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## Europeanization and Refugee Integration in Higher Education in Türkiye: The Case of Dokuz Eylül University

Zühal Ünalp Çepel\* , Sinem Abka\*\* 

### Abstract

Türkiye hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally at approximately 2.7 million. As refugee arrivals increased, the number of refugee students in higher education also rose. Higher education policies have been shaped by both the Europeanization process and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. As higher education in Türkiye internationalized, integration and campus cohesion became more salient policy concerns. This study contributes to the existing literature on the integration of refugee students who have been displaced to Türkiye, employing Dokuz Eylül University as a case study. It examines bilateral perceptions, learning processes, and interactions of both the host country university staff and students, as well as refugee students. The study's findings indicate that mutual prejudices between the two student groups can be reduced by raising awareness of their socio-cultural similarities, which they have developed through socialization. It also suggests that the individual experiences and perspectives they have gained can promote harmony in broader community relations.

**Keywords :** Europeanization, Migration, Refugees, Integration, Higher Education

## Türkiye’de Yükseköğretimde Avrupalılaşıma ve Mülteci Entegrasyonu: Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Örneği

### Özet

Türkiye, yaklaşık 2,7 milyon mülteci ile dünyada en fazla mülteci barındıran ülkelerden biri konumundadır. Bu değişime paralel olarak, yükseköğretim sistemindeki mülteci öğrenci sayısı da artmıştır. Yükseköğretim politikaları, hem Avrupalılaşıma süreci hem de Birleşmiş Milletler Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri çerçevesinde şekillenmektedir. Türkiye’de yükseköğretim alanı uluslararasılaştıkça entegrasyon ve kampüs uyumu önemi artan politika alanları haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi özelinde Türkiye’ye yerleşmek zorunda kalan mülteci öğrencilerin entegrasyonu konusunda mevcut literatüre anlamlı bir katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca, ev sahibi ülke üniversite personeli ve öğrencileri ile mülteci öğrencilerin karşılıklı algılarını, öğrenme süreçlerini ve etkileşimlerini ölçmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, iki öğrenci grubu arasındaki karşılıklı önyargıların, sosyalleşme yoluyla geliştirdikleri sosyo-kültürel benzerlikler konusunda farkındalık yaratılarak ortadan kaldırılabileceğini öne sürmektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, edindikleri bireysel deneyimlerin ve bakış açılarının makro düzeyde uyumu teşvik edebileceğini öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler :** Avrupalılaşıma, Göç, Mülteciler, Entegrasyon, Yükseköğretim

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## Introduction

Migration flows have been changing the demographic structure of Türkiye. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2025), there are 2.7 million refugees<sup>1</sup> in Türkiye, primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In this environment, the peaceful coexistence of different nationalities requires well-structured social integration policies. Education policies at the elementary, middle school, and higher education levels are also directly affected by migration and social integration policies. Higher education policies in Türkiye have been shaped both by the Europeanization process and the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The European Union (EU) candidacy status of Türkiye, which started in 1999, has introduced the Bologna process to higher education. Meanwhile, Türkiye has prioritized the goals of “quality education” (Goal 4) and “reducing inequalities” (Goal 10) within the scope of the UN SDGs. With the growing number of international students following the new internationalization strategy of the Turkish Republic Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in the 2000s, social integration has become a crucial priority of the public institutions. However, it should be stressed that the experiences of Syrian, Iraqi, or Afghan students who have fled from the internal conflict and violence in their countries differ from those of the other international students.

Since the 2010s, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the social integration of refugees at higher education institutions (HEIs). These encompass analyses inspecting revised higher education strategies, linguistic obstacles, cultural distinctions, and trauma experiences of refugee students. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies with single case and comparative case studies in this literature exemplify effective and unsuccessful strategies in Türkiye (Erdoğan & Çorabatır, 2019; Yıldız, 2019; Ertong Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Kaya, 2021; Gülerce & Çorlu, 2021; Hacettepe University, 2021; Çoban & Gülerce, 2023). Erdoğan & Çorabatır (2019) provided a projection for Türkiye with Syrian refugees and argued that, if social acceptance has been achieved, the social integration of Syrians in every field, including higher education, would then be more probable. There is also migration literature on higher education based on specific cases, such as Harran University (Gülerce & Çorlu, 2021; Çoban & Gülerce, 2023) and Mersin University (Ertong, Attar & Küçükşen, 2019) at a national level, and selected cases at a Europe-wide level, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Norway and the UK (Yıldız, 2019). This study addresses the relative absence of research on İzmir by examining Dokuz Eylül University (DEU), focusing on whether administrative and academic approaches and campus activities promote refugee student integration and societal cohesion. It uses “refugee students” to refer to students under temporary protection status and international protection applicants in Türkiye, corresponding to the prevailing literature on migration.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘refugee’ is used here as a broad sociological descriptor, notwithstanding Türkiye’s geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

