Turkish University Students' Perceptions towards Their Syrian Classmates

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Abstract

The war in Syria is five years old now. This long-lasting phenomenon has caused a historic case of mass forced migration. That is, millions of Syrians have been forced to displace and escape from the war in Syria to several transnational destinations. Hosting nearly three millions of Syrians, Turkey is a destination to which the highest number of Syrians have moved. To host her guests well, Turkey has been providing the Syrians in Turkey with several supports. Among the supports for the Syrian guests, there comes the access to higher education in Turkey. In this sense, the Turkish Government's several legislative regulations have enabled 5560 Syrians to study at universities in Turkey. Unlike conventional migration studies that just focus on migrants' adaptation to their new lives, this study examines the perceptions of non-immigrants who are local Turkish citizens. Specifically, this study explores the perceptions of Turkish university students towards their Syrian classmates. The data of this qualitative inquiry were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by content analysis technique. The findings reveal that most participants have serious concerns about Syrians' access to universities in Turkey. Nevertheless, they surprisingly support their Syrian classmates' participation in their classrooms.

Introduction

Since the crisis in Syria began, it has always been on the priority agenda of neighboring Turkey. Turkey exhibited a hospitable image and accepted millions of Syrians who fled the war in Syria to the Turkish territory. Recent research (Erdoğan, 2014a; Gürsul, Terek Ünal, Aktürk, & Şahin, 2016) indicates that even if the war in Syria comes to an end, the Syrian guests[2] have the tendency of continuing their residence in Turkey. This confirms the idea that the crisis was an "unprecedented case" and seems to be "a long-term issue" (İçduygu, 2015, p. 12). As it is highly probable that this long-term crisis will result in 'long-term residence' of the Syrian guests, Turkey seems to be doing her best to integrate the Syrian guests into society by developing and implementing several policies.

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[2] As the Syrians in Turkey are under temporary protection, they are officially called 'guests' rather than 'migrants' or 'refugees' (Aras-Gökalp & Mencütek, 2015; İçduygu, 2015).

Among the governmental supports for the Syrian guests, there comes the access to higher education in Turkey. In this sense, the guests were provided with the chance of beginning or continuing their higher education in Turkey. For this, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), which co-ordinates the universities in Turkey, has taken several steps.

The first step was taken by the CoHE on 3 September 2012. On that date, the CoHE asked seven universities in the south of Turkey to receive the Syrian migrants in Turkey as guest students (or non-degree students) in the 2012-13 academic year. A year later, on 4 September 2013, the CoHE announced that the Syrians who enrolled in the universities in Turkey according to the previously specified criteria by the CoHE, would not need to pay tuition fees. It was added that their tuition fees would be covered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (PTARC). Lastly, on 9 October 2013, the CoHE announced that the Turkish, Syrian and Egyptian students who could officially prove their previous undergraduate or graduate level of study in a university in Syria or Egypt (with a transcript etc.) could apply to universities in Turkey for transfer and continue their higher education in Turkey. The maximum quota of a department for this transfer was determined as 10% of that department's general quota for Turkish students. In the same announcement, it was also noted that ones who could not officially prove their studentship in Syria and Egypt could study at previously announced seven universities in the south of Turkey as guest students (Gümüş, 2016; Seydi, 2014).

It is obvious that the Turkish government had a positive look at the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey. Were these educational steps of the government useful? The available number of the Syrian university students in Turkey indicates that this governmental policies definitely worked. Accordingly, the number of the Syrian university students in Turkey was just 455 in 2010 (Çetinsaya, 2014), before the Syrian civil war. Whereas, this number reached at 1784 in 2014 and with more than a two-fold increase, it has recently reached at 5560 in 2015 (CoHE, 2015). It could be inferred from these numbers that Syrian guests in Turkey 'welcomed this opportunity'.

Providing the Syrian guests in Turkey with the access to higher education can be regarded as one of the significant integration policies implemented by the Turkish government. This governmental policy has been in place for more than three years. This policy should be discussed in detail so as to improve it and draw a better trajectory of it. For this, exploring not only the guests' perceptions towards the policy, but also the local people's could be of vital value.

Although revealing the Syrians' perceptions towards the access to higher education in Turkey is not in the scope of this study, it can be noted that the Syrians who currently study at Turkish universities express their happiness and appreciation (Hürriyet, 2013). Besides, Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King (2014) met Syrian university students in Turkey and they "conveyed a generally positive outlook and were hopeful about their futures" (p. 33). This implies that Syrian students are pleased with being provided with this opportunity. What about the Turkish students' opinions on the Syrian guests' access to higher education in Turkey? This study seeks for the answer/s of this question.

