017: 596-7). Following the EU-Turkey Deal on 18 March 2016, to give an end to the illegal migratory movements from Turkish soil to the EU, irregular arrivals lowered substantially with a decrease of 97% when compared with the earlier period. Within the scope of the Deal, the EU has provided Turkey with a financial support of €4.2 billion, out of the €6 billion package, in support of projects towards Syrians under *temporary protection* (European Commission, March 2019: 2). In return for Turkey's readmission task, the EU member states accept migrants seeking refuge based on certain conditions ("AB Mülteci Zirvesi", 2016). Following the Deal, the EU member states and Turkey have faced sharp criticism from the international community for avoiding their responsibilities to protect refugees and transferring their obligations (Rygiel, Baban and Ilcan, 2016: 163). In July 2019, Turkey suspended the Readmission Agreement with the EU after the decision on the EU sanctions over Turkey with the reason of gas drilling operations in the Mediterranean Sea ("Turkey Suspends", 2019). The current development starts a new process in Turkey's policies for Syrian migrants.

### 3. TURKEY'S STRATEGIES FOR SYRIAN MIGRANTS

It is emphasized in the literature that Turkey addresses the immense challenge of humanitarian crisis in a way that goes far beyond hospitality (Kirişçi, 2014). Since 2011, Turkey has followed an open door policy for the Syrian migrants but has not provided a *refugee* status for them. The reason behind this is the *geographic limitation* of Turkey on 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 The Protocol on the Legal Status of Refugees. In accordance with these two international legal documents, the migrants except the ones coming from the European continent cannot seek official refugee status from the state authorities.

<sup>7</sup> Agreement Between the European Union and the Republic of Turkey on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation, Official Journal of the European Union, L 134/3, 7.5.2014, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX3A22014A0507280129> (Accessed 22.9.2019).

While following an open door policy for the Syrian migrants, Turkey has also reformed its asylum policy in parallel with the EU legislation to ensure the responsibilities originating from the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement. Those reforms have not only identified more specific provisions for the irregular migrants in Turkey but also have been considered as the important reforms for the EU accession. In order to harmonize national policies with the EU acquis, Law on Foreigners and International Protection\* came into force in 2013. The same year Turkey and the EU bilaterally signed the Readmission Agreement particularly for the management of irregular migrant flows to the EU member countries. In 2013, DGMM was established under the authority of Turkish Ministry of Interior within the scope of Law on Foreigners and International Protection. Currently this public institution has aimed at cooperation with foreign students, academics, media, civil society organizations and other public institutions to minimize the challenges on integration.

Turkey has been implementing comprehensive migration policies since 2014. The first important change has been the legal arrangement which granted Syrian migrants *temporary protection* status (Erdoğan, 2015: 15). The number of Syrians with *temporary protection* status is 3.674.588 in October 2019. Table 1 shows that majority of the Syrian people in Turkey with *temporary protection* status live in İstanbul. The other cities where Syrians live at most are Gaziantep, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, Adana, Mersin, Bursa, İzmir, Kilis and Konya respectively. 146.806 Syrians live in İzmir, and this number corresponds to 3.40% of the total population of the city (goc.gov.tr, October 2019; multeciler.org.tr, October 2019).

**Table 1: Demographic Indicators of Syrians with Temporary Protection Status**

CITY	POPULATION	COMPARISON TO CITY POPULATION
İstanbul	549.477	3.65%
Gaziantep	451.461	22.26%
Hatay	440.336	27.35%
Şanlıurfa	428.684	21.06%
Adana	239.258	10.78%
Mersin	204.313	11.26%
Bursa	177.193	5.92%
<b>İzmir</b>	<b>146.806</b>	<b>3.40%</b>

\* The legal text of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, 11.4.2013. Available at: <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.6458.pdf> (Accessed 18.10.2019).

Kilis	116.638	81.83%
Konya	109.488	4.96%

**Source:** Turkish Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, October 2019.

Turkey's efforts to ensure the integration of Syrians under *temporary protection* into the society includes providing them with working permits issued in *The Regulation on Provision of Work Permits for People under Temporary Protection*, introduced in January 2016. The regulation requires various eligibility criteria and administrative procedures. Some of them are directly related with the applicant such as having 6 months of legal residence in Turkey and making an application to the Ministry of Labour from the province where the temporary identity card was issued. Whereas other criteria are concerned with the employers such as applying a quota for employing Syrians and prohibiting them from certain job categories due to the relevant national legislation (Siviş and Yıldız, 2019: 2).

