

Barriers, policies, and support strategies: Exploring Syrian students' integration into education process in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

The number of students from migrant backgrounds has significantly increased. This has occurred for a variety of reasons such as economic migration, and in the case of some European countries and Türkiye, a result of political upheaval in Syria. In this study the aim was to fill the gap of identifying barriers for Syrian students' integration into education process in Türkiye and to provide strategies for overcoming these barriers. An exploratory mixed methods design was used which included 186 participants. The results revealed that systematic, financial, language, and social barriers significantly prevented migrant students' integration into education process in Türkiye. However, provided suggestions about how these barriers could be mitigated. Recommendations are provided regarding how education systems can put strategies and support systems into place to improve the chances of refugees not only in Türkiye but also in other affected countries.

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Introduction

The concept of international migration is one of the most important topics of academic interest. Throughout history, people have migrated to other countries for economic, social, political, and/or environmental reasons. Also, immigration may occur on a voluntary basis but in some cases it may also be compulsory. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 122.6 million people were forced to migrate in late 2024 (UNHRC, 2024a). For example, due to the Syrian war, millions of people had to migrate to neighbouring countries to flee the conflict.

The war in Syria caused 7.2 million Syrians to flee their homes (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024). When migratory routes and countries of transfer for migrants are examined, Türkiye lies in a central position due to its strategic location and geopolitical standing. As a result, large numbers of immigrants and refugees, mostly from Asia, the Middle East and Africa either migrate to Türkiye or use it as a country of transit (Unsal, 2019). However, the immigration issue is not only limited to neighbouring countries. In recent years, immigration to the European Union (EU) has continued to rise, reflecting global migration trends. In 2023, the EU received over 1.14 million asylum applications, an 18% increase from 2022 and the highest number since 2016. Syrians continue to constitute the largest group seeking international protection in European countries. In 2023, Syrians (181 000) submitted significantly more applications; in fact, recording an increase of 38 % compared to 2022. This represents just under half of the number of applications lodged in 2015 (EUAA, 2024). Thus, the Syrian crisis is a situation that is of concern for both Türkiye and the European Union. Accordingly, this study explores formal educational

process and meaningful educational integration for Syrian students in Türkiye and suggests concrete supports.

Literature review

Migration is accompanied by various problems for the immigrants themselves and the countries that have accepted them. For example, upon arrival to the host country, migrants are often forced to stay in camps which lack sufficient infrastructure, are poorly planned, far from natural resources, excessively crowded with limited rights and freedom, lack security as well as lack proper nutrition and adequate living conditions. Additionally, immigrants face significant difficulties from cultural, political, and social issues (Salameh, 2019), and often citizens of host countries have a negative perception that immigrants cause high crime rates and are more inclined to commit crimes (McCann & Boateng, 2020). Importantly, the quick and successful integration of immigrants plays a vital role in preventing crime due to factors that make them more prone to crime such as feeling insecure or unsafe, lack of accommodations, lack of employment and education opportunities, and lack of a supportive family unit which might make youngsters more prone to suffer from violence, workforce exploitation, robbery, fraud, and/or hate crimes (FRA, 2019). Therefore, for most refugees in Europe, integration is considered the most suitable and permanent solution (UNHRC, 2013).

However, the social integration of refugees can progress slowly (Trines, 2019). This is seen in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). The MIPEX is a tool utilised to compare countries in terms of their policies regarding the integration of immigrants. In this respect, countries on five continents, including all EU member countries, the United Kingdom, other non-EU European countries as well as several countries in Asia, North America, and South America are all compared. It presents data by examining issues related to countries' immigration and integration policies in terms of education, health, political participation, accommodation, anti-discrimination, family unity, access to citizenship, and the labour market. Each country is evaluated on a 100-point scale, and it was revealed that no country scored within the 80-100-point range regarding integration. Türkiye scored at 52 points in terms of integration policies in education (MIPEX, 2020). It is revealed in the MIPEX data that there is a need for integration policy improvements within several European countries and more importantly within Türkiye.

Thus, to actualise social integration quickly and successfully, some specific strategies are needed. According to Ager and Strang (2008), accommodation, health, and employment are keys to ensuring social integration. In this regard, it could be claimed that education plays a critical role in immigrants' integration into their host country. Education has a significant role in developing societies which are inclusive, peaceful, fair, and free of fear and violence. Principally, it ensures the peaceful, productive, and inclusive integration of immigrants into the political processes and civil structures within the host society.

Moreover, education can increase tolerance by providing harmony and consolidation (UNICEF, 2019), develop self-confidence and personal capacity, and contribute to active citizenship (UNESCO, 2017). Education is an important means for refugees to gain purpose and dignity after experiencing the trauma of being displaced (UNHRC, 2019b). Providing refugees access to education can help them improve their mental health and better integrate into their new environment (Magos & Margaroni, 2018).

Türkiye is one of the countries hosting the largest number of refugees displaced due to forced causes such as war and conflict worldwide. It currently hosts approximately 3.2 million registered Syrian refugees and approximately 222 thousand people of other nationalities (UNHRC, 2024b). It appears that children constitute half of the refugee population (UNHRC, 2019a). 2.9 million of the school-age refugee children reside in only five countries, and the highest number are in Türkiye (UNHRC, 2024b). 1 million 124 thousand 353 of these refugees are children of compulsory school age. Only 65% of them were attending Turkish Public Schools. Almost 400 thousand Syrian children were out of school. Enrolment rate in primary school is almost 80 %, it is only 50% at the upper secondary level. Syrian children often work outside or in the home rather than attending school (UNICEF, 2022).

As one of the most prominent host countries, the Turkish government has created regulations regarding Syrian migrant and refugee children. First, for the education of Syrian children, Temporary Education Centres (TECs) have been established inside and outside of temporary refugee centres, and Syrian children are provided primary school to post primary education (Dillioglu, 2015). Additionally, following 2014, Syrian children have had the opportunity to receive education within Turkish public schools under supervision of the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Importantly, the children are only required to have a foreigner identification document and are not required to have a residence permit. As a result, the number of Syrian students in the Turkish education system has increased over the years. Furthermore, following the 2016-17 academic-year, Syrian children for the first time have been enrolled into kindergarten and the 1st grade under supervision of the MoNE. As a result, Syrian children have studied at MoNE supervised schools,

instead of the TECs. The transition from TECs to public schools has shown with numbers between 2014–2021 in Figure 1.

