

# TRANSITION AND ADAPTATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION: SYRIAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN TURKEY WITHIN CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*The turmoil that started for democracy and reform in Syria in 2011 and the civil war following it caused a great immigration movement. Syrian refugees not only immigrated to and changed the face of the neighboring countries but also caused a moral panic in Europe. As most of the immigrants were in the school-ages, one of the areas that were affected negatively and caused difficulties in the host countries has been education. Schools, teachers, classmates, administrations, and governments face various kinds and levels of problems. In higher education where the transition is already challenging, immigrant students need to cope with not only academic challenges but also cultural, social, and linguistic ones. This study aims to identify these challenges from the perspective of Syrian immigrant students residing in Turkey and attending higher education institutions and to provide insights for the design of future higher education policies. In accordance with the aim of the study, a mixed method approach was adopted that uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection means. While findings revealed that the participants had no problems in terms of socio-cultural adaptation, they experienced struggles in their academic performance because of the language of instruction.*

**Keywords:** *immigration, transition, adaptation, challenges, Turkish as a foreign language.*

## Introduction

As a result of the turmoil that started in 2011 for democracy and reform in Syria, Turkey faced a great immigration movement and the first migration from Syria to Turkey took place on April 29, 2011 when a group of 250 immigrants crossed the border (Seydi, 2014). During this process, the number of immigrants from Syria to Turkey has grown significantly since Turkey shares a border with Syria, kinship, and trade relations in addition to Turkey's open-door policy to Syrian immigrants and its provision of a safe environment (Kılcan, Çepni & Kılınc, 2017). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that 6.6 million Syrians have been displaced in their own country (UNHCR, 2021) and, as of June 2021, Turkey is the country that hosts the largest number of Syrian immigrants globally with over 3.6million registered immigrants (UNHCR, 2021). Therefore, the striking increase in the number of immigrants caused a great number of problems in meeting the various needs in health, accommodation, education, employment, language, and adaptation to social life. It is no doubt that one of the most significant areas affected by the war and the immigration triggered afterward is education. Seydi (2014) puts forth that Syrian children and teenagers had faced

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setbacks in their education before they immigrated to Turkey as their schools had been closed to a large extent because of the war. However, Ergin (2016) states that “it seems Turkey has been trying its best to adapt its Syrian guests to society by developing and implementing various policies as this long-term crisis might end with Syrian guests’ ‘long-term residence’” (p. 399).

In this comprehensive study where both qualitative and quantitative data collection means are used, it is aimed to explore the transition process experienced by Syrian immigrant students at a higher education institution in Turkey in terms of social interaction and academic, language, and socio-cultural adaptation aspects. First of all, some key concepts are defined and policies implemented by Turkey for Syrian immigrant University students are reviewed. Second, relevant literature on the issue is assessed. Third, current study is reported in terms of its method and findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings and with propositions for future actions.

### **Definitions**

As a concept, migration is defined as “an event in which a person changes his or her place of usual residence.” (Poulain, 2008, p.43). The author also provides the definition of two key concepts related to migration:

“immigration” means the action by which a person establishes his or her usual residence in the territory of a Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least twelve months, having previously been usually resident in another Member State or a third country

“emigration” means the action by which a person, having previously been usually resident in the territory of a Member State, ceases to have his usual residence in that Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least twelve months (p.43)

Although migration simply is a state of “replacement”, it is not hard to comprehend that this concept cannot simply refer to replacement when the reasons forcing individuals or groups to immigrate and the problems caused by the immigration are considered. Moreover, immigration does not only affect the individual or the group that immigrates. According to Sezgin and Yolcu (2016), there are two basic characteristics of immigration that are the results for the one/s who immigrate/s and results for the local people residing where immigration takes place; therefore, the adaptation process affects both groups. In addition, immigration can be classified as forced and voluntary immigration in terms of people’s willingness. Öner (2012, as cited by Aktaş 2015) describes forced immigration as the one “when people immigrate en masse to survive due to war, natural disasters, famine, epidemic, ethnic pressures and social, economic, and political reasons” (p. 17). Voluntary immigration, on the other hand, is defined as the type of immigration when people immigrate willingly to have a better life or have a better education and career (Sezgin and Yolcu, 2016). However, Erdal and Oeppen (2018) assert that making a clear-cut distinction between forced and voluntary migration is unacceptable for migration scholars as it is not easy to describe immigrants’ decision to migrate as entirely forced or voluntary while using oppositional typology matters to states. Consequently, Syrian immigration to Turkey has made it the country that hosts the largest number of Syrian immigrants and that has been affected by the process and outcomes to a significant extent.