To demonstrate the impact of social activities with refugee students at HEIs and contribute to the migration literature, this study uses single case study as one of the qualitative methodologies and follows a population-space-place heuristic that illuminates the complementary components of the social integration process. The population in the research consists of two different communities. The first is the administrative and academic staff, and the second is the local and refugee students at DEU Faculty of Business (FoB). Space refers to Türkiye's higher education system as the institutional environment. Finally, the place refers to DEU's campus context, including its internationalization strategy, student culture, and inclusion policies. The research is based on the UNHCR dataset collected during activities conducted as part of the Leave No One Behind Project, implemented at the DEU FoB in 2022. It also uses statistical data compiled from UNHCR, the Presidency of Migration Management and the CoHE in Türkiye.

The paper starts by providing information about the research data and the research methodology. Secondly, it addresses the concept of social integration and the significance of the educational sphere within this context. Then, it discusses the Europeanization and internationalization of higher education policies and social integration in Türkiye to illustrate the transformation process in this field. Finally, the case and data analysis section elaborates on the project results and findings.

## **Data and Methodology**

The paper uses a multi-strategy research approach, combining a case study with a UNHCR project-based dataset. Case studies on social groups are conducted over a limited period, such as weeks, months or years (Neuman, 2007, p. 5). They may focus on a single social system, or they may compare multiple systems. Case studies offer researchers several advantages, including generating new theories and explanations and expressing cause-and-effect relationships between phenomena through in-depth observations of specific target groups (Bennett, 2002, pp. 29, 37).

Single case studies suggest that specific cases differ from the general population. This paper presents a single case study of DEU, analyzing the social integration of refugee students and host country nationals within a single HEI in Türkiye, drawing on a project-based dataset provided by the UNHCR. DEU was designated as a pilot university to implement the policies determined under the internationalization strategy by the CoHE in Türkiye. The strategy has led to a significant increase in the number of international students across DEU's various units. DEU has welcomed foreign students, particularly those under temporary protection status such as Syrians, provided they meet the university's specific entry requirements. As a product of the internationalization strategy, DEU agreed upon a Memorandum of Understanding with the UNHCR Türkiye. One of the expected outcomes of this collaboration was conducting a project on the integration of refugee students at DEU. This collaboration has resulted in the preparation of the

'Leave No One Behind Project' (2022-IZM-HEDU-01), which was approved by DEU and the UNHCR Türkiye. The implementation of the project was conducted by the FoB Deanship in collaboration with the DEU Sustainable Development Student Community (PlatformUp) and UNHCR Türkiye between June and December 2022.

The project aimed to promote social integration between refugee students and host country nationals at DEU, overcoming prejudices and contributing to the achievement of the UN SDGs, including Goals 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 10 (reduced inequalities). The project management team at the FoB enabled the authors to conduct direct observations of the relationships between Faculty staff and refugee students, as well as between Turkish and refugee students.<sup>2</sup> Data on these target groups were provided by the DEU Student Office and the FoB. The authors also conducted participant observation during project activities and analyzed meeting notes and UNHCR-generated focus group reports.

The study applied the UNHCR project-based dataset on social integration of refugee students, the host country students, and the Faculty staff. The observations and findings gathered during the implementation of the seven-month-long project, including two workshops with administrative and academic staff, and a seminar titled "False Facts on Refugees in Türkiye," as well as feedback gathered in one-day International Culture Fair (ICF), and the findings of the focus group discussions conducted by UNHCR separately with local and refugee students as part of the project, provided enriched data on the causes of diverse perceptions and opinions regarding the refugees and the host country nationals. Through the above-mentioned activities, the multi-strategy research approach allowed the authors to use different methods to achieve reliable results and eliminate gaps in their arguments (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006, p. 20).

### Conceptual Background: Social Integration

Social integration requires mutual understanding between host societies and refugees. According to Crisp (2004), social integration produces a peaceful society with inclusive processes. The processes include legal protection, economic self-reliance, and social acceptance. Legal protection is provided through the implementation of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which provides the right to live, the right to be employed, the right to access public services, and citizenship as a final point. The second process is economic self-reliance, which involves refugees being employed in the host society and living without assistance. The third process has a social dimension and requires inclusive policies for refugees (Crisp, 2004, p. 1). Hynie (2018) agrees with Crisp (2004) and emphasizes that social integration brings about societal change through the combined efforts of the host

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<sup>2</sup> Consistent with migration literature, 'refugee students' encompasses those under temporary protection and international protection seekers in Türkiye.

society and the incoming group. Therefore, the host society incorporates migrants and refugees into its way of life. Additionally, the central state, local governments, institutions and refugees themselves play significant roles in promoting the social integration process (Memişoğlu & Yavçan, 2020).