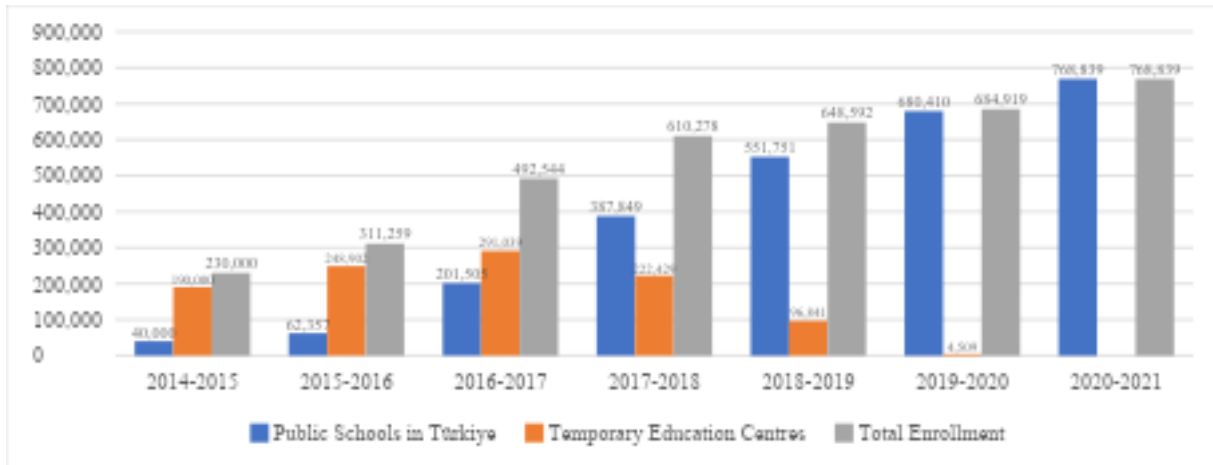


Figure 1. Transition from TECs to public schools between 2015–2021 (UNICEF, 2023)

As Figure 1 has signed, the number of Syrian students, who enrolled in public schools has increased day by day. Between 2020–2021 there is no Syrian students at TECs. All of them have been enrolled directly to public schools, which can be regarded as a sign of their overcoming language and culture barrier. This improvement is also reflected in schooling rates of Syrian student. The schooling data of Syrian students is shown in Figure 2.

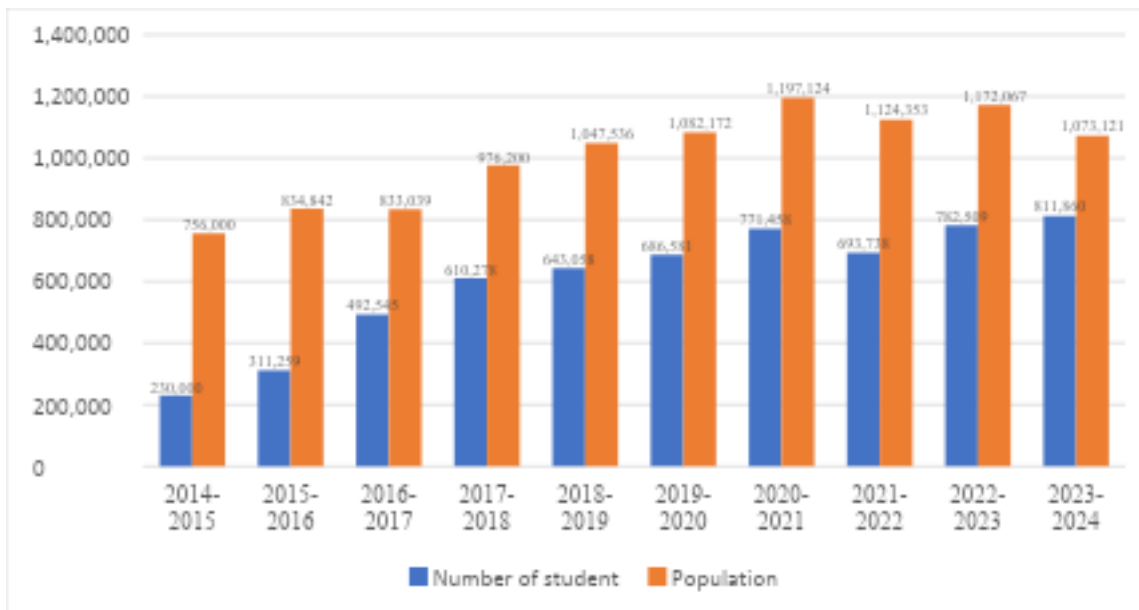


Figure 2. Schooling data of Syrian students under temporary protection in Türkiye according to their years of education (MoNE, 2024)

Figure 2 summarizes the schooling rates of Syrian students between 2014–2024 in Türkiye. While 3% of the total Syrian population went to school between 2014–2015, this rate has increased to 75% between 2023–2024. It is expected that these numbers and rates will gradually decrease with the end of the war and their return to Syria. However the current number of Syrian students studying in Türkiye is quite high. These numbers according to education level are given in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of Syrian students under temporary protection in Türkiye according to education level (2016–2024)

Education Year	Pre-school (5 age)		Primary School (6–9 age)		Lower Secondary (10–13 age)		Upper Secondary (14–17 age)		Total number of students	Rate of Schooling (%)
	Number of Students	Rate of Schooling (%)	Number of Students	Rate of Schooling (%)	Number of Students	Rate of Schooling (%)	Number of Students	Rate of Schooling (%)		
2016–2017	25.761	31,09	308.638	76,38	106.257	45,70	51.889	24,33	492.545	59,13
2017–2018	36.548	39,06	374.304	78,75	137.613	50,58	61.813	23,93	610.278	62,52
2018–2019	32.198	33,09	365.535	95,50	173.252	57,66	72.073	26,77	643.058	61,39
2019–2020	35.553	31,51	338.807	88,61	222.703	69,98	89.518	33,31	686.581	63,44
2020–2021	35.707	28,06	353.130	79,75	271.645	77,92	110.976	39,86	771.458	64,42
2021–2022	43.202	36,59	311.822	74,68	263.492	78,43	75.222	29,76	693.758	61,70
2022–2023	50.102	41,36	335.689	77,85	283.478	79,98	113.240	42,69	782.509	66,76
2023–2024	56.050	47,40	365.000	90,85	278.593	93,53	112.217	43,96	811.860	75,65

Resource: (MoNE, 2024).