## **Policies Implemented by Turkey for Syrian Immigrant University Students**

There are 129 state and 74 foundation universities in Turkey and there are 37.236 Syrian students registered in these universities according to the 2019-2020 academic year statistics (Turkish Higher Education Council, 2021). Biçer and Alan (2017) state that numerous projects have been conducted nationwide for the Syrian immigrants to help them adapt to life in Turkey such as providing education to all Syrian children who are at the age of mandatory education, directing adult Syrian immigrants to handicraft courses, and offering Turkish language courses for all age groups. The first step was taken in 2012 for immigrant students to start or pursue higher education (Ergin, 2016). Turkish Higher Education Council asked seven state universities (Çukurova, Gaziantep, Harran, Kilis 7 Aralık, Mustafa Kemal, Mersin, and Osmaniye Korkut Ata universities) to allow Syrian students to take courses in the 2012-2013 academic year. According to the Turkish Higher Education Council's circular issued on September 4, 2013, education fees of Syrian students who are registered in regular and open university programs would be covered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities budget (Turkish Higher Education Council Circular no.57802651/1008, September 4, 2013). The decree issued October 9, 2013 also states that students who started their associate degree, bachelor's degree, and graduate degree programs in Syria and Egypt before the 2013-2014 academic year and who are Turkish citizens, citizens of the host country, and international students in these countries can transfer to the universities in Turkey (Turkish Higher Education Council, 2013). However, only those who can submit the required documents are granted for an application while others who do not can only take courses at the seven abovementioned state universities as students in temporary status. Kartal and Manço (2018) also state that the Turkish Higher Education Council considers the possibility of assigning the student quota that cannot be filled in at vocational schools to Syrian students.

Turkish Higher Education Council increased the quotas for all international students who wish to study at a university in Turkey year by year. Now, Turkish universities are allowed to determine the number of international students they accept each year by the current legislation on the condition that this number should not exceed 50% of the number of Turkish students. While until 2013 Syrian students were required to abide by the same admissions regulations as the other international students, they must take the YOS (Foreign Student Examination) of which every university has its own version. To facilitate the Syrian students access to Turkish higher education, "several legislations and bylaws were passed, such as easing transfer processes, relaxing the original documentation submission for degree equivalency, providing a high school completion test option (in the absence of a high school diploma), a university fee waiver system for all Syrian students..." (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017).

## **Transition and Adaptation of International Students**

Globalization and internationalization are the most common concept in higher education today. Students who have wider and diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds look for opportunities to have a competitive and transnational career in the future in addition to the qualities of higher education (Ashton-Hay, Wignell & Evans, 2016). However, students who are defined as international students may face adaptation problems regarding various aspects of higher

education such as language, culture, and a new learning environment during the process. Javed (2016) puts forth the struggle of his students when they try to adapt to the new learning culture as “I feel like my students are thrown into the sea before they are instructed about how to swim and are expected to reach the shore on the other side” (p. 1-2). The whole process is defined as a transition or the first-year experience and described as a progression from unknown to known, from usual to unusual, and from a lower level to an upper level (Bolt & Graber, 2010; Hellesten, 2002; Kantanis, 2000). Therefore, according to Ashton-Hay, Wignell, and Evans (2016), this transition experience has the potential of affecting the students positively or negatively especially in their first year when they face culture shock and; thus, the students need to get language, cultural, and educational support in order to manage the process successfully. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2006) state that it is necessary to provide support to the first-year students during the process so that they can adopt a more independent learning style. Syrian immigrant students registered at a higher education institution in Turkey have been given the chance of continuing their education. Syrian students, who hold immigrant student status and have quantitatively significant potential (such as high school transcripts and diplomas and language proficiency test results), still struggle during the transition and adaptation process; although, they are accepted neither as immigrants nor refugees but as brothers and sisters (Aras & Mençütek, 2015). These struggles have been listed in recent studies conducted in Turkey as language and communication problems with faculty staff/scholars/classmates, cultural differences, and integration problems, adaptation to social life, having difficulty accessing up-to-date information about the application conditions and processes of universities, language barriers (being inadequate especially in writing and speaking skills), a lack of clear information and guidance, inconsistent implementation of the regulations, online system-based problems, negative discourses created by using false facts and the image of marginalized Syrians, prejudice, financial problems, lack of social bridges, lack of social bonds and academic concern (Ateşok, Çıtıptıoğlu, & Özer, 2020; Sağır & Aydın, 2020; Yıldız, 2019; Şahin & Sümer, 2018; & Dereli, 2018). As immigration by itself is such a great trauma, it is inevitable for these students to experience a significant effect of these various problems stemming from being in a new country that has a different system on their academic achievement. Therefore, it is crucial to have a smooth transition to higher education for the students to prevent them from having dissatisfaction in their academic experiences and; therefore, drop out as a result of low achievement (Chidzonga, 2014).

The increasing number of Syrian immigrant students and policies implemented regarding their education have been on researchers’ agenda for the last few years. However, there are a limited number of studies conducted within the context of higher education. The first research report on the issue was published by the Institute of International Education and the University of California Davis Human Rights Initiative (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King, 2014) which presents the policies concerning the inclusion of Syrian immigrants to the Turkish education system. The study examines the perspectives of Syrian students and scholars on the educational conditions at Turkish universities and reports that “unlike those in Lebanon or Jordan, university-age Syrians in Turkey generally report positive experiences and supportive environments both on and off their university campuses” and that “Turkish and English language training is an essential vehicle for Syrian assimilation into Turkish society, the local

labor market, and institutions of higher learning, as well as for facilitating Syrians' international mobility" (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King, 2014, p. 45).

