



Kent Academic Repository

Parkinson, Tom (2025) *Syrian students in Turkish higher education: A systematic review and thematic synthesis*. *International Journal of Education Research Open*, 8 . ISSN 2666-3740.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/108452/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100416>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



Syrian students in Turkish higher education: A systematic review and thematic synthesis

Tom Parkinson 

Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NZ, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Turkey
Syrian students
Higher education
Refugee education
Inclusion
Forced internationalisation

ABSTRACT

A large scholarly literature now exists concerning displaced Syrian students in the Turkish higher education system. This literature is multilingual, thematically diverse, and dispersed across several disciplines. No systematic review of this literature has been undertaken to date, and there is therefore a need for corpus-level work to summarise its characteristics and synthesise its key concerns and themes. Following a hybrid approach incorporating scoping review and thematic synthesis, this article summarises the state of this literature, before synthesising its key themes and debates, highlighting points of consensus and contradiction, and identifying limitations and gaps to inform further research in the field. The review reveals a broad range of rich, intersecting themes, but also identifies limitations including a lack of developed theory, a reliance on a limited range of qualitative methodologies, limited geographical coverage, and the absence of longitudinal and intervention-based studies. Addressing these limitations in future work will strengthen the interface between academic research and evidence-informed policy and practice to support refugee students.

1. Introduction

Turkey hosts more forcibly displaced people than any other state, including approximately 3.5 million Syrians who have entered the country since 2011 (Dereli, 2022; Yıldız, 2023b). The average age of Syrians in Turkey is 22 (Karamese, 2023b), and around one in four are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four (Tekin Babuç & Avcı, 2019). Access to higher education (HE) has been shown to mitigate the impact of displacement for young people, their communities, and wider society, and to support social and economic integration (Arar et al., 2020). Accordingly, the Turkish state has facilitated Syrians' access to HE through Arabic-language degree courses, transfer routes for those with documentation, language courses, fee waivers, and scholarships (see Ünalp Çepel, Abka & Durmuşlar, 2021). However, implementation of these policies and initiatives has depended on individual institutions, and their reach and impact has been uneven and erratic (Seydi, 2013; Atesok, Komsuoglu & Ozer, 2019; ¹ Kondakci, Zayim Kurtay, Kaya Kasıkcı, Senay & Kulakoglu, 2023; Ünalp Çepel et al., 2021; Yıldız, 2023b).

Syrian students (hereafter SSSs) encounter diverse challenges within and beyond the university that negatively impact their engagement, attainment, sense of belonging, and psychological wellbeing. However,

research has also illustrated the transformative impact HE can have on SSSs' agency, self-efficacy, and resilience (e.g., Arar, Kondakci, Kaya Kasıkcı & Erberk, 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Şafak-Ayvazoglu & Kunuroglu, 2021), and its potential to foster solidarity and belonging (Dereli, 2022).

A sizeable and diverse scholarly literature now exists concerning SSSs in Turkish HE. There is therefore a need for corpus-level work to summarise this literature's characteristics, synthesise its key themes and debates, highlight points of consensus and contradiction, and identify limitations and gaps to inform further empirical research in the field. The overarching aim of this study is therefore to systematically review peer-reviewed research surrounding SSSs in Turkish HE, guided by the following research questions:

1. *What is the state of this literature in terms of disciplinary, geographical (regions, cities), and temporal (i.e., years of publication) distribution?*
2. *What theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches predominate?*
3. *What are the main foci, themes, issues, findings, and concerns?*
4. *What are the literature's main limitations and gaps?*

E-mail address: tparkinson@kent.ac.uk.

¹ Author surnames are presented as per the source publications and therefore do not always use the characters of the Turkish alphabet.

2. Methodology

This review followed a hybrid approach (Paré, Trudel, Jaana and Kitsiou, 2015, cited in Xiao & Watson, 2019) incorporating aspects of scoping review and thematic synthesis. In accordance with scoping review approaches, I took a systematic, as opposed to iterative, approach to the search phase, following a strict protocol and adhering to *a priori* eligibility criteria. I extracted descriptive data to generate a ‘snapshot of the field’ (Xiao & Watson, 2019: 99) and, in aiming for comprehensiveness, did not include quality as an eligibility criterion (Peters, Godfrey, Khalil, McInerney, Parker and Soares, 2015, cited in Xiao & Watson, 2019). In line with thematic synthesis approaches, I elicited, categorised, and synthesised themes that characterise the literature as a whole (Xiao & Watson, 2019). I did not apply an *a priori* conceptual framework, nor seek to support, contextualise, or marshal an argument in the manner of a narrative review. Because the literature is predominantly qualitative, I did not incorporate meta-analysis (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The search phase followed a logic model based on Xiao and Watson (2019, see Fig. 1). The eligibility criteria were as follows: all studies must a) discuss the presence or experience of Syrian students studying at universities in Turkey; b) be peer reviewed; c) have been published between 2011 and 2024; and d) be written in English or Turkish. The decision to limit the study to peer-reviewed literature is based on there being a distinctive grey literature predominantly comprising governmental, NGO, UN, and think tank reports, which is being reviewed separately. The objective of this study is to gauge the state of *academic* research and discourse in this area. The decision to limit the study to English and Turkish texts was made after a preliminary search for Arabic texts in Google Scholar yielded no results.

I began by conducting searches through the Clarivate Web of Science (WOS) and EBSCO Academic Search Complete (ASC) databases, using the Boolean search string (“*Syrian students*” OR “*Suriyeli öğrenciler*”) AND (Turkey OR Türkiye) AND (“*Higher Education*” OR *yükseköğretim* OR *University* OR *Üniversite*),² with date parameters set at January 2011 to March 2024. These databases were chosen because they index peer-reviewed literature in Turkish and English, are large and well-known, and have lower instances of duplication than web-crawl-based search engines such as Google Scholar. The titles of search results (WOS $n = 161$, ASC $n = 138$, total $n = 299$) were screened for duplicate and obviously irrelevant items, and the metadata and abstracts for all remaining items ($n = 154$) were inputted into Zotero. Based on a review of abstracts, items that did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. I then downloaded the full texts of the remaining items ($n = 50$) and removed the records of those I was unable to access ($n = 3$). I then conducted a backward search by screening the bibliographies of all items and repeated the screening process with the newly identified items ($n = 20$). Finally, I used Google Scholar and to conduct a forward search to identify any eligible non-indexed items that had cited items in our library ($n = 19$), up until July 2024. A total of 86 articles were included in the review.

The next phase involved capturing descriptive data to answer the first two research questions. This was conducted using Zotero’s tagging function, with tags added for year of publication, regional focus, disciplinary domain (based on journal title), and methodological approach (e.g., ‘quantitative’, ‘case study’, ‘interview’, ‘phenomenology’, etc.). This allowed the items to be filtered to show those published in a given year, or conducted in a given region, and so on. Other salient details (e.g., sample sizes and makeup) were recorded as notes.

The thematic synthesis phase addressed the third research question. All texts were uploaded into NVivo, and thematic codes and sub-codes were generated inductively through reading, re-reading, and

categorising the textual data. Segments of text were assigned to codes, and annotations were added to capture areas of porosity and overlap across themes. Finally, each thematic code was analysed and written up as a narrative summary. The following sections address each research question in turn.

3. State of the literature

3.1. Year of publication

The literature spans eleven years from 2013 to 2024 (see Fig. 2, 2024 studies to July ($n = 6$) not represented). Seydi’s (2013) study of education provision for Syrians in Turkey, for which he interviewed Syrian educators based in Turkey, was the earliest to consider SSs’ access to HE. Reflecting the early stage of displacement, participants raised concerns about the lack of HE access for camp-based populations, but also highlighted barriers related to language, lack of documentation, financial hardship, and limited enrolment by institutions which foreshadow the findings of many later studies. Gün’s (2015) study of Turkish language tutors’ opinions regarding SSs’ reading skills at Çukurova and Adana Science and Technology Universities also reflects a key priority of the early period of Syrian mass migration into Turkey, and a key site for its enactment (Çukurova was one of seven institutions where SSs lacking documentation were permitted to enrol, see Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018). Although Gün’s findings relate primarily to language pedagogy, insights relating to students’ challenges and motivations, educators’ preparedness, and the role of language teaching in supporting ‘cultural transfer’ (p.1426) prefigured concerns that emerged in later research.

From 2016 onwards, a broader range of foci and contexts featured, and qualitative investigations of students’ experiences came to dominate. Although the publication trend shows an increased and later sustained interest in this area, I did not find any longitudinal studies.

3.2. Disciplinary field

Articles were published through a range of disciplinary channels; the largest proportion being published in general education journals (see Fig. 3). However, given the inherent interdisciplinarity of the study area, this did not always correspond to theoretical or methodological differences and there was no significant disciplinary siloing.

3.3. Field sites

Most studies gave details of the regions or institutions where data collection occurred. Istanbul and Gaziantep were the cities best represented in the literature. Ankara, and the cities and regions close to the Syrian border where large numbers of Syrians are domiciled and where SSs were permitted to enrol prior to 2015 were also well represented (see Fig. 4).³

This distribution of research sites is unsurprising and loosely reflects the distribution of Syrians across Turkey and the universities with large numbers of SSs (see Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Harunogulları et al., 2019), though some regions, notably Karabük (whose university has had the third largest proportion of SSs in the country, see Bariscil, 2017; Taşar, 2019, Sağır & Aydın, 2020), were underrepresented relative to demographics.