Finding out the answer/s of this question could be of importance. This is because integration is "the practice of uniting people" (Merriam Webster, 2015b). Integrating the Syrian guests into the Turkish society could be regarded as uniting the Syrians and the Turkish. Therefore, integration would be easiest if two sides can tolerantly approach to each other. In this sense, knowing the perceptions of 'hosts' can contribute to the integration of the 'guests'. And, being aware of the perceptions of the Turkish students, who are classmates with the Syrian guests at universities in Turkey, towards the Syrian guests can facilitate the integration of the guests into the universities in Turkey and the achievement of the governmental higher education policy for the Syrians in Turkey. For this reason, unlike the conventional migration studies which deal with just migrants' experiences, this study will focus on non-immigrants who are local university students in Turkey. Specifically, this study aims to reveal the in-depth experiences and perceptions of the Turkish university students about being classmates of Syrian students who fled the war in Syria and currently continue their higher education at a university in Turkey.

Background of the Study

In this part, the background of the study is provided under four subheadings. First, the concept of migration is discussed. This discussion includes lexical and academic definitions of the concept. Upon defining it, the reasons why people migrate from a place to another are questioned. Secondly, the concept of forced migration is discussed in detail. In this discussion, not only the definition of the concept, but also the reasons why people are forced to migrate and historic cases of forced migration are touched upon. Thirdly, the Syrian crisis, which has led to considerable forced migration recently, is discussed. Finally, neighboring to Syria, Turkey's political attitudes towards the crisis in Syria and the migration waves from Syria to Turkey are referred in an elaborative way.

Migration

Migration is at the same age with the human being. That is, as the theological doctrines of the monotheistic religions agree and embrace, Adam -the first human- was displaced from the heaven to the earth as a result of his disobedience to God. This displacement can be regarded as the first example of an individual's movement from a place to another. Nevertheless, migration did not come to an end with Adam's case. Since then, Adam's descendants have migrated on the earth for different reasons and at different places and times.

A good starting point to discuss the concept of migration, which has been a part of the human since his 'being', can be to define what it exactly is. Lexically, it is simply defined as "the act or an instance of moving from one place to another" (Merriam Webster, 2015a). However, academically speaking, no one definition of the term that is agreed by all the researchers exists. This could be because migration is regarded as a 'multidisciplinary' concept. In other words, it is in the areas of interest of several disciplines including anthropology, demography, political science, history and economics (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000; Oderth, 2002).

Despite the diversity of its definitions, several researchers define migration in similar ways. To exemplify, Martin and Zurcher (2008, p. 3) and Vargas-Lundiu, Lanly, Villarreal, and Osorio (2008, p. 8) define migration as "movement or displacement of people from one place to another". On the other hand, Kearney (1996) relates it to a demographic term 'population' and states that migration is the "movement of population" (p. 374). Agreeing with this definition, Lee (1996) underlines the duration of this movement and indicates that migration is a "temporary or permanent movement of population" (p. 16).

Forced Migration

Upon mentioning what migration is, providing the types of migration could be of importance to comprehend the ways people displace from a place to another. Nevertheless, it should be noted first and foremost that there is no one list of migration types that is agreed by all the researchers. Researchers discuss the types of migration from different perspectives. To illustrate, Hanlon and Vicino (2014) mention internal and external migration. Accordingly, the former is inside the national borders of a country, while the latter is an international movement from a country to another. On the other hand, Özyakışır (2013) underscores the un/willingness of the migrant. As he notes, an act of a movement in which an individual can voluntarily choose his/her destination is an example of voluntary migration. As an example of voluntary migration, he provides a retiree's case in which the retired moves to a more peaceful place to live in his/her retirement years. As for forced migration, he means the displacements of people who are made to move from a place to another by external factors including climate changes, poverty and wars.

Beside the types of migration, the reasons why people migrate are worth mentioning. Research (Murat & Taşkesenlioğlu, 2009; Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan, 2011; Özyakışır, 2013) indicates that people move from one place to another for economic, socio-cultural, political, family, religious and/or natural reasons. Throughout the history, human beings have migrated or have been made to migrate for these reasons. For example, Noah, the prophet, migrated to escape from the floods thousands of years ago (Hanlon & Vicino, 2014). Likewise, Europeans migrated to the US for a 'better life' more than a century ago (Hoerder & Knauf, 1992) and the Turks moved to Germany to work in German factories more than half a century ago (Sowell, 1996).

