

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) of Two Higher Education Systems for Refugee Youth: Turkey and Spain

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) plays a key role in helping refugee youth build stable and productive futures. This paper examines the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) of HE policies for refugees in two Mediterranean countries: Turkey and Spain. Through qualitative policy analysis, the study evaluates scholarly literature and international reports within the SWOT framework. Findings show that Spain has a decentralized HE system, where policies vary across autonomous communities, while Turkey follows a more centralized approach under the Council of Higher Education, though admission requirements still differ between universities. In terms of strengths, Turkey's system makes diploma recognition easier and exempts Syrian refugees from tuition fees, whereas Spain offers university-led support programs that include tuition assistance, legal aid, and language courses. However, challenges persist. In Turkey, refugees encounter admission barriers such as limited quotas and the International Student Exam requirement. In Spain, high validation fees, long processing times, and proof of prior education make university access difficult. Additionally, financial difficulties, language barriers, and a lack of clear information about HE opportunities remain common issues in both countries. Given the protracted nature of refugee displacement, developing inclusive HE policies may not only improve access to education for refugee students but also bring cultural and economic benefits to host societies.

Keywords: SWOT analysis, higher education, refugee education, Spain, Turkey

Introduction

Recent statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024) indicate that the number of refugees has reached 37.9 million globally. Although the main priority for host countries is to ensure safety and a sense of normalcy for those fleeing war and conflict, facilitating their access to education is also crucial for successful integration (Hansen, 2018; Arar, 2021). While HE is crucial for personal and societal growth (Taylor & Kaur, 2012; Aydin et al., 2019), it remains largely inaccessible for refugees (UNHCR, 2024). Research on HE for refugees has also been relatively limited (Arar et al., 2020; Arar, 2021). One of the reasons is the lack of systematic data on the educational qualifications of young refugees, although nearly half of the global

refugee population falls within the 18–34 age range (Yıldız, 2019; Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020). Another challenge is that the availability and accessibility of HE institutions are regulated at the national level in host countries. Hence, practices vary widely, creating inconsistent opportunities for refugee students seeking to begin or continue their HE.

This conference paper utilizes a SWOT analysis to examine the HE systems in two refugee-receiving Mediterranean countries: Spain and Turkey. Both countries have received a large number of refugees via the Mediterranean Sea in recent years (Martín-Ruel, 2021). Additionally, Turkey is known as a bridge between the West and the East, serving as a key transit point for refugees to Europe (Güngör & Soysal, 2021; Kondakci et al., 2023), as well as being the second country that hosts the largest number of refugees since 2011 (UNHCR, 2024).

Acknowledging the significance of HE for refugees, this paper explores the following research question: What are the HE policies for young refugee adults in Spain and Turkey?

Methodology

The present paper is based on a qualitative policy analysis. To achieve this, scholarly articles published by Marcu (2018), Estrada Moreno and Palma-García (2020), Güngör and Soysal (2021), and Kondakci et al. (2023), along with international reports by UNHRC and the OECD, were collected. These resources were analyzed within the SWOT framework, which allows researchers to evaluate positive and negative aspects of the given environment (Yilmaz & Şensin, 2021). Originally developed for business (Wehrich, 1982), SWOT analysis is now used across various fields, including education. By evaluating both internal and external factors, SWOT supports researchers and policymakers in the decision-making process. The framework consists of four main elements: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. By using SWOT, I aim to evaluate the efficiency of the HE policies for young refugee adults by comparing Spain and Turkey.

General overview of the HE systems in Spain and Turkey

Spain

The Spanish HE system consists of 89 universities, with 50 of them being public and 39 of them being private. To enter public universities, Spanish students who complete high school (*Bachillerato*) for 2 years are required to sit a national university entrance exam known as *Selectividad*, which evaluates core subjects such as Spanish Language and History and specialized subjects relevant to the student's intended degree.

When it comes to refugees in HE, Spain only had a small number of students from foreign nationalities before the announcement of the refugee crisis in 2015. Even after the refugee crisis was declared, the Spanish government did not implement refugee-specific regulations in HE. That means, refugees are also subject to similar regulations to the other international students who want to study in HE. Moreover, HE requirements vary across Spain, as each university sets its admission criteria. In addition to Spanish language proficiency, the majority of the universities have common requirements as follows: (a) having specific international test results or a school graduation diploma as

per the Spanish guidelines, and (b) a formal recognition of the previous studies acquired in the country of origin.

Public scholarships and grants managed by the Spanish Ministry of Education or regional governments are available to refugees. However, these scholarships often have eligibility criteria (e.g., legal residency status, specific academic records) that can be challenging for refugees to meet if they lack documentation or have not yet completed the asylum process. Certain universities, often through partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private foundations, offer scholarships or fee waivers for refugee students (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020). Based on Estrada Moreno and Palma-García's (2020) study, the universities in Spain play a key role in refugee protection, providing university housing, food, and tuition and participants viewed the university as the best pathway to social integration, as they were treated as students rather than as part of a refugee population.