Syrians can also be granted with Turkish citizenship. According to the data provided by Mülteciler Association, 92.280 Syrian people acquired Turkish citizenship until August 2019. According to the same source, the average age of the Syrian people in Turkey is 22.58 (Mülteciler Association, October 2019). The population of Syrian men in Turkey is much higher than the Syrian women as can be seen in Table 2. And the largest deviation (93.173 people) is between the ages of 19 and 24. It means that there are more male students than female students in the Turkish HEIs (goc.gov.tr, October 2019).

**Table 2:** Gender Distributions of Syrians with Temporary Protection in Turkey

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TOTAL	<b>1.991.638</b>	<b>1.682.950</b>	<b>3.674.588</b>
0-4	291.323	272.160	563.483
5-9	255.107	240.254	495.361
10-14	200.039	185.169	385.208
15-18	151.756	123.725	275.481
<b>19-24</b>	<b>323.678</b>	<b>230.505</b>	<b>554.183</b>
25-29	206.662	146.651	353.313
30-34	169.595	124.375	293.970
35-39	119.754	94.722	214.476
40-44	78.947	70.024	148.971

45-49	58.549	55.908	114.457
50-54	47.314	45.434	92.748
55-59	32.914	33.326	66.240
60-64	22.991	23.767	46.758
65-69	15.060	15.771	30.831
70-74	8.474	9.148	17.622

**Source:** Turkish Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, October 2019.

The future prospects of foreign population in Turkey have been shaped through the Adaptation Strategy Document and National Action Plan prepared by DGMM for the 2018-2023 term (DGMM, 2018). This new initiative represents a goal-oriented perspective for all of the public institutions in Turkey in order to increase the adaptation of foreigners to the Turkish society through the coordinated actions. This kind of initiatives will contribute to meet the educational, socio-cultural and economic needs of Syrian population and Syrian university students in Turkey. It is announced by DGMM that the focus of the public institutions and academia had been the social integration of Syrians during 2012-2018 term; however the adaptation processes of Syrians is now on the agenda of those institutions.\* In that sense, the public institutions in Turkey have been currently stressing on a change of approach for the Syrians, a transition from integration to adaptation in order to overcome the challenges.

#### 4. SYRIAN STUDENTS IN HEIs: GENERAL OVERVIEW ON TURKEY

Following the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Turkey as one of the most welcoming countries accepted large number of irregular Syrian migrants and fulfilled their boarding and lodging needs in the first stage. An inclusive integration approach has been followed particularly in education since it constitutes one of the most important human rights. Accordingly CoHE initiated an immediate action for seven HEIs to admit Syrian students without legal documentation demonstrating their academic affiliation. For the academic year 2012-2013, Gaziantep University, Karabük University and Mersin University are among the universities that have registered applicant Syrian migrants as *special students* (Yıldız, 2019a: 81). This measure aimed at ensuring their social adaptation but not promising a degree at the end of their studies.

In 2013, a new article to the *Regulation on Principles of Transfer between Associate and Undergraduate Degree Programs of Higher Education Institutions, Double Major, Minor, and*

\* The legal text of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, 11.4.2013. Available at: <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.6458.pdf> (Accessed 18.10.2019).

*Credit Transfers Between Institutions* was added by CoHE for foreign students. Through the new article, the foreign students who cannot maintain their studentship in their countries for special reasons such as violent acts and humanitarian crisis can be transferred to the degree programs at the HEIs in Turkey (CoHE, 2013). With this regulation, the students holding *special status* were provided the right to apply all Turkish HEIs in addition to those that are located in the border region as of the academic year 2014-2015.\* After this opportunity was given to the Syrian students, the number of applications has accelerated and reached to 1.986 in Gaziantep University, 1.217 in İstanbul University, 1.178 in Karabük University and 1.127 in Mersin University. These universities are the top four in the list of universities in terms of the population of Syrian students. During the 2017-2018 academic year when the questionnaire of this research had been disseminated to the Syrian students in İzmir, a total of 7.560.371 students were enrolled in Turkish HEIs including 20.701 Syrians. Among them the Syrian male students constitute the majority with a number of 12.980 while there are only 7.721 Syrian female students. Demographic attributes of Syrian students in Turkey indicate that there are 554.183 Syrians between the ages of 19 and 24, however only 4% of those are enrolled in HEIs.\* Accordingly, Turkey has been collaborating with international institutions in order to encourage more Syrian participation in higher education by providing tuition support and scholarship. The inclusive approach of Turkey is believed to be crucial for skill and knowledge acquisition of Syrians, for creation of a developed, prosperous and socially inclusive society as well as ensuring a successful integration process. Therefore the most important actors in this process are regarded as the HEIs.

