"I don't feel like a refugee. I'm here as a student": Exploring Syrian Displaced-Background Students' Transitional Process in Private Mexican Higher Education

Photo by author: Traditional altar "Día de los Muertos", Syrian students participated in its elaboration.November 2019.

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Abstract:

Humanitarian crises caused by natural disasters or human reasons have hampered the access of generations of young adults to higher education. The aftermath of the Syrian conflict in 2011 led to the emergence of various initiatives, mostly set in neighboring countries and the global north, for refugees and displaced populations to pursue higher education studies. Policymakers and academics have focused their efforts to identify the obstacles to access higher education in emergencies contexts. Nevertheless, there is little attention concerning the students that have taken part in such initiatives.

In 2015, the Mexican non-governmental organization the "Miga Project" offered scholarships to displaced and Syrian refugees to study at private universities. This thesis seeks to understand the Syrian students' challenges with the organization and their transitional process through private tertiary education. The research is conducted through semi-structured interviews of seven Syrian students, participant observations, and photographs collected during fieldwork between June and December 2019 in Macondo City, Mexico. The analysis is based on Pierre Bourdieu's analytical tools on habitus, capitals, and field, Anthony Giddens' conceptualization on agency, and theoretical lenses on transitional processes. Hence, this study concluded there are primary dynamics derived from the Syrian students' habitus in connection to the language training program, the students' capitals and socio-economic inequalities faced in the private educational system, and the exercise of agency in their transitional process into tertiary education.

Keywords: Syrian students, Mexico, transitional process, private higher education, forced displacement, habitus.

I was happy to be selected by the Miga Project,
but I was sometimes scared
because when you have all the happiness,
you get scared, you know?
Malak, Syrian student, 27 years-old

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Abbreviations

EiE –Education in Emergencies

HE – Higher Education

HEIs- Higher Education Institutions

MENA- Middle East and North Africa

NGO- Non-Governmental Organization

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNHCR – United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees

Table of contents

1. Introduction

In Mexico, the famous cultural celebration "Día de Los Muertos" (Day of the Dead) takes place during the first days of November. A few days after these festivities, I found myself looking at a traditional altar in the Miga Project's[1] headquarters in Macondo City, Mexico. The cover photo of this thesis is the reflection of this altar that Syrian students, the Project's team members, Venezuelan guests, and community members decorated intending to share national traditions and remember their loved ones. Noticing its details, and imagining the amount of work they put into it, I thought about the lives of the family and friends of the Syrian beneficiaries represented on this altar. While touring the office and the students' residence, I reflected on how the Syrian conflict was one of the reasons these students were here.

Human conflict and natural disasters have forced young generations to suspend their studies on higher education (HE) levels. In March 2011, Bashar Al-Assad's government's violent repression against peaceful protests led Syria to a perpetuated armed scenario resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crises in the XXI century. After the armed conflict started, the Syrian students never expected that their homeland would sink into war for almost a decade now, let alone they did not imagine they would end up in Mexico and study their bachelors in Spanish in private universities. During the first days of my fieldwork, I met Kausar, a joyful young Syrian sponsored by the Miga Project. Kausar planned to finish the Spanish language training program and enroll at a university in Colibri City. Because of my background as a bachelor's graduate from a private university in Mexico, I was able to talk about some common experiences of studying in this educational system with the Syrian students. At the end of my stay, I promised Kausar to meet again in the future to explore Colibri City together and visit places frequented by university students. Because of the social and political circumstances of their arrival in Mexico, the Syrian beneficiaries face different challenges than Mexican students. Although all of them stay in Mexico under a student permit, they have a background of leaving their homes under forced circumstances. I was

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[1] The names of the project, cities and participants are pseudonyms.

intrigued to hear the dynamics these Syrian students experience during their educational transition process to Mexican universities sponsored by the Miga Project.

Mexico is a country of origin, destination, transit, and return of migration flows (Ruiz 2016, 1). Over the last decade, the Central American transit migration flows have increased on their route to the North American countries. In 2016, there was an estimation of 400,000 migrants arriving in the country from, mainly, Central American countries (Ibid.). However, in the same year, 6,000 migrants from Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Senegal, and Somalia arrived at Mexico's northern border (Lara 2018, 134). To the intensification of these migration movements, Larisa Lara points out the ineffective state's response to establish policies to improve the integration and personal development of the migrant populations (Ibid.,133). Legally, article 44 of the Mexican Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum Law guarantees legal access to health, education, and protection of their rights just as the nationals (DOF 2014, 13). Despite the constitutional obligations, there is still a significant void from the Mexican government to respond noticeably to the forced displacement waves.

