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Navigating university spaces as refugees: Syrian students' pathways of access to and through higher education in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore how refugee students construct pathways of access to higher education by drawing on interviews with 15 Syrian university students studying at different universities across Turkey. The research is located within a capabilities-based human development paradigm from which it outlines the factors that enable students' transition into university and looks at how they navigate complex higher education spaces. The refugees' narratives show that access to university is intersectionally shaped by personal ambition, family encouragement, community support, and the social and education policy. On the other hand, their educational experiences highlight that higher education works as a site of justice where the everyday racism, xenophobia, and discrimination is alleviated to a significant degree through providing a peaceful and safe space for coexistence with others despite its financial and pedagogical constraints. The paper draws attention to the agency of students in mobilising the assets they have gained for the good and well-being of their communities and fleshes out the values universities should promote for refugee students who have accessed university against the odds.

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Introduction

On 2 September 2015, a photo depicting the body of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, which washed ashore on a beach in Turkey, received intensive media attention and mobilised international actors. This human tragedy caught the attention of the global arena on the growing refugee crisis and led to several initiatives on urgent policy-making and solutions. Almost five years later, Turkey is hosting the largest number of people forcefully displaced by the conflict, around 3.6 million Syrian Refugees,¹ as of April 2019 (Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management 2019). Fundamental needs such as food, shelter, health, and ensuring integration have been of central concern to improve the livelihoods of refugees. However, as far as education is concerned, the focus has mostly been on basic education (Wright and Plasterer 2010). The challenges, factors, and vulnerabilities that play out in students' academic achievement, or the role of education in easing integration have been widely discussed and documented (Sirin and Aber 2018; Uyan-Semerçi and Erdoğan 2018; Emin 2016), whereas there has been little concern for the

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higher education prospects of the Syrians. Nevertheless, this lack of concern is a global trend, as donors often view tertiary education as a luxury (Crea 2016). We acknowledge that investing in basic education has much higher returns for disadvantaged groups (e.g. refugees), and it is fundamental for gaining literacy, numeracy, and language skills that could greatly improve their quality of life. However, we argue that higher education is equally important, not only in order to meet the skills and knowledge needs of the labour economy and market, but also as a unique driving force for equality, social change, and 'building democratic societies with high quality services for all' (Walker and Fongwa 2017, 7). Therefore, in this paper, we examine the lives and experiences of refugee youths at universities to understand how they negotiate the unfamiliar landscape of higher education institutions.

Syrian refugees in Turkey have access to free public services, including education and healthcare, yet employment, and the cumbersome process of obtaining a work visa is still a significant issue, forcing many Syrians to drop out of school to work in the informal sector in precarious conditions and discouraging them from furthering their education. When Turkey allowed Syrian students to forego the higher education fees normally paid by international students in public universities, in 2013, it also provided scholarships through the Presidency for Turks abroad and Related Communities and the Turkish presidency. These scholarships were followed by a number of initiatives from (I)NGOs, and charities and organisations such as UNHCR, DAFI to support students' financial needs (Erdoğan 2017). In addition, the Ministry of National Education initiated free Turkish language proficiency and vocational training courses to facilitate their integration (Yaycan and El-Ghali 2017). However, the number of Syrian students in the Turkish universities still remains at 20,701 (YÖK 2018), which corresponds to around 0.4% of Syrians in Turkey. Although the free language courses, lifting tuition fees, and scholarship initiatives greatly help by overcoming some of the access problems and easing the direct costs of education, several studies highlighted additional barriers that Syrian students face once within the higher education (Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King 2014; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017; Erdoğan et al. 2017; Erdoğan and Erdoğan 2018). These studies show that the significant issues that affect student participation or drop-out include a lack of career counselling, academic barriers, the difficulty of providing legal documents, a lack of knowledge of the educational options available to refugees, the prioritisation of spending on basic necessities, and the dependence on young people's contributions to household income. They also document the post-war vulnerabilities, vividly display the unclear future aspirations of refugees, and flesh out viable policy and practices. However, little is known about how these Syrian refugees construct pathways of access, and their valued opportunities and freedoms through university education.