Integration policies are the policies followed by the host country's government and are shaped by the priorities of the state's interests. It is because those policies require efforts from refugees to adapt themselves to society. To make those incoming groups a part of society, the government assigns specific conditions to be met. If those conditions are met by the incoming groups, then they will gain specific rights and responsibilities in their new society (Hammar, 1990). While the government brings specific conditions, it should not violate the international refugee regime. For example, the social integration process does not aim to achieve assimilation, as this is not suggested by the 1951 Geneva Convention (Crisp, 2004, p. 1).

Ager and Strang (2008) highlight the key areas of social integration, including employment, housing, education and health. The figure below illustrates the sectors and fields involved in social integration programs, as well as the connecting factors and facilitators. They argue that fulfilling the needs within these domains leads to full integration into society. This paper takes 'education' as one of the core domains of integration while analyzing the case of the 'Leave No One Behind' project. In the 'education' field, refugees are in schools or HEIs, which are the most important places for communicating with the host society. Social connections, such as acceptance and equality, as well as access to various services and facilitators, such as language courses and cultural activities within an educational environment, promote integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration



**Source:** Ager and Strang, 2008, p. 170.

Social integration of refugee students has been one of the important dimensions of migration studies. Pistoia (2018) draws attention to the social and economic rights of the refugees as the fundamentals of social integration. Following the fundamental rights, Hammoud (2024) in his study on refugee students in Lebanon and Australia found that refugees with no difficulties in the host country language more easily integrate into the classroom, campus life, and wider society. Another study by Reindl, Auer & Gniewosz (2022) on the case of refugee students in Germany emphasizes that there are two significant socialization instruments for refugee students which are peers or fellow students and teachers.

Under ‘education’, as one of the core domains of social integration, the aim was to foster social connections by building social bridges, creating social bonds, and maintaining social links between the host society and refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008). This study is based on two levels of groups at DEU, firstly the administrative and academic staff and secondly native and refugee students at the DEU FoB. As the literature points out, interactions between the host society and refugees, as well as the language skills and socio-economic conditions of refugees, are significant factors in social integration. Following this background, the project team, comprising coordinators, the FoB Deanship, representatives of the UNHCR involved in the project and the DEU PlatformUp, attempted to facilitate the social integration of host community members and refugee students. The section below explains the main social integration approach of education policies in Türkiye.

### **Europeanization and Internationalization of Higher Education Policies in Türkiye**

Since the early years of the Republic, Türkiye has enjoyed close economic, political and cultural relations with European organizations and the UN. The association agreement between Türkiye and the European Economic Community, which was signed in 1963, was upgraded to candidate status at the EU Helsinki Summit in 1999. Between 1999 and 2010, European norms and values were implemented as part of the reform process, a period that can be considered the Europeanization of Türkiye. A total of nine harmonization packages have been adopted and many constitutional amendments have reformed the 1982 Constitution.

While Europeanization is not a theory of European integration per se, it is useful for explaining how EU norms shape democratization, reforms, and social learning in candidate countries, which aligns with social constructivist accounts of norm diffusion. According to social constructivism, rules, norms, identity, ideas, language, and discourses can have a considerable impact on a state, its policies, and its domestic realm (Smith, 1999; Badie, Berg-Schlosser & Morlino, 2011). The domestic impact of Europeanization has been the main driver of democratization. Reforms in the 2000s and the EU programs for higher education in Türkiye have brought about social learning processes

involving an inclusive academic environment. These programs provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups, such as migrants, and offer academic and non-academic support to researchers and students (European Education Area, 2022). Türkiye has Europeanized its HEIs via the Bologna process since May 2001. Universities have voluntarily adopted the reforms introduced by this process (Onursal-Beşgül, 2017). These reforms have transformed departments and courses offered by the universities. Students have benefited from those reformed programs and the Erasmus exchange programs, which have raised awareness of freedoms, civil society, democracy, and universal values.