As a consequence of the government's ineffectiveness, several NGOs and civil society initiatives have emerged in Mexico to assist the needs of different migration flows (Casillas 1991, 77). Institutional corruption and drug violence frame the performance of the NGOs as well as the lives of the displaced and refugee populations (Walker 2014, 138; Lara 2018, 134). Working under this context, the Miga Project functions as a NGO attempting to open tertiary educational opportunities to a Middle Eastern community, which the Mexican policymakers and other national organizations have not included. Plus, there is a lack of interest, from the governmental and public spheres, due to the geographical and political distance to conflicts in the MENA region (Wolf 2019b, 109). Additionally, the narrow donation culture in Mexico and the lack of governmental efforts to cooperate with these initiatives limits the space for the community to actively involved and support NGOs and civil society organizations (Ibid.).

In an attempt to offer young adults with forced displaced[2] and refugee[3] background enrollment in higher education institutions[4] (HEIs), Taylor Mendez founded the Mexican NGO the Miga Project in 2015. The founder is a young Mexican who had worked in refugee camps in Afghanistan and Iraq, who sought to sponsor an educational opportunity for young Syrian men and women and place them in Mexican universities. Based on a selection process, interviews, and review of documentation, the Miga Project selects the candidates. The organization is also responsible for the travel expenses of the routes from Syria to Mexico (*see Appendix 1*). The Project also covers administrative costs such as permits, passports, certifications, tuition fees, and a monthly financial scholarship. Since its establishment, the Miga Project has evolved significantly (*see Appendix 2*). At the time I conducted this research, they sponsored thirteen Syrian students.

The Miga Project has agreements with diverse private Mexican universities to provide full academic scholarships covering Syrian students' tuition fees. In the last 30 years in Mexico, the number of HEIs has increased, although 72% of the HEIs are private, these institutions vary in costs and elite settings (OECD 2019, 52). Access to these institutions remains highly social and economically selective for the national population (Post 2000, 159-160; Villa 2015, 5). The elitists' structures of private HEIs are a reflection of Mexican society's class stratification (Post 2000, 145; Hicks 2017, 112-113). Mostly national students coming from wealthy households can afford the tuition fees. Therefore, the hierarchical fragmentation derived from the Mexican HE system reinforces the social and economic class disadvantages and inequalities (Lever 2015, 5). Thus, in this institutional setting, the Syrian

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[2] UNHCR defines Internally Displace Persons (IDPs) as: *[…] people or groups of people who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an international border."* (UNHCR 2018, 63).

[3] A refugee is a legal term defined under the 1951 Geneva Convention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This status is granted to: *"[…] a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him— or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution"* (UNHCR 2011, 3).

[4] Compared to 36% of the global population, only 3% of the refugees worldwide enroll in a higher education program (UNHCR 2019, 37).

students sponsored by the Miga Project are immersed facing their social background with the inequalities of the educational system.

1.1 Purpose of the study

There are diverse efforts in academia to focus on the stories of young adults who have experienced forced displacement, sponsorship from governmental, international institutions or NGOs, and enrollment in HEIs in Europe, North America, and Australia (Ramsay & Baker 2019, 76). In the same lines, there is an increase of research concerning the policy and practical barriers for young students to access these initiatives (Avery & Said 2017, 112; Bariscil 2017, 145; Aristorenas et al. 2018, 130-137; Al-Mabuk & Alrebh 2018, 59; Al-Rousan et al. 2018, 197; Bircan 2018, 168). However, there is a gap of research concerning young adults who are studying in HEIs through these initiatives (Naidoo et al. 2018, xxi; Baker et al. 2019, 6-8). John Field denominates this intermediate space as a transitional process in adult learning (2012, 4). In the case of Miga Project, there is lack of in-depth discussion concerning the dynamic derived from the students' background role in the transition of the students into private universities. Hence, I argue that exploring the dynamics between transitional process into HE and the students' background contributes to filling the gap to analyze the challenges displaced young populations face during this stage.