Most significant though is that no research has been undertaken in several regions with small numbers of SSs. As I discuss below, studies have shown the importance of access to in-group support networks to SSs’ resilience and sense of belonging, which suggests that SSs without such access may be prone to isolation and othering. Moreover, regional demographics and cultural climate can be seen to impact on how, and the extent to which, SSs engage with wider society and experience

² For WOS, the search was set to ‘All Fields’; for ASC the search was set to ‘TX Text’.

³ Map template © Vemaps.com. Used by permission.

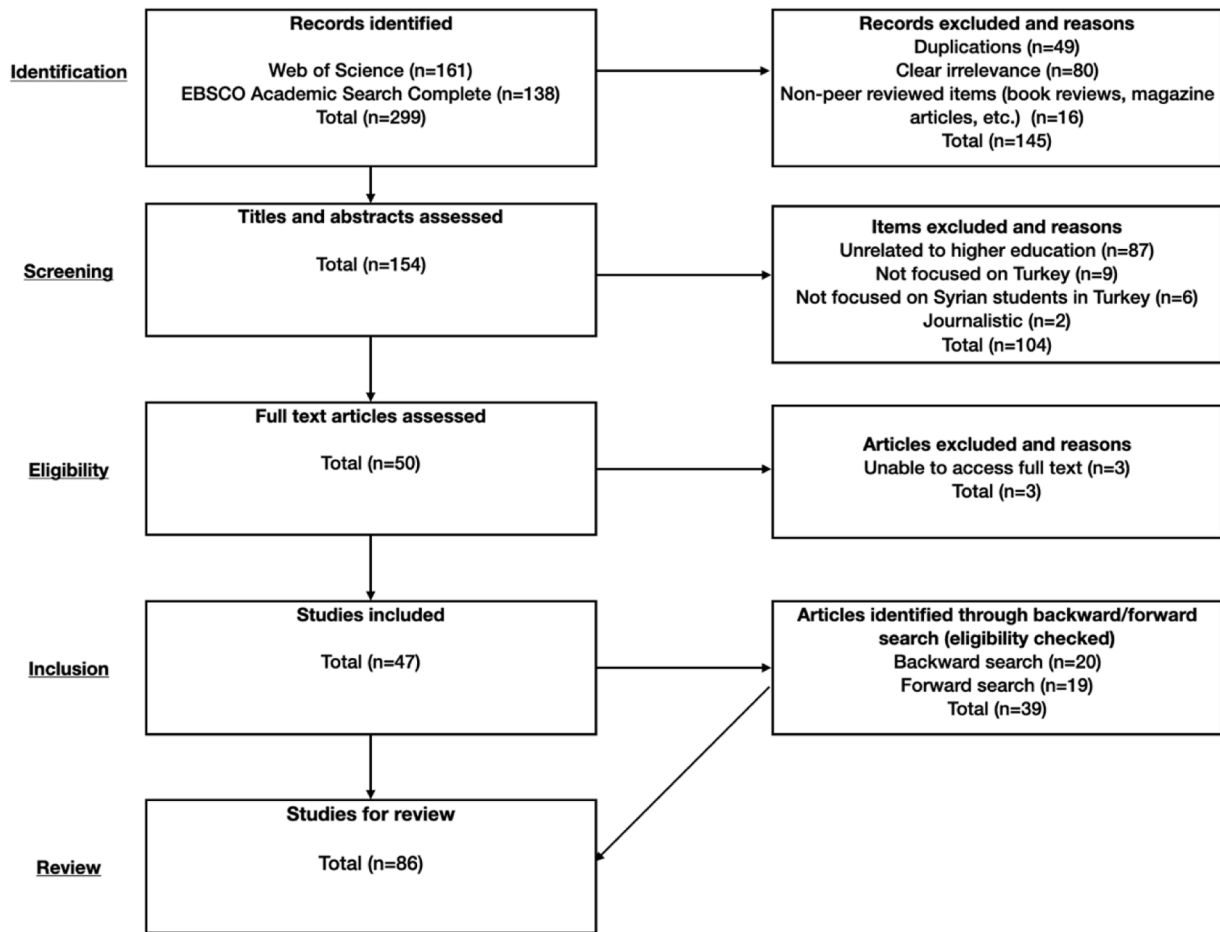


Fig. 1. Literature search logic model.

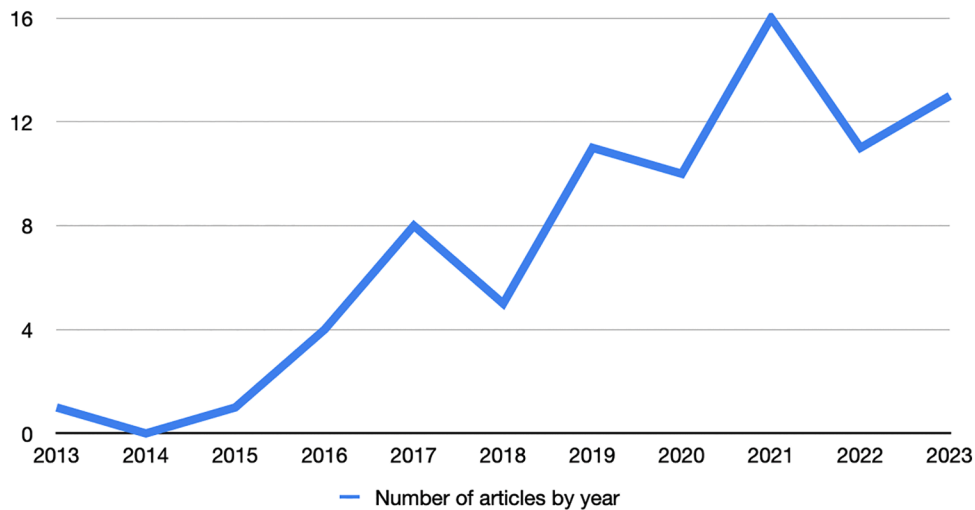


Fig. 2. Publications by year (2013–2023).

belonging.

3.4. Methodologies and theoretical frameworks

The literature is predominantly qualitative. Given the unprecedented scale and pace of Syrian mass migration into Turkey, it is unsurprising that early research prioritised gathering rich-thick data to elicit key themes and issues. Among qualitative studies, a large proportion address

very broad research questions (relating to, for example, experiences of or challenges encountered by Ss at university) and yield similar findings. While some replication is useful in highlighting prevalent issues, there is some saturation, and few studies build iteratively on earlier literature to interrogate established themes or generate new theory.

The most common data collection method across the literature was interview ($n = 36$). Focus groups were less well used ($n = 10$). One study used participant diaries (Tanrikulu, 2021), and two used arts-based

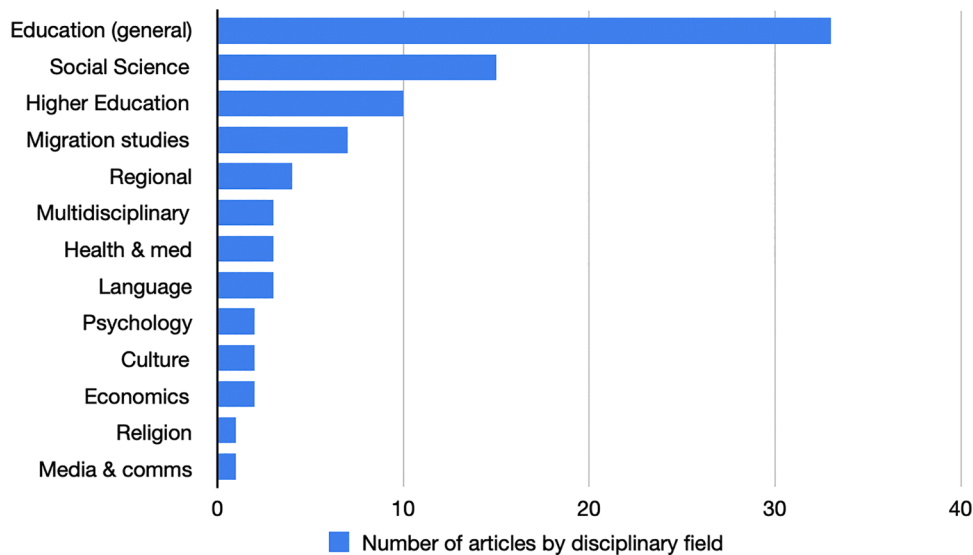


Fig. 3. Publications by disciplinary field.