Table 1 summarizes the number of Syrian students and their schooling rate between 2016–2024 in Türkiye. While in 2016 the total schooling rate was 59,13%, it has increased to 75,65%. To explain the current numbers in more detail, out of 56 thousand 50 students are in kindergarten, out of 365 thousand have studied at primary school, out of 278 thousand 593 students have studied at lower secondary school, and out of 112 thousand 217 students have attended upper secondary schools. While the rate of education among Syrian children is highest in primary school, it is lowest in upper secondary. As the grade level increases, there is a decrease in schooling rates. As a result, to increase the schooling rate of Syrian children within Türkiye, especially at the upper secondary school level, and to ensure their integration into schools, there is need for further studies focusing on upper secondary and higher education.

Various obstacles have prevented refugee children from attending school. Primarily, there may not be a school in the vicinity of the refugee camps, and even if there is a school, then there may be problems such as cramped classrooms, lack of teachers, lack of basic necessities like water, cleaning, hygiene, and teaching/learning materials. Unfortunately, the chaos caused by a hurried relocation might cause people to lose vital records such as birth certificates, identification cards, education records, and exam certificates, which would allow them to receive further education in another country. Moreover, even if they possess these documents, there is not a guarantee that schools in the host country will accept them. Also, enrolment is only half the problem (UNHRC, 2019a), for example, after enrolling in a school, refugee children might face difficulties which cause them to leave. Language barriers, social norms, ethnocentrism, unclear legal and managerial processes, lack of identification cards, and/or not recognising previous education are common barriers which keep migrant children out of school within their host communities (UNICEF, 2019). However, any effort made by host countries, benefactors, the UNHRC, and/or stakeholders might make a difference in migrants children's lives (UNHRC, 2019b). Consequently, it is crucial for Türkiye and the EU to enable Syrian students the opportunity to integrate into the education system. In turn, this will aid Syrian children's future social integration into the host country's community.

The points discussed so far have shown how important it is for refugee children to receive education to construct a better future. Therefore, public expenses spent on refugees' education should be a very profitable investment (Bonin, 2017). The aim of the UNHRC (2019b) Refugee Education 2030 strategy is to ensure that refugees reach equal levels as non-refugee students in kindergarten, primary and secondary education as well as raise enrolment rates within higher education to 15%. For Türkiye to fulfil these aims, it is necessary to determine substantial problems in the national education system and take preventive measures to correct them. Importantly, international actors like the UNHRC and UNICEF stress the importance of supporting refugees within the national education system (UNHRC, 2019a; UNICEF, 2019). In this current study, the aim was to identify the barriers for Syrian students to attend higher education in Türkiye as well as their integration into the education system.

Despite the significant progress made in expanding access to school for Syrian students under temporary protection in Türkiye, critical challenges persist, particularly in relation to their continued participation and integration at the upper secondary and higher education levels (UNHCR, 2019a; UNICEF, 2022; MoNE, 2024). While enrolment rates have increased substantially over the past decade, these improvements mask structural, linguistic, socio-economic, and institutional barriers that hinder students' educational trajectories beyond compulsory education (Ager & Strang, 2008; Trines, 2019). Existing policy frameworks and statistical indicators provide limited insight into how these barriers are experienced by students themselves and how they shape access to higher education (Bonin, 2017; UNHCR, 2019b). Accordingly, the central problem addressed in this study is the gap between formal educational access and meaningful educational integration for Syrian students in Türkiye, with a specific focus on the barriers affecting their transition into higher education.

The aim of the study

In this context, this study aims to identify the barriers for Syrian students' integration into education process in Türkiye and suggest strategies and policies to overcome these barriers. In line with this aim, the following questions guided this study:

- According to Syrian students, what are the barriers that they have experienced as a part of their integration into the education process in Türkiye?
- To what extent do Syrian students agree with the integration barriers into the education process in Türkiye?
- According to Syrian students, what policies and strategies should be developed for Syrian students' integration into the education process in Türkiye?

Methodology

Research design

This study followed a mixed methods research paradigm, which is defined as mixing or combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, or approaches into a single study" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). Accordingly, an exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2020) was adopted to capture both the breadth of Syrian students' educational barriers through quantitative data and the depth of their lived experiences through qualitative inquiry, thereby allowing for a more context-sensitive interpretation of integration into the education process in Türkiye. It was organised into three strands. The aim of Strand I is to reveal barriers, in this sense, the qualitative study is conducted using a lotus blossom technique, which was developed by Yasuo Matsumura, emphasizes the power of brainstorming by the application of a visual representation of ideas (Phung et al., 2016).

The lotus blossom technique was deliberately selected as a qualitative data collection tool in this study because it facilitates the systematic exploration of complex and multi-dimensional problems by encouraging participants to generate, organise, and elaborate their ideas in a structured visual format (Michalko, 2006). This technique is particularly suitable for exploratory phases of mixed methods research, as it supports idea generation while minimising researcher dominance and allowing participants to express their perceptions freely. In this respect, the technique has been applied in five basic steps. In the first step, a lotus blossom diagram with a square in the middle and eight circles surrounding it was drawn and distributed to the participants. In the second phase, the main problem was written in the square at the center of the diagram. In the third phase, participants were asked to think of ideas related to the main problem and to write them in the circles surrounding the square. After the participants wrote their opinions, at the fourth step, each idea in the circles was carried to the square in the center and became the main problem of the lotus blossom diagram. For example, financial problems in one of the circles in lotus blossom were written in the center square on the next diagram, and participants were asked what financial difficulties prevent them from integrating into the education process. As for the final step, the process continued until all the ideas were used.

The aim of Strand II is to determine to what extent Syrian students agree with the integration barriers into the education process. In this sense, the quantitative study is conducted by means of "Barriers for Syrian Students' Integration Questionnaire." Strand III analytically extends Strand I by shifting the focus from problem identification to solution construction. While Strand I uses the Lotus Blossom technique to map and categorise the barriers Syrian students face in the education process, Strand III reengages participants with these empirically grounded barriers to elicit policy-oriented interpretations, coping mechanisms, and support strategies. In this way, the same visual technique functions differently: in Strand I it supports

exploratory diagnosis, whereas in Strand III it facilitates analytical reflection and forward-looking sense-making, allowing participants to transform lived constraints into actionable recommendations. This sequential use ensures methodological coherence while enabling a deeper, more applied understanding of integration by linking barriers to context-sensitive solutions.