Türkiye Scholarships provide various opportunities for Syrian students in public universities. Until 2019, more than 5.000 Syrian students' tuition fees are paid by the program. Moreover almost 16.000 Syrian students have been funded by YTB between 2012 and 2019 (Yıldız, 2019a: 81). YTB and Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) Programs via the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) action of the EU and SPARK Turkey are the other scholarship programs for the Syrian students (Hohberger, 2017: 5; Yıldız, 2019a: 88).

In Turkey, international students including the Syrian applicants should meet the specific criteria of the institution that they prefer to study. Turkish universities are free to determine their

\*Council of Higher Education decision dated 18/06/2014, 09/07/2014, 06/06/2018, <https://www.yok.gov.tr/ogrenci/ek-madde-2-uyarinca-misir-ve-suriyeden-yapilabilecek-yatay-gecis-islemlerine-iliskin-esaslar> (Accessed 26.12.2019)

\* Council of Higher Education, Information Management System, Student Figures Based on Nationality 2017-2018 Academic Year, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (Accessed 18.07.2019).

own admission criteria for those applicants.<sup>12</sup> Universities have applied the criteria of Foreign Student Exam (*Yabancı Öğrenci Sınavı-YÖS*) or international tests such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), National College Admission Examination (ACT) and Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) as a substitute for YÖS (Yıldız, 2019b: 6). On the other hand, international students may need to fulfil the specific language proficiency criteria of the institution that they apply to. For instance, it is required to have B2 level certificate for Turkish undergraduate programs in İstanbul University. Whereas, Yaşar University requires the Syrian candidates to hold an internationally recognized English language certificate such as Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or pass the English language test offered by Yaşar University (Yıldız, 2019a: 80). The social and educational integration of Syrian students in Turkey demonstrates differentiated characteristics from city to city on which needs to be shed light. From this viewpoint, the section below focuses on the distinctive characteristics of İzmir case.

### 5. SYRIAN STUDENTS IN HEIs: İZMİR CASE

As the third largest city in Turkey, İzmir is located on the western coast of the country away from the Syrian border. However, the city functions as a transit gate to Greece since Syrian migrants take the İzmir-Greece transit route as a step on their way to other European countries. Thus, Syrians prefer the city either for residing and studying or getting prepared for the transit passage to Europe.

According to the official data provided by the CoHE, the total number of Syrian university students registered to the HEIs in İzmir during the academic year 2017-2018 has been 105.<sup>13</sup> While 104 of those have been studying at public universities, only 1 student has been enrolled in a foundation university.

**Table 3:** 2017-2018 Academic Year-Number of Syrian University Students in İzmir

Name of the HEI	Type	Male	Female	Total
Dokuz Eylül University	Public	26	3	29

<sup>12</sup> Council of Higher Education “Principles for Admission of International Students”, 2018, [http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/40914149/2018\\_Yurtdisindan\\_Ogrenci\\_Kabulune\\_Iliskin\\_Esaslar.pdf](http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/40914149/2018_Yurtdisindan_Ogrenci_Kabulune_Iliskin_Esaslar.pdf) (Accessed 26.12.2019)

<sup>13</sup> Council of Higher Education, Information Management System, Student Figures Based on Nationality 2017-2018 Academic Year, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> (Accessed 18.07.2019).

Ege University	Public	29	17	46
İzmir Katip Çelebi University	Public	21	3	24
İzmir Institute of Technology	Public	5	0	5
Yaşar University	Foundation	1	0	1
Total		82	23	105

**Source:** Data compiled from CoHE Information Management System (2017-2018)

According to the data obtained from both YTB and DGMM in İzmir, approximately 90 of those students have been funded by Türkiye Scholarships and the rest are either covering their own expenses or holding other kinds of scholarships provided by international organizations or private institutions (Interviewee 1, 2019; Interviewee, 2018; Interviewee, 2018).

In order to elaborate on the relatively lower number of Syrian university students registered to the HEIs in İzmir, the background of their admission process to the HEIs in Turkey would guide the researchers. Both the regulations of the CoHE and universities in İzmir have been influential on this situation along with the limited potential for employment opportunities compared with İstanbul which hosts the largest Syrian population as a city without a geographical proximity with Syria. Concerning the reasons why İzmir is hosting relatively lower number of Syrian students, it is observed that there are multiple determinants limiting their motivation to apply to the HEIs in İzmir.