Fig. 4. Field-site representation in the literature.

approaches (e.g., Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer, 2021; Egüz, 2020). Some studies drew on secondary data sets, reports, or existing literature (Altunbaş, 2020; Aydın, 2021; Bariscil, 2017; Duruel, 2016; Erdemir, 2022; Erdoğan, 2023; Güngör & Soysal, 2021; Kamyab, 2017; Ünalp Çepel et al., 2021; Yıldız, 2023b). Participant observation featured in six studies (Ayyıldız, 2024; Biçer & Alan, 2017; Dereli, 2022; Karaman et al., 2023; Karamişe, 2023a, 2023b), and three studies were explicitly ethnographic (e.g., Ayyıldız, 2024; Erdoğan-Öztürk & Sağın-Şimşek, 2023; Gökğöz, 2023). Some language-focused studies used task-based activities to generate linguistic data (e.g., Derman, Bardakçı & Öztürk, 2017; Özçakmak, 2019). Among the limited number of quantitative ($n = 9$) or mixed-methods ($n = 11$) studies, several used established survey scales aligned with their theoretical frameworks (e.g., Apak, Yiğitalp & Tatlıcıoğlu, 2024; Cinkara, 2017; Karaman et al., 2023; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018; Sari et al., 2020), while others developed new scales and survey instruments (e.g., Sağır & Aydın, 2020; Kaya & Kan, 2021). Studies with a policy focus centred on policy implementation and impact, rather than discourse (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Kondakci et al., 2023; Yıldız, 2023b). Surprisingly, despite frequent contextual reference to media portrayals and sociopolitical climate, there were no discourse analyses of media or policy.

Although contexts and methodologies were often elaborated in detail, much of the literature was basically atheoretical. While some studies outlined their theoretical frameworks explicitly (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Akkaya et al., 2021; Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Ayyıldız, 2024; Dereli, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Karamişe, 2023a; Korumaz et al., 2022), and most unpacked and explored their key concepts (discussed in more detail under Thematic Synthesis), a large minority did not. Such studies can offer valuable descriptive insight and evidence-based recommendations, but in the absence of theory are somewhat reiterative. Further work is needed to build theory.

Key theories and concepts reflected the literature's positioning at the nexus of education, migration studies, and social science. Concepts and models from migration and refugee studies, such as push-pull factors, were incorporated into some studies' frameworks (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Fincham, 2020; Kondakci et al., 2023; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021). Capabilities approach theory, originally emerging within welfare economics but now widespread in human development domains, was adopted by Cin and Doğan (2021), Çuhadar, Çirkin and Sakız (2024), and Fincham (2020). Several studies approached Ss in Turkish HE through the lens of HE internationalisation (e.g., Karadağ, 2016; Sağır & Aydın, 2020; Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022), though none made use of the

(albeit recent) conceptual framework of *forced* internationalisation proposed by Ergin, de Wit and Leask (2019). Place- and space-based frameworks were also used, particularly in relation to belonging (e.g., Ayyildiz, 2024; Dereli, 2022; Karamese, 2023a). Elsewhere, theoretical frameworks incorporated linguistic (e.g., Derman, Bardakci & Öztürk, 2017) and psychological (see e.g., Karaman et al., 2023) concepts that aligned with specific data collection tools.

4. Thematic synthesis

In the following sections, I present and explore the themes that characterise this broad literature. Themes were far from discrete and intersected in complex ways.

4.1. Language

Language emerged as a cross-cutting issue that was pivotal in all domains of SSs' lives. While several studies had a predetermined focus on aspects of language, including acquisition, use, and identity, issues relating to language also emerged from inductive studies exploring barriers to access and participation in HE, inclusion and belonging, and social adaptation. Several studies found that lack of Turkish language proficiency was a significant barrier to SSs' academic engagement, causing difficulties with institutional orientation and bureaucracy (Arar et al., 2020), hindering students' ability to communicate or process information in class (Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Arar et al., 2020; Gün, 2015; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018; Taşar, 2019), undermining their self-confidence or self-efficacy (Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Gün, 2015; Kaya, 2021b; Kaya & Keklik, 2022; Özenç-Ira, Üzar-Özçetin & Çelik, 2024) and impeding relationship building at university (Arar et al., 2020). Demir and Aliyev (2019) and Kaya and Keklik (2022) identified language non-acquisition as a major risk factor in students' social adaptation.

Dereli (2022) research meanwhile revealed the positive impact of multilingual university environments, where Arabic-speaking personnel and dedicated multilingual initiatives supported integration and enhanced SSs' sense of belonging. However, Aydin and Gürsoy (2022) found that, while SSs' willingness to communicate was high, they preferred to use Arabic and prioritised in-group communication.

Taken together, these studies' findings reveal some complex intersections of factors influencing language use and its relationship to belonging. For example, Aydin and Gürsoy's (2022) finding that access to a large Syrian community led students to rely on Arabic to maintain their sense of belonging, together with Arar et al. (2020) observation that low Turkish proficiency inhibited out-group socialising, suggest important relationships between demographics, language use, and out-group relationship-building. Given that some cities host significantly more Syrians than others, comparative studies exploring these relationships in different contexts are needed. Elsewhere, studies highlighting linguistic ties shared by SSs of Turkmen origin and their Turkish classmates (e.g., Akyol, 2022; Dereli, 2022; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Karipek, 2017; Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019) reveal an ethnic dimension to Attar and Küçükşen's (2019) observation that students with high Turkish proficiency developed relationships more quickly.

Also explored was the relationship between language use and identity negotiation. Erdoğan-Öztürk and Sağın-Şimşek (2023) observed the discursive code-switching, through usage of Arabic, Turkish, English and Kurdish, that two Syrian graduate students used to distance themselves from stigmatised identity categories such as 'Arab', 'refugee', or 'Syrian', or to perform other identities such as '[non-refugee] foreigner' or 'European' (10) (see also Identity). Similarly, for participants in Karamese's (2023a) study, avoiding Arabic was 'a language-based tactic for overcoming public exclusion' (92).

4.2. Aspirations

Students' aspirations featured prominently across the literature. I identified six sub-categories, the most prevalent of which was *mobility*. Participants in several studies aspired to futures either abroad or in Turkey, though there were differences across and within samples. In some studies, most participants wanted to leave Turkey for Europe, the US, or Arab countries, often to pursue postgraduate study or reunite with families (see e.g., Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021), while elsewhere the majority wished to stay in Turkey (e.g., Çangal, 2022; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Kaya & Keklik, 2022, see also Arar et al., 2020). Although many SSs spoke of their desire or willingness to return to Syria (see e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Fincham, 2020; Kaya, 2021b; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021), this was nearly always contingent on the end of conflict and regime change. One participant in Fincham's (2020) study hoped to return to Syria to fight for the Free Syrian Army (FSO), which may be a more prevalent but under-disclosed position due to political sensitivities (Fincham, 2020). As the literature related to this theme was qualitative, there is no real basis for gauging students' mobility aspirations proportionally; rather, the range of perspectives represented is a reminder of the heterogeneity of the SS population in Turkey.

Uncertainty surrounding the protracted conflict and Syrians' status in Turkey inhibited SSs' long-term planning in all areas (see e.g., Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021; Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019). Nonetheless, I identified five further sub-categories related to SSs' visions of their futures: *career-based*, *livelihood-based*, *duty-/public good-oriented*, *entrepreneurial*, and *subject choice*.

Career-based and *livelihood-based* aspirations both involved securing sustainable livelihoods. However, the former were more transformative and linked to social mobility and achieving 'a good life' (Kaya & Keklik, 2022: 7756), whereas the latter were alleviative and focused on addressing immediate needs such as household expenses. Rather than centring on SSs' own personal or family futures, *duty-/public good-oriented* aspirations instead related to leveraging their knowledge, skills and social capital to improve the circumstances of the Syrian community in Turkey (e.g., Cin & Doğan, 2021) or participate in recovery and reconstruction inside Syria (Arar et al., 2020; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018). *Entrepreneurial* aspirations entailed setting up businesses, NGOs or other ventures (see Ayyildiz, 2024; Çangal, 2022; Kaya, 2021a).

Subject choice aspirations were intermediary and fed into other aspirations. Although participants' choice of degree subject was usually oriented towards career-based aspirations, and in some cases reflected gendered expectations concerning career suitability for men and women (e.g., Fincham, 2020; Karamese, 2023a, see Gender), Kondakci et al. (2023) found that students' main priority was simply to gain access to university by any means necessary, rather than subject preference. Several studies found that students accepted scholarships in subjects chosen for them by the university, regardless of interest, experience, motivation, or aptitude (see e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Fincham, 2020). As such, many SSs' career pathways were determined less by *career-based* aspirations than by limited options and *livelihoods-based* imperatives.

Notwithstanding the chronic liminality affecting SSs' orientations towards their futures (Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019), several studies underscored HE's transformative role in facilitating personal development, particularly among females, by enhancing students' capabilities, agency, self-efficacy, and awareness of rights (see e.g., Cin & Doğan, 2021; Çuhadar et al., 2024, Fincham, 2020).

Absent from the literature are longitudinal studies examining how SSs' visions of their futures developed *over time*. This is significant for three reasons: firstly, students' aspirations often change as they develop self-awareness, their circumstances change, and their horizons are broadened by new knowledge and perspectives; secondly, research has shown that refugees' aspirations are often fluid and susceptible to changes across time and context (Mkwananzi, 2019; Mkwananzi & Wilson-Strydom, 2018, cited in Çuhadar et al., 2024); and thirdly,

although the experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey have long been precarious, there are notable junctures, such as in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election, at which hostility towards Syrians has spiked and assurances of long-term protection have appeared in doubt. While some studies alluded to the political climate in general terms (e.g., Akyol, 2022; Arar et al., 2020; Kondakci et al., 2023; Korumaz et al., 2022), none except Akyol (2022) examined in depth the impact of specific events, policies or discourses on SSS' perspectives on the future.