Among the types of migration provided above, the cases of forced migration have always taken place in the history at different places and times. In these cases, the sufferers are "those who are forced to leave their homes due to events beyond their immediate control" (World Disasters Report, 2012, p. 14). For instance, in the fourth century, the Huns moved to the West, where Germanic tribes lived, to escape from the reign of the Chinese. This made peoples of the Germanic tribes to find another place to live and they finally moved into Europe (Kınık, 2010). Similarly, after the great geographical discoveries, about twenty millions of African slaves were made to move to America and work there (Oderth, 2002). Centuries after, following the partition of India in 1947, nearly fifteen millions of Hindus and Muslims were displaced (Giddens, 2010).

The Syrian Crisis: The Current Case of Forced Migration

Returning to the present day, forced migration is still on the agenda of the world. This is because a considerable amount of people - over 72 millions - have currently been the sufferers of forced migration around the world. This means "more than one in every 100 of the world citizens are forced migrants today" (World Disasters Report, 2012, p. 15).

As an example of recent forced migration cases, one of the largest mass migration began in 2011 in the Middle East. That year, the Syrians' opposition to the Bashar Assad regime started across the country. Since then, this struggle has never come to an end and it has inevitably evolved into a nationwide internal war which still continues. Not surprisingly, this internal war has led to both internal and external displacements of millions of people.

As the official numbers of the United Nations Refugee Agency (2016) indicate, inside Syria, 13.5 millions of Syrians have been forced to displace. Beside this, with the Syrian case, the world has currently been facing a historic case of 'external forced migration'. Up to now, 4.837.572 Syrians have escaped from the war in Syria to several transnational destinations. Accordingly, in Turkey, 2.749.140; in Lebanon, 1.055.984; in Jordan, 638.633; in Iraq, 246.123; in Egypt, 119.665 and in North Africa, 28.027 Syrian forced migrants survive (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2016).

Turkey: The Most Popular Destination for Syrian Forced Migrants

As the numerical distribution of the Syrian external migrants by country indicates, Turkey is a destination to which the highest number of Syrians have moved. Research conducted with the Syrian participants in Turkey reports that there are several reasons for this. Accordingly, the Syrians have the belief that Turkey is easier to reach than other countries, there are good opportunities in Turkey, they have trust for Turkey and they have religious reasons to live in Turkey (AFAD, 2013). Having provided the reasons for the Syrians' movement to Turkey, for a mutual understanding of this ongoing mass migration process from Syria to Turkey, it would be of value to take not only the migrants', but also the host people's perspectives.

Turkey's policy towards the Syrian crisis have not been stable since it began in 2011. This policy can be analyzed through three time periods. In the first period, Turkey preferred using diplomatic channels. Accordingly, Turkey tried to communicate with the Bashar Assad regime and persuade Assad to apply democratic reforms in Syria. When Turkey couldn't succeed it, she moved to another period. In the second period, Turkey faced with the crisis in Syria. In this face-off, she declared her view that the ruling people in Syria, including Assad, should be changed. With this idea, Turkey supported the anti-regime powers in Syria. In the last period, Turkey had a defensive position. In this period, she took several precautions to protect the Turkish territory and sought for the support of international organizations including NATO (Ananicz, 2014).

Having touched upon the chronological overview of the Turkish foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis, Turkey's policy towards the Syrian migrants is worth mentioning. First and foremost, it should be noted that -unlike her foreign policy- Turkey had a stable policy towards receiving the migrants from Syria. Accordingly, Turkey has been implementing an "open door policy" since the very beginning of the migration waves she received from Syria (Aras-Gökalp & Mencütek, 2015, p. 194; Özden, 2013, p. 5). With this policy, the Turkish border has been 'wide open' to any Syrians who want to cross it.

Diplomatically, the Turkish government refers to the Syrians in Turkey as 'guests' rather than 'refugees' (Aras-Gökalp & Mencütek, 2015). However, despite being not legitimized as refugees, the Syrian guests in Turkey have been provided with not only the open door policy, but also the principles of "temporary protection, non-refoulement (no forcible returns) and humanitarian assistance" (İçduygu, 2015, p. 8). Beyond any doubt, achieving these principles has placed such a burden on the Turkish government that the amount spent on the expenses of the Syrians in Turkey has reached at 7.6 billions of American dollars (Haberturk, 2015). It was spent on several services for the Syrian guests including humanitarian assistance, tent cities, health and education supports.

Method

In this part, detailed information about the methodological processes of the study is provided. First, how and why the research design, setting, participants and data collection instrument are determined and utilized is mentioned. In addition, the common characteristics of the participants, the process of selecting the participants and the way the data collection procedure proceeded are presented in detail. Last, the considerations for validity and reliability of the data and ethics before, during and after the study are provided.