Research conducted by PODEM (2020) on European and Turkish youth indicates that Erasmus exchange programs have a positive impact on the tolerance of university students for differences. The study also found that Turkish students have transformed their perceptions of the EU after their Erasmus experiences. The research on Harran University by Gülerce, Ağca Varoğlu and Gülerce (2023) indicated that Erasmus+ Youth Exchange projects have also promoted the culture of living together and the social integration of local and migrant youth. According to Saleem, Kausar, and Deeba (2021), practice has a significant role in the learning process. The activities by students expand their social environments and result in social inclusion of differences. This learning environment at HEIs has also been promoted with the UN SDGs since the introduction of the goals in 2015. Accordingly, 67 percent of the universities in Türkiye have incorporated SDGs into their strategic plans, curricula, extracurricular activities, and campus life (Güngör Tañç et al., 2022; Suklun & Bengü, 2024). Yılmaz Fındık and Erçetin (2023) found that the universities with SDG goals are in the list of QS World University Rankings and are in the category of 'research universities' approved by the CoHE.

In conclusion, implementing the Bologna process requirements alongside the Europeanization process, and the programs and projects associated with the UN SDGs, promotes an inclusive environment for students of all nationalities, genders and socio-economic backgrounds in Turkish universities. Therefore, this research can be regarded as a test case for evaluating the impact of the Europeanization and internationalization of higher education policies on refugees and the host society at DEU.

## **Social Integration in Türkiye's Higher Education Policies**

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, migration has been an important policy issue in Turkish domestic and foreign affairs. The huge number of displaced persons in Türkiye necessitated the implementation of sustainable social integration policies (Erdoğan, 2014; Aras & Yasun, 2016; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Yıldız, 2019). According to Kirişçi (2014), the social value of hospitality in Türkiye has not been able to meet the needs of refugees. What is needed is social integration through the implementation of international refugee norms. Türkiye has a geographic limitation on the 1951 Geneva

Convention and the 1967 Protocol on the Legal Status of Refugees. This limitation does not allow Syrians to apply for refugee status. It is admitted that only migrants from Council of Europe member states can apply for refugee status, provided they meet the conditions set out in the Refugee Convention (Ünalp Çepel, Abka, & Durmuşlar, 2021, p. 131).

Türkiye has been both a transit and a host country for refugees, with many fleeing the civil wars in neighboring countries during the 2000s. To manage migration and related issues, Türkiye reformed its laws and aligned them with international standards, particularly those of the EU. In 2013, Türkiye and the EU signed the Readmission Agreement to collaboratively manage regular and irregular migration flows. One of the most significant reforms to migration policy was the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which came into effect in the same year. The law regulates temporary protection status, refugee status, and conditional refugee status. Syrians in Türkiye were granted “temporary protection status” in 2014 (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 15). Considering the requirements of the Law, the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) was established as one of the sub-departments under the Ministry of Interior. As shown in Table 1 below, there are currently 2.7 million refugees living in Türkiye. Most of these refugees are Syrian and are under temporary protection status. Türkiye is home to the second-highest number of refugees in the world alongside Germany.

**Table 1.** Countries hosting the largest refugee and refugee-like populations

States	Number of refugees
Colombia	2.8 million
Türkiye	2.7 million
Germany	2.7 million
Islamic Republic of Iran	2.5 million
Uganda	1.9 million

**Source:** UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2025.

To manage migration more effectively, the DGMM was transformed into the Presidency of Migration Management in 2021. The Presidency collaborated with several institutions, universities, civil society organizations, international organizations, and the EU to accelerate the social integration of refugees. The Presidency changed its approach, announcing the Adaptation Strategy Document and the National Action Plan for the term of office from 2018 to 2023 (T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2018). The aim of this plan was to take a coordinated approach to integrating refugees into Turkish society. It included educational, socio-cultural and economic programs for Syrians under temporary protection and other refugees in Türkiye. Essentially, between 2012 and 2018, Türkiye adopted

a social integration approach for refugees, followed by an adaptation program between 2019 and 2023. However, the migration agenda in Türkiye appears to have shifted following the 2023 and 2024 general and local elections. Therefore, it can be concluded that social integration and adaptation policies have not been the only priority of the government. The objectives of 2024-2028 Strategic Plan of the Presidency illustrate the transformation of the priorities. Manageable regular migration, combating irregular migration, effective and predictable protection mechanisms, integration and communication efforts, border management, and strengthening institutional capacity are determined as the strategic goals of the recent period (T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2024).