4.3. Gender

Approximately one third of SSS are female (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019). Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu (2021) suggested that families' concerns for daughters' security, their prioritising of sons' education for cultural and economic reasons, male students' higher financial motivation, and girls' marriage at a young age were reasons for female underrepresentation among SSS in Turkey. However, female underrepresentation was not investigated empirically anywhere in the literature.

However, several studies offered insight into the gendered dimensions of access to, and experiences in, HE. Fincham (2020) explored the complex intersection of gender role expectations, social capital and status, and the economic realities of displacement influencing male and female SSS' attitudes towards HE in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. She identified a delicate and sometimes contradictory landscape of traditional beliefs and stereotypes, mixed with pragmatic imperatives, that SSS had to negotiate when making decisions about their futures. Males felt compelled to prioritise employment in any sector due to the 'breadwinner's burden' (332) and were motivated to access HE primarily to increase their employability and earning potential (see Aspirations). Females, too, were increasingly motivated to secure livelihoods due to war-related hardships but felt less cultural obligation and were freer to follow their intrinsic motivations.

While some cultural beliefs and norms, such as the belief that women were naturally studious, facilitated women's access to HE, concerns related to gender mixing or women spending time outside the home could hinder women's participation due to restrictions imposed by families or husbands. Fincham's (2020) study also revealed a precarious relationship between HE and marriage for both male and female students. Because high status and earning potential increased men's eligibility for marriage, HE was seen as a way to enhance males' marriage prospects. However, while gaining some education made women more marriageable, *too much* education drew stigma and suspicion and was seen to pose a threat to male authority, and thus limited their marriage prospects. Some female participants saw HE as a means of delaying marriage (see also Akbasli & Mavi, 2021) but waiting too long could have serious social consequences. Married female students' participation in HE was entirely dependent on their husbands' consent. Married male students were vulnerable to drop-out due to having to juggle studies around paid work, and universities offered little flexibility.

Fincham's (2020) study offers important insight into how Syrian refugees' engagement with HE is inflected by gender. An interesting Turkey-specific finding was that female students lived away from their families in university dormitories and enjoyed the relative autonomy that this 'semi-independent living' (347) afforded. Other studies highlighted the importance of university environments in facilitating female SSS' freedom from surveillance and restrictive norms relating to women's propriety, and in developing their capabilities to engage in mixed-gender interactions and friendships (e.g., Cin & Doğan, 2021; Karamişe, 2023b). However, while Cin and Doğan (2021) framed this in terms of women's empowerment and self-worth, Fincham (2020) emphasised the importance of acknowledging framings of equality and empowerment which may entail 'adherence to [as opposed to rejection of] traditional cultural and/or religious codes' and attending to 'what is valuable to the individual' (337, citing Sen, 1992).

4.4. Turkish-Syrian relations

Many studies focused directly on relations between SSS and their Turkish counterparts or staff. Although in some studies a majority of Syrian participants reported good relationships with Turks (see e.g., Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Kaya & Şahin, 2021), the prevailing impression across the literature was of strained, if not always overtly hostile, relations. While SSS often reported having Turkish friends, these friendships were typically superficial, functional, and predominantly classroom-based, compared to those formed with other Syrians (see e.g., Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Dereli, 2022; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019). Factors including mistrust, language barriers, fear of prejudice, and reliance on large numbers of SSS for social networks, led to social distancing and *de facto* segregation between groups (Dereli, 2022; Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Kaya, 2021b; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2021; Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019).

While these provide interesting insight into the nature of relations, the samples (with the exception of Bozdağ, 2020, and Kaya & Şahin, 2021) are generally small and localised and do not provide a basis for generalisation. Dereli (2022) in particular noted significant variation in the nature of relationships reported by her diverse sample. Participants in some studies reported that making friendships with native students reduced prejudice and increased belonging (e.g., Bozdağ, 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Dereli, 2022). Şafak Ayvazoğlu and Kunuroglu (2019, 2021) observed differences in interactions between Izmir and Istanbul, highlighting the importance of accounting for regional variance, while Dereli (2022) found that SSS of origin formed friendships with Turkish students more easily due to their 'language, their Turkish origin names and their appearance' (209–210). However, Turkmen participants in Karipek (2017) study reported feeling doubly othered, neither Turkish nor Syrian. Both perspectives reveal the limitations of binary Turkish/Syrian identity categories (see also Identity).

Notwithstanding tensions in interactions between Syrian and Turkish students, several studies suggested that students were more out-group oriented and comfortable sharing space than wider populations (see e.g., Dereli, 2022; Karamişe, 2023a; 2023b), and that university spaces facilitated easier and more positive interactions (Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019).

4.4.1. Turkish perspectives

The vast majority of studies collected data from SSS themselves. Only six studies analysed the perspectives of Turkish students or staff who worked or shared university spaces with SSS (Akkaya, Korumaz & Tabancalı, 2021; Atesok, Komsuoglu & Ozer, 2019; Bozdağ, 2020; Ergin, 2016; Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Gün, 2015). Turkish students in Ergin's (2016) and Attar and Küçükşen's (2019) studies had more positive attitudes towards Syrian classmates than towards other Syrians and supported their right to access education. However, they held negative beliefs and resentments concerning SSS' perceived unwillingness to integrate, preferential access to HE, and impact on the job market. Bozdağ (2020) investigated the relationship between Turkish students' social contact with, and xenophobic attitudes towards, their Syrian classmates. While increases in the quantity of contact had a negligible impact, increased quality of social contact corresponded to a significant decline in xenophobic attitudes. Bozdağ (2020) concluded with recommendations for a multicultural education that introduces Turkish students to the lifestyles and cultures of their Syrian classmates, promotes acceptance of difference, and engenders positive relationships.

University staff perspectives depicted a workforce who, while generally sympathetic and supportive of SSS' right to education, struggled to integrate them or attend to their complex needs. Managers interviewed by Akkaya et al. (2021) reported 'behavioural disorders' (714), cheating in tests, and lack of respect for teachers, while administrators in Atesok et al.'s (2019) study expressed concern that the HE system was oversubscribed and insufficiently staffed. Staff in neither study had received specialist training.

Both Akkaya et al. (2021) and Gün (2015) found that staff associated their role not only with integrating SSs into the education system, but also with inculcating them into the dominant Turkish culture and values, suggesting a 'hegemonic' and assimilationist, as opposed to multicultural, understanding of inclusion (Akkaya et al., 2021: 714).

The shortage of Turkish perspectives is a significant limitation of the literature. Firstly, the enactment of Turkish state policy concerning HE for Syrians, which has been described as reactive and inconsistent (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Atesok et al., 2019; Kondakci et al., 2023), has been enacted by institutions of varying cultures and capacities (Yıldız, 2023b). Insight into the diverse experiences of staff working in different institutions (such as offered by Atesok et al., 2019) is therefore essential for understanding the application of policy. Secondly, while host populations' encounters with and opinions of Syrians have been widely researched, little is known of host populations' experiences of encountering SSs in HE contexts, despite evidence that SSs feel greater belonging there (see e.g., Dereli, 2022). Further research could bring contextual nuance to the prevailing impression of worsening tensions between host and Syrian populations. Thirdly, while the few existing studies certainly identified prejudice and negative attitudes towards Syrians among Turkish students and staff, these appeared somewhat less severe and widespread than Syrian participants perceived them to be elsewhere (see e.g., Erdoğan-Öztürk & Sağın-Şimşek, 2023; Kaya, 2021b; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021). Comparative analysis of perceived and reported attitudes could support efforts to improve intergroup relations in HE contexts.

4.5. Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination and hostility were widespread. However, while some students encountered discrimination on campus, off-campus experiences of discrimination were more common and universities offered sanctuary to many (see e.g., Cin & Doğan, 2021; Dereli, 2022). Various terms, including racism (e.g., Korumaz et al., 2022; Kaya, 2021b, also *ırkçılık*, e.g., Dalaman, 2022; Gül & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2020; Kaya & Şahin, 2021), prejudice (e.g., Dereli, 2022; Attar & Küçükşen, 2019, 2019; Kondakci et al., 2023), stigma[tisation] (e.g., Özenç-Ira et al., 2024), discrimination (Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Korumaz et al., 2022; also *ayrımcılık*, e.g., Dalaman, 2022), and xenophobia (Bozdağ, 2020; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Gül & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2020; Kondakci et al., 2023; also *zenofobi*, see e.g., Gül & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2020), were used across the literature. However, while these conceptual terms were occasionally defined and delimited, particularly where central to a theoretical framework and/or measurement tool (see e.g., Bozdağ, 2020), they were often used interchangeably and rarely interrogated. This might impede comparative analyses of policy discourse or political rhetoric, where terms may carry distinct meanings or associations.

4.6. 'Integration', 'Acculturation', 'Adaptation', 'Assimilation', 'Harmonisation', 'Belonging': terminological elision and inconsistency

Much of the literature explored SSs' presence within Turkish society. Several conceptual terms were used including 'integration' (*ente-grasyon*), 'acculturation' (*kültürleşme*), assimilation' (*asimilasyon*) 'adaptation' (*adaptasyon*), 'harmony' (*uyum*), and 'belonging'. However, as with those relating to discrimination, these terms were often used interchangeably or vaguely. This makes it difficult to compare and synthesise across studies, examine relationships between constructs (such as, for example, integration and belonging), and take into account the provenance or associations of, or ideological assumptions inherent to, particular policy terminologies – 'harmony' (*uyum*), for example, is the chosen terminology in Turkish migration and HE policy (Dereli, 2022; Yıldız, 2023b), whereas EU policy refers to 'inclusion' and 'integration' (see Akkaya et al., 2021; Kaya & Şahin, 2021).