Research Design

This study is a study of human perceptions and experiences. That is, the researcher had a purpose of exploring the participants' perceptions and experiences about an ongoing process in their lives. The study was grounded on a qualitative research design. The main reason for this preference was tightly related to the researcher's above-mentioned purpose. The researcher aimed to 'touch upon' the social, cultural and academic experiences of the participants in their relationships with their Syrian classmates (Merriam, 1998).

Specifically speaking, the researcher struggled to "describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 27). That is why he searched for the meanings in the participants' experiences rather than the numerical measurements (Moustakas, 1994). Thus the researcher's goal was to come up with experiences of a small group of participants, not generalizable and statistical findings.

Based upon the qualitative research design, the researcher adopted phenomenological research method. In this method, the main goal "is to describe a 'lived experience' of a phenomenon" (Waters, 2016, para. 1). The researcher had the concern of understanding the phenomenon from the eyes of the participants (Welman & Kruger, 1999). In the current study, Syrian guests' access to higher education in Turkey as a result of a governmental policy is regarded as a socio-educational phenomenon. The local Turkish university students, one of the parties influenced by this phenomenon, are the ones whose lived experiences would enable the researcher to understand the phenomenon from a different perspective.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at a university in the Marmara Region, Turkey. This university was chosen as the research setting for several reasons.

First of all, it is a 'state' university. This would make the findings of the study more distinctive. One rationale for this assumption is that Syrians who have a 'financial power' to be able to pay tuition fees at a foundation university (equivalent to private university in Turkey) could already continue their higher education there without any financial supports of the government. Another rationale for this assumption is that getting into a state university in Turkey is more challenging than getting into a foundation university. Universities in Turkey accept students by a central test that is given once a year. The minimum score required for being accepted to a program at a state university is often higher than that of the same program at a foundation university. In this sense, the participants' perceptions towards the Syrians at a state university were thought to be unique by the researcher.

In the meantime, the acceptance procedure of international students to the universities in Turkey should briefly be mentioned. Accordingly, like the university entrance test for the Turkish citizens, a central test was given to the international candidates up to 2011. Nevertheless, the CoHE decided to abolish this exam in 2010. From that day forward, within the knowledge of the CoHE, universities determine quota and criteria for prospective international students and may give written tests to them. This procedure is also valid for the Syrians. However, as the number of the Syrians in Turkey is quite higher than the number of the people of other nationalities, applications to universities by the Syrians can be higher than those of the candidates of other nationalities. In any case, getting into a university in Turkey could be regarded as more competitive for Turkish citizens as more than two million Turkish citizens take the university entrance test to get into a university in Turkey.

Correspondingly, the research setting in this study is regarded as a 'successful university' as it can take place on the international rankings of top universities in the world and the minimum test scores required for the acceptance to its programs are higher than those of most state universities in Turkey. Therefore, the researcher had the assumption that including participants from this university in the study would reveal if the participants had the opinion that Syrian migrants' access to their class is 'unfair' to them or not.

Secondly, the research setting was convenient for the researcher as he found a gatekeeper who obtained connection with the head of the department, faculty members and participants. As related literature and previous research experiences indicate, in qualitative fieldwork, gatekeepers are very important mediators who facilitate a researcher's gaining access to the field (Okumuş, Altınay, & Roper, 2007; Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003; Gummesson, 2000; Lee, 1993). Therefore, the researcher desired to 'make use of this opportunity'.

Research Participants

In this part, the participants' common characteristics and selection process of the participants is provided in detail.

The Participants' Common Characteristics

This study has participants of ten undergraduate students who have several common characteristics. First, the participants were Turkish citizens who got into the state university in the 2014-15 academic year. They took the university entrance test and ranked in the group of top one hundred thousand students among over two million test takers; and as a result, could enroll in this well-known state university in Turkey. Second, the university required them to successfully complete a one-year intensive English language program at the university before they started their four-year undergraduate program. This program would last for two semesters from September to July. When they participated in this study, the participants had just successfully completed this English program. Third, the participants studied in this English language program in different classes with the same curriculum. Last, all the participants' classes included Syrian students. So that, the participants had Syrian classmates for two academic semesters. Table 1 provides the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. The Overview of the Participants' Demographic and Academic Characteristics

Participant	Class	Sex	Age	Department	Duration of Fellowship with Syrian Classmates (semester)
1	A	M	18	Social	2
2	A	F	20	Sciences	2
3	B	M	18	Sciences	2
4	B	F	18	Social	2
5	C	M	19	Sciences	2
6	C	F	21	Social	2
7	D	M	20	Social	2
8	D	F	18	Sciences	2
9	E	M	18	Sciences	2
10	E	F	19	Social	2

As Table 1 indicates, all the participants had Syrian classmates for two academic semesters. For the sake of the diversity of the participants, they were selected from five different classrooms each of which included three Syrian students. To minimize the gender bias, the participants were equally selected from both genders. Next, to diverse the departments of the participants, half of the participants were selected from the ones enrolled in a program within Social Science Disciplines and the other half is selected from the Sciences. Lastly, the average age of the participants is 18,9 and they had just completed their first year at university.