Educational policies play a significant role in managing migration policy. The right to education for those under temporary protection status requires extensive coordination, particularly for students. Higher education in Türkiye is very important for the future lives of refugee students and the host society (Ünalp Çepel, Abka, & Durmuşlar, 2021, p. 129). Syrian students were accepted by various universities (İstanbul University, Harran University, Gaziantep University, Karabük University, Anadolu University, Siirt University, Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University) in Türkiye between 2011 and 2015. Since 2013, all students who are under temporary protection have had the opportunity to be enrolled in any university in Türkiye. Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018, p. 73) found that more than half of the Syrian students in higher education prefer staying in Türkiye. As can be seen in Table 2, the high number of refugee students requires the university administration and academic and administrative staff to play an active role in supporting integration policies.

**Table 2.** Number of international students in HEIs (2024 – CoHE)

Number	Nationality
60,750	Syria
40,354	Azerbaijan
28,924	Iran
13,153	Iraq
11,958	Kazakhstan

**Source:** CoHE, 2024, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>. These figures include all international students; Syrians constitute the largest group, including many under temporary protection.

Türkiye provides Türkiye Scholarships for international and refugee students. This program funds 5,000 international students every year, and covered the tuition fees of over 5,000 Syrian students until 2019. Furthermore, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) funded almost 16,000 Syrian students between 2012 and 2019 (Yıldız, 2019, p. 81).

Türkiye has collaborated with several international and regional organizations to facilitate the participation of refugee students in education. These programs include the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) Programs run by the UNHCR, Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) action of the EU, and SPARK (Hohberger, 2017, p. 5; Yıldız, 2019, p. 88).

### Case and Data Analysis

This section analyzes the results of the Leave No One Behind project, which was conducted by UNHCR Türkiye and DEU. The analysis focuses on the social integration processes of local and refugee students within HEIs and provides a framework for managing these processes, with a particular focus on the integration of refugee students.

The research findings are based on the dataset generated by the project's four main activities. These activities are composed of workshops with the academic and administrative staff, a seminar entitled "False Facts on Refugees in Türkiye," a one-day ICF, and finally, the focus group discussions, which were held in two private sessions with the participation of local and refugee students. Data analysis followed an interpretative qualitative methodology focused on intergroup contact and social exchange. Each event was treated as a distinct unit of analysis, utilizing meeting notes and field observations as primary data sources. These materials were systematically reviewed to identify shifts in the attitudes of refugee students, university staff, and Turkish peers. By providing a thematic synthesis at the conclusion of each event section, the study illustrates how micro-level campus interactions foster empathy and reduce misunderstandings, ultimately facilitating a 'snowball effect' for broader social integration.

### Findings of the workshops with the academic and administrative staff

The workshops for the academic and administrative staff were held on 29 September 2022 in the FoB. The workshop was for the administrative staff, while the second was for the academic staff. There were at least two representatives from each of the five departments that run education and academic training in the Faculty and the attendance was voluntary. The workshops were facilitated by Associate Professor Gazanfer Kaya from the Department of Sociology at DEU. He moderated the workshops with a presentation on his own field research on refugees in İzmir. His presentation included basic explanatory definitions of key concepts such as migrant, refugee, international protection, and temporary protection. The presentation focused specifically on Syrians in İzmir who hold temporary protection status. The participants were informed that Syrians, particularly those living in districts such as Altındağ, Torbalı and Basmane in İzmir, have become victims of urban poverty. It was reported that the school enrollment rate for Syrians was 34 percent at the high school level and 4 percent at the university level in 2019. According to Kaya,

the reasons for their limited participation in education are language barriers, disadvantaged economic position, and the need to be involved early in the labor market, as well as the perceived negative perceptions against refugees in the media (Kaya, 2022).

It is reported by the UNHCR that the administrative staff were satisfied that they had been given a voice within the Faculty to express their perceptions and exchange ideas about the refugee groups. The participants draw attention to the problems including the language barriers and the non-standardized policies for the admission of refugee students in HEIs. It is underlined that a more intensive discussion on refugee students in higher education was held with academic staff. The main challenges concerning refugee students, as identified by the academic staff, can be summarized as in the following paragraph.

English-medium instruction appeared to enhance refugee students' interaction with colleagues and faculty compared to Turkish-medium contexts. Nevertheless, the reluctance of refugee students to take part in social activities has made their participation in group work harder, which in turn has resulted in perceived discrimination when they looked for homework partners. According to the academic staff, this situation largely derives from the media framing of refugees and the influence of radical political discourse. Refugee students also intentionally do not participate in the courses on migration to avoid any negative attitudes directed towards them. Although they are academically very successful, they do not want to stay in Türkiye for the long term, and instead they look for postgraduate research opportunities abroad.

Furthermore, most of those students pay high tuition fees unless they are awarded scholarships, and they also face difficulties in finding accommodation and employment. In addition, they struggle with psychosocial health problems, which further complicates their integration into academic and social life. Finally, refugee students lack sufficient information about the facilities provided by the public and private sectors, which restricts their ability to benefit from such resources.