Turkey

The Turkish HE system consists of 129 public universities, 75 private universities, and 4 vocational schools of HE. For Turkish citizens, admission relies on a highly competitive, nationwide university entrance exam, while international student entry varies by university. Typically, applicants need to hold a Turkish high school diploma or an equivalent qualification, and each university announces admission criteria for international students. Some universities require students to take the International Student Exam (ISE), assessing skills such as reading and mathematics. Although most of these exams are administered in Turkish, a growing number of universities also offer them in English, French, Arabic, and Russian. Other universities accept international test scores such as the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and ACT (American College Testing). Additionally, students must prove language proficiency in the language of instruction.

When it comes to refugees, starting in 2012, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) allowed students from war-affected countries (i.e., Syria and Egypt) to enroll as 'special students' without official documents, mainly at seven universities near the Syrian border (Güngör & Soysal, 2021). In 2013, the Council of Ministers waived tuition fees for Syrian students pursuing daytime or open education programs, and the Higher Education Executive Board expanded lateral transfer options for foreign nationals from Syria and Egypt, provided they met certain criteria. Nonetheless, to graduate from a university, students must transition from 'special student' to regular student status, a process that requires them to submit certain documents and fulfill additional conditions (Kondakci et al., 2023).

Another legislation removed tuition fees for Syrian students admitted to Turkish public universities as of 2013 (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018). Scholarships are also available to Syrian refugee students in Turkey, but these are mainly funded by the European Union (EU) and international NGOs. One example is the "Syria Support Scholarship" program, launched in late 2015, with 85% EU funding and 15% national (Güngör & Soysal, 2021). This financial support plays a crucial role in enabling Syrian refugees to overcome economic barriers and continue their education within Turkey's HE system.

SWOT analysis and comparison of countries

Strengths

Both Spain and Turkey are strong advocates of ‘education for all’, allowing refugees to enter universities once they meet specific requirements, often regulated by the individual universities. Turkey provides exemplary HE practices for refugee students. Accordingly, refugee students generally do not face significant challenges in obtaining equivalency or diploma recognition, and they find university application processes straightforward (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Kondakci et al., 2023). For instance, unlike other international students, Syrian students were not required to validate official documents, recognizing the difficulties they faced in obtaining them from Syria. Another noteworthy example by Turkey is that ISE was initially offered only in Turkish and English, but was later expanded to include Arabic, Russian, French, and German to accommodate Turkey’s growing refugee population. However, not all universities administer or accept ISE scores, creating inconsistencies in the admission process for international and refugee students. Despite this, the expansion of exam language options is a significant step in improving access to Turkish HE for refugees (Güngör & Soysal, 2021).

In Spain, once the asylum procedure is completed and acknowledged by the government, the refugee students can have economic support up to 24 months, however, this does not apply to university studies, thus, refugees are expected to cover their own expenses. On the other hand, to decrease this level of burden, some Spanish universities (e.g., the University of Barcelona, Complutense University of Madrid, and University of Sevilla) (Marcu, 2018) have their own refugee support programs to cover tuition fees, legal and psychological assistance, and preparatory language courses. Estrada Moreno and Palma-García (2020) found positive outcomes from the Refugee Student Support Plan at the University of Málaga, highlighting the significant efforts of social workers in supporting training and employability, which helped young refugees gain meaningful experiences.

Weaknesses

Both countries initially adopted a non-discriminatory approach by treating refugee students as regular international students. However, this approach presented challenges in the long run, as refugee students face distinct difficulties such as language barriers, credential recognition issues, and a lack of necessary enrollment documents (Kondakci et al., 2023). Based on Kondakci et al.’s (2023) study, Syrian refugees in Turkish HE face multiple challenges, beginning with admission barriers, such as the ISE requirement and limited quotas for foreign students, which restrict their chances of securing a place in universities. Due to these difficulties, many prioritize gaining entry into any available program rather than their preferred field. Financial struggles further complicate their education, as many depend on Turkey Scholarships, and they mostly do not work while studying due to legal restrictions. Legal mobility restrictions also prevent them from moving freely between cities in search of better educational or job opportunities.

In Spain, one of the major weaknesses of the HE system for refugees is the requirement to provide proof of prior education and diplomas. Considering that these persons flee war under extraordinary conditions, it is unlikely that they would carry legal

and official diplomas during their escape. Thus, expecting refugees to prove their previous qualifications without offering alternative options does not give equal academic opportunities. Furthermore, the fees associated with validating previous academic credentials in Spain can be high, making it unaffordable for many refugees. It might also take up to 2-3 years for refugees' past education to be officially recognized in Spain (Marcu, 2018). To overcome these challenges, the Integra Project, funded by UNHCR, offers scholarships to refugee students. 11 universities in Spain have also implemented measures to facilitate refugee students' access to HE (Marcu, 2018). They offer language courses and initiatives such as the "Student-Refugees Welcome Program", which aims to support refugees to continue their studies through a special application process. However, these programs remain limited in scope and are not available nationwide. As a result, it may not meet the broader needs of refugee students due to the small number of participating universities and a lack of financial support.