Firstly, Syrian students were only able to apply to the selected Turkish HEIs in the border regions in the pre-2015 period. Yet, during the post-2015 period they were given the right to apply to other HEIs all around Turkey. However as can be observed in the numbers provided above there are still high number of Syrian students enrolled in the same HEIs in the border region. The reason why they choose these universities might be dependent upon the feeling of a secure environment where they can meet other Syrian friends and relatives.

Second determinant is directly related with the different regulations each university determines and implements regarding the admission criteria for international students. Accordingly, the applicants should meet the criteria of the institution that they apply to. This creates both

opportunities and difficulties since some universities are more willing to accept international students whereas others follow stricter policies which are not as flexible as the other universities in terms of creating a welcoming environment (Interviewee 1, 2019). The differences in the policies occur due to the reason why some universities accept more documentation demonstrating the score of international exams such as SAT, ACT or MCAT while others require the candidates to be successful in the YÖS examination implemented by their own institution (Yıldız, 2019b: 6, Interviewee 3, 2018).

Apart from the different criteria each HEI pursues, it is observed that all universities accept limited number of international students including the Syrians. This limit is determined by the authorities of each university considering the adequacy of departmental facilities. The universities in İzmir have strict policies in this regard. However, by virtue of the new target to attract more international students under the *Internationalization Strategy* of CoHE\*, some universities have broadened the numbers of international students to be accepted for the upcoming years (Interviewee 1, 2019).

Finally, from a critical perspective, İzmir may be considered to have limited employment opportunities compared with the extensive private sector institutions in İstanbul. In addition, the number of Syrian population is much higher in İstanbul (560.706. to 143.660) and their socio-economic profile differs from those who reside in İzmir. It is observed that the reason why Syrians choose İzmir is mostly because of their intention to use the city as a transit point. The city's location connecting Turkey to Europe makes İzmir an attractive hub for the Syrian migrants (Yıldız and Uzgören, 2016: 201).

### 5.1. Methodology

In order to reveal and analyze the Syrian university students' challenges in higher education, as well as their socio-economic conditions and integration prospects, two methods, a questionnaire and unstructured interviews have been applied to this research. Besides, running records and secondary resources have also been included in the article to support the analysis.

The questionnaire aims to obtain general information about the characteristics and the needs of Syrian students. The main goal of the research has been explained to the target group and responses from 22 voluntary Syrian students have been collected anonymously. Through the

\*Council of Higher Education, Yükseköğretimde Uluslararasılaşma Strateji Belgesi 2018-2022 [Stragey Paper on the Internationalization of Higher Education 2018-2022], 30 June 2017, [https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/AnaSayfa/Yuksekogretimde\\_Uluslararasılaşma\\_Strateji\\_Belgesi\\_2018\\_2022.pdf](https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/AnaSayfa/Yuksekogretimde_Uluslararasılaşma_Strateji_Belgesi_2018_2022.pdf), p.52 (Accessed on 28 October 2019).

findings of the obtained data from the respondents, educational, socio-cultural and economic challenges are first described and then analyzed by the authors.

The questionnaire prepared by the authors consists of 30 questions. 5 questions have been prepared to measure demographic information including gender, age and income level. 15 questions are multiple choice questions some of which the students are able to choose more than one option. In 2 questions, 5-level Likert scale method has been used to measure their perception of living in İzmir and integrating into Turkish society. 6 open-ended questions have been directed to obtain their own opinions and interpretations. Finally, the questionnaire includes 2 specific questions to decipher potential gender-based issues.

Due to the legal framework based on Turkish Data Protection Law on the sharing of personal data, the authors were not allowed to obtain individual contact information of the target group. A call and the link of the online questionnaire form prepared by the authors have been sent by YTB İzmir Office to the affiliated Syrian university students for several times in 2018 and 2019. 22 of the Syrian students in İzmir universities have voluntarily participated in and provided the authors with detailed information on their educational, socio-cultural and economic needs, along with future perspectives.

The unstructured interviews conducted with an officer in charge of International Students at the International Relations Office of Dokuz Eylül University (Interviewee-1) as well as other officials from YTB İzmir Office (Interviewee-2), and an academic specialist from CoHE (Interviewee-3) have provided information supportive to the findings of the research. The names of the interviewees are not shared due to the unstructured nature of the interviews and the reason why their consent has not been asked for. The interviews which were held in 2018 and 2019, consisted of the general questions regarding the management of Syrian students' integration into higher education, the regulations that are followed by the HEIs, the challenges the HEIs have to struggle with and finally the socio-cultural tendencies of Syrian university students in terms of responding to the integration policies of Turkey. Accordingly it is observed that Syrian students have a lack of interest in sharing their life trajectories either with researchers or stakeholders. In a similar vein, all the interviewees have mentioned that Syrian migrant students are not willing to participate in cultural and educational network meetings. This can easily be associated with their traumatic experiences of the civil war and migration.