Drawing on the narratives of 15 Syrian youths who are studying at university, we use the capabilities approach developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) to focus on the relationship between education and social justice by investigating access, the opportunities valued by the youth and the role of universities in contributing to social and individual well-being. The capabilities approach offers us an alternative way of understanding development and approaching well-being as opposed to other unidimensional theories of development that focus on economic means. Sen (2009, 232) links the concept of capability 'closely with the opportunity aspect of freedom, seen in terms of comprehensive opportunities' and sees education as central to the formation of freedoms and opportunities, which

could be facilitated through enabling factors such as inclusive pedagogical processes or good lecturers (Wilson-Strydom and Walker 2017). Therefore, a good quality education sits at the heart of capabilities and plays a powerful role in formulating valued goals for expansive well-being, developing skills and democratic values and serving as a catalyst for personal and social change, especially for people from disadvantaged communities. Hence, through our theoretical lens, we are concerned with the redistributive role of education to assess which opportunities are available to enhance the livelihoods of refugees who have managed to access higher education.

Capabilities, access and education

Sen (1999) distinguishes between capabilities and functionings, arguing that capabilities are the freedoms people have to choose and exercise the functionings they have reason to value. Thus, a functioning could be the ability to vote, but the real opportunity to vote – a democratic environment and fair elections – is the corresponding capability. Capabilities are the opportunities to realise functionings.

In the process of converting resources/opportunities into functionings, the concept of conversion factors plays an important role in taking different contextual or individual differences into account. Functionings may be the same for students, but students' genuine opportunities to function may be different or influenced by conversion factors, which 'determine the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning' (Robeyns 2018, 45). The conversion factors are not fixed and given (Robeyns 2018), but there are two important factors that play role in enabling access: (i) resources as the means to achieve (scholarship, schooling) and (ii) general conversion factors (policies, practices, social norms, people's attitudes and behaviours, structural constraints, gender or ethnicity) (Walker and Mathebula 2019). The capabilities approach provides a nuanced understanding of the ways these factors come into play. For instance, equality of resources does not mean that there will be equality of outcome and functioning. Refugees may not necessarily convert the resources at their disposal into functionings. A refugee may need monetary resources and language skills to access education, but the availability of these resources does not mean that the valued functionings (e.g. to be educated) will be achieved as the environment, structures, agency, norms, or other factors may influence.

Another strength of the capabilities approach is that it gives a central role to education for the expansion of freedoms and the achievement of functionings. Sen (1999) sees education as a fundamental capability that is intrinsically, instrumentally, and socially valuable because it plays a distributive role through enabling a person to use the gained skills and knowledge to challenge oppression in society and help other people expand their opportunities. As a framework, the approach goes beyond the understanding of education as a legal right or investment in human capital, helping us conceptualise education as a central capability that leads towards opening up opportunities in one's life, to lead a life with dignity, and a life that one values. It is concerned with promoting positive freedoms and rights, such as to have one's identity reflected in the curriculum of schools, and with looking into the conditions of being educated and how being educated influences the functionings that each person values (Unterhalter 2007; Tikly and Barrett 2011). Education can be a 'transformative space in providing students with real opportunities to

develop their capacities for choosing and enacting valued ways of being and doing' (Cin 2017, 121). It can fulfil aspirations, widen opportunities to make life choices, and open up freedoms that people would be culturally and socially deprived of (see Cin and Walker 2016; Cin 2017). Yet, some practices and cultural norms perpetuated in education have the potential to thwart capabilities and do not always lead to expansive freedoms when institutional regulations and practices do not value everyone equally (Unterhalter 2007). Therefore, it is important to highlight the connection between the education one receives and the extent to which one becomes a full social and political member of society, as only an inclusive and quality education allows people's well-being to flourish and enables their participation in the public and political spheres (Cin 2017). We should recognise these tensions in the relations of exclusionary educational discourses – which produce inequalities – and the distributive role of education. For example, lifting tuition fees or scholarships may be an enabling conversion factor for a refugee student to access higher education, but this does not guarantee that it will necessarily provide them with equal opportunities or promote their social inclusion. This is because access alone does not tell us about the conditions of being educated. To this end, access does not equate to participation or recognition for marginalised and vulnerable communities, but what matters is 'the capability to participate in higher education' (Wilson-Strydom 2015), and the school context, social relations and networks, respect, dignity and recognition, and socio-economic factors influence the capabilities of learners to participate in higher education and mobilise the outcomes gained from it.

Given this normative role of education, in this paper, we are concerned with the experiences of refugee students, who are gradually constituting a group whose needs and experiences should be accounted for in Turkish Universities. The narratives of 15 refugee students present their higher education journey, which has a lot to offer of in terms of extrapolating the values universities should promote for disadvantaged groups, but also shows that refugee youths are not passive and vulnerable victims and consumers of higher education; they have strong agency in mobilising the assets and skills they have gained for the well-being of their communities.