Study group

The study group was selected through purposive sampling with specific criterion (Patton, 2014) in order to achieve the aim of this research. It includes two different study groups for quantitative and qualitative strands. Participants for the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study are different but are drawn from the same population of interest (Collins et al., 2007). In this current study, the criterion included Syrian students studying at public schools in Türkiye. The study group for qualitative strands (I–III) consisted of 28 Syrian students from four cities in Türkiye including Istanbul, Hatay, Mersin, and Ankara. These cities were chosen from among the top ten cities in Türkiye where Syrians were under temporary protection. Moreover, as the cities were being chosen, it was also important that each city was located within a different region of Türkiye. For example, Istanbul is in the Marmara region, Ankara the central Anatolia region, Mersin the Mediterranean region, and Hatay located in the southeast Anatolia region. These cities were selected because of the high population of Syrians. Participants are between the ages of 15 to 18, and they are studying at different post primary schools. Thus, qualitative data were collected from 28 Syrian students attending post primary school in Türkiye, and the research reached data saturation. It is suggested that six to twelve participants are sufficient for data saturation in hard-to-reach groups such as Syrian citizens with low school enrollment rates (Guest et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2023; Morse, 2000).

For the quantitative strand of this study, 158 Syrian students attending state upper secondary schools in Istanbul, Hatay, Mersin, and Ankara provinces in Türkiye were purposively selected for participation in this study. Information regarding students' demographic characteristics is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic information of the participants

		<i>F</i>	%
Sex	Female	115	72.8
	Male	37	23.4
	Missing	6	3.8
	Total	158	100
Age	14	8	5.1
	15	31	19.6
	16	30	19.0
	17	17	10.8
	18	33	20.9
	19	10	6.3
	20 and above	2	1.2
	Missing	27	17.1
	Total	158	100
Grade	9th	44	27.9
	10th	48	30.4
	11th	13	8.2
	12th	52	32.9
	Missing	1	0.6
	Total	158	100
The length of years they have been in Türkiye	1 year	7	4.4
	2 years	12	7.6
	3 years	23	14.6
	4 years	40	25.3
	5 years	42	26.6
	6 years	23	14.5
	7 years	6	3.8
	Missing	5	3.2
	Total	158	100
Working status	Working	10	6.3
	Not working	145	91.8
	Missing	3	1.9
	Total	158	100

As shown in Table 2, 72.8% of the participants were female, 23.4% were male and 3.8% of the data were missing. The participants' age range was mostly between 15 to 19-years-old. Only two participants were 20

years old or older and 17.1% did not state their age. They had been in Türkiye a specific amount of time (e.g., 1 to 7 years). Although most of them (91.8%) did not work, there were a small number who (6.3%) were employed.

Data collection

The data collection tools are developed by the researchers for this study. For the first and last strand, the data are collected by Lotus Blossom Technique on barriers and possible policy and support strategies in the process of integration into the education process. In this respect, Lotus Blossom studies were held in four different cities independently. The study was held with the voluntary students at a predetermined date and time. For the second strand, "Barriers for Syrian Students' Integration into Turkish Education System Questionnaire," is developed and administered to Syrian students. The questionnaire consists of two parts. In the first part, questions related to demographic information, in the second part, barriers for Syrian students' integration into the Turkish education system take place. In the questionnaire, 27 barriers with the help of qualitative data were ordered and evaluated on a 5-point likert type rating. Ratings were defined from "1-No Effect" to "5-Major Effect". Students were asked to determine to what extent these barriers affect their integration into the education process.

Data analysis

In this study, the quantitative data were analysed through the SPSS program. The student's views were evaluated in terms of frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The qualitative data were analysed using the content analysis technique. In this respect, each view the students wrote provided on their Lotus Blossom page were uploaded to a computer and saved. Then, the uploaded data were analysed and coded by each researcher independently. The researchers compared their results, discussed any differences, and ultimately reached a consensus on the analyses. Finally, researchers decided together whether themes that appeared in the data could be combined under more general groupings and checked these results.

The mixed methods research requires integrating quantitative and qualitative data to interpret the results. According to Fetters et al. (2013) the researchers can integrate the data at three levels in mixed methods studies: study design, methods and interpretation and reporting levels. This research is designed in the exploratory sequential mixed methods research design, in which the researchers first collect and analyze qualitative data and then the qualitative findings are used to develop a quantitative data collection tool in order to make a generalization. As a part of the contiguous approach to integration, through this research, the qualitative and quantitative findings are reported in different sections within a single report. It is also possible to say that both qualitative and quantitative data provide similar findings, which means confirmation of the results. Confirmation provides greater credibility for the results.

Reliability and validity

In order to provide validity and reliability of the research various methods were used. For credibility, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Moreover, to make an intended difference in the formation of the study group, students from different regions and cities in Turkey were selected (Merriam, 2018). Furthermore, to provide reliability direct quotations from students were used in findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As a matter of fact, direct quotations support credibility by providing readers to make a judgement that the analyses were made objectively and correctly (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). As for transferability, how the study was held tried to be explained in detail (Anney, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Merriam, 2018). In this respect, how the data were collected, which method was used in the analysis of the collected data, how the analysis process was held and how the findings were drawn were explicitly explained. One of the other ways to ensure transferability is to choose participants and cases rich in subject knowledge (Bitsch, 2005). Accordingly, Syrian students who personally experienced the barriers in the integration into Turkish education system were selected. For confirmability, the characteristics of the participants were explained in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As for dependability, "stepwise technique" offered by Anney (2014) was used. This technique is an evaluation procedure where two or more researchers analyze the same data separately and compare the results. In this respect, qualitative data in the study were analyzed individually by the researchers and results were compared. The clarity of the questionnaire used in the study in terms of language and expression and its comprehensiveness were examined by four researchers together. Moreover, the questionnaire's total Cronbach Alpha coefficient was calculated as .912 (>0.70), corrected item total correlation of items changed between .348 and .637. These values, over this critical point, have shown that the questionnaire is reliable (Troiba, 2008).

Findings

Findings from Strand I: Barriers for Syrian students' integration into education process

Through this research using a Lotus Blossom study, attempts were made to reveal the barriers for Syrian students' integration into the education process in Türkiye. The barriers for Syrian students' integration were collected under the themes presented in Figure 3.