Finally running records and secondary resources have been referenced in the research to provide a historical background, to enlighten on the life trajectories of Syrians and to strengthen the arguments presented by the authors. Running records comprise of the official statistical reports

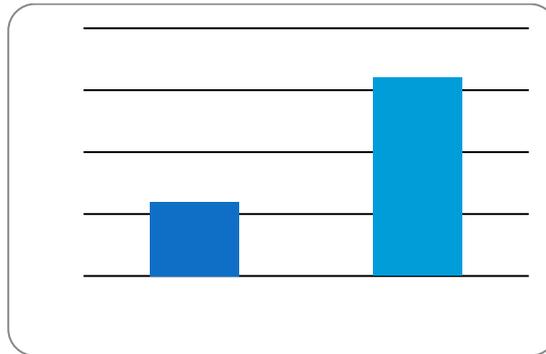
published by state authorities and international organizations such as the EU, CoHE, DGMM and YTB whereas the secondary resources refer to the existing literature on the Syrian migrants. Besides, attendances to national and international workshops and meetings with the state authorities and representatives from NGOs are complementary parts of the research phase of this article. The workshops which the authors have participated in include the Workshop on *Integration of Refugees into Higher Education: Comparative Country Cases* which was organized by Yaşar University UNESCO Chair on International Migration on 5 December 2018 at Yaşar University; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Adaptation Meeting organized by DGMM on 21 December 2018, in İzmir; and the International Students and Academics Social Adaptation Meeting organized by DGMM on 23 December 2019, in İzmir. These workshops and meetings have provided the authors with a convenient environment to obtain information regarding the latest discussions on the integration of Syrian students in Turkey and to listen to the first-hand narratives from the invited Syrian students which are crucial for gathering supportive information to the results of the questionnaire and the interviews.

## 5.2. Findings of the Questionnaire

### *Demographic features*

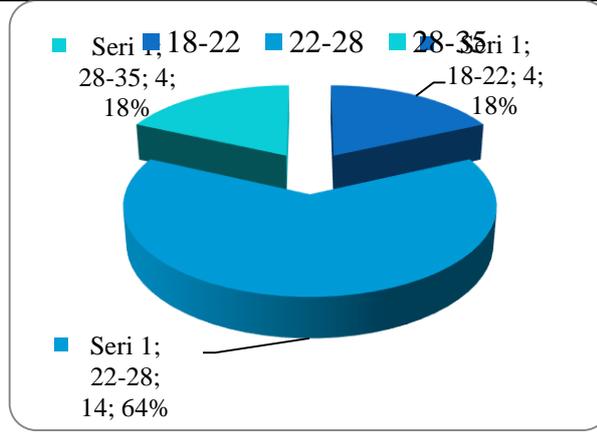
According to the data provided by the Turkish Ministry of Interior, the number of Syrian male students residing in Turkey is higher than the female students. Accordingly, the demographic features of the respondents to the questionnaire provided by this research consist of 72% male and 28% female as evidenced in the Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Gender**



The age range of the respondents varies from 18 to 35. The rate of those respondents who are between 18-22 is 18%, those who are between 22-28 is 64% and those who are between 28-35 is 18% as evidenced in Figure 2. These rates clearly indicate that most of the Syrian students in İzmir are pursuing their undergraduate studies.

**Figure 2: Age**



### ***Educational challenges***

The Syrian university students studying in İzmir consider YÖS as a very difficult test to qualify for enrolling to a public university. They draw the attention to the quotas in the HEIs reserved for Syrian migrants and consider them as limiting their opportunities. Thus they define these challenges as the main obstacles on their access to higher education opportunities in Turkey.

The Syrian students' responses to the questions on the challenges they face in educational life are also related with the courses offered in the academic curriculum. In the questionnaire there exist some questions that aim to determine their basic needs to recover those educational problems such as the courses they expect to be added to the academic curriculum, their demands to learn specific topics and to obtain skills for better employment opportunities. Respondents suggested new courses such as Turkish language\*, Syria-Turkey relations, cultural integration, labour market in Turkey, courses on management and information technology skills, English language and preparatory courses for the TOEFL test. As Hohberger (2017: 9) also stresses, the demand for English language courses is very common among the Syrians students.