A second report was published by the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (Yavcan & El-Gjali, 2017). As exploratory qualitative research, the study investigates the perception of Syrian immigrants concerning the policies and practices on higher education in Turkey. It reveals that "language is reported to be a key factor in the retention of the Syrian refugee students in higher education institutions across in Turkey" (p. 41). The study conducted by Sezgin and Yolcu (2016) to investigate how Syrian immigrant students are affected by society's social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics while putting forth their social adaptation and social acceptance processes is a qualitative study. Our study, however, is a more comprehensive study that examines the experiences of Syrian immigrant students during the process of transition and adaptation to a higher education institution and thus that will light the way for other studies that might be conducted in the future on evaluating the student services and improving the conditions of such processes. This study also provides the students with the opportunity of expressing the language problems and socio-cultural adaptation struggles they experience. As a result, this study aims to explore the newly-arrived Syrian immigrant students' transition from secondary levels to a Turkish Higher Education and investigate their transitional process in terms of social interaction and academic, language, and socio-cultural adaptation aspects. The study also aims to understand how Syrian immigrant students adapt to the university culture. The following questions are dealt with:

- 1) What are the perceptions of Syrian students about the transition process in terms of social, academic, language, and socio-cultural aspects?
- 2) What kinds of difficulties Syrian students have faced when they have been trying to adapt to the higher education culture?
- 3) How do Syrian students adapt to the higher education culture during the transition process?

### **Method**

In this study, a mixed method approach has been adopted to study Syrian immigrant students' experiences of their transition to higher education. Creswell (2014) defines the mixed method approach as the one "where the researcher collects both quantitative (close-end) and qualitative (open end) data, combines both, and then interprets the findings by looking at the strongest aspects of the combined data set to understand the research questions" (p. 2). Therefore, this mixed method study that uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection means provides both a more detailed picture of the Syrian immigrant students' transition and adaptation to higher education processes and a more comprehensive perspective for the problem at hand. The participants of the study constitute 209 freshman Syrian immigrant students studying in various programs at a higher education institution in southeast Turkey. Ethical approval has been taken from the Harran University Ethics Committee (Dated 14/02/2018 and numbered 2018/07) in order to conduct this research study.

## **Data Tools and Participants**

First of all, a survey was applied and quantitative data were obtained in order to understand the experiences of Syrian immigrant students in their transition and adaptation to higher education at Harran University, Sanliurfa. The participants could choose between an English and Arabic version of the survey. The instrument was applied in April 2018 during the 2017-2018 academic year and piloted with a group of 20 participants. A few items were revised as a result of the piloting process. The survey, Syrian Immigrant Students Transition to Higher Education Survey (SISTHES), was created by using questions drawn from scales in four previous studies on international students' transition and their first-year experiences (Hsu, 2011; Krause & Coates, 2008; Mirici, Galleano & Torres, 2013; Yorke & Longden, 2007). SISTHES included items intended to function both as discrete indicators of students' transition and adaptation processes, and as elements of adjusted adaptation scales. The survey included four scales; Social Adaptation Scale, Academic Adaptation Scale, Language Adaptation Scale, and Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale. It was calculated that the Cronbach  $\alpha$  reliability of each scale varied between 0.72 and 0.89. As the reliability of the scales is above 0.70, a value often accepted as a criterion for scales applied in large-scale survey studies, it was determined to be reliable.

The survey consists of 79 items that inform about participants' experiences during the process of transition to higher education in terms of their social, academic, language, and socio-cultural adaptation. Out of these 79 items, 16 items ask about social adaptation, 21 items refer to academic adaptation, 22 items inform about language adaptation, and 20 items question socio-cultural adaptation.

Qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted with 10 Syrian students (5 female and 5 male). Purposive sampling was used to select those participants who were willing to participate in the study and potentially information rich. The semi-structured interview form was prepared to investigate the participants' transitional and adaptation process to a higher education institution. The form contains 10 open-ended questions with 22 follow-up questions. Interviews took place in May 2018 with the presence of a translator. The purpose of the research study was explained to the interviewees before the interview and it was stated that they were free to interrupt the interview and leave if they felt uncomfortable during the interview due to questions or any other reason.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were first entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each participant who filled in the survey was assigned a number and the data were coded accordingly. SPSS software v22 was used to analyze the quantitative data. The survey responses were summarized by using descriptive statistics.

For the analysis of the qualitative data, each audio file and transcription were organized into computer files. Participants were assured that their real names would not be saved or used; thus, each participant was assigned an alias, and computer files were labeled according to the data when the interview took place. The recorded interviews were listened to and then transcribed verbatim in Turkish. Then, all of the interview transcripts were translated into

English and the accuracy of the translations was checked back by the corresponding author. The data were analyzed manually and coded. The findings obtained from interviews were discussed under several major themes.