The Selection Process of the Participants

In order to reach the participants, the researcher pursued several steps of a plan. First of all, the researcher met the gatekeeper from the university and informed her about his research design. The gatekeeper had been teaching at that university for twenty years. She had several administrative duties as well. This let her have a wide web of human connections at the university. At the end of this conversation, the researcher and the gatekeeper agreed that the English Language Preparatory Department would be a good research setting for this study. This is because the department had Syrian students for two semesters and these students were divided into different classes. This was ideal for the researcher as he was searching for participants who had similar academic characteristics in different classrooms and had Syrian classmates for two semesters. The gatekeeper promised the researcher to ask for an appointment from the head of the English Language Preparatory Department.

Next, the researcher informed the head of the department about the study. The head stated that five classes at her department included Syrian students at that time. She advised that the lecturers of these classes could be 'better gatekeepers' as they were inside the classrooms and knew more about the classes. She assured that she would help the researcher conduct this study at the department and promised the researcher to call him later to let him meet the lecturers of these five classes. A week later, the head called and invited the researcher to meet five lecturers who taught five different classes. The researcher met the lecturers at the university and informed them about the research. The lecturers taught these classes for 10-15 hours per week. They knew the classroom environment very well and they agreed that their classrooms would be ideal source of data for the researcher. They promised the researcher that they would make announcements about the study in the class for a couple of times. So that everybody would learn about the study.

In the following week, the head called the researcher and asked him to go to the department and wait in the meeting room at the department. The lecturers announced this and voluntary students came to the researcher and the researcher explained them about the details of the research. In total, thirty eight students contacted the researcher. The researcher noted down the volunteers' names and randomly selected two students from each class. Besides, two more students were chosen for the pilot study. In order to keep diversity, the participants were selected from different departments and among both females and males.

Data Collection Instrument

The researcher aimed at exploring the participants' perspectives towards their Syrian classmates' access to their classrooms and their experiences with those Syrian fellows. In phenomenological research analysis, researchers "obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, the researcher decided to collect data by means of qualitative interviewing as it could be a good way to explore the participants' perceptions and feelings. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

In line with the aim of the study and the research questions, the researcher reviewed the related literature and prepared the first draft of the interview questions. Then the researcher contacted two other researchers who had qualitative interviewing experiences in their doctoral dissertations. Accordingly, the literature review and the experts' opinions enabled the researcher to come up with interview questions which would let him reveal the participants' opinions about being classmates with Syrians and their experiences with them. After that, the researcher contacted two participants (one male and one female) and conducted a pilot study to check the efficiency and clarity of the interview questions. At the end of this procedure, probe questions that would allow the participants to speak more were added and the final version of the interview questions was obtained.

Data Collection Procedure

The pilot study allowed the researcher to find out the duration of each interview. Accordingly, each interview lasted for about thirty minutes. With this in mind, the researcher could arrange the interview program. The researcher was given an available room to use alone in the department. He called each participant and asked for appointments. In five days, the interviews with all the participants were completed. In the following week, the participants were contacted again and interviewed twice. This second interviews lasted for about ten minutes and the researcher asked the participants to check their previous interviews' notes which were transcribed on the computer by the researcher.

Data Analysis

In the analysis of this phenomenological research, the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). This analysis was implemented through several steps.

First, the researcher transcribed the data and wrote them on the computer. Secondly, he read the transcriptions for two times to determine the keywords that could be units of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Thirdly, the units of meaning were clustered. Next, these clusters enabled the researcher to obtain central themes (Hycner, 1999).

Consideration for the Maximum Validity and Reliability of the Data

In order to ensure the maximum validity and reliability of the data, several steps were followed by the researcher. First, to avoid any conflict of interests, participants were chosen among the students whom the researcher had never met before. Second, the researcher took some field notes during and after his visits to the research setting. This allowed the researcher to be familiar with the research setting, names of the people and the parts of the building. Third, the researcher went to the second interviews with the previous interviews' notes typed on computer and asked each participant to check whether s/he agreed on the answers s/he had given to the researcher in the previous interviews. In this way, both the researcher and participants made sure that the data were obtained correctly (Hycner, 1999). Fourth, the handwritten notes taken in the first interviews were destroyed in the second interviews before the eyes of the participants. And, the word document that included the interview notes on the researcher's computer was encrypted by AxCrypt software program to protect the confidentiality of the data and participants. Fifth, at the end of the publication process, the document on the computer will permanently be erased by Eraser 6.0.10 software program.