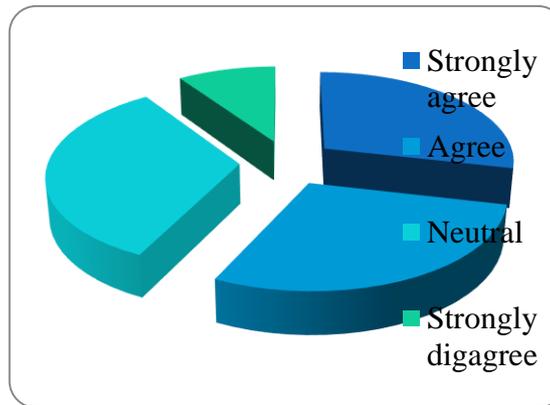
Through the questionnaire results, it is also aimed at determining Syrian students' expectations of and suggestions for extracurricular activities throughout their higher education experience in Turkey. Accordingly, the respondents' demands consist of traineeship opportunities and study trips to public and private institutions that they consider as prospective employers or employees. Syrian university students mentioned their desire to be trained on arts and sports as well.

\* UNHCR Officer Neşe Kılınçoğlu stated as well that the inability to speak Turkish language is the first and the most important challenge of the Syrians in Turkey. Kılınçoğlu added that the second important challenge is Syrians' insufficient knowledge on their own rights and obligations. DGMM, International Students and Academics Social Adaptation Meeting, İzmir, 23.12.2019.

### *Socio-cultural challenges*

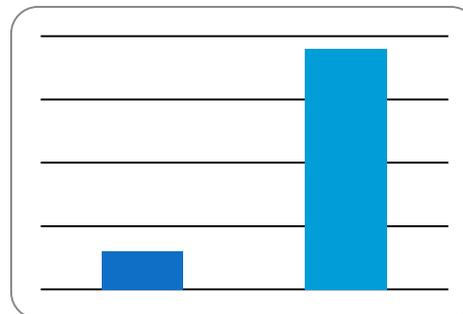
The first question in the questionnaire regarding the socio-cultural life of Syrian university students is about their integration into Turkish society. To determine their perception, they were asked whether they agree with the idea that integration into Turkish society is easy or not. 55% of the respondents agree that integration into Turkish society is easy, while 9% of the respondents strongly disagree with this idea. The Figure 3 below demonstrates that most of the respondents do not perceive great discrepancies between themselves and Turkish society.

**Figure 3:** Integration into society is easy



The second question regarding the socio-cultural life is about the willingness to acquire Turkish citizenship in order to measure the Syrian students' future plans concerning their intention to stay in Turkey or not. While 86% of the respondents are willing to be granted Turkish citizenship, the rest is still not sure whether to acquire. These results reflect that none of the respondents reject the probability of acquiring Turkish citizenship. On the other hand, 14% of those are not really sure about acquiring citizenship as depicted in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Are you planning to acquire Turkish citizenship?

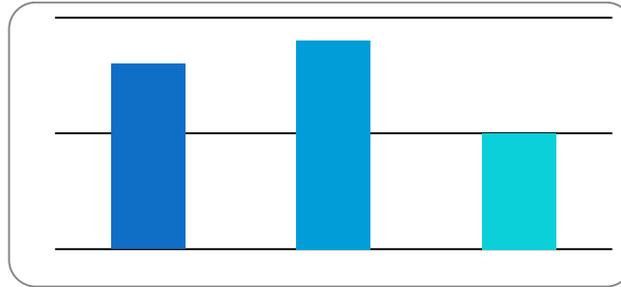


Along with these indicators the respondents were also asked about their future plans whether they would like to stay in Turkey after graduation. While 73% would like to continue living in

Turkey, 23% of the respondents are not sure about their intention to live in Turkey. Only 1 of the respondents clearly expressed her intention to leave the country. The elaboration of her personal responses demonstrates that no ability to speak foreign languages other than Arabic and low level of income might be the determining factors for her future plans.