Refugees and pathways to higher education

Higher education can help refugees gain knowledge and skills for employability, easing their integration by expanding their social capital (Wright and Plasterer 2010; Doyle and O'Toole 2013), develop a voice in their lives and communities (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010), by inspiring young people to aspire to the future (Gateley 2015), and become socially productive members of their society, where their voices count and matter (Wright and Plasterer 2010). By attending higher education, they also create a sense of belonging (Makhoul, Alameddine, and Afifi 2012) and help establish peaceful relations between refugees and the host community members (Wright and Plasterer 2010). However, there is little concern for refugee higher education provision across the world (Crea 2016; Mkwanzani and Wilson-Strydom 2018). This is mainly because there are economic, structural, and institutional barriers that make it difficult for refugees to integrate into the university system of host countries. These barriers are economic resources related to both university fees and scholarships (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010), experiences of trauma and interrupted education, isolation and lack of support

(Stevenson and Willott 2007), the non-recognition or lack of evidence of previous qualifications (Bloch 2002), the lack of proficiency in the local language or lack of resources, such as textbooks (Crea 2016), the structural barriers around culture (Watkins, Razee, and Richters 2012), and the high cost of attending university (Anselme and Hands 2012). In the face of these multiple constraints barring refugees access to university, studies show that refugees may learn to navigate their own way through the system, be resilient, and develop navigational resources to deal with the challenges (Naidoo et al. 2018; Mkwanzani 2018).

Access to higher education should not be the sole focus of refugee education. Equally important as the factors impeding access are the questions of what happens after enrolment or access is achieved. The slippery side of access is that it may mask the inequalities that universities produce. If we take access as the ultimate aim, then we miss out on what students can do and achieve and whether they can make reflexive and informed choices about what makes a good life for each of them as it overshadows whether students are genuinely participating in education and developing the capabilities they value (Wilson-Strydom 2015). Therefore, equity, in the context of higher education, should look into educational processes, relations, and opportunities which expand well beyond access (Marginson 2011). For instance, research into the experiences of refugees in Australian universities focuses on educational and support needs to adapt university culture (Joyce et al. 2010), lecturer support for those students who had experienced an interrupted education (Hirano 2014), and how enabling learning culture helps students gain the necessary skills to navigate the university field (Naidoo et al. 2018). On the other hand, higher education is not always empowering, and the research of Keddie (2012) and Mangan and Winter (2017) document the exclusion, misrecognition, and racism refugee students experience at universities. Likewise, Morrice (2013) highlights that refugee students' experience of higher education in the UK is quite different from that of other non-traditional students and requires attention. This growing research informs us about the complex and multi-layered inequalities that underpin pathways of access and refugee experiences. Yet, there has been little research (Mkwanzani 2018) examining the conversion factors of access and capabilities valued by refugee students. Such an exploration is crucial to understand what socially just higher education requires for equitable access and participation of all groups, including the most disadvantaged ones. Drawing on the narratives and experiences of refugees in Turkey – which has the highest number of refugees in higher education in the world – can greatly advance our thinking on how universities that respond to the changing global challenges and crises can be created. Finally, unlike many previous studies of refugee youths at universities, such as those mentioned above, this research aims to fill the gap by providing an account of the conversion factors enabling access, functioning and capabilities valued and developed in and through higher education to provide an informational basis for policy development.

Methods

We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews to capture refugees' perspectives and understandings of the structural and institutional features of society that impact upon and shape their educational experiences. It is not sufficient to focus only on an individual's actions and understanding (micro-level), but also on the wider societal and institutional processes

(macro-level) in which they are embedded (Morrice 2009). Therefore, the interview questions had four foci: their arrival in Turkey, the settlement process, their educational lives in Turkey before they started studying at university, and their higher education experiences and migration plans. We deliberately did not focus on their pre-educational lives in Syria so as not to evoke the traumatic experiences that they may have been through. However, during the interviews, several students briefly mentioned that they had lost their relatives, siblings, or one of their parents in the war and mentioned how higher education worked to help them move on with their lives, as a new page to plan their lives from scratch. The participants were aged between 19 and 27: eight of them were male and seven were female. We recruited participants who had been living in Turkey for at least four years to ensure that they had spent enough time in the country to understand the structures that shaped their motivations, experiences and opportunities to study. Information about the research and an invitation to participate were presented to Syrian students in face-to-face meetings at an NGO working with refugees. Snowball sampling was used to access other participants and most of the time, at the end of the interviews, students themselves mentioned that they know other university students who could form part of this research. We conducted individual interviews for reasons of privacy, as they may have been unwilling to share their experiences in the presence of others. We guaranteed confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