The workshop produced a suggestion by the academic staff to establish a special commission for refugee students to provide university-led support in both academic and daily issues. The authors of this paper observe that this suggestion was put into practice through the formation of the International Student Coordination Office by DEU Rectorate in 2024 to support academic and personal development processes of international students and to facilitate their integration to the university and the country.

The workshop with academic staff indicated that the academic success of refugee students may contribute to more positive perceptions. Compared to the administrative staff, the academic staff was found to be more empathetic and sensitive towards the refugee students. The administrative staff's prejudice against the existence of refugees in Türkiye

was clear in their statements. In addition to factors such as family, ideology, and personal experience, the level of education may also play a role in the differences between the perceptions of the two groups in this case.

The workshop concluded that the process of social integration of different groups is not unilateral and that both host communities and newcomers have a role to play. This rule also applies to the integration of refugee students at DEU. Whether academic or administrative staff, informing all staff interacting with all international students about the legal status and rights of refugee students will help to overcome their prejudices against this group. Moreover, such interactive meetings are important to ensure that the proposals they formulate are considered and communicated to the competent authorities. By offering the parties the opportunity to get to know each other and develop a culture of co-existence, this group, which is likely to remain in Türkiye, will also have more and easier access to employment opportunities as well as health and social care.

### Findings of the Seminar Entitled “False Facts on Refugees in Türkiye”

The Seminar entitled “False Facts on Refugees in Türkiye” was held on October 7, 2022, at the FoB with 51 participants who are lecturers and students from different departments. The seminar was organized to address common misconceptions about refugees in Türkiye. Upon the invitation of the UNHCR İzmir Office, the seminar was initiated by an expert from the Presidency of Migration Management. The expert primarily addressed questions related to Syrians with temporary protection status in Türkiye, including topics such as their participation in the labor market, crime statistics, access to citizenship, and educational rights.

The second part of the seminar included presentations by two academic members of the project team. It is stated that according to the UNHCR 2019 data, 1 percent of the world’s population is displaced. As of the end of 2021, there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced persons, 27.1 million refugees, 53.2 million internally displaced persons, and 4.6 million asylum seekers in the world. The participants were later informed about international refugee rights, the Law of Foreigners and International Protection, temporary protection status, and the nationalities of refugees in Türkiye. The seminar also underlined that primary sources of information about refugees were newspapers, television channels, and social media. However, the accurate and reliable information should be obtained from official sources such as UNHCR, relevant public institutions, non-governmental organizations working in close collaboration with the UN, and academic publications.

The UNHCR report indicated that the seminar provided information on the roles of the host community and refugees to prevent social tensions and promote social

integration in society. Some students from the host community shared their negative perceptions of Syrians and Afghans in Türkiye. They stated that refugees would take their jobs and limit their opportunities. It was reported that those students did not want to hear or see any Syrian words in Türkiye. The statements below by a student who works in the textile sector illustrate the role of communication and obtaining objective information:

“Afghans are not as civil as we are. My Turkish friends hate them and influence me to have negative perceptions of them. But after this seminar, my point of view has changed. They come from a different culture, a country in conflict. We need to help each other.”

This seminar, which focused on misconceptions about refugees in Türkiye and in particular on the disinformation spread by social media, is regarded as one of the most influential activities of Leave No One Behind Project. The main reason was to raise awareness among participants of the misconceptions they had developed, as regards persons who are under temporary protection in Türkiye. As can be seen from the above quote, the participants gave positive feedback of this type. Another recommendation of this study on achieving social inclusion is therefore to promote awareness-raising sessions on the importance of access to accurate information from reliable sources and on how misinformation spread by social media can affect our perception of different groups in society.

### Findings of the ICF

The ICF was organized on October 14, 2022 at DEU FoB. The project coordinators and the two partners, consisting of the UNHCR İzmir Office Representative in charge of the Leave No One Behind Project and the DEU PlatformUp, invited DEU university students to the ICF by using their networks. The snowball effect provided broad participation in the one-day-long fair with 257 total participants, including 137 women and 120 men, meeting in the faculty garden for various cultural activities. The nationality, gender, and number of participants were as follows: Turkish (107 women and 87 men), Kazakh (eight women and seven men), Russian (two women), Italian (one woman), Syrian (four men), Uzbek (one woman and three men), Palestinian (one man), Egyptian (one man), Turkmen (three women and five men), Kyrgyz (two women and two men), Iranian (four women), Moroccan (two women), Kenyan (one man), Indonesian (one man), Azerbaijani (six women and eight men), UK (Wales) (one woman).