## Findings

### Results from the survey

The participants of this study are first-year university students who are Syrian immigrants. First of all, data collected from the surveys were analyzed and demographic results of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Demographic results

Demographic Characteristics	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	79	37.8
	Female	129	61.7
Department	Faculty of Engineering	99	47.4
	Faculty of Agriculture	55	26.3
	Faculty of Theology	39	18.7
	Arts and Sciences	3	1.4
	Health Sciences	3	1.4
	Medicine	3	1.4
	Economics and Administrative Sciences	3	1.4
	Faculty of Veterinary Medicine	2	1
Learning Turkish	1-3 years	191	91.4
	4-6 years	14	6.7
	10 years and over	1	0.5
Turkish Proficiency Level	Advanced	57	27.3
	Upper-intermediate	65	31.1
	Intermediate	57	27.3
	Elementary	11	5.3
	Beginner	16	7.7

As Table 1 shows, out of 209 students who participated in the study, 129 were female and 79 were male while 1 of the students did not indicate his/her gender. The number of the students who participated in the study from the Faculty of Engineering was 99 students while 55 students were from the Faculty of Agriculture. While 39 students from the Faculty of Theology participated in the study, the rate of the students studying in the faculties of Arts and Sciences, Health Sciences, Medicine, Economics and Administrative Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine had the lowest number of students among the participants. 191 of the participants stated that they have been learning Turkish for 1 to 3 years, 14 of them stated that it is 4 to 6 years, and one participant said that it has been over 10 years. 3 participants did not answer this question.

65 participants indicated that their Turkish proficiency level was upper-intermediate while 57 stated that their level was advanced. Among the rest of the participants, 57 of them stated that their level was intermediate while 11 of them indicated that it was basic level. 16 participants, on the other hand, stated that their Turkish proficiency level was a beginner.

Results of the second section of the survey were analyzed in four different scales as social, academic, language, and socio-cultural adaptation scales. 5-point Likert type scale with five possible responses, which were ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to each of the questions was used for scoring the scales.

The category of transition and adaptation to higher education experiences examined within the scope of this study is about participants' social adaptation at the university. 16 items that question their social interaction and adaptation experiences were given results of which are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.**  
Social Interaction and Adaptation Experiences (distribution of responses in percent).

Items	SDA	DA	N	A	SA
1. I participate in activities organized by Turkish students.	14,8	9,9	22,7	39,9	12,3
2. I engage in face-to-face communication with Turkish friends and acquaintances.	4,4	11,8	21,2	38,9	23,2
3. I attend public meetings and events where most of the people are Turkish.	8,4	10,8	26,6	38,9	15,3
4. I invite Turkish friends to join me in activities.	7,4	9,9	28,1	36,9	16,3
5. I ask Turkish friends or acquaintances for help.	7,4	3,9	20,2	41,9	23,2
6. I participate in activities organized by people from my native country.	5,4	10,3	18,2	37,4	27,1
7. I engage in face-to-face communication with friends and acquaintances from my native country	8,4	4,9	14,8	40,4	31
8. I attend public meetings and events where most of the people are from my native country.	6,9	10,8	26,1	34	21,2
9. I invite friends from my native country to join me in activities.	6,9	7,9	25,1	37,4	20,7
10. I ask friends or acquaintances from my native country for help.	9,4	8,4	18,2	40,4	21,7
11. I have joined a society/club/association on campus.	11,8	17,2	28,1	24,6	15,3
12. I am adapting to the university social culture.	4,9	10,8	25,6	38,4	18,2
13. I feel isolated on campus.	28,6	23,6	25,6	11,3	9,9
14. I enjoy the social side of higher education.	6,9	9,4	25,1	38,9	18,7
15. I have made at least one close friend at this institution.	8,4	7,4	16,3	33,5	32
16. I like to participate in social activities on campus.	6,4	10,3	22,2	37,9	22,7

Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Not Sure (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

The key findings for the Social Interaction and Adaptation Scale can be summarized as follows:



Regarding the questions concerning positive experiences about interaction with Turkish students (Item 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 15) there was broad agreement that Syrian students did not hesitate to interact with Turkish fellow students both for social events and help. Additionally, a majority of the respondents agreed that they were able to adapt to social life at the university (Item 11, 12, 14, and 16). However, regarding the questions concerning adaptation challenges, a majority of the respondents agreed to a great extent that they preferred to join fellow students only from their native country for social activities or to get help (Item 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10). On the other hand, a majority of respondents (52,2%) disagreed that they felt isolated on campus (Item 13) although it referred to an adaptation challenge.