All the interviews were conducted in Turkish and none of the participants had language problems as they had already been living in Turkey for a number of years and pursuing their studies in Turkish. None of the students wanted to be interviewed in Arabic, which indicates that they wanted to show they were fully integrated into Turkish culture and life. Some students even asked for confirmation that their Turkish was good or native enough. Interviews were taped and transcribed. The students who were interviewed were studying in different cities of Turkey: Istanbul, Van, Ankara, Adana, Malatya, Mersin and Erzurum. They were students of Pre-school education, Psychology, Architecture, Theology, Nursing, Biology, International Relations or Engineering. Since there are only 20,000 Syrian refugees in higher education, and as some of them are among the few Syrian students, or the only student, in their respective universities and departments, we are not collating the student profiles in a table or providing further demographics in order not to present any information that could reveal their identities.

Understanding pathways to access

When the refugees we interviewed embarked on the journey of higher education, they experienced several challenges, such as the language barrier, lack of information, not being able to verify the documents they brought from home, and the economic difficulties to maintain the indirect costs of education, all of which are echoed in research that explores refugees' experiences of accessing university (Naidoo et al. 2018; Doyle and O'Toole 2013; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). It was family members, teachers, someone from their community, interpersonal relationships, or social support networks who motivated refugees to further their education and helped them to overcome the access barriers by providing the right information about the system. These mechanisms of support are, indeed, global patterns as many studies also indicate that the individual ambition, agency and support of the intimate environment work as conversion factors

in enabling access or in helping to engage with the system (Naidoo et al. 2018; Gateley 2015). Such support from the community and family is not enough on its own without the availability of financial support. Unlike other contexts of higher education, the Turkish governments' policy of abolishing university fees for Syrians, in 2013, and the scholarships provided both by the official bodies and (I)NGOs were a significant conversion factor making access possible and helping them achieve the functioning 'to be educated'. For instance, Cemre, a female student, noted that it was thanks to her teachers and one of the university student in the refugee camp that she made her application to study and secured funding:

My teacher in the camp told me that I am a very successful student and I should attend higher education upon graduation as it was free for us. She helped with my application process. When I got into a university, I was not sure whether I would be able to study because I needed money to meet my living costs. There was a university student in our camp who was studying in another city, she put me in contact with her sponsor, it was a charity, and that charity also offered me scholarship because they were particularly supporting girls' education.

Research on refugee higher education places a great deal of emphasis on refugees' aspiration to secure income and employment through studying at a university (Mkwanzani 2018; Phan 2018). However, a significant question to consider for Syrian refugees in Turkey was why they would opt for higher education given that it may be very unlikely for them to secure employment due to increasingly informal labour market that employs the Syrians. Many of the students we interviewed indeed worked in the informal sector with very low wages and expressed that higher education was a gateway for them to escape the structures of precariousness. Therefore, they stressed the intrinsic value of higher education. Being highly aware that a university degree would provide little opportunity for economic capabilities, they nevertheless had high aspirations for studying owing to its personal and wider social benefits, and as a future investment for a nation-building project to reconstruct their nation, if they can ever return back to Syria. This discourse was particularly prevalent among the women, as Hümeýda,² a female student of psychological counselling education, stated:

It is very difficult for us to get teaching posts at public schools, but I still wanted to study ... When I got the scholarship to study at the university, I said to myself that I want to be an educated person ... I want to make most of the education I get here in Turkey. When I graduate, I can take volunteer work here in Turkey to help other children who escaped from the war, or I can work in the NGOs or charities to provide counselling to Syrians. When the war is over in Syria, they will need educated people like us to build the country. They will need teachers and I will then go back to my country to serve.