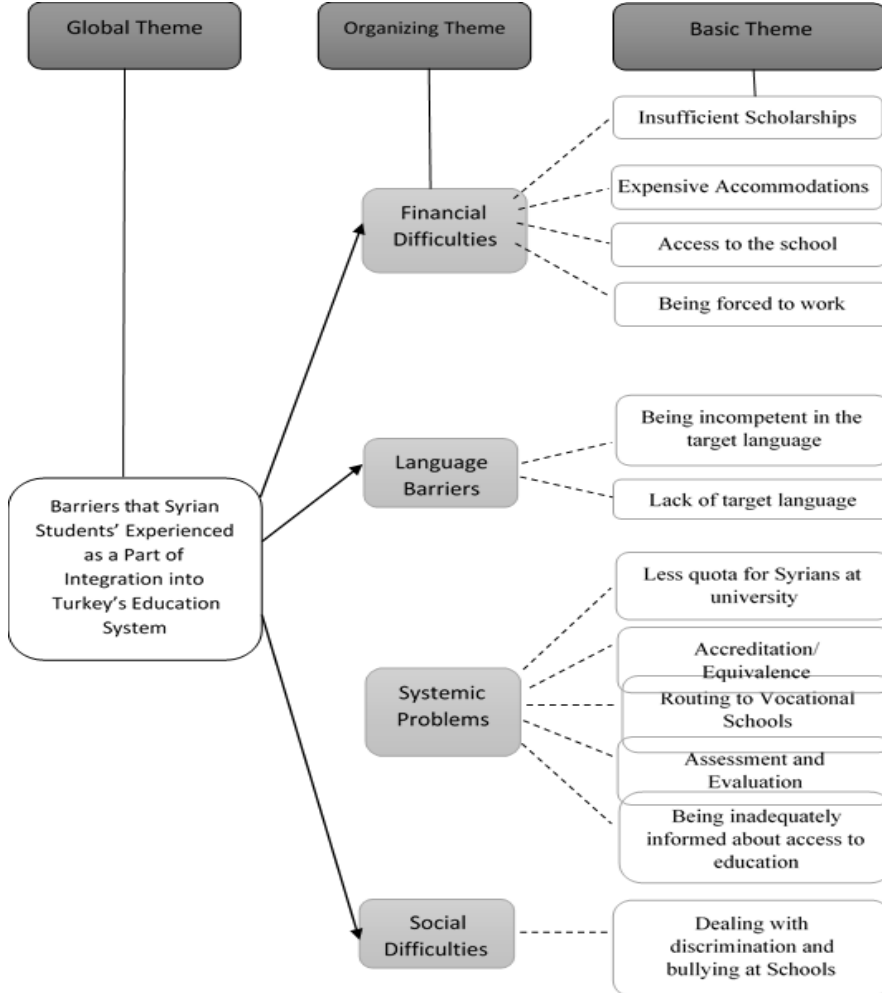


Figure 3. Barriers for integration into education process in Türkiye (Opinions of Syrian students)

As seen in Figure 3, the difficulties Syrian students face are collected under the themes of financial difficulties, language barriers, systemic problems and social difficulties. Each of these themes is described in the following sections.

Financial difficulties

Through the responses of participating Syrian students in this study regarding barriers they face for integration into the education process, it was determined that the students faced economic difficulties when attempting to continue their higher education. Even though compulsory education in Türkiye is free of charge, students indicated that attending school was an economic strain on them because the expense of continuing their education was often too high. It was remarkable in this theme that transportation was considered a serious problem for many of these students. For example, students who utilise public transportation for commuting to school claimed that ticket prices were too expensive. As seen in one of the students' statements, "Even though I have a student ID, I cannot get a free pass, because it does not appear on the system", was one reason for students' inability to afford continuing higher education.

Another student stated, "Because I have to work, I cannot continue school", which suggests that some students must support their families financially and cannot continue their full-time education. Thus, families who could not meet their basic needs were not able to provide educational expenses for their children and/or family members. Additionally, in these cases the number of scholarships provided to Syrian

students were often insufficient. For example, students could only meet a limited amount of their education expenses even when provided a scholarship. Moreover, there was an opinion expressed that, "Since I don't have a scholarship, I cannot go to university", which revealed that there are serious financial difficulties for students to attain higher education. Additionally, students who emphasised that university education was too expensive also reported that accommodation costs were another expense to be considered. In fact, one of the participants pinpointed the difficulty of finding affordable student housing within university dormitories for their accommodation needs by stating, "Finding a dormitory at university is very difficult".

Systemic problems

Problems within the system itself might also cause Syrian students' integration into Türkiye's education system. Under this theme, students stated that they could not continue their university education in Türkiye at the level they had achieved in Syria because of not being able to provide documents substantiating their prior educational diplomas and/or certificates. This was primarily the result of their having to rapidly flee their home country, and as a result, leaving behind important documents such as their educational diplomas and/or transcripts. Moreover, they stated, "Getting a certificate of equivalence is too hard. There are a lot of procedures", which makes it clear that getting a certificate of equivalence within the host country can be a difficult and complicated bureaucratic process. Additionally, it was stated, "We cannot go to upper secondary schools, general or academic". This statement highlights that these migrant students were often directed to religious and vocational upper secondary schools, instead of general or academic upper secondary schools within the host country. Thus, this was considered another barrier facing the students' integration into the education process.

Furthermore, another difficulty caused by the education process in Türkiye was not providing sufficient information regarding how immigrants could access education. This was clear by their statements, "I want to build a career, but I don't know how to do it", and "I don't know how to attend university". Therefore, students stated that they wanted to continue their higher education, but the system seemed confusing for them. One cause of confusion was highlighted as, "Admission differs from university to university". Thus, it appears that each higher education institution had its own admission policies regarding international students. As a result, this was considered a significant barrier to Syrian students' integration into the education system. Another difficulty faced by Syrian students regarding continuing university education was the limited number of quotas allocated for international students. As was evident by this statement, "It is very difficult for me to go to university because the quota for international students is very limited". Clearly, the limited quota for international student university enrolment was a big source of concern for Syrian students. Importantly, the students also emphasised that it is almost impossible for them to relocate to another city to attend university due to the excessive costs. Also, a confounding factor was that the universities in their place of residence had limited quotas for international students. This problem was mostly expressed by students living in the Turkish provinces of Hatay and Mersin by stating, "The university where I live (Hatay) does not accept too many Syrian students", and "The University of Mersin does not accept too many Syrian students".

Another reason preventing students from integrating into the education process was that the assessment and evaluation system in Türkiye is different from the one they experienced in Syria. For example, students who expressed the opinion that the "Grading system is very different", remarked that grading in the education process is different for their home country and the exams in Türkiye are stringent. Students who stated that, "University entrance exams are difficult", emphasised that they experienced difficulties in the exams due to differences in the education system.

Language barriers

It was indicated through the results of this current research that another difficulty for Syrian students' integration into the education process was the language barrier. For example, it appears the students considered themselves to be lacking in their proficiency in the Turkish language. This is due to the university instructors' desire for international students to possess a high level of Turkish language proficiency to understand and participate in the university curriculum. In some cases, international students, including Syrian students, had challenges using Turkish since it was a new language. For example, the students who emphasised that learning a new language is difficult by stating, "Learning Turkish is very difficult", and they also expressed that the Turkish language courses offered were insufficient.