In addition to the terms outlined above, counterpoint terms such as

otherness (*ötekileştirme*), othering, being other (e.g., Akyol, 2022; Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Dereli, 2022, Levent et al., 2021; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024) marginalisation (e.g., Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021) and exclusion (*dışlanma*) (e.g., Ayyıldız, 2024; Gül & Şaşman-Kaylı, 2020) were often used to describe students' negative experiences.

As already discussed, several studies explored the relationship between language and social or academic integration or belonging. Other sub-themes included *support*, *cultural distance/proximity*, and *material* (e.g., *financial*) *barriers*.

4.6.1. Support

Several studies highlighted the central influence of in-group support on students' adaptation, while others revealed the importance of out-group relationships with Turkish citizens. Participants in Tekin Babuç & Avcı, 2019 study reported close relationships with language centre staff, who alongside families were the primary source of support and key to their institutional integration, while students in Karaman et al.'s (2023) study formed meaningful relationships with professors in lieu of family support. Şafak Ayvazoğlu and Kunuroğlu (2019) found in-group support was the main mediating factor in SSs' initial adaptation, but supportive relationships with native students were important to longer-term adaptation. In a later study (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021), the same authors applied Arends-Toth and Van de Vijver's acculturation framework and found that reliance on in-group support influenced recently arrived students' choice of a 'separation', as opposed to 'integration', acculturation strategy.

Notwithstanding conceptual variance between terms, these findings highlight the temporal dimension of adaptation and acculturation and point to the need for longitudinal research. Furthermore, they intersect with wider findings relating to SSs' relationships and socialisation on and beyond campus (e.g., Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Dereli, 2022; Sari et al., 2020).

4.6.2. Cultural distance and proximity

Cultural distance was a prominent sub-theme relating to both integration and belonging. Notably, Akyol (2022) and Karipek (2017) found that perceived cultural similarity was a crucial factor in accelerating belonging and positive adaptation, while Şafak Ayvazoğlu and Kunuroğlu (2019, 2021) observed that perceived cultural similarities between Istanbul and Damascus, in terms of appearance, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and Islamic identity, engendered a positive sense of belonging. Importantly, however, this was in contrast to perceived cultural distance in Izmir, where students felt excluded and othered. This highlights that SSs' experiences are contingent on regional as well as national conditions.

Across several studies, similarities in food, music, religion, and other cultural domains were seen to support adaptation, belonging, and relationship-building (e.g., Arar et al., 2020, Çangal, 2022; Ergin, 2016; Karameşe, 2023a; Kaya & keklik, 2022; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2021). However, Arar et al. (2020) also found that cultural differences could lead to conflict and emphasised the importance of considering subcultural and ideological differences within Turkish and Syrian societies. These map against regional differences in terms of political affiliation, geographical proximity to Syria, kinship ties predating current borders, and demographics of the host and Syrian populations in terms of ethnicity, language, religion and religiosity, and city or region of origin. This again highlights a need for comparative studies of SSs' experiences in different regions.

Cin and Doğan (2021), Çuhadar et al. (2024), Fincham (2020); Karameşe (2023a), and Kondakci et al. (2023) all observed SSs' encounters with new, more liberal norms, which could manifest as discomfort but also increased agency, particularly in relation to gender roles and relations. While participants in several studies underwent a process of assimilation in terms of outlook, appearance, and lifestyle, Dereli (2022) found that students sought acceptance of their Syrian identity within a pluralist, multicultural whole, rather than assimilation.

4.6.3. Material conditions

Material conditions negatively impacted students' integration in and through HE. Although not always explicitly framed in terms of exclusion, many studies identified financial hardship among the main factors posing a risk to students' access, participation, completion, and attainment at university (e.g., Akbasli & Mavi, 2021; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Demir & Aliyev, 2019; Dereli, 2022; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Kaya & Şahin, 2021; Kondakci et al., 2023, Yıldız, 2023b). Some studies highlighted specific examples of poverty-based barriers to socio-cultural integration, such as inability to afford language courses, having to work in demanding jobs alongside studying (Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019), or not being able to afford a computer (Cin & Doğan, 2021). Fincham's (2020) finding that scholarships were insufficient, and that only those from wealthier backgrounds could cover the indirect costs of HE, sheds light on a class dimension to SSS' exclusion and the role of HE in entrenching class inequities in Syrian society.

4.7. Identity and status

Identity emerged as a cross-cutting but multifaceted theme. Explicit consideration of identity occurred across studies centred on SSS' developing sense of who they are in relation to place and society, others that explored the experiences accompanying different identity categories assumed by or ascribed to SSS, and others considering the dynamic interaction between these two aspects. Identity categories included *refugee*, *Syrian*, *student*, *ethnicity-based*, *religion-based*, and *citizen*.

Refugee identity was often experienced as a foundational identity that subordinated all others (see Erdoğan-Öztürk & Sağın-Şimşek, 2023). Refugee identity positioned SSS as a disempowered out-group, paradoxically rendered them both conspicuous and invisible (Özenç-Ira et al., 2024), limited their access to opportunity (Kondakci et al., 2023), and was subject to stigma and misinformation. *Syrian* identity overlapped with, but was also distinct from, refugee identity. Like refugee-ness, Syrian-ness was stigmatised (e.g., Dereli, 2022), but extended beyond status-based prejudice to include racist comments about physical appearance (see e.g., Erdoğan-Öztürk & Sağın-Şimşek, 2023; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024). Participants across several studies masked their Syrian and refugee identities by avoiding Arabic or dressing differently (e.g., Dereli, 2022; Erdoğan-Öztürk Sağın-Şimşek, 2023; Karameşe, 2023a; Kondakci et al., 2023; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018, see also Language).

The influx of Syrians since 2011 has destabilised Turkey's demographic makeup and exacerbated existing tensions (Kondakci et al., 2023). However, only a few studies looked beyond binary *host-refugee* or *Turkish-Syrian* distinctions to consider how *ethnicity-based* identities affected SSS' experiences (e.g., Akyol, 2022; Dereli, 2022; Karipek, 2017; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019), despite high concentrations of SSS in multiethnic border cities with historical ties to Syria, and where minority Syrian ethnicities (e.g., Turkmen, Kurdish) are disproportionately represented.

Several studies highlighted the value of *student* identity in reducing prejudice and stigma, eliding ethnic difference, gaining acceptance on campus and beyond, and supporting better interactions with the host community (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Dereli, 2022; Korumaz et al., 2022; Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019). Participants also spoke of practical benefits accompanying student status, such as discounts and ease of movement (Arar et al., 2020; Dereli, 2022; Kondakci et al., 2023; Korumaz, Akkaya & Çeven, 2022).

Although the theme of religion exceeded matters of identity and intersected with other themes (such as gender, acculturation, and psychosocial resilience and wellbeing), a *religion-based* identity emerged most prominently in relation to students' sense of belonging to, or alienation from, Turkish society. Islam was central to many students' self-identity (see e.g., Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019, 2021), and

common religion with Turkey was important to their sense of belonging and cultural affinity (e.g., Akyol, 2022; Ayyildiz, 2024; Karipek, 2017; Kondakci et al., 2023; Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019, 2021). However, perceived differences in religiosity (gauged through lifestyle practices such as gender mixing or alcohol) could lead to alienation from, or rejection of, the host country identity (see Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2019).

A final identity category was *citizenship*. Although participants mostly spoke of the practical benefits of citizenship status in terms of stability and rights (see e.g., Çuhadar et al., 2024), some wanted to attain citizenship based on feelings of affinity and gratitude towards Turkey (see e.g., Kaya & Keklik, 2022), or reported feeling a greater sense of belonging and identity after attaining citizenship (see e.g., Akyol, 2022). Some studies revealed the perception that participation in HE made attaining citizenship easier (see e.g., Dereli, 2022, Tekin Babuç & Avci, 2019). Attaining citizenship was not a panacea for SSS' problems, however; some worried it would undermine their competitive advantage in HE or hinder their postgraduate prospects (Akyol, 2022; Atesok et al., 2019).

Approaching citizenship less as a formal status than as a feeling of historical and cultural identification with the host country, Korumaz et al. (2022) explored how SSS processed citizenship and belonging, and HE's role in preparing students for civic life. They found that universities did little to make SSS aware of their rights or responsibilities, and thus failed to provide a robust foundation on which to build feelings of citizenship. Drawing on Arendt (1959, 1971, cited in Korumaz et al., 2022), they advocate for a return to pre-globalised models of citizenship education explicitly rooted in Turkish Republican values and tradition.