An open call to the host community, students, and international students at DEU for the ICF provided a wide scope of cultural exchanges not only between the host community and refugee or international students but also between the refugee students and international students. At the fair, the students were welcomed to open a stand to represent their countries and introduce their countries' cuisine, culture, traditional clothes, ethnic

music, photos of important figures, and natural landmarks.

The students, their family members, and the academic and administrative staff of the FoB visited 11 stands of different nations and met with 32 foreign students representing their countries. Those representative students informed the visitors about the different cultural elements of their nations. The visitors tasted different drinks and food and communicated with representative students. Visitors appeared curious about learning new things, and students at the stands were very happy to introduce their nations. The Fair was visited by the Rector of DEU and students expressed appreciation to UNHCR and DEU for this event. It was observed that the refugee students needed to express themselves, their problems, and their expectations. A Syrian student expressed his opinions with the words in the following: “This fair was very beautiful, and we want to participate in new activities like this.” In addition to that, Iranian students shared their opinions as follows: “We felt so happy to represent our culture here. We also had the chance to express our feelings with everyone on women’s rights in Iran.” Accordingly, the fair has been a catalyst for the socialization of refugee students.

We observed that the Turkish students who had questioned the existence of refugees in Türkiye in the seminar titled “False Facts on Refugees in Türkiye” enjoyed the ICF and danced with their refugee friends at the end of the day without any prejudices. The fair produced positive results in eliminating negative standpoints, especially among students. Therefore, the beneficiaries of the fair were mainly DEU students, and these findings suggest that such activities should be sustained on campus and extended through community-facing events.

In conclusion, the ICF plays an important role in the social integration process of all international and refugee students. This is an event in which students interact directly and experience first-hand the traditions and cultures of other countries through country-specific stands. Given that education is one of the most important areas for ensuring social inclusion, encouraging such events in HEIs could be a major step toward broadening its impact across society, enabling all international students, regardless of their legal status, university staff and citizens of the country concerned to develop mutual recognition and tolerance.

### Findings of the Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions were conducted by the UNHCR on October 21, 2022, at the DEU FoB. The participants were drawn from two distinct sample groups of students enrolled at the university, consisting of seven local students and 11 refugee students. The low attendance from local students was attributed to scheduling conflicts with their coursework. The refugee participants were primarily from Syria, with one participant from Iran. The UNHCR dataset indicated that the female participants were more

hesitant to contribute to the discussions. Detailed participant demographics for both groups are presented in Table 3, revealing that local participants were younger on average than refugee participants.

**Table 3.** Demographic profile of the focus group participants

	Number	Gender	Age	Nationality
<b>Local students</b>	Seven	Four women Three men	18-22	Seven Turkish
<b>Refugee students</b>	11	Four women Seven men	20-34	10 Syrian Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection One Iranian International Protection Applicant

**Source:** The table is prepared by the authors.

The focus group discussions by UNHCR were effective in encouraging refugee students to share their experiences in an open and sincere atmosphere. The primary issue raised by participants was the language barrier. Most refugee students reported having to acquire Turkish through informal and non-systematic means. As a result, they were unable to understand the jokes, humor, and colloquialisms used by their local peers. This communication gap led to feelings of discrimination from host students and a gradual loss of confidence in their ability to interact, ultimately limiting their social integration into university life.

The refugee students largely expressed frustration with the common misconception that they had been enrolled at the university without an entrance examination. They emphasized that they had worked diligently to pass the university entrance exam, which they noted was both challenging and expensive. While most of the participants had been studying law or engineering in their home countries, they were unable to obtain a certificate of equivalence to continue their studies in Türkiye. Consequently, they were older than the average university student, having lost several years in the process of re-taking the entrance exam. This age gap between Turkish and refugee students also contributed to communication difficulties.

The UNHCR report on refugee students indicated that cultural differences and differing social norms were significant factors affecting communication and social integration. Participants felt obligated to decline invitations to social events, such as those at bars or nightclubs, as these activities did not align with their cultural or religious values. This refusal to engage in certain social activities, however, reinforced communication barriers and hindered social integration with their local peers.

Participants also reported instances of perceived discrimination within the academic setting. A few students reported experiencing inappropriate or discriminatory remarks

from professors regarding their nationality, which they found deeply humiliating. This led some students to conceal their true nationality, identifying as being from other countries to avoid stigma. In contrast, other students expressed appreciation for classmates who intervened and defended them against offensive jokes. One respondent noted that, despite not experiencing what they would consider as exclusionary attitudes and/or practices, refugee students must be more proactive to achieve better integration.