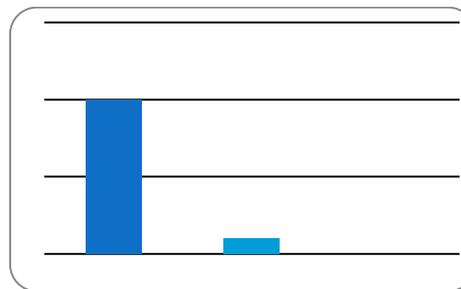
As an important figure to understand social integration of Syrian students with the Turkish society, an elaboration on their willingness to stay with Syrians in İzmir was also requested. Although they demand to acquire Turkish citizenship and their intention to stay in Turkey is clear, it is observed that they still wish to stay with their compatriots. While 36% of the respondents express their choice to live with Syrians, 23% of them respond to this question negatively as can be seen in Figure 5. It is also observed that 41% of the respondents do not have a concrete idea about their choice on the features of the district where they would like to live.

**Figure 5:** Do you prefer staying with Syrians who reside in İzmir?



In order to better evaluate the level of socio-cultural integration of the respondents the role of holding a university degree in the integration process was also directed as a supportive question. What is found out from the responses is that holding a university degree is believed to be an important factor that leads to social integration. While 91% of the respondents strongly support this proposition, there is no single respondent who rejects that as can be seen in the Figure 6.

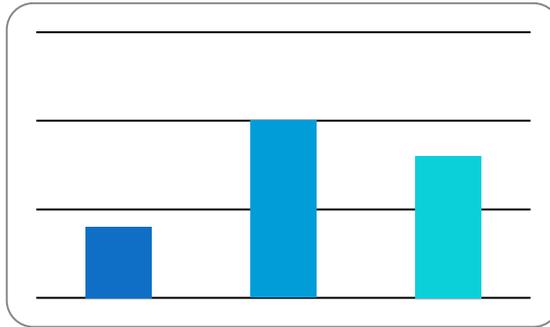
**Figure 6:** Do you think Syrians holding a university degree have more chance in integration into Turkish society than who don't have?



Additionally gender discrimination as another factor that might be influential regarding social integration is also included in the questionnaire. The respondents were asked about their opinions whether female students face greater problems than the male ones. According to the

respondents, gender issue is an important reference point in social integration of Syrian students in İzmir. 45% of the respondents believe that female students do not have more problems than males in terms of integration as shown in the Figure 7. However 36% of the respondents express about the possibility for females to be discriminated in the society and 19% of the respondents claim that female students are discriminated primarily in the labour market, and then in social and educational life.

**Figure 7:** Do you think female Syrian students in İzmir have more problems than male ones?

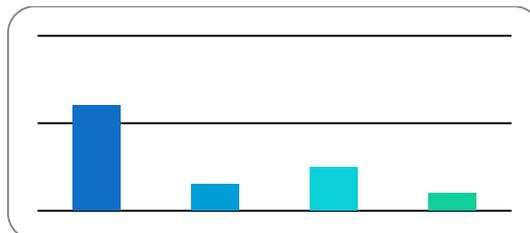


In their answers to the open-ended questions, the respondents also expressed their demands to have psychological counselling and guidance. Additionally, one of the respondents who have been living in Turkey for 5 years has suggested an active dialogue between Turkish and Syrian communities to reduce the misunderstandings, misleading information resources and cultural differences. The same respondent has also underlined the importance of learning Turkish culture and politics good enough and harmonization with Turkish traditions and lifestyle in order not to be perceived as a foreigner in the society.

### ***Economic challenges***

In order to make an evaluation concerning the financial problems the Syrian university students in İzmir face, it is aimed to draw a general picture about their economic status. In line with this aim, the respondents were asked a question about their current employment status. As can be seen in Figure 8 below, 9% of the respondents work and 14% identify themselves as being unable to work. On the other hand those who are looking for work constitute the majority with the ratio of 55% and the rest is not looking for any work opportunities.

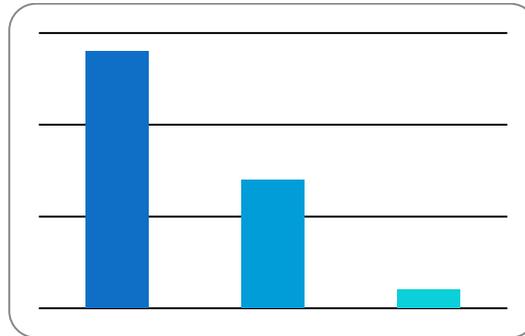
**Figure 8:** Employment Status: Are you currently...



Considering the important role personal skills play in accommodating the candidate into the labour market, the respondents were asked about the skills and knowledge that could be helpful for an employment opportunity in Turkey. Accordingly 45% of the respondents think that having language skills would improve their opportunities to find a job. A male respondent makes this statement clear with the following words: “*Learning Turkish so good not to be detected as a foreigner*”. This answer indicates that to be a foreigner in the Turkish labour market is perceived as a disadvantage.