The longing for home and desire to go back when the war is over in Syria was prevalent among the refugees. Ceyda, another female refugee student, expressed that she wants to go back in the future and, if she cannot, then she wants to develop skills and knowledge to be useful to her community and other Syrian children around her. In such contexts, refugees see education as an important capability that could give them some agency to navigate through the challenges, hopes and aspirations they have for the future. Yet, the aspirations of refugees, unlike the findings of some other research (Baker, Irwin, and Freeman 2019; Naidoo et al. 2018), are not primarily driven by the search for better life opportunities,

generating income, or an upwardly mobile aspirational future, but by the desire to make small changes in their own lives and engage with the society and community. Here, the public good role of higher education as a normative concept appears as being ‘accountable to the larger community’ (Marginson 2011, 418), which underlines the idea that participation in higher education also involves developing aspirations and agency to expand the capabilities (opportunities) of others, to work for the social good, and to challenge structural inequalities in an effort to create a more inclusive society. Thus, these narratives highlight the redistributive role of education in the capabilities approach.

This is not to say that refugees do not worry about the insecure future. They are all concerned about the possibility of being trapped in the informal sector with precarious working conditions, but they also show a great deal of concern about their community and the less advantaged people around them. This concern is most often complementary to one’s personal agenda through the understanding that the investment in oneself can lead to an indirect greater good for society. For instance, Cihan, a male student studying to become a teacher, worked as a waiter and shoe-repairer for very low wages to survive before he decided to study. Getting enrolled in the university was not easy for him due to the challenges outlined above. It took him two years to be accepted to a university and, finally, one of his customers in the workplace helped him with the application process and funds. He explained that he did not want to be like many other young refugees around him who are neither in education nor in employment, or who are working far below minimum wages, and wanted to study with the hope that he could make some changes, both in his life and those of others. Despite all the suffering he has experienced as a refugee, he finds condolence in being a source of inspiration to others, the social capability of taking responsibility for his own community, and being respected:

Studying is a better option, you gain skills, it expands your network ... but my dream is coming true, the other Syrians who see that I am studying also start to think that they could study and ask me how they could also get into a university ... They respect me because I am one of the few in the community who is studying at a university. It is like being a role model to the people around you.

In all the narratives, the crucial roles played by teachers at schools, families or people in their communities, the policy of no fees for the Syrians, the charities and NGOs who have provided funds to meet their expenses were important conversion factors that enabled the capability to be educated. Most students expressed that their expectations of generating decent income after graduation would be slim. Instead, their desire to study was mainly related to achieving the functionings of gaining knowledge, skills, and acculturation that could help them mobilise these assets to work with more disadvantaged people around them, using the education they have received to improve other people’s livelihoods.

Navigating higher education spaces: ‘on being included’

It was difficult for many of the students to leave their communities, settle in a new environment and place if they had not been to university. Higher education serves an ideal space for them to navigate safely between the space inside and that outside their communities, whilst the connection with their own communities remains strong (Walker and

Mathebula 2019). This is because they feel less welcome outside as many of them experienced hostility and discrimination in their everyday interactions – from getting on a bus to renting a flat. Ceyda mentioned being verbally harassed and exposed to racist comments on a bus for speaking Arabic, and Selin explained the difficulty of renting a flat with her parents when they first came to Turkey. As these tensions and hostilities between the refugees and host communities seem to increase, for many youths, higher education is a space that mitigates these tensions, reduces inequalities and opens up opportunities for establishing friendly interaction with the locals. For some, like Sare, a female student of biology, university was the only place where she made her first local friends, despite having lived in Turkey for five years, and had friendly encounters with Turkish people:

In everyday life, people explicitly express their dissatisfaction with our presence ... there is xenophobia, but my life at university is very different. Lecturers are very friendly towards us and I made my first Turkish friends here at the university, before that I did not have any ... I do not feel like I am a Syrian here, it is as if I am one of them, we study and have lunch together.

Being able to study at a university is an important enabling conversion factor, broadening their social networks and providing opportunities to develop new friendships, and thus contributing to their valued social capabilities of feeling ‘part of the local Turkish community’ and interacting peacefully with others without shame, harassment, or discrimination as also indicated by other research on refugee education (Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas 2009). Indeed, this was a common shared experience among almost all the refugee students, in contrast to the wider community, where structural and discursive inequalities are reproduced and produced, universities as sites for equity and justice emerged as the places where they received some level of justice and recognition (Cin 2017). Some also spoke about their increased confidence as a result of being exposed to a culture of solidarity and accepting differences, and recognising the inherent value of another. Murat, a male student of engineering, put it this way when speaking about his first encounter with lecturers at the university:

Starting from the first day of my class, we have been very close with our professors, we can drink tea and coffee with them, chat outside the class time, we can go to their offices without feeling resentment. I can ask any question in the classroom and I can even express my views. This gives you a feeling of confidence and freedom.