Results regarding the participants' academic adaptation experiences are shown in Table 3. The key findings for the Academic Adaptation Scale can be summarized briefly as follows:

**Table 3**  
Academic Adaptation Experiences (distribution of responses in percent).

Items	SDA	DA	N	A	SA
1. I am satisfied with the level of my academic performance.	13,3	22,2	25,6	28,6	9,9
2. I am as skilled with my academic work as the average students.	3,9	18,7	35,5	33,5	6,9
3. I am quite confident that I will be able to deal with future challenges [at the university].	6,4	6,9	19,2	42,9	23,2
4. So far, my experiences in the program have met my expectations.	5,9	22,7	31	30,5	8,4
5. I have good communication with faculty and with fellow students in my program.	6,4	15,8	19,7	36	21,2
6. I have no trouble concentrating on my studies.	8,4	18,7	30	29,1	11,8
7. I am adapting to the university academic culture.	8,4	10,8	31,5	36,9	10,3
8. I can manage the university academic workload.	6,9	11,8	35,5	32,5	12,3
9. I can complete my academic tasks within given time.	5,4	17,7	34	32,0	8,4
10. The way in which program assessments (assignments, etc.) are scheduled causes problems for me.	8,4	15,3	44,3	23,2	7,4
11. The criteria used in assessing work were made clear at the beginning of my program.	3,0	15,3	38,9	32	9,9
12. The facilities for working on one's own within this institution are inadequate.	9,9	20,7	38,4	16,7	9,9
13. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.	10,3	17,2	24,1	33,5	11,8
14. I do not hesitate to ask the teaching staff questions in classroom.	9,4	14,3	27,1	29,6	18,7
15. I do not hesitate to request the teaching staff for clarification of a concept in classroom.	9,9	17,2	21,2	32,5	15,8
16. The teaching staff made it clear from the start what they expected from students.	11,3	14,8	30,5	30	10,8
17. The teaching staff is good at explaining things.	11,8	14,8	36	23,2	12,8
18. I am satisfied with the quality of the teaching on my program.	4,9	17,2	37,9	25,6	12,3
19. I have had difficulty in adjusting to the style of teaching at this institution.	12,8	23,6	36	18,2	7,9
20. I have been able to contact the teaching staff when I needed to.	6,9	12,3	16,7	46,8	15,8

21. I am satisfied with the level of tutorial support on my program.	7,4	12,3	30	32	15,8
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Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Not Sure (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

A majority of the respondents tended to agree that they were able to fulfill the requirements of the academic life and cope with academic workload, tasks, and future challenges (Item 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9). In addition, a majority of the respondents reported that they were satisfied with their academic performance, the program, library resources and services, the quality of teaching, the way of teaching and teaching support (Item 1, 4, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 21). They also reported that they had good communication with other stakeholders (Item 5 and 20). On the other hand, there was broad agreement (30,6%) that assessments caused problems for the respondents (Item 10). However, a majority of respondents disagreed that the facilities for working on their own inadequate (Item 12) and they had difficulty in adapting the style of teaching (Item 19) although they referred to academic adaptation challenge.

Table 4 presents the data obtained on participants' adaptation experiences regarding language use. The key findings for the Language Adaptation Scale can be summarized as follows:

**Table 4.**  
Language Adaptation Experiences (distribution of responses in percent)

Items	SDA	DA	N	A	SA
1. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in my class.	34	23,6	17,2	15,3	9,9
2. I keep thinking that other students are better at the Turkish language than I am.	19,2	22,2	25,6	18,2	14,3
3. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my class.	18,7	21,7	26,6	24,6	8,4
4. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my class.	17,7	22,2	22,7	26,1	9,9
5. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the Turkish language.	20,2	25,6	18,2	19,2	16,3
6. I always feel that the other students speak the Turkish language better than I do.	15,8	27,1	23,2	18,7	13,8
7. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the Turkish language.	14,8	18,2	25,6	27,6	12,3
8. I can do critical reading for comprehending the texts (in Turkish) in my BS study syllabus.	6,9	18,2	37,9	25,6	8,4
9. I can comprehend the lectures in Turkish.	8,9	8,9	33,2	39,6	9,4
10. I do not hesitate to speak Turkish in classroom.	9,9	15,8	28,1	31,5	12,8
11. I face no problem in writing assignments in Turkish.	9,4	17,7	30	29,1	12,8
12. I face no problem in taking assessments in Turkish.	8,9	12,3	27,6	37,9	11,8
13. I can speak Turkish fluently.	10,8	15,8	37,9	23,2	10,8
14. I can speak Turkish confidently.	8,4	17,7	29,1	30,5	12,8
15. I can write in Turkish clearly and effectively.	9,9	13,8	28,1	34	12,8
16. I am adapting to the Turkish language of instruction in university.	6,9	13,8	45,3	25,1	8,4

17. I can present orally in Turkish in front of an audience without the fear of making mistakes.	14,8	23,2	36,5	18,2	6,4
18. I have to take help (tuition/coaching) in learning and understanding the Turkish language.	6,4	11,3	28,1	34,5	19,2
19. I think in Arabic and then translate in Turkish before final reproduction of a response in Turkish.	12,3	18,2	19,7	29,6	18,2
20. I have had difficulty in following the lectures.	10,8	14,8	40,4	22,2	10,3
21. It is difficult for me to comprehend exam questions in Turkish.	11,3	17,7	29,1	26,1	14,3
22. It is great fun learning Turkish.	8,9	5,4	19,2	24,1	41,9

Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Not Sure (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

The majority of the respondents tended to agree that they had no difficulty in terms of language skills and adapting the medium of instruction, and they were happy with learning Turkish (Item 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 22). However, they reported that they were afraid of making mistakes when they were presenting orally in Turkish (Item 17). Nevertheless, a majority of the students reported language adaptation challenges such as difficulty in comprehending lectures and exam questions in Turkish, need help for understanding and producing the language (Item 7, 18, 19, 20, and 21). On the other hand, there was broad disagreement on feeling ashamed or anxious during the lectures while the students were speaking Turkish in front of others and being called on in the class (Item 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6).

Results regarding the participants' socio-cultural adaptation are given in Table 5 below. The key findings for the Language Adaptation Scale can be summarized as follows:

**Table 5.**  
Socio-Cultural Adaptation Experiences (distribution of responses in percent)

Items	ND	SD	MD	VD	ED
1. How difficult has it been to understand the locals' value system?	16,7	22,2	47,8	7,4	5,4
2. How difficult has it been to understand the locals' world view?	16,7	29,1	36,9	11,8	5,4
3. How difficult has it been to see things from the locals' point of view?	21,2	24,6	38,9	10,8	2
4. How difficult has it been to understand local cultural differences?	22,7	32	31	9,4	3,4
5. How difficult has it been to take a local perspective on the local culture?	20,2	27,6	30,5	14,3	4,9
6. How difficult has it been to make friends with Turkish people?	27,6	26,1	23,6	14,8	6,4
7. How difficult has it been to be able to see two sides of intercultural issues?	23,2	26,6	32,5	12,8	4,4
8. How difficult has it been to deal with problems with your family?	39,9	25,1	21,7	8,4	3,4
9. How difficult has it been to make Turkish people understand you?	21,2	33,5	24,1	15,3	4,9
10. How difficult has it been to communicate with people from different ethnic groups?	30,5	28,6	24,6	8,9	5,4
11. How difficult has it been to interact with members of the opposite sex?	25,1	25,6	27,6	13,3	5,9
12. How difficult has it been to understand the political system?	16,7	24,1	30	18,2	10,8

13. How difficult has it been to find your way around?	27,6	27,1	23,6	12,8	5,9
14. How difficult has it been to deal with people in authority?	15,3	19,7	30	19,2	12,3
15. How difficult has it been to deal with people staring at you?	27,1	23,6	27,6	14,3	5,9
16. How difficult has it been to deal with someone who is unpleasant?	15,3	24,6	32,5	14,8	11,8
17. How difficult has it been to deal with unsatisfactory service?	10,2	26,1	36	16,3	8,4
18. How difficult has it been to deal with bureaucracy?	8,9	20,7	38,9	13,8	14,3
19. How difficult has it been to deal with the pace of life?	14,3	29,6	30	18,2	6,9
20. How difficult has it been to find food you enjoy?	36,9	21,7	18,2	11,8	10,8

Not Difficult (1), Somewhat Difficult (2), Medium Difficult (3), Very Difficult (4), Extremely Difficult (5)

The results showed that understanding local's value system, their world view, their point of view, the political system, intercultural issues, and taking a local perspective on the new culture were moderately difficult (Item 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 12) according to a majority of respondents. Additionally, they found dealing with authority, people staring at them, unpleasant people, unsatisfactory service, bureaucracy, and the pace of life (Item 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19). A majority of the respondents (27,6%) also reported that it was moderately difficult to interact with the opposite sex (Item 11). Nevertheless, the results revealed that a majority of the respondents found understanding local cultural differences and being understood by Turkish people slightly difficult (Item 4 and 8). On the other hand, it was not difficult for the majority of the respondents to make Turkish friends, to deal with family issues, to interact with other ethnic groups, to find their way and food they like (Item 6, 8, 10, 13 and 20).

The results of t-test analysis regarding whether the mean scores of the students' adaptation experiences differ according to their gender are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
T-test results of four scales by gender.

	Mean ( $\bar{X}$ )		t	p
	Male (N=79)	Female (N=129)		
SIAS	3,66	3,39	2.956	.003*
AAS	3,30	3,17	1,394	.165
LAS	3.09	3.10	-.223	.825
SCAS	2.45	2.64	-2.309	.022*

Notes: SIAS (Social Interaction and Adaptation Scale); AAS (Academic Adaptation Scale); LAS (Language Adaptation Scale); SCAS (Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale); \*p < 0.05.

According to the data presented in Table 6, it can be seen that there was a significant difference in favor of male students in the mean scores of social interaction and adaptation scale. Additionally, there was a statistically significant difference in favor of female students in the mean scores of the socio-cultural adaptation scale. However, no statistically significant difference was found regarding age, department, and proficiency level.