In line with the question above, the respondents were also asked about their specific needs to be employed in Turkey. 45% of the respondents strongly believe that the first condition to find a job in Turkey is to speak Turkish fluently. The respondents also underline the significance of having computer skills and certificates of proficiency in English, learning about Turkish politics and gaining knowledge on Turkish labour law. The suggested solutions of the respondents to overcome their economic challenges include financial and moral support, new scholarship opportunities and access to traineeship opportunities in order to sustain their higher education and get prepared to the employment stage.

**Figure 9:** Are you planning to live and work in İzmir after graduation?



When Syrian students were asked about their future plans to live and work in İzmir following their graduation from the university, it was found that 64% of the respondents state their intention to continue living in İzmir as can be seen in Figure 9. This might be either due to being accustomed to the lifestyle in İzmir or their social networking they have created during their stay. Another reason why they choose İzmir might be arising from its geographical proximity to Europe. This elaboration depends on their preferences they expressed when other countries where they would like to work have been asked. Those preferences are mostly centred on Canada, the U.S. and the EU member states such as Germany and Austria.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Readmission Agreement between the EU and Turkey aimed at decreasing the number of irregular migrants passing across the Aegean Sea through Turkey and eventually arriving at the

bloc's territory. Accordingly, the migrants who arrive in Greece illegally and whose application for seeking refuge has been refused by the authorities are sent back to Turkey. However, after the suspension of the Agreement, Turkey needs to follow alternative policies for the Syrian migrants.

The need to formulate alternative policies mainly focused on the integration issues of migrants, especially the Syrians, in Turkey into the host society. Over time this approach has been evolved from integration into the adaptation of foreign population since their socio-economic and psychological vulnerability required more sensitive policies to be able to overcome the challenges. Accordingly the early ad hoc solutions have been replaced with comprehensive approaches towards many services including the higher education in order to meet the needs of university-aged Syrian migrants. Turkey's humanitarian efforts on these new policy areas are regarded as being exemplary when compared with other states.

Considering the aforementioned exemplary policies Turkey has been following for the adaptation of Syrian migrants in Turkey, this study aims to detect to what extent the Syrian university students in İzmir could benefit from these policies to better analyse the current developments and put forward future prospects in this regard. The findings of the research reveal the local needs of Syrian university students in İzmir as well as their general needs and expectations so that they can provide the academics and public institutions to compare İzmir case with the other cases in Turkey.

The data on socio-economic problems and perceptions regarding the integration issues have been collected through the questionnaire prepared by the authors. Economic challenges seem to remain in spite of the scholarships and funds provided by both international institutions and national agencies. Half of the respondents emphasized that, they are searching for employment. Even though high number of young Syrians in Turkey is not involved in higher education, İzmir case differentiates from the average number. The Syrian students perceive the YÖS exam as a considerable hurdle on their way to university life. In this vein, competency in Turkish language is regarded as a determining factor in their success both in achieving university studies and potential employment opportunities. Furthermore, the respondents have reflected their willingness both to learn and advance their English language skills. When approached from the socio-cultural perspective, almost half of the respondents reflected that they have been at ease with integrating with the Turkish society. The aim to obtain Turkish citizenship has been almost a common desire for nearly all of the respondents. In addition to that, a university diploma is perceived to be a promoter of social integration with the Turkish society.

This article puts forward that a better prospect of successful integration of Syrians with the Turkish society has become an imperative since the conflict in Syria has not been resolved yet and the Readmission Agreement between Turkey and the EU has been suspended very recently. This is further consolidated with one of the questionnaire results stating that Syrian university students in İzmir have a strong tendency to continue living in Turkey. The students will both have a relative advantage in adapting to the Turkish society and labour market. This will catalyze the integration of Syrians in general with the society and improve Turkish citizens' perceptions towards Syrians. An efficient and goal-oriented higher education policy and strong coordination between the public institutions such as CoHE, DGMM, YTB and public universities will help the Syrian students integrate into socio-cultural, economic and educational life and equip them with necessary qualifications and skills.

### **INTERVIEWEES**

**Interviewee 1:** Interview with an officer in charge of International Students at the International Relations Office of Dokuz Eylül University, 25 July 2019.

**Interviewee 2:** Interview with an officer from İzmir Office of Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, 7 December 2018.

**Interviewee 3:** Interview with an academic specialist from Council of Higher Education, 5 December 2018.

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