Some students also claimed that the language barrier was a big obstacle for their attending university in Türkiye. As a matter of fact, a student indicated that, "To be accepted to university you need a C1 level, and we don't have it", and achieving this level of Turkish language proficiency can be extremely difficult. Additionally, they stated, "Applying for graduate education is difficult. You need advanced level Turkish", which highlighted their difficulties for applying to graduate school along with the undergraduate education process.

Social difficulties

The Syrian immigrant students in this study also pointed out difficulties they experienced because of social difficulties they faced regarding integration into the education process. Examples of exclusion and bullying they faced were highlighted, “We have exclusion and discrimination problems”, and “Sometimes, Turkish students misbehave against Syrian students at school”. Obviously, these issues can cause Syrian immigrant students to feel alienated within the host environment. Unfortunately, this situation of bullying and discrimination might cause some Syrian students to drop out of university and discontinue their education entirely. An example provided by one of the students was that the “Attitude towards Syrian students is quite negative; we are treated as if we are lower-class people”, which of course could be an experience that would be difficult and dissuade many of these students.

Findings from Strand II: Distribution of barriers for Syrian students’ integration into the education process in Türkiye

The researchers organised the barriers for Syrian students’ integration into the education process determined by the Lotus Blossom technique in this current study into a questionnaire. The frequency distribution, mean, and standard deviation values are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation values regarding barriers for Syrian students’ integration into education process in Türkiye

Item	No Effect (f)	Minor Effect (f)	Neutral Effect (f)	Moderate Effect (f)	Major Effect (f)	M	SD
Syrians’ not having enough knowledge regarding their education rights	16	27	17	43	54	3.58	1.38
Not knowing the necessary conditions to enrol in school	20	27	26	49	34	3.32	1.33
Having to work to support family	42	10	12	29	61	3.37	1.68
Insufficient number of educational scholarships	26	13	27	25	65	3.58	1.50
Not knowing how to acquire a Certificate of Equity for diplomas	35	26	17	29	51	3.22	1.58
The long process of acquiring a Certificate of Equity	37	25	20	29	43	3.10	1.56
Being bullied at school	41	22	13	21	58	3.21	1.67
Being discriminated in and around school	36	27	18	16	57	3.20	1.63
Blamed for being the cause of negativities at school (discipline problems, violence etc.)	36	31	22	25	42	3.04	1.54
Not being treated equally by teachers	32	17	25	23	58	3.37	1.57
Limited types of schools to choose (vocational schools, religious vocational upper secondary schools)	29	21	14	29	59	3.45	1.57
The distance between schools and where they reside	28	26	17	29	54	3.36	1.54
Cost of transportation (not having a student discount card)	19	16	21	27	73	3.76	1.44
Not knowing enough Turkish	9	17	20	41	66	3.90	1.24
Being educated in a foreign language (Turkish), different from their mother tongue (Arabic)	14	30	24	39	49	3.51	1.35
Not having enough materials to learn Turkish	48	28	33	26	21	2.64	1.41
Not having support courses at schools	30	28	34	30	31	3.03	1.41
Not having enough support from in-school counselling services	19	14	38	40	44	3.49	1.32
Not having sufficient knowledge regarding terms and conditions to continue higher education	23	17	27	33	56	3.53	1.44
The difficulty of passing exams in higher education	16	17	15	36	73	3.85	1.38
A limited number of quotas for international students at universities	16	12	6	15	103	4.16	1.40
High cost of university education (student fees, accommodation, transportation)	13	12	21	27	75	3.94	1.33
Not having Syrian teachers at schools where Syrian students attend	42	34	16	30	28	2.79	1.50
Having cramped classrooms at schools where Syrian students attend	17	22	37	36	41	3.41	1.32
Not providing enough support for Syrian students with special needs	11	21	25	32	57	3.71	1.32
Not being able to communicate well with Turkish students	15	21	14	45	58	3.72	1.35
Not having social and cultural activities at schools which bring Syrian and Turkish students together	20	12	16	40	63	3.76	1.41

M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

As seen in Table 3, the Syrian students experienced difficulties regarding integration into education process in Türkiye. Thus, the greatest barriers to integration into education process in Türkiye according to Syrian students were, “A limited number of quotas for international students at universities ($M = 4.16$)”, “High cost of university education (Student fees, accommodation, transportation) ($M = 3.94$)”, and “Not knowing enough Turkish ($M = 3.90$)”. On the other hand, the Syrian students relatively agreed less on items like, “Not having sufficient materials for learning Turkish ($M = 2.64$)”, “Not having Syrian teachers at schools where Syrian students attend”, and “Blamed for being the cause of negativities (discipline problems, violence, etc.) at school ($M = 2.79$)”. When the items were examined related to frequency distribution, the items that were chosen most appeared to be. “A limited number of quotas for international students at universities ($f = 103$)” and “High cost of university education (Student fees, accommodation, transportation) ($f = 75$)”.

In this research, it is pointed out that both data confirm the results. For the qualitative study, the mostly-stated barriers by the Syrian students are limited quotas for international students at universities, language barrier and financial difficulties. In this case the participants have mostly said that Syrians' access to higher education is a big problem because of limited quotas for international students. What's more, one of the most agreed-upon items by the students in the survey is that “Low student quotas at universities”. On the other hand another student has expressed that higher education is very expensive, we can not afford it.” In the survey, most of the students agree with the item “High cost of university education”. In the qualitative study, the students have stated that “*passing the university entrance exam requires C1 level Turkish, but we do not and learning the Turkish language is very hard*”. In the survey the third most agreed item is that “not knowing enough Turkish”. All told, It is possible to say that the quantitative findings confirm the qualitative ones.

Findings from Strand III: Solution suggestions regarding difficulties Syrian students experienced with integration into education process in Türkiye

Some of the responses provided by the Syrian students on the Lotus Blossom form in terms of solution suggestions are presented in the following Figure 4.