Ethical Consideration for the Study

As this study was conducted with the participation of human beings, the researcher took maximum ethical precautions to protect the rights of the participants in several ways. First of all, no private information was gathered from the participants. Next, the participants' written consents were obtained by a consent form adapted from Seggie (2007). Beside this, the transcriptions of the interviews were kept on the researcher's computer. Nobody, other than the researcher, could reach them. Finally, regarding that individual ethical precautions taken by the researcher might not be adequate for ensuring complete ethical consideration, the researcher applied to the Ethical Committee for Human Research at Boğaziçi University (INAREK) where the researcher is a PhD. candidate. INAREK provided the researcher with the ethical approval for the study.

Findings

In this part, the findings of the study are presented in three sections. In the first section, the participants' perceptions towards the internationalization of higher education are revealed. In the next section, the participants' perceptions towards the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey are given. And more specifically, the last section provides the participants' perceptions towards their Syrian classmates.

The Perceptions Towards the Internationalization of Higher Education

This section includes the explorations about the participants' perspectives towards a broad topic. Accordingly, whether the participants have the belief that higher education should be 'internationalized' is revealed here. This section will enable us to find out if the participants are for or against international students' access to the higher education system in Turkey. As the concept of internationalization of higher education is complicated enough (Knight, 2015); in this study, it is simply referred as a university with international students. In this way, whether the participants are un/sympathetic towards international students at universities in Turkey would be explored. The findings of this section are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Perceptions Towards Internationalization of Higher Education

Main Theme	Unit of Meaning
Economic contribution	Tuition fee
Cultural contribution	New culture
Other	Overseas friendship & Practicing a foreign language

Table 2 indicates that all the participants express positive opinions on the internationalization of higher education in Turkey. In other words, all the participants state that international students' access to the universities in Turkey would contribute to these universities in several ways. According to the participants, one of the prominent ways of international students' contribution to the universities in Turkey is economic. The explanation by one of the participants summarizes the rationale for this belief:

> We are not a rich country. Look at the physical condition of this university! [Pointing at the wall by his finger] It is too old and needs renewal. Most classrooms in the university don't have a computer. Our lunch is not very good, either. This means that our university is not rich enough to offer these services in a better way. If I'm not wrong, international students' tuition fees are higher than those of Turkish citizens. If more international students were here, the university would earn more money. So that, this money could be spent on meeting our needs.

As the answer of the participant indicates, he has the opinion that universities in Turkey do not have enough financial power to provide high quality services. He thinks that high amount of tuition fee obtained from international students could be a practical solution for this problem.

Next, the participants also agree that the existence of international students at universities in Turkey would have cultural influences on their university environment. A participant explains this cultural contribution in detail:

> I am from a small town in Turkey. I have just come to this metropolis for my higher education. Here, I've made friends from different parts of the country. This allowed me to broaden my horizon. I know traditions, cultures and food of different regions in Turkey now. If I had international friends from different countries, I would learn about their hometowns as well. So that, I would be able to have different perspectives.

In addition to the economic and cultural benefits of having international friends, the participants provided other benefits including making international friends, practicing a foreign language and establishing academic networks with their international friends. One of the participants explains the former:

> My dream is traveling around the world. However, it is too expensive. Even if I had money, I wouldn't dare it. I don't know other countries very well. I don't know what to do and where to go there. Yet, if I had friends in other countries, I would visit them. So that, I would have international friendships.

It would be possible to conclude that the participants have positive opinions towards having international fellows in their university. They believe that the presence of international students would help them economically, culturally and socially.

The Perceptions Towards Syrians' Access to Higher Education in Turkey

In this section, the participants' views on a narrower topic, the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey, are discovered. The participants provide both positive and negative views on this. Table 3 illustrates the summary of these views:

Table 3. Perceptions Towards the Syrians' Access to Higher Education in Turkey

Main Theme	Unit of Meaning
	Unfair
Negative	Decreases job opportunities
	Makes the classes more crowded
Positive	Universal right

Table 3 indicates that the participants have both negative and positive views on the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey. Speaking of the negative ones, it is stated at first that the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey is not fair. One of the participants clarifies it:

Unfortunately, it is unfair! Getting into a university in Turkey is already rather competitive. There is a race among millions of Turkish people to study at a university here. They [Syrian migrants] get into very good universities. I see a lot of Syrians on the campus. Rather than the Syrians, Turkish students should study at these good universities. It is very demoralizing for me. Is it fair?