Murat’s experience of being included, respected and recognised by lecturers, and Sare’s friendships for emotional support, leisure and study, were also echoed by other youths participating in our study and such opportunities provided by a higher education space were all significant conversion factors for them to achieve the capabilities such as self-worth, self-confidence and recognition. These interactions also nurture students’ aspirations and desires for the future. One of the participants, Sevda (a female architecture student) noted:

I started to make future plans, such as opening my own firm with a Turkish friend of mine, only after I started studying and made friends ... By studying, I moved on and walked away from the past, losses and pains that haunted me and started to look at future.

As Hart (2016) argues, supportive environments promote the capability to aspire and provide a starting point to work towards a better life. Also, the aspirations are formed

in interaction with others in a thick social life (Appadurai 2004), influenced by the education and social context one is situated in (Conradie and Robeyns 2013). Students' aspirations often focus on establishing their own businesses, enterprises, kindergartens, or centres and NGOs in an attempt to create employment opportunities and support to other refugees in their communities. These aspirations that are directed towards the public good indeed signal that one can develop such greater good aims and visions when positioned in a context where one feels valued. So, higher education may have the potential for accepting and accommodating those who live on the margins of society.

On the other hand, getting through university is also shaped by access to resources, by being able to afford daily needs and study materials. Many times, in his narratives, Sedat, a male theology student, expressed that he felt culturally and socially alienated because he cannot afford a laptop or to go out socialising with his friends, which restricts his valued functioning of being socially included: 'You meet different people, but it is not easy when you cannot afford what other students have.' Some students also expressed that scholarships were not enough to meet their daily expenses and that they had to spend time in the libraries and queue to use university computers, or rely on their friends' books or printed materials to do their assignments. Although one-to-one personal relations and the university environment were welcoming, lack of adequate material resources and funds caused resentment, the language and lack of prior academic knowledge were barriers for academic achievement and they didn't feel recognised as equals compared to local students. As Şeyma, a preschool education student, put it:

It is extremely difficult for me to understand courses, I need a lot of support, I have some from friends and my tutor, but it is not enough. I need regular tutorials to help me, there are so many skills and so much knowledge that I need to learn. I am so close to give up and drop-out.

Whilst students develop a sense of self-worth and confidence, economic, personal and institutional conversion factors can negatively influence academic achievement at university. Therefore, in addition to providing safe and friendly spaces, universities should also have the relevant policies in place for the educational well-being of students, such as resources, support, and pedagogies that could ensure success and prevent drop-out.

Changing lives: towards gender equality

The potential of higher education to empower refugee students manifested its implications in their personal lives and engagement with others as a form of promoting gender equality. Gender equality is rarely discussed in refugees' university experiences although it is central to the discussions of inclusion and access (Aikman, Halai, and Rubagiza 2011) as it draws out how education can redress multiple intersecting inequalities, promote women's participation in education, and challenge the long-entrenched norms depriving women from accessing the same opportunities as men (Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Walker and Loots 2018). The ways in which higher education shapes and impacts the access and inclusion of women refugees who migrate to more gender-equal societies and step out of their communities become more salient, as displayed in narratives. Many refugees, who in their own terms defined Turkey as being an egalitarian country committed to

gender equality compared to Syria, expressed that going to university was transformative in developing their social capabilities of interacting with the opposite gender without shame and harassment. For instance, Dicle, a female student found the mixed-gender relations at university quite eye-opening:

Here at universities, the relations between men and women are very open, there is no gender segregation. Female students interact with their male peers, go out to the cinema, meet to do the group work for courses or hug another male friend of theirs in public. This sort of behaviour is not acceptable in our culture, even meeting your male friend for a group project would seem inappropriate, but it is not a problem here. When I saw these gender relations, I was very shocked, but now I am used to it. It is good to enjoy the freedom or peace of mind that no one will condemn you for hanging out with a male next to you, or will create inappropriate rumours. (Dicle, female student)

For some students, higher education was a sort of negotiating with their identities within the dominant conservative discourse in their communities that forbids women's visibility in social and public life. Especially for female students, university space was a significant step in developing critical thinking about their wider environment and self-realisation. For instance, Necla, married with a child, talked about how her perception about the role of women in society changed and she stopped wearing a burka after she started to study:

When I first came to Turkey, I was wearing a burka and people were staring at me on the streets ... When I started studying Theology here, the interactions with my classmates, lecturers, and the welcoming environment of the university with many social opportunities helped me to question the traditional roles of women. I started to wear a veil rather than a burka. Now, I think it is better for a woman to be educated, rather than sit at home and do nothing, and I think women should also be as visible as men outside, and work.