A significant finding from the focus group with refugees was the complex trade-off between social integration and cultural identity. One refugee student, who had successfully established social ties with Turkish students, expressed the view that this success required him to adapt certain cultural practices. He asserted that integration should not necessitate the abandonment of one's identity; however, he had emotional difficulty in navigating between his Turkish and Syrian peer groups.

When it comes to the focus of the discussions with Turkish students, the main debate centered on their social experiences outside the university. A key finding was their lack of awareness regarding the temporary protection status of their foreign friends. While participants reported having numerous foreign acquaintances, few Turkish students interacted with refugee students. Turkish students speculated that refugee students are hesitant to share details about their legal status in Türkiye. Furthermore, the limited interaction between these groups was attributed to the fact that refugee students are predominantly enrolled in different faculties, such as the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Science, which restricts their opportunities for social integration.

The initial influx of Syrians into Türkiye coincided with the elementary school years of the Turkish students who participated in this study. Many of them shared the same school environment as the Syrian students and reported negative experiences, including social polarization and aggression. This negative perception persists today, not specifically toward refugee university students but toward refugees they encounter in their daily lives. Some Turkish students shared lingering negative perceptions of refugees, including assumptions about aggression and inappropriate behavior. These views appeared driven more by societal stereotypes than by direct contact with refugee university students. Participants also expressed stereotypical views about refugees' appearance, suggesting they could be easily identified based on generalized physical traits.

A key finding was the nuance in the perceptions of participants that, while they held negative views of refugees broadly, they believed that those who choose to live in Türkiye permanently tend to achieve successful integration and positive civic outcomes. This more favorable view was supported by their specific experiences with refugee university students, as participants reported a complete absence of intergroup aggression on campus.

**Table 4.** Key findings of the FGDs

Local students	Refugee students
Limited Interaction with Refugees	Language Barrier and Communication Gap
Persistent Negative Stereotypes about refugees outside academia	Misconceptions about University Admission
Beliefs about Refugee Admission	Academic and Age Disparities
Nuanced Perceptions of Integration	Cultural and Moral Differences
	Experiences with Perceived Discrimination
	The Cost of Integration

**Source:** The table is prepared by the authors.

The focus group discussions held in two separate meetings with Turkish and refugee students were important to identify the group's attitudes toward each other and toward society in general. In this context, this study suggests that Turkish language programs for refugee students could be offered to help them overcome language barriers and socially inclusive events such as the ICF could be organized on a regular basis, thus reducing the potential social integration costs for such students. Meanwhile, the legal status of these students can be clarified by educating Turkish students on the legal system in Türkiye, thereby removing the misperceptions about the university admissions system. These actions by HEIs can help to initiate social integration at campus level and, through a snowball effect, contribute to a positive societal change at community level in the medium and long term.

## Conclusion

The Europeanization and internationalization of higher education policies in Türkiye have brought European and international norms to the social and educational spheres. The Bologna process, which started with the EU candidacy status granted in 1999 and the introduction of the UN SDGs, particularly within education, redefined the necessary steps to be taken within the Turkish educational system. These two processes have also integrated Turkish academia and students into broader international academic norms and networks. The mass migration of people from Syria to Türkiye, either as a transit or a destination country, has provided an important test case for this renewed educational landscape. More than 3 million Syrians were granted temporary protection, enabling the Syrian children to benefit from the state-led educational institutions. The higher education system has also integrated refugee students into higher education alongside other international students. This coincided with the introduction of an internationalization strategy by the CoHE at HEIs.

The migration literature in Türkiye focused on the rights, responsibilities and policies since the 2010s. One of those mentioned important dimensions has included the best practices in the educational sphere. Various case studies, fieldwork, and project-based research papers have put forward the local, regional and cultural characteristics of the cities where the HEIs are located. Thus, the social integration of refugee students has also been under the impact of local, campus-wide and city life realities changing from the south-eastern to the western regions, from the northern to the southern regions of Türkiye. This research was conducted to support the social integration of refugee students into DEU campus life and ultimately the socio-economic life in İzmir. Activities carried out under the project ‘Leave No One Behind’ helped to reduce the prejudices between the local and refugee students. The project activities revealed the socio-cultural similarities between the host society and refugees. The participants shared common memories after socialization and acknowledging the benefits of diversity during project activities. They gained understanding and empathy for each other by spending time together. In conclusion, this study suggests that academic or campus-based activities that encourage refugee students to integrate into HEIs may contribute to overcoming prejudices and promoting social harmony through the snowball effect.

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