The participant underlines the competitive university entrance system in Turkey and states that he spent a lot of efforts passing the university entrance test. Thus he advises that all the Syrians who want to study in a university in Turkey should take the same test that the Turkish citizens take.

Agreeing with this, another participant takes a futuristic perspective towards the issue :

The Turkish government allows the Syrians to study at universities here. On one hand, I support this. All the people who live here should be educated. It is a great idea! But, when these Syrians have the same degree with me, they will be rivals for me when seeking for a job after the university. They will have learnt Turkish, they already speak Arabic and most of them speak English. So, when we look for a job, they will most probably be more advantageous than me. This makes me worried.

Next, the participants also state that the class sizes at universities in Turkey are already too high and they worry that the Syrians' participation in these classes might make them more crowded.

Nevertheless, not all the participants think in the same way. One states the reverse:

To be honest, they [Syrian guests] must be at the universities in Turkey. Just go back and look at the Turkish history... Just after the World War II, many illiterate and poor Turkish people went to Germany. They had to do so... There are a lot of Turkish scientists, artists and writers in Germany and Europe now. It is the same. I am sure there must be very hardworking people and people with different intellectual abilities among the Syrians. We should support them. So that, they might join the workforce in Turkey and contribute to our economy.

Compared to and linked with the findings of the previous section, this section made it clearer that although the participants strongly support the increase in the number of international students at universities in Turkey, they have serious concerns about the Syrians' access to higher education in Turkey.

The Perceptions Towards One Year of Fellowship with Syrian Classmates

All the participants of this study had Syrian classmates for two academic semesters which means nearly a year. Therefore, it would be noteworthy to explore the experiences they had with their Syrian classmates throughout this time period and disclose their feelings towards the Syrians participation in their classrooms. The findings of the section are provided in Table 4:

Table 4. Perceptions Towards Syrian Classmates

Theme	Unit of Meaning
Positive	Socio-cultural exchange
	Human duty
Neutral	Nothing special
Negative	None

According to Table 4, the participants have both positive and neutral attitudes towards their Syrian classmates.

Speaking of the positive ones, most participants state that they are very happy with the presence of their Syrian classmates as they can learn a lot from them. One makes it clear:

When I look at them during the class, I get happier. They make our class more international. They are the only international students in our class. Sometimes they tell about what they know and share their academic knowledge that they had in Syria. It is good to know about a country. And, one of the Syrian guys is my close friend. We have the same religious belief, we listen to the same international singers and we like the same meals. I get on well with him. I have to get on well with them as they will not return to Syria and live here with us. Even if they return, I think they won't forget Turkey's help to them.

The participant states that Syrian students make their class more quality and he has a lot in common with his Syrian friend. Another participant agrees with this idea:

I like all the Syrian guys in my class very much. They are very good people. I can easily communicate with them. They always smile. One of them is my close friend. I sometimes meet her out of class hours. We talk about fashion and food. She gave me some traditional Syrian recipes. But, I don't think every Syrian is like the ones in my class. I think I can get on well with them just because they are educated. I mean... I wouldn't get on well with the uneducated ones.

Next, another idea raised by the participants is that the Syrians in their class have experienced a war and helping them is a human duty. One participant explains it:

I am really sorry for my Syrian friends in the class. Once, I spoke to one of them. He said that he lost his uncle and cousins in the war. I was really sorry for him. I would never want to experience the same! I cannot imagine it! These guys experienced very bad things. They do not have a home now. We should help them. I do not have money, I cannot help financially. But, at least I can smile at them whenever I see them. It is a human duty. But, the thing is, sometimes I cannot communicate with them as they don't speak Turkish and I don't speak Arabic. Neither mine or their English is very good.

Another participant reveals neither positive nor negative feelings towards their Syrian classmates:

I didn't notice that they are Syrians for a long time. They wear like us and behave like us. I have never seen their damages or helps to me. Deciding who should be a student here is not my duty. I just come here, listen to my lesson and leave. I don't care who is in the class. Syrian guys are just ones of my classmates.

Discussion and Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored a group of Turkish university students' perceptions towards their Syrian classmates. The findings of the study were three-sided and each side was linked to another in a way from general to the specific. These three complementary aspects of the findings should be discussed briefly.

First of all, the participants' perceptions towards a broad issue, which is the internationalization of higher education, were revealed. The internationalization of higher education has recently been on the agenda of both international (De Wit, 2002; Altbach, 2007, Knight, 2015) and national (Kondakçı, 2011; Erdoğan, 2014a,2014b; Ergin, 2015) researchers. Although it does not have a definition agreed by all the researchers, it can be defined as "internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels" (Knight, 2008, p. 21).