### Results from the Interviews

In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with a small group of Syrian immigrant students studying at various faculties at a Turkish state university located in the southeast region of the country to obtain a comprehensive view of their experiences and adaptation during the process of transition to higher education. Analyses of these interviews yielded seven categories that are presented as (1) accommodation and duration spent in Turkey, (2) reasons for the choice of the university, (3) first impression, (4) positive experiences and adaptation difficulties regarding academic studies, (5) positive experiences and adaptation difficulties regarding social life, (6) positive experiences and adaptation difficulties regarding language, and positive experiences and adaptation difficulties in terms of the socio-cultural aspect.

One of the most significant elements that affect the adaptation process is accommodation and the duration of time spent in the host country. Therefore, the participants were asked where they used to live in their home country and where they live now. Most of the participants stated that they used to live in the city in their home country and they live in the city in Turkey too. The duration of time spent in Turkey differs from 2 years to 4 years.

The participants provided different answers to the question of why they chose the university they are studying at now. Agah stated that he chose this university because he wanted to be close to his family; though, he had applied to other universities. Amir said that he was encouraged by his family to apply to this university. Huseyin had applied to other universities as well but this one offered the best program he could get in. That is why he chose to study at this university. Yasin explained that it would have been a burden for his family financially if he had decided to study in another city. Resul, likewise, decided to study at this university as other universities he had applied to required high tuitions he could not afford.

When asked about their first impressions about the university, Amine stated that she had a rather negative impression:

“I did not like it here. I mean it is no different from a high school. They always say that university life is different but I did not feel that it was different. It is like high school.”

Amir said that he liked the university but he experienced communication difficulties:

“I was not able to talk to other students much when we first started.”

Hafza admitted that she was scared when she first started the program and felt shy and refrained from other students:

“I was scared at first because I thought what they (Turkish students) would think about me.”

When it comes to their experiences regarding academic studies, most of the participants agreed that they have not experienced any problems in interacting with instructors and asking for help from them. They also mainly agreed that the education provided in the programs is quite satisfactory. On the other hand, they all complained about the difficulties they have experienced because of the language. For example, Yasin stated that he sometimes does not understand the lecture as the instructor speaks too fast. Amine agrees and adds:

“I know Turkish better than other friends. Some of them know very little (Turkish). The instructor does not consider the fact that there are foreign students in the class and does not lecture in detail. S/he just gives her/his lecture and goes. It is like there are only Turkish students in the class.”

Resul agrees and mentions that he sometimes has difficulty in understanding the exam questions:

“I learned Turkish spoken at streets first (but) I haven’t learned (academic language) for the university. ... If I can’t translate the question, I skip it, I do not answer it.”

As Hafza openly states that “language is a negative element that affects (our) academic success very negatively.”

When asked questions about their social life at the university, it is seen that most of the Syrian students do not participate in social activities either because they do not have time as they feel they need to focus on their studies or because they are not interested in. Only a few of them stated that they took part in some activities of student clubs they are a member of:

“Of course... there is this (student) club at the university. We went camping with Turkish (students). We went to Halfeti and camped there. We stayed for 3-4 days.”

It is seen that the aspect of language is the most significant element that affects the adaptation process. The participants of the interviews talked mostly about the language barrier they have been experiencing and provided vivid examples. For example, Agah stated that he is better at listening but not good at speaking. That is why he has been shy in the class:

“Well I would like to ask a question in class but I can’t. I go to the instructor’s office after the class to ask. ... I feel like when I stand up to ask a question and form a wrong sentence other students stare at me.”

Another participant, Hafza, adds and shares her experience as:

“I sometimes ask a question but I feel a little scared because when I asked a question one time my friends started to laugh and I felt ashamed.”

In addition, Amine emphasizes that she is hesitant to ask questions in class because:

“I mean I can’t ask (a question) if I don’t understand (it) because what if I don’t understand again when (the instructor) explains it in Turkish?”

The participants acknowledge that they are better at certain language skills (listening and reading mostly) but not so good at others (speaking and writing). They are aware of the fact that they need more practice in Turkish. However, they need to be approached with empathy by their classmates and instructors as they have already built some psychological barriers that prevent them from actively participating in class.

In terms of socio-cultural activities, it is seen that there have been dramatic changes in the participants’ lives. For example, they report that they used to have spare time that they used to spend with friends and in doing sports. They state that they either study for their lessons or work during weekends. They do not have much social life and interaction, especially with Turkish people.

When the participants were asked what it means and how it feels to be an immigrant student at a Turkish university, only one of them reported negative feelings. Amine says:

“It is a bad feeling. I never forget I am a guest here. No matter how adapted I am, we are guests, this is not our country.”