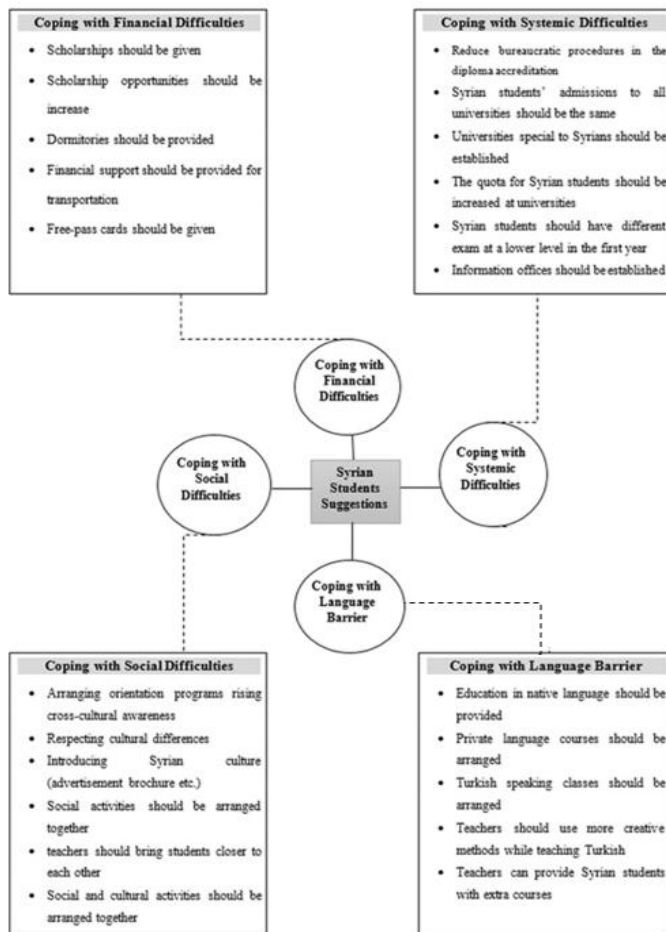


Figure 4. Syrian students' suggestions for integration into education process in Türkiye

As seen in Figure 4, Syrian students provided suggestions regarding the problems they experienced with integration into the education process in Türkiye. For example, the Syrian students stated that to overcome barriers such as financial problems, it is important and necessary to increase scholarship opportunities for international students. Moreover, students who experienced difficulties in their commute to and from school, should have financial support provided for their transportation. Thus, some students also claimed that providing them with free-student transportation pass cards could help eliminate their problems with transportation expenses to and from school. In terms of accommodation, providing dormitories for Syrian students at the university level could also contribute to alleviating their financial concerns.

As for the solutions to problems caused by the education system itself, Syrian students suggested that accepting their diplomas without a Certificate of Equity or reducing the procedures involved with the equity process could be another important solution for aiding their integration into the education process in Türkiye. Importantly, due to their proximity as a country and long held relationship with Türkiye, the Syrian students specifically felt that their certifications should be accepted in Türkiye.

To provide access to education for Syrian students, it is essential for them to know how to continue their education at the highest level. Thus, students believe that the establishment of an office where they can obtain the necessary information regarding the Turkish education system could provide a solution to these problems. According to Syrian students, to be able to have access to higher education, admission should be the same for every university within Türkiye. Moreover, students believed that increasing quotas for international students at universities and providing extra quotas at universities in regions where there is a dense population of Syrian students could help them meet their education goals. Interestingly, some students even believed that a solution could be to establish new universities that primarily accommodates students.

Students stated that the difficulties they experienced regarding the assessment and evaluation system within Türkiye was different from the one in Syria, and they suggested that students should be provided the opportunity to take exams at a lower level to integrate into the education system. Moreover, providing Syrian students the exams in Arabic could also provide a solution to the exam problems they experienced. Students also found that the university entrance exams were challenging; thus, the university entrance exam could be organised by considering the education levels of Syrian students as well as their current situation as immigrants.

As for as solutions regarding the problems students experienced concerning language barriers, possible options can be providing private courses for students whose Turkish language proficiency is low, using more creative approaches in Turkish language instruction, and arranging speaking classes for such students to practice Turkish. On the other hand, some students demanded that they be taught in their native language and/or have Syrian teachers within their classes.

According to the students, various steps should be taken to solve bullying and discrimination problems. In this respect, the most mentioned suggestions were that both Turkish and Syrian citizens respect one another's cultural differences, orientation programs raising awareness regarding cultural differences should be organised, social activities where people from both cultures mingle should be held, teachers should bring Turkish and Syrian students together through activities and learning, and activities should be planned to introduce the Syrian culture.

Discussion, conclusion, and recommendations

While existing policy documents and prior research extensively document the structural barriers faced by refugee students in Türkiye, this study contributes by foregrounding how these barriers are experienced, prioritised, and interconnected from the perspective of Syrian students themselves. Rather than treating financial, linguistic, and systemic challenges as separate issues, the findings reveal how these barriers mutually reinforce one another in shaping access to post-primary and higher education. Syrian students experienced language barriers, financial difficulties, systemic, and social problems as part of their integration into the education process in Türkiye. In this current study, the refugee students queried, emphasised that the quotas allocated for them at Turkish universities were considerably low in terms of access to higher education. While 37% of youngsters around the world can access higher education, the rate for refugees is only 3%. As of the 2023–2024 academic year, the total number of international students is 336,366, with Syrian students representing the largest group among all nationalities with 60,750 (The Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2025). In this study, Syrian students suggested that offering more quotas for international students could help alleviate the barrier of their integration into the education process in Türkiye. Accordingly, to create more quotas to Syrian students, the structure of the universities in Türkiye should be improved in this respect.

The cost of higher education can be a serious problem for Syrian students access to education. Students remarked that the transportation and accommodation costs necessary for them to study at universities in different cities was a serious problem. According to Syrian students, to cope with their financial problems, they believe scholarships, student housing, transportation support, and free-pass cards could be provided to them. Syrian students are exempt from paying all fees at state universities which makes it easy for them to study at universities. Moreover, to solve students' financial difficulties, a variety of national and international institutions (EU support, DAFI, HOPES), notably The Presidency of Turks and Related Societies Abroad, do provide scholarship support (Hohberger, 2018). Additionally, a great deal of DAFI scholarship programs provided throughout the world by UNHCR (2019b) assist Türkiye; however, these students are limited in number. For example, only 873 students are approved for this scholarship, and almost 15% of Syrian students benefit from these scholarship opportunities (Erdogan, 2020). Importantly, further plans are made to provide this scholarship to a greater number of students.