As the definition implies, the internationalization of higher education has a broad coverage including the mobility of international students and academics, international collaborations between higher education institutions and branch campuses. Therefore, in order to make the scope of the concept narrower here, the participants' views on the international students' access to universities in Turkey were questioned. It was found out that the participants were in support of the international students' access to universities in Turkey. This is because they had the belief that if Turkish universities became a destination for international students, both the university and they could make use of it financially and culturally. Speaking of the former, the participants stated that the tuition fees received from the international students might be used for different services of the universities in Turkey. This is in line with the view of an early theoretician about the topic. Accordingly, Knight (1997) had already predicted that internationalization could provide universities with direct institutional income.

Besides, the participants noted that international students might contribute to them culturally. That is, they had the idea that if there were international students on campuses, they could make them friends and learn about their home countries and cultures. This overlaps with what Kondakçı, Broeck, and Yıldırım (2008) found in their study. In that study, the participants comprising of international and local students stated that cultural diversity is essential for making their school more international as cultural learning and understanding appears in the school.

Secondly, from a general to specific manner, the study attempted to explore the participants' perceptions towards the Syrian migrants' access to higher education in Turkey. The participants underlined that the admittance of a great number of Syrians to the universities in Turkey would be unfair to them and decrease their job opportunities in the future. They noted that even if the Syrians take a test and go through an admission procedure to get into a university in Turkey, the admission for the Turkish citizens is more competitive. The same concern was expressed by the participants in Kondakçı et al. (2008). While the participants of that study stated that they were in favor of international diversity at their university, they underscored 'equality' and indicated that everyone at university should make sure no nationality is more advantageous than another.

In addition to the concern for equality, the participants in this study had the belief that most Syrians will permanently live in Turkey. Thus they were worried that the Syrians who have degrees from universities will seek for jobs in Turkey and this will decrease the Turkish citizens' chance of finding a job. In fact, as it can be inferred from Erdoğan (2014a), it is a concern not just specific to the Turkish university students, but to Turkish people in general. This is because Turkish people have the belief that the Syrians will not return to Syria even if the war ends (AFAD, 2014; Gürsul et al., 2016).

And specifically, the participants' perceptions towards their Syrian classmates were disclosed. It is noteworthy that the participants expressed very positive feelings and views about their Syrian classmates. One inference could be that the participants attached importance to their classmates' access to higher education in Turkey. They stated that access to education is a universal right which is noted in universal documents (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). They had the opinion that their classmates should be supported to hold this right. Additionally, the participants agreed with the common belief that being an international student is a difficult process (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Devos, 2003) which includes communicative, academic, social/cultural, psychological, financial and demographic challenges (Özoğlu, Gür, & Coşkun, 2015). In this sense, the participants shared their perspectives that as local students, the more empathy they develop towards their Syrian classmates, the more they enhance the Syrians' adaptability to their classroom and university which confirms the idea in previous research (Kondakçı et al., 2008) that local people can facilitate the migrants' adaptability.

Some participants also stated that supporting the Syrians is not only human, but also diplomatically strategic. That is, the participants believed that if their Syrian classmates would return to Syria in the future, they would play a crucial role in rebuilding the post-war Syria and maintaining good diplomatic relations with Turkey. In this regard, their classmates' access to higher education is important as "education, especially higher education, is often considered as a form of diplomatic investment for future political and economic relations" (Knight, 1997, p. 9).

Suggestions

In the light of the findings, several suggestions could be raised. Firstly, even if the participants had some concerns about the Syrian guests' access to higher education in Turkey, they had generally positive attitudes towards their Syrian classmates whom they already knew and spent time together. Within this context, allowing the local and Syrian students at universities in Turkey to spend time in social, cultural and academic projects, activities, travels and jobs might further develop the already existing harmony between two parties. Next, it was also noted by the participants in this study that even if the participants were willing to communicate with their Syrian classmates, they may not be able to do so as they do not speak each other's mother tongue and their English language level might not be satisfactory for this. So, although governmental and non-governmental organizations have been providing the Syrians in Turkey with the opportunities of learning Turkish language, similar opportunities which are in the easy access of the Syrian university students should be increased. Last, for a mutual understanding, more research which aims at exploring the perceptions of the Syrian guests in Turkey , e.g. Erdoğan (2014b), should be conducted as well.

Limitations

This study has two main limitations. First, it was conducted with a group of participants including ten people. This makes the findings insufficient to generalize. Second, all the participants are from the same state university in the west part of Turkey which means there were no diverse research settings. Given the fact that in some universities, specifically in the south part of Turkey, there are much more Syrian students, Turkish students' perceptions in those universities might be different.

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