4.8. Psychosocial issues

Psychosocial issues emerged as final major theme. Resilience was the most common concept through which the psychological aspect of SSS' experiences was explored and theorised (e.g., Demir & Aliyev, 2019; Karaman et al., 2023; Özenç-Ira, Üzar-Özçetin & Çelik, 2024; Sari et al., 2020), and also emerged as a cross-cutting sub-theme in inductive studies. Students were found to have derived strength from their experiences of displacement (e.g., Özenç-Ira et al., 2024), which could translate into increased self-confidence and self-efficacy (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2021; Sari et al., 2020). However, several studies also highlighted the enduring impact of trauma and the prevalence of psychopathological symptoms among SSS (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Karaman et al., 2023; Kaya & Keklik, 2022), as well as aspects of SSS' experiences in Turkey that negatively impacted their psychological wellbeing such as racism and discrimination (e.g., Kaya, 2021b; Kondakci et al., 2023; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024), separation from and loss of family (e.g., Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Kaya, 2021b), intrusive thoughts (Kaya, 2021a; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2021), poverty (Akbasli & Mavi, 2021) and homesickness (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu, 2021).

There was evidence of the positive impact of both formal (e.g., counselling, see Kaya & Keklik, 2022) and informal (e.g., from teachers, see Kondakci et al., 2023) psychosocial support within universities, a desire for more psychological counselling from students (Kaya, 2021a; Kaya & Keklik, 2022), and of HE helping SSS move on from trauma (Cin & Doğan, 2021), but also of inadequate levels of support (e.g., Kaya, 2021b; Korumaz, Akkaya & Çeven, 2022).

Several studies highlighted the importance of religion to students' psychological and social wellbeing. Şafak-Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroglu (2019) found that religious coping was one of the main coping mechanisms for SSS, while for students in Karaman et al.'s (2023) study, religion 'offered security and safety similar to how friends and family contributed to resilience' (p.498). Özcan (2019) identified a correlation between SSS' cultural adaptation and positive religious coping, while Yılmaz and Temizkan (2022) found that freedom to practice religion was crucial to SSS' wellbeing. For SSS interviewed by Gulyenli and

Tanrıverdi (2024), access to religious care was central to their holistic conception of wellbeing.

Although several studies made recommendations regarding psychosocial support offered to SSSs (Akbaşlı & Mavi, 2021; Dereli, 2022; Gulyenli & Tanrıverdi, 2024; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024), I found no evaluations of interventions.

5. Conclusion

This article represents the first systematic review scholarly literature concerning the presence and experience of Syrian students studying in the Turkish higher education system. In this final section I summarise the limitations of, and gaps in, the literature, suggest future directions for research, and highlight implications for policymakers and educators in Turkey and other displacement contexts.

The corpus comprised studies in English ($n = 60$) and Turkish ($n = 26$), presenting obvious challenges to researchers who lack proficiency in either (or both) language(s). However, while most Turkish-language studies provided English abstracts and keywords, no English studies provided the reverse, and none provided Arabic abstracts. Where publishers allow, making articles searchable for Turkish and Arabic readers would enhance the reach and inclusivity of research in this area.

Although the literature was relatively substantial and mature, it lacked integration in terms of cross-citation. This is likely due in part to many studies being unindexed and others being paywalled, as well as the language barriers discussed above, and may have contributed to repetition and impeded theory building. I also found that metadata for Turkish language studies were often in a poor state; several DOIs were invalid, and several items were listed in different repositories with different lead authors and/or slightly different titles (and cited with different English translations of the original Turkish titles).

Notwithstanding some innovative and illuminating applications of theory, taken as a whole the literature was somewhat descriptive and lacking in theoretical rigour. Conceptual terms were frequently used as if their meanings were stable and self-evident, rather than unpacked and delimited. Future work should make judicious use of conceptual terminology, grounded in existing literature within and beyond the subject area. Scholars undertaking inductive work should also seek to build new theoretical concepts and propositions. Recently proposed overarching concepts, such as forced internationalisation (Ergin et al., 2019), should be extended to develop a common conceptual framework and vocabulary.

Most studies were qualitative and thus entailed intersubjective meaning-making by researchers and their interlocutors. Despite this, very few studies attended to their authors' positionalities, or acknowledged the influence of their prior experiences and beliefs on data collection, analysis, and methodological decision-making (exceptions include Ayyıldız, 2024; Dereli, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Karameşe, 2023a; Karameşe, 2023b; Kaya, 2021b; Özenç-Ira et al., 2024). Reflexivity is a cornerstone of qualitative research and adopting an explicitly reflexive approach will enhance the validity of future work.

Notwithstanding some authors' claims to insider positionality based on common or analogous experiences or contexts (e.g., having been international students (e.g., Ayyıldız, 2024), working in Turkish HE (Kaya, 2021b), or being Muslim (e.g., Karameşe, 2023a)), no studies were explicitly written from the perspective of displaced Syrians themselves. Syrian academics based in Turkey experience precariousness and discrimination, which may discourage some from undertaking research in this area, but many work closely with Syrian students and would surely contribute vital emic perspectives and insights.

Despite the literature spanning eleven of the thirteen years since the first influxes of displaced Syrians arrived in Turkey in 2011, I found no longitudinal studies examining developments in students' or institutions' experiences over time. Future work could be undertaken to track the SSSs' experiences from enrolment to graduation, and even beyond; despite widespread attention to SSSs' visions for their futures,

only one study (Güvendi & Alpaydın, 2022) explored their post-graduation experiences. The Turkish Council for Higher Education could institute a scheme to facilitate multi-institutional research in this area, the findings of which could inform policy regarding the provision of support. Other countries experiencing more recent influxes of refugee students should start undertaking longitudinal, mixed methods research at the earliest opportunity, to identify key issues and support proactive as opposed to reactive policymaking.

Furthermore, lack of detail regarding when primary research was conducted, together with publication lag, limit the possibility of inferring how Turkey's dynamic political climate has impacted on students' or institutions' experiences. As such, it is difficult to track change over time through the scholarly literature. As far as possible, future studies in the Turkish context, and those elsewhere, should detail when primary research took place and situate the findings within the (geo)political and cultural climate *at that point in time*, with reference to salient policy or events.

Also related to temporality, while earlier literature reports on the experiences of SSSs who had spent their formative years in Syria, and had experienced displacement as adolescents or adults, many participants in later studies entered Turkey as young children and experienced exposure to the host country, society, and culture through the Turkish school system (see Akyol's (2022) discussion of "tabula rasa" students). In the coming years, young Syrians born in Turkey, many of whom will be Turkish citizens, will enter HE, and their experiences and identities may differ markedly from earlier cohorts. This will require researchers to engage with the more substantial literature concerning Syrian children in schools, and with wider research concerning second generation immigrants' and ethnic minority students' experiences of HE.

The existing literature provides rich insight into the experiences of Syrian students in Turkish HE, and in particular into the challenges they face in relation to adaptation, engagement, attainment, efficacy, and overcoming trauma. This should inform the design of pedagogic, pastoral, and psychological strategies and interventions. Case studies and evaluations of such interventions elsewhere are widespread, but I found none relating to SSSs in Turkish HE. Such interventions may already exist, but they have not been the subject of research articles and need to be disseminated nationally (and internationally) to inform evidence-based best practice. Successful interventions and evaluative research designs developed in other contexts could be trialled providing they are adapted to account for the uniquely intersectional experiences of Syrian students and the structural specifics of the Turkish higher education system (see e.g. Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik & Jeong, 2019).

While regions and institutions hosting the largest numbers of SSSs are generally well represented in the literature, many regions with small SS populations are absent (though they may have featured in studies where the field sites are not named). Given findings relating to in-group support, friendship, and belonging, students without access to large Syrian populations may be at greater risk of isolation. Collecting data from small, conspicuous populations presents ethical challenges, but this is nonetheless an area in need of attention.

5.1. Implications for other contexts

Although Turkish universities host the largest numbers of Syrian students, mass displacement from Syria has been far-reaching and hundreds of thousands more are studying in other receiving countries. While in Jordan and Lebanon they are a sizeable presence relative to domestic students,⁴ elsewhere they have a smaller footprint and, consequently, have garnered less attention. Notwithstanding the need to account for contextual differences, comparative insights from Turkey may help policymakers and institutions elsewhere to develop targeted

⁴ Lebanon and Jordan both host higher numbers of Syrian refugees per capita than Turkey.

interventions, particularly in relation to language acquisition, orientation, and psychosocial support. In contexts beyond the Middle East region, and particularly non-Muslim contexts, Syrian students may experience greater levels of culture shock, feel less cultural affinity with the host culture, or encounter racism, discrimination, and othering, all of which are highlighted in the literature as factors that can negatively affect their sense of belonging and inhibit their integration (see 4.5; 4.6.1; 4.7). Moreover, where Syrian populations are smaller, students may have limited access to in-group socialising and support, which different studies suggest can both aid and hinder adaptation (Şafak Ayzavazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2019, 2021, see 4.6.1). Facilitating SSS' access to in-group support networks, including through online channels, alongside provision of accessible institutional support, may promote integration over segregation.

In addition to Syrians, millions of refugee students displaced from other contexts are studying in universities worldwide. With several ongoing conflicts and perhaps the most precarious geopolitical climate since the Cold War, the number and diversity of refugee students is set to increase, requiring proactive and pre-emptive policymaking. The literature reviewed here highlights the heterogeneity of refugee student populations and should ward against one-size-fits-all approaches, however some top-level themes are universally transferable and should be considered foundational to policies relating to refugee students in HE. The first of these is language acquisition, which was revealed by this review to be crucial to SSS' social adaptation, relationship building, sense of belonging, engagement, attainment, and other aspects of their experience (see 4.1). In addition to providing effective language classes, national HE systems and institutions should ensure that information and bureaucracy are accessible to refugee students whose language proficiency is still developing, including through translation where possible. A second transferable theme is material conditions (see 4.6.3). Many refugee students lack access to resources and/or live in harsh conditions, or those not conducive to independent study. Providing access to space, connectivity, and information technology is vital. Support with basic needs should also be factored into policies and strategies. Finally, the need for adequate and culturally appropriate psychosocial and well-being support (see 4.8) is pertinent to all contexts. As the literature reviewed here reveals however, understanding the context-specific needs of refugee students is crucial to ensure the cultural appropriateness of such support.