On the other hand, most of the participants stated that they do not feel like they are immigrants and do not think about going back to their home country when the war is over:

“According to you, I am a foreign student. To me, I am not. I do not feel like a foreigner here.” (Fatima)

“My family may want to go back but I don't. I spent the most beautiful years of my life here. I am so used to living here now.” (Umaye)

## **Discussion**

This study deals with the Syrian immigrant students' transitional process from secondary levels to a Turkish Higher Education institution located in the South-eastern part of Turkey regarding social interaction, academic, language, and socio-cultural adaptation aspects. Demographic results revealed that the number of Syrian female students attending university was higher than the number of male students. This may be the case due to the responsibility of young men that have to earn money, and this responsibility is an obstacle to education (Üstübcü, 2020). When the results are analyzed from the point of social adaptation experiences, it is seen that most of the participants stated that they adapted to the social culture of the university, did not feel lonely on campus, and made friends at the university during the transition process. Some of the interview participants also stated that they have membership in at least one of the student clubs and they participate in social activities. In terms of social adaptation, none of the interviewees reported any adaptation difficulties.

When the participants were asked about their adaptation to the academic life at the university during the transition process, the results showed that most of the participants felt confident about dealing with any potential difficulties in their academic studies and that they were able to interact with the students and instructors at their faculties without any problem. They also mentioned that they were satisfied with the quality of the programs they were studying and the resources and service at the library. Moreover, many of them reported that they felt free to ask questions to instructors in the class, contacted them when needed, and felt satisfied with the support they received at their programs. However, most of the participants emphasized that they were not happy with their academic performance. The reason behind it was Turkish as the medium of instruction. For example, most of the participants complained that the instructors were speaking too fast while giving the lecture, so the participants felt lost in class. The interviewees also reported that their hearts pound too fast when they were called on in class, that they were afraid other students would laugh when they spoke Turkish, and that they have difficulty following the lecture and understanding the exam questions. Although the results from the quantitative data showed that a majority of the respondents were not afraid of being laughed at by other students, some of the interviewees stated that they felt anxious while they were speaking Turkish in class. The difference in the findings obtained from quantitative and qualitative strands of the study may result from the reason that transition and adaptation

process is a complex and personal experience. Therefore, it can be suggested that Syrian students' transition and adaptation to higher education is not linear and passive. The reason could be the presence of a complex set of shifting associations between language mastery, social interaction, personal, pedagogical and psychological factors that affect the students' transitional and adaptation process. Additionally, the participants stated that they felt anxious about giving presentations in front of a group as many of them asserted that they could not speak Turkish fluently and that speaking was their weakest skill. That is why they felt uncomfortable when they caught other students' smiling and staring which also prevented them from actively participating in class, taking to the floor to speak, answering a question, or asking one. In short, most of the participants believe that Turkish is a barrier to their academic success which they need to overcome by studying and practicing more.

Most of the participants in the study reported that it was not difficult to make friends with Turkish people, deal with problems, communicate with people from different ethnic groups, and find their way in town. From the socio-cultural perspective, most of the participants in the interviews stated that they did not experience any difficulties regarding being an immigrant student and that they did not feel alienated in the city. However, they expressed that it had been challenging for them to understand the local's worldview and the political system of the country. It was also troublesome for them to deal with unfriendly stares, unsatisfactory service, and bureaucracy. Data also suggested that the participants had a quite passive process in terms of participating in socio-cultural activities. Despite the reported difficulties, it was revealed that most of the participants did not want to go back to their home country even if the war was over.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of the immigration that started in 2011 and is continuing, the number of Syrian immigrants has increased which has caused serious problems in many areas of life. One of the most problematic areas that need urgent attention and solution is education. Although on each level of education problems have been experienced, it can easily be said that the biggest problem is being experienced in higher education. Continuously increasing number of students in higher education programs and lack of accommodation and student loans, language learning centers to overcome the language barrier, and books and resources for these centers can be counted as main problems. In addition to these general problems, Syrian immigrant students may experience some difficulties during their transition to higher education exclusively. As this study is conducted at one of the leading universities that host a significant number of Syrian immigrant students, it yields significant findings in terms of social, academic, linguistic, and sociocultural difficulties experienced during the transition process.

The results of the study show that Syrian immigrant students have experienced challenges due to the language barrier that affects especially their academic success and social life at the university. They reported that they experienced some adaptation difficulties with Turkish students at first but had no problem with communicating with the academic staff from whom they received a lot of support. When it comes to their academic performance, it is seen that the participants are not happy about it; although, they are highly satisfied with the quality of the education at their programs.



As it is seen from the findings, Syrian immigrant students have experienced challenges mostly at the beginning of their life at the university. Therefore, it would be wise to provide support centers and orientation programs for these students before they start their education at the universities. It would also be beneficial if social activities are held so that both Turkish and Syrian immigrant students can find a bonding zone. In order to help them to overcome the language barrier, comprehensive needs analyses should be done and language education should be provided accordingly.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

This study was funded by the Scientific Research Board of Harran University (Project no.: 18028) and to be able to conduct this research study, ethical approval has been taken from the Harran University Ethics Committee (Dated 14/02/2018 and numbered 2018/07)

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