Both Dicle and Necla's narratives tell us that critical engagement with peers, lecturers, and the social context of the university that values men and women equally in virtue of being a human being were significant indicators and enablers, leading women to develop the functionings of critical reflection in their lives, recognising their true potential and generating self-worth, and thus expanding both their intellectual and social capability sets. These experiences are indeed echoed in the few studies with a gender dimension on refugee education (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017; Mangan and Winter 2017) that university helped women to develop a more critical understanding of cultural gender norms that devalue women's potential, and empowered them to grow in confidence, opening up a divide between them and others in their community.

Concluding thoughts

In the present paper, we have reflected on the lives of refugee youths, documenting their higher education journey and exploring the conversion factors leading to educational access, well-being, and also the capabilities students value. The multi-dimensionality of the capabilities approach shows that the economic resources, social connection and care and support are helpful in navigating the university. Based on their accounts, the aspects students most value are (i) to be educated, (ii) to be part of the host community, (iii) to achieve, and (iv) to lead a life that is more gender equal and free.

Unlike other studies (Mkwananzi 2018; Mangan and Winter 2017), which mostly tease out the potential economic benefits and employment opportunities refugees can achieve through higher education, in our case, where refugee access to university was supported both by government policies and private initiatives, the prospect of generating income was not articulated to any great extent by the participants. Here, what becomes important are the pathway to university and the skills and knowledge they want to develop through higher education to be able to work for the public good. However, it should be stressed that while intervention and economic resources providing access and participation to marginalised or less advantaged students is important, it does not necessarily mean they participate meaningfully in an education context or experience successful transition to university (Wilson-Strydom 2015). Therefore, we also explored how they got through higher education in an attempt to understand the role of universities in the functionings and capabilities that matter to them. The findings suggest universities do indeed have the potential to compensate for the inequalities refugees face in society. Having experienced xenophobia and discrimination in their everyday lives, students recount experiences of how university life offered them a safe option to be included on par with others, socialise with people outside their community and develop friendships based on mutual care and trust, which in turn made them more self-confident individuals and developed their aspirations. For some, higher education was important to move on, leave traumatic experiences behind, and normalise everyday life. This is not to say that universities had inclusive curriculum, pedagogies, policies and structures that did not alienate them. Some talked about how the economic constraints of not having any money to go out, buy a laptop or study materials affected their university life, or of not having the institutional support and educational arrangements for them to succeed in their studies. This underlines that the institutional support of language, tutorials and appropriate pedagogies are what students need for academic achievement.

Yet, what came out from our research is that attending university was per se a very valuable and capability-multiplying experience for the youths who have been in protracted crisis. The social capability of recognition, stepping outside their own community, being visible in social life and having friendly exchanges with locals was what they valued most. Particularly for women, higher education opened up opportunities (e.g. mixed-gender relations, transforming their gendered identities) that they were culturally deprived of, which contributed to their capacity to construct a life they valued living, as in the case of Necla, who stopped wearing a burka and changed her mind about the traditional roles of women, or that of Selin, who wanted to cultivate and educate herself.

Although it is not our intention to generalise the findings of these 15 narratives, they help us elucidate that higher education, as a valued capability, has great potential to build individual capability sets, turn the resources at the disposal of refugees into valued functionings, strengthen agency, and enlarge other people's choices, as stressed in the purposes of development (Haq 2003). Thus, these narratives show that education is inclusive to the extent that it offers spaces of justice and equality to disadvantaged communities, transforms their lives, and raises individuals who are able to secure and distribute diverse and incommensurable goods and capabilities to other members of the community. Lastly, these experiences also posit that higher education can produce sustainable policies for integration, and transform the socially perceived image of refugees as 'passive, vulnerable and traumatised victims'.

Notes

1. Although we use the term refugee in this paper, Syrian nationals who came to Turkey after 28 April 2011 due to the civil war are provided with temporary protection (TP) by the Government of Turkey. This means they are not sent back to Syria unless they themselves request to do so.
2. Pseudonyms are used in order to not reveal the identities of the participants.

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