The insufficient number of scholarships provided to immigrant and refugee students towards continuing higher education was another barrier. In this current research, some students pointed out that they could not continue their education at university due to a need seek employment to help support their families. In other words, in post-primary education, Syrian students' schooling and attendance rates were low. According to the MoNE (2024) data (Table 1), while 91% of refugee students are enrolled in primary education, this rate remains at % 44 for upper secondary. Similarly, in European countries, the dropout rate is higher for refugee students when compared to their native counterparts (Cerovic et al., 2018). In many cases, this situation is a result of students having to work to contribute to the family budget (Ozel, 2019). It is notable that in the personal information of 10 students with whom the quantitative portion of this study was carried out, these students declared that they were working. Additionally, the "The Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (ŞEY)" provided to Turkish citizens with cooperation of UNICEF in 2017 was also expanded to Syrian and other refugee students as a solution to this issue. The aim of the program is to decrease the economic hardships of low-income families as well as to encourage families to regularly send their children to school (UNICEF, 2020). Another support programme, Social Cohesion Assistance (SUY), was launched in 2016 as an unconditional monthly grant to asylum seekers who meet the conditions necessary to help them meet their basic needs, and is implemented within the scope of the Kızılaykart platform (UNICEF, 2023). It is clear that there have been several attempts to draw students into post-primary education, but it is remarkable that the number of scholarships provided have not been sufficient for meeting the needs of the students and/or providing adequate opportunities for all students.

In this study language barrier was regarded as a significant problem by Syrian students. This supports the study of Ernas and Taskin (2025) which revealed that language proficiency functions critically both as an academic barrier and as a broader socio-cultural limiting factor. Because it becomes inevitable factor for both academic achievement and refugees' integration into society (Selcuk & Guzel, 2025). There have been a series of important steps taken to resolve the problem of language barrier for students. For example, in the "Promoting Integration of Syrian Children to Turkish Education System (PICTES)" Project (2016–2021) and PICTES+ (2021–2025), which was financed by the EU and conducted by the Turkish Ministry of Education (MoNE, 2024). PIKTES I and PIKTES II include a wide range of activities that Turkish and Arabic language education, compensatory education, supplementary education, material development, guidance and counselling services, social cohesion activities, school safety and hygiene, transportation to school, educational equipment and materials support, trainings for teachers and administrative staff, and awareness raising activities for children and their families (UNICEF, 2023). The notice published by MoNE (2019), highlights the extent of the project which anticipates that foreign students at the primary and post-primary levels who lack sufficient language skills in Turkish should be enrolled into integration classes. Beyond confirming language as an academic barrier, this study highlights its role as a gatekeeping mechanism that limits access to information, guidance, and institutional navigation, thereby deepening systemic exclusion.

Importantly, to eliminate the language barrier, MoNE has taken steps to provide Syrian students opportunities to study at State schools alongside their Turkish peers. To accomplish this goal, new registrations to TECs have been discontinued and the hours of Turkish courses in these institutions have been increased. Also, at MoNE's Public Education Centres, "Turkish Teaching for Foreigners" modules have been prepared to provide Turkish education for different age groups. Thus, approximately 505.922 Syrians have attended Turkish language courses and other courses, while each age group was taken into consideration for these courses between 2014 to 2019 (Erdogan, 2020). What's more, "Increasing Turkish Language Learning and Vocational Education of Syrians who are in the Scope of Temporary Protection in Türkiye Project", which is conducted jointly between MoNE and UNCHR, and financed by the EU is to improve the Turkish language skills of Syrians. Therefore, as pointed out here, Türkiye has taken important steps to assist Syrian students in their pursuit to overcome their language barrier in Turkish.

Additionally, since Türkiye's assessment and evaluation system is different from the system experienced by students in Syria, they commented on their difficulties. For example, students indicated that they should be provided different exams geared towards them in style, substance, and in their mother tongue so that they could have a better chance of integrating into the education process in Türkiye. Having students who come from a different language and cultural backgrounds, have various ethnic identities, and different teaching and learning experiences, can make it necessary for diversifying their assessment. Thus, it is best to provide an assessment that is advantageous to all students' skills and competencies, including immigrants test taking experiences and language proficiency levels (Burns et al., 2019). Raising students' awareness regarding alternative approaches and applications for culturally responsive assessments as well as conducting research to determine policies on this subject may also be a useful solution of immigrant students' integration into their host country's education system. Students' calls for alternative assessment formats reflect not a demand for lowered standards, but a demand for epistemic recognition of prior learning trajectories disrupted by forced displacement.

In terms of social difficulties, the participants' suggestions were found to be introducing Syrian culture, respecting cultural differences, and arranging orientation and social activities. Importantly, school counsellors should take the lead in orientation program activities. For example, in Türkiye, counselling services are provided at State schools, but in many cases, they are not equipped in dealing with the serious trauma that Syrian students have experienced due to witnessing the horror and suffering of war and forced relocation (Crul et al., 2019). Moreover, the number of counsellors available for these students is often insufficient. As a result, to aid in Syrian students well-being and overall integration into the host country's education system it is crucial to increase the number of qualified counsellors to provide support to them for their success inside and outside of school.

Drawing on the findings of this study, Syrian students' integration into the education process in Türkiye requires a culturally responsive, multi-layered policy approach that addresses structural, financial, linguistic, and psychosocial barriers in an integrated manner. Within this framework, access to higher education should be reconceptualised as an equity-based policy domain, with needs-based and regionally differentiated quota systems introduced to expand opportunities for refugee students without generating competition with domestic students, supported by state investment in institutional capacity. Financial barriers that undermine participation and persistence necessitate holistic scholarship models combining tuition exemptions with housing, transportation, and subsistence support, while language proficiency should be addressed through institutionalised, age-appropriate, and discipline-specific Turkish as a Second Language programmes embedded within mainstream curricula. In addition, misalignments between Syrian students' prior educational experiences and Türkiye's assessment system call for flexible, and formative assessment practices supported by teacher training in culturally responsive assessment literacy. Finally, culturally responsive education policies must prioritise students' emotional well-being through increased access to trauma-informed and interculturally trained school counsellors, mandate intercultural orientation and social cohesion programmes across all educational levels, and frame refugee education as a shared international responsibility supported by sustained international funding, inter-ministerial coordination, and data-driven monitoring systems.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although data were collected from multiple cities, participation was limited to volunteer Syrian students, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to the broader refugee student population in Türkiye. Second, the qualitative data relied on self-reported perceptions gathered through the Lotus Blossom technique; while this method allowed for rich and in-depth insights, participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability or group dynamics. Third, the quantitative strand was based on a questionnaire developed from the qualitative findings, which strengthens internal coherence but may limit comparability with other standardized instruments. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for examining changes in students' experiences over time. Future research employing longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and multi-informant perspectives would help to address these limitations and further strengthen the evidence base.

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