While other issues discussed in this review (such as experiences associated with specific identity categories, see 4.7) are grounded in the Turkish context, this highlights the value of inductive research in understanding refugee students' diverse experiences. Researchers worldwide have an important role to play in ensuring refugee students' experiences and needs are understood and reflected in policy and practice.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tom Parkinson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

This research was undertaken as part of the British Academy-funded project (Un)-bordering heritage: Supporting refugee-host community integration through inclusive tourism, common history and higher education in Mardin, Turkey (TGC\200129).

References

- Akbasli, S., & Mavi, D. (2021). Conditions of Syrian asylum seeker students in a Turkish university. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(7), 763–778.
- Akkaya, A., Korumaz, M., & Tabançali, E. (2021). The out of border education: The inclusion of Syrian refugees in higher education. *International Online Journal of Educational Sciences*, 13(3), 705–721.
- Akyol, E. (2022). Political socialization experiences of Turkish citizen university students of Syrian origin. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 87, 142–156.
- Altunbaş, A. (2020). Türkiye'de yaşayan göçmenlerin üniversite eğitiminden memnuniyetlerinin Konya'daki Suriyeli öğrenciler örneği üzerinden değerlendirilmesi. *Üniversite Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 3(2), 64–74.
- Apak, H., Yiğitalp, G., & Tatlıcıoğlu, O. (2024). The effect of health literacy and self-efficacy levels of Syrian refugee university students on quality of life. *Journal of Public Health*, 1–8.
- Arar, K., Kondakci, Y., Kaya Kasıkcı, S., & Erberk, E. (2020). Higher education policy for displaced people: Implications of Turkey's higher education policy for Syrian migrants. *Higher Education Policy*, 33(2), 265–285.
- Atesok, Z. O., Komsuoğlu, A., & Ozer, Y. Y. (2019). An evaluation of refugees' access to higher education: Case of Turkey and Istanbul University. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 8(2), 119–136.
- Attar, G. E., & Küçükşen, D. (2019). Somehow familiar but still a stranger: Syrian students in Turkish higher education. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20(4), 1041–1053.
- Aydın, M. S. (2021). Sığınmacıların yükseköğretim hizmetlerine erişimi: Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi örneği | Access of asylum seekers to higher education services: The case of Mardin Artuklu University. *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Elektronik Dergisi*, 12(3), 762–774.
- Aydın, G., & Gürsoy, I. A. (2022). Willingness of Syrians who are learning Turkish as second/foreign language in terms of communicating in Arabic and Turkish. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 10(4), 49–55.
- Ayyıldız, Ş. (2024). The feeling of exclusion and/or inclusion in shared places: Syrian students' emotions and social imaginations in Istanbul. *Heliyon*, 10(9), e29213.
- Barışıl, A. (2017). An emergency academic support – Syrian refugee students in the Turkish higher education. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 9(1), 39–49.
- Biçer, N., & Alan, Y. (2017). An action research investigating the needs of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language. *International Online Journal of Educational Sciences*, 9(3), 862–878.
- Bozdağ, F. (2020). Xenophobia and social contact in university students. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 8(4), 87.
- Call-Cummings, M., & Hauber-Özer, M. (2021). Virtual photovoice: Methodological lessons and cautions. *The Qualitative Report*.
- Çangal, Ö. (2022). The reasons of Syrians learning Turkish as a second language, their perceptions of Turkey and their future expectations. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 18(1), 65–84.
- Cin, F. M., & Doğan, N. (2021). Navigating university spaces as refugees: Syrian students' pathways of access to and through higher education in Turkey. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(2), 298–312.
- Cinkara, E. (2017). The role of L+ Turkish and English learning in resilience: A case of Syrian students at Gaziantep University. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 190–203.
- Çuhadar, P., Çirkin, Z., & Sakız, H. (2024). Career aspirations of refugee women in Turkey within the context of higher education. *Higher education policy*. OnlineFirst.
- Dalaman, Z. B. (2022). A new women's identity formed by Syrian female university students in Turkey from the perspective of transnational feminism. *İçtimaiyat*.
- Demir, Ö. O., & Aliyev, R. (2019). Resilience among Syrian university students in Turkey. *Turkish Journal of Education*, 8(1), 33–51.
- Dereli, B. (2022). Belonging through higher education: The case of Syrian youth in Turkey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35(1), 195–219.
- Derman, S., Bardakçı, M., & Öztürk, M. S. (2017). An investigation of read speech of Arabic students learning Turkish as a second language in terms of stress and pause. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(1), 215–231.
- Duruel, M. (2016). Suriyeli sığınmacıların eğitim sorunu. *Atatürk Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi*, 5, 1399–1414.
- Eğiz, Ş. (2020). The meaning of war and peace for the migrant Syrian students at tertiary level in Turkey: An art-based study. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching*, 7(3), 992–1008.
- Erdemir, B. (2022). Higher education policies for Syrian refugees in Turkey: Opportunities and challenges for Syrian and Turkish students. A.W. Wiseman. In *Annual review of comparative and international education 2021*, 42A pp. 185–205. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Erdoğan, A., & Erdoğan, M. M. (2018). Access, qualifications and social dimension of Syrian refugee students in Turkish higher education. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie (Eds.), *European higher education area: The impact of past and future policies* (pp. 259–276). Springer International Publishing.
- Erdoğan, Z. (2023). Assessing the criteria for equality of the right: Refugees' higher education from the perspective of human rights. *Milli Eğitim Dergisi*, 52(237), 577–602.
- Erdoğan-Öztürk, Y., & Sağın-Şimşek, Ç. (2023). Language ideologies and stancetaking in refugee identity negotiations: Exploring multilingual refugees' narratives of language use in Turkey. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–15.
- Ergin, H. (2016). Turkish university students' perceptions towards their Syrian classmates. *TED Eğitim Ve Bilim*, 41(184).
- Ergin, H., de Wit, H., & Leask, B. (2019). Forced internationalization of higher education: An emerging phenomenon. *International Higher Education*, (97), 9–10.