In Spain, refugee students often feel lost due to a lack of information (Marcu, 2018). In some academic contexts, refugees were not informed about the requirements for university admission. Additionally, academic staff were not available in languages other than Spanish. However, the initiative taken by the University of Málaga, in which social workers assist refugee students in navigating educational and social systems and ensuring their access to necessary resources and support services, has proven to be successful. This highlights the importance of the guidance and support that refugee students require (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020).

From a bureaucratic perspective, there has been no consensus in HEs to offer certain criteria, hence, each case is handled individually by the Spanish authorities, resulting in long processing times and delays (Marcu, 2018). Spain's HE system is somewhat decentralized, meaning policies can differ across its autonomous communities, and refugee students navigate a decentralized admission process governed by foreign student regulations. Consequently, levels of support and the specific procedures for qualification recognition and admission may vary from region to region. In contrast, the CoHE in Turkey sets the overall regulatory framework; however, individual universities still establish specific admission criteria.

Another major weakness in both countries' HE systems is the language barrier (Yıldız, 2019; Arar et al., 2020; Şahin & Çelik, 2020). In Turkey, most HE programs require Turkish proficiency, but language courses focus on grammar rather than practical skills (Kondakci et al., 2023). In Spain, refugees often lack access to preparatory Spanish courses. While some universities offer language support, students still struggle with ineffective course designs as existing programs focus on basic language skills instead of academic proficiency (Marcu, 2018; Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020).

Opportunities

A key opportunity is to expand the labor force by integrating emotionally and academically prepared refugee young adults into the workforce (Kouni, 2018). Both Spain and Turkey can benefit from the skilled refugee graduates who may contribute to economic growth. In Turkey, the large number of Syrian refugees, many of whom are of university age, presents an opportunity to fill gaps in sectors experiencing labor shortages, such as manufacturing (Varol, 2024). Meanwhile, Spain has the third-largest level of labour shortage among EU economies (OECD, 2024), particularly in industries such as hospitality, sales, and construction (Carrillo-Tudela et al., 2024). Through

improved and inclusive HE practices, both countries can transform what is often seen as a ‘burden’ (Türk & Garlick, 2016) into an economic asset.

Threats

The language barrier remains a primary challenge. Without adequate and structured language instruction, refugee students may struggle academically, which may affect their transition into employment. They might experience loneliness and isolation due to limited proficiency in the local language (Arslan & Kılınç, 2021). Additionally, the lack of mental and psychosocial support, along with the (un)welcoming environments (Kalocsányiová et al., 2024), may hinder their long-term success.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations in applying the SWOT framework to evaluate HE policies. The framework may not fully reflect and may oversimplify the dynamic nature of policies, which are influenced by political, economic, and social factors. Additionally, the categorization of SWOT can be subjective, as it relies on available sources and the researcher’s interpretation, highlighting the need for complementary analytical methods in future research.

Conclusion

This conference paper investigates the HE policies for refugees in Spain and Turkey through a SWOT analysis. Despite differences in national frameworks, with Spain’s decentralized approach compared to Turkey’s more centralized CoHE structure, both countries grant refugees the right to pursue HE. This inclusive policy presents an opportunity to address labor market shortages. However, significant weaknesses exist, such as the requirement for official documentation and high fees for credential recognition, particularly in Spain, as well as limited special-status programs and inadequate language and financial support in both contexts. These challenges often prevent refugees from accessing or benefiting from HE. In the Spanish context, this paper suggests establishing alternative systems to evaluate refugee students’ knowledge and abilities for university admission, similar to the approach implemented in Turkey. Additionally, many refugees are not aware of their rights or how to successfully apply to the right universities. To address this, information/call centers could be established in both countries to provide necessary guidance. Moreover, collecting comprehensive local and national data, including the number of young refugee adults ready for HE, refugee applications to universities, professional backgrounds, and language proficiency, can help develop better and more sustainable integration strategies. Language support for refugee young adults should also go beyond grammar instruction to a more holistic and developmental approach to enhance their educational success. Existing literature often portrays refugees as a ‘rapid shock’ to host countries (Salehyan, 2019), instantly impacting their economies and politics. However, many refugee crises are long-term and persistent, as seen in the case of Turkey. Therefore, suggested measures that Spain and Turkey may take would not only benefit refugee students but also contribute to long-term advantages for host societies in terms of cultural and economic prosperity.

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