- Fincham, K. (2020). Rethinking higher education for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(4), 329–356.
- Gökçöz, G. (2023). Göç ve Medya: Gaziantep'teki Suriyeli göçmen üniversite öğrencilerinin Suriye medyasına ilişkin eğilimleri. *İlefler Dergisi*.
- Gulyenli, N., & Tanrıverdi, G. (2024). Defining the cultural care needs of Syrian university students in Türkiye using Leininger's Sunrise Model. *Health Sciences Quarterly*, 4(2), 145–153.
- Gül, M., & Şaşman-Kaylı, D. (2020). Türkiye'deki Suriyeli üniversite öğrencilerinde sosyal dışlanma algısı üzerine nitel bir araştırma: Uşak Üniversitesi örneği | A qualitative study on the perception of social exclusion in Syrian university students in Turkey: Uşak university sample. *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 31(3), 985–1007.
- Gün, M. (2015). Opinions of instructors about reading skills of Syrian students learning Turkish. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 10(10), 1424–1433.
- Güngör, H., & Soysal, T. (2021). Türk yükseköğretiminde Suriyeli mülteciler. *Millî Eğitim Dergisi*, 50(1), 1245–1264.
- Güvendi, M. F., & Alpaydın, Y. (2022). Suriyeli mültecilerin yükseköğretimden istihdam geçiş deneyimlerinin incelenmesi. *Marmara Üniversitesi Atatürk Eğitim Fakültesi Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 55(55), 365–388.
- Harunoğulları, M., Süzümüş, S., & Polat, Y. (2019). Türkiye'deki Suriyeli üniversite öğrencileri ile ilgili bir durum tespiti: Osmaniye Korkut Ata Üniversitesi örneği. *Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 21(3), 816–837.
- Kamyab, S. (2017). Syrian refugees higher education crisis. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 9, 10–14.
- Karadağ, N. (2016). Yükseköğretimde uluslararasılaşma bağlamında Türkiye'de eğitim gören Suriyeli öğrenciler üzerine bir araştırma. *Electronic Turkish Studies*, 11(19), 477–490.
- Karaman, M. A., Schmit, M. K., & Can, N. (2023). I fight, I don't give up hope": Resilience and life satisfaction among Syrian refugee university students in Turkey. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 21(3), 486–501.
- Karameşe, Ş. (2023a). Immediate and future-oriented tactics of Syrian students in Istanbul as an integrational bridge between the past and future. *Migration Letters*, 20(1), 89–99.
- Karameşe, Ş. (2023b). Rethinking place-based gender relations in the new country: The case of tertiary level Syrian students in Istanbul. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 11(1), 3.
- Karipek, Y. Z. (2017). Asylum-Seekers experience and acculturation: A study of Syrian university students in Turkey. *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 105–133.
- Kaya, İ., & Kan, M. O. (2021). Developing a scale to measure Syrian students' attitude towards Turkish (SSATT) and examining its psychometric properties. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 17(6), 115–129.
- Kaya, M., & Şahin, H. (2021). Analysis of academic integration processes of Syrian students at Harran University. *Journal of Humanity and Society (İnsan & Toplum)*, 11(3), 39–84.
- Kaya, Ö. S., & Keklik, İ. (2022). Adjustment experiences of Syrian immigrant university students in Turkey. *Current Psychology*, 41(11), 7751–7761.
- Kaya, Ö. S. (2021a). Suriyeli üniversite öğrencilerinin göç nedenleri ve deneyimleri: Nitel bir çalışma. *Trakya Eğitim Dergisi*, 11(2), 969–979.
- Kaya, Y. (2021b). "If only they forgot that I was Syrian and an Arab, I am a human being too." Syrian university students' experiences of being a foreigner: A phenomenological study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 83, 43–54.
- Kondakci, Y., Zayim Kurtay, M., Kaya Kasıkcı, S., Senay, H. H., & Kulakoglu, B. (2023). Higher Education for forcibly displaced migrants in Turkey. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(3), 619–632.
- Korumaz, M., Akkaya, A., & Çeven, G. (2022). An Arendtian perspective on education as a means of citizenship: How citizenship is processed by Syrian immigrant students in higher education. *International Education Studies*, 15(6), 71.
- Kozikoğlu, İ., & Aslan, M. (2018). Socio-cultural, psychological and academic problems of undergraduate Syrian students in Turkey. *Issues in Educational Research*, 28(3), 701–719.
- Levent, F., Öksüz Gül, F., & Aydemir, T. (2021). Suriyeli üniversite öğrencilerinin Türkiye'de üniversite deneyimleri. *Millî Eğitim Dergisi*, 50(1), 807–835.
- Özçakmak, H. (2019). Evaluation of Syrian students' dictation texts (A2 level). *World Journal of Education*, 9(1), 179.
- Özcan, Z. (2019). Mülteci öğrencilerin kültürel uyumları ile dini başa çıkmaları arasındaki ilişki üzerine bir araştırma. *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi*, 23(1), 127–147.
- Özenci-Ira, G., Üzar-Özçetin, Y. S., & Çelik, S. (2024). What doesn't defeat me makes me stronger": A qualitative study drawing on the perspectives of Syrian refugee university students in Turkey. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 29(3), 615–630.
- Sari, H. Y., Gelbal, S., & Sari, H. (2020). Factors affecting academic self-efficacy of Syrian refugee students: A path analysis model. *International Journal of Assessment Tools in Education*, 7(2), 266–279.
- Seydi, A. R. (2013). Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Akademisyen ve Eğitimcilerin Görüşlerine Göre Suriye'deki Çatışmaların Suriyelilerin Eğitim Sürecine Yansımaları. *Sileyman Demirel Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 30(1), 217–241, 2013.
- Streitwieser, B., Loo, B., Ohorodnik, M., & Jeong, J. (2019). Access for refugees into higher education: A review of interventions in North America and Europe. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(4), 473–496.
- Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, A., & Kunuroğlu, F. (2021). Acculturation experiences and psychological well-being of Syrian refugees attending universities in Turkey: A qualitative study. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(1), 96–109.
- Şafak Ayvazoğlu, A., & Kunuroğlu, F. (2019). Being a Syrian university student in Turkey: Intergroup relations, psychosocial issues, and boundary formation. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 38(4), 425–447.
- Sağır, A., & Aydın, E. (2020). Türkiye'deki üniversitelerde öğrenim gören Suriyeli öğrencilerin sosyo-ekonomik ve sosyo-kültürel profillerinin analizi. *Adam Akademik Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 10(1), 153–182.
- Tanrıkulu, F. (2021). The use of face-to-face and mobile assisted peer tutoring in solving the language problems of Syrian refugees. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 29(2), 215–237.
- Taşar, H. H. (2019). Türkiye'deki Suriyeli mültecilerin yükseköğretim sorunları: Adıyaman Üniversitesi örneği. *Adıyaman Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 31, 160–187.
- Tekin babuç, Z., & Avcı, M. (2019). A relational sociological analysis of Syrian students' experiences in Osmaniye province on integration to higher education process. *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, 10(37), 833–848.
- Ünalp Çepel, Z., Abka, S., & Durmuşlar, T. (2021). Integration process of Syrian migrants following the EU-Turkey readmission agreement: Case of Syrian university students in İzmir. *Uluslararası Anadolu Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 5(1), 127–149.
- Xiao, Y., & Watson, M. (2019). Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review. *Journal of planning education and research*, 39(1), 93–112.
- Yıldız, A. (2023b). Inclusive Approach of Türkiye on Access and Integration of Refugees to higher education. *Bilgi*, 107, 197–222.
- Yılmaz, K., & Temizkan, V. (2022). The effects of educational service quality and socio-cultural adaptation difficulties on international students' higher education satisfaction. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), Article 215824402210783.

Further Reading

- Akkaya, A. Y., Çilingir, G. A., & Levent, G. T. (2018). Van Yüzyüncü Yıl Üniversitesi'ndeki Suriyeli öğrencilerin akademik sorunları üzerine bir çalışma. *Journal of Social Policy Studies*, 18(402), 413–448.
- Arik, F., Fidan, Ç., & Hoş, R. (2024). Higher education for Syrian refugee students in Türkiye: Challenges and expectations. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 1–12.
- Bimay, M. (2021). Yükseköğretimde okuyan suriyelilerin eğitim sorunları ve beklentileri: TRC3 bölgesi (Mardin, Batman, Siirt, Şırnak) üniversiteleri örneği. *Millî Eğitim Dergisi*, 50(1), 895–923.
- Boylu, E. (2020). Turkish language in the perspective of Syrian refugee students: A metaphor study. *Educational Policy Analysis and Strategic Research*, 15(4), 214–233.
- Büyükkiz, K. K., & Çangal, Ö. (2016). Suriyeli misafir öğrencilere Türkçe öğretimi projesi üzerine bir değerlendirme. *Uluslararası Türkçe Edebiyat Kültür Eğitim (TEKE) Dergisi*, 5(3), 1414–1430.
- Cambaz, H. Z., Aslan, A., & Karasu, S. (2018). Üniversite öğrencilerinin Suriyeli mültecilere yönelik algı ve görüşlerine yönelik bir nitel araştırma. *R&S – Research Studies Anatolia Journal*, 1(3), 472–489.
- Atasoy, A., & Temizkan, M. (2018). The relationship between reading anxiety and the reading errors of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language. *Çukurova Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 47(2), 738–764, 2018.
- Eyitmiş, A. M., & Sezer, F. (2022). Suriyeli yüksek öğrenim öğrencilerinin girişimcilik niyetlerinin nicel ve nitel yöntemlerle incelenmesi. *Van Yüzyüncü Yıl Üniversitesi İktisadi Ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 7(14), 206–227.
- Gülerce, H., & Çorlu, R. (2021). Yükseköğretimdeki Suriyeli sığınmacı öğrenciler: Uyum ve çatışma alanları. *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 12(2), 71–106.
- Hauber-Özer, M. (2023a). Barriers to higher education in displacement: Experiences of Syrian refugee students in Turkish universities. *Global Perspectives on the Difficulties and Opportunities Faced by Migrant and Refugee Students in Higher Education* (pp. 136–159). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7781-6.ch006>.
- Hauber-Özer, M. (2023b). Journeys to higher education in displacement: a narrative portrait of Syrian refugees in Turkish universities. In A. W. Wiseman, & L. Damaschke-Deitrick (Eds.), *International Perspectives on Education and Society* (pp. 195–211). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-36792023000045011>.
- Şahin, S. A., & Çelik, Z. (2020). Dışlanma ve umut arasında: Suriyeli yükseköğretim öğrencilerinin deneyimleri. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 10(3), 494–503.
- Ünal, K. S., Göziyeşil, E., & Tar, E. (2019). Üniversite öğrencilerinde uykusuzluk, yorgunluk ve ağrıda kullanılan tamamlayıcı ve alternatif yöntemler. *Çukurova Medical Journal*, 44(2), 602–611.
- Usta, S., Sayın, Y., & Güzelipek, Y. A. (2017). Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin kente ve üniversiteye uyumu: Karaman ili örneği. *Journal of Higher Education and Science*, 7(3), 565–577.
- Yıldız, A. (2023a). Access and integration of refugees into higher education: A Turkish inclusive approach. In H. Pinson, N. Bunar, & D. Devine (Eds.), *Research Handbook on Migration and Education* (pp. 370–383). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839106361.00034>.
- Yilmazel, G., & Atay, D. (2023). Challenges of migrant students in Turkish higher education. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 17(2), 132–145.
- Zavalı, Y., & Gündag, E. (2017). Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin sosyo-kültürel entegrasyonu. *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(5), 3168–3192.
- Dartan, M., Ersoy, İ.S., Şirin, N.A., & Deniz, P. (2023). Marmara Üniversitesi'ndeki Suriyeli öğrencilerin pandemi döneminde uygulanan hibrit eğitimde yaşadıkları sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri. *Marmara Üniversitesi Avrupa Toplumlu Enstitüsü Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 31–1(31–1), 1–36.