My research seeks to add to the academic gap on transitional processes of displaced-background students into private HEIs sponsored by an NGO. With the increase of forced migration waves in Mexico from Central American countries, less visible communities arriving from other regions, such as the MENA, are left out of the academic and policy debates. Thus, my thesis adds to this gap by looking at Syrian displaced students within the Mexican state's political negligence and other NGOs and civil organizations. Bearing in mind the gaps identified above, my thesis aims to recognize the role and experiences of Syrian students, from a displaced-background, in relation to the Miga Project during their transitional process into private Mexican HEIs. To achieve this aim, my specific objectives include:

- To analyze the Syrian participants' agency through their transitional process into private HEIs sponsored by the Miga Project.

- To identify the social and economic dynamics Syrian students' encounter within the Mexican private HEIs.
- To examine the Syrian students' use of the Miga Project on their transitional process into higher education.

Thus, the research question that guides this thesis is:

How do Syrian students from a displaced-background experience the "Miga Project" as a transitional space to private Mexican higher education?

1.1 Delimitations

The Syrian students who agreed to participate in my study were accepted regardless of their gender, career, time in Mexico, Spanish level, or age. However, I recognize there is gender bias since most were male participants. Due to the aim of this thesis, I did not include the Syrian students who have dropped out of the Miga Project. Because my research seeks to explore the processes of students enrolled in universities, I decided to not discuss on the documentation and travel challenges the Syrian participants faced on their application process into this program. My thesis seeks to provide a delimited and individualized understanding of the seven participants to avoid the homogenization approach of displaced populations as one single mass. Also, I do not aim to generalize the experience of the 13 Syrian students within the Miga Project. Concerning the interviews, because I do not speak Arabic or Kurdish, I gave the participants the option to be interviewed in English or Spanish.

1.2 Thesis Outline

Following this introduction, in Chapter 2, I discuss the literature review concerning the refugee label and its connection with access to higher education. In addition to current research on efforts on higher education for displacement, including the responses from Latin America, and the studies focused on transitional experiences of mainly refugee and background students into HE education initiatives. In Chapter 3, I justify the methodological approach and features of this thesis. Chapter 4 concerns the theoretical framework; I discuss theory concerning habitus, capitals, field, agency, and transition. In Chapter 5, where I review three overarching themes concerning language training, class and social inequalities, and

agency through tertiary education. Chapter 6, the analysis, I discuss and relate these three themes in connection to my theory. Chapter 7, I present my conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

The present literature review is divided into four subsections that provide significant academic debates concerning higher education for displaced background students. The first section explores the connection between the refugee label and its relevance to access higher education, as well as the framework of education in emergencies. The second subsection looks at the current research on efforts concerning tertiary education for displacement populations established in the global north[5]. In the third subsection, I expose the initiatives for higher education from the global south, including the responses from the Latin America region. The last subsection focuses on the research concerning transitional experiences of mainly refugee and displaced background students into HE education initiatives.

2.1 The Refugee Label's Weight

During this thesis, the terms refugee and displaced appear regularly. I find it necessary to provide clarity to these terms to understand their relation with the HE context. Beyond the legal refugee status, there are other socially constructed categories of human mobility. UNHCR's labels include economic migrants, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, returned refugees, stateless and other persons of concern (2018, 63). As argued by Zetter, these categorizations, derived from policymakers and international organizations, led to a fragmented and ambiguous framework of protection (2015, 65). These groups' claims can be as legitimate as the refugee label, yet they might be dismissed and lost in this massive imaginary labeling process[6] (Zetter 2007, 182). Derived from this complex process, I use Susan Martin et al.'s definition of displacement referring to individuals "forced to move by

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[5] I am aware of the controversies using global north and global south terms. I understand these categories beyond a geographical categorization. I refer to the Global north as the economic and political hegemonies. Meanwhile, Global south as settings that share institutional and cultural practices derived from colonization, imperialism, and economic disadvantage. For further discussion, see: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena, and Patricia Daley. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of South-South Relations*. 1st Ed. London: Routledge.

[6] For further discussion, see: Zetter, Roger. 2007. "More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20 (2): 172–92.

events beyond their direct control […] may be temporary or it might become protracted" (2014, 5). Following this understanding, I use this term displacement for my research to include the individuals who have received the refugee status. Nevertheless, I will use the term refugee based on its legal distinction when other authors apply it and when its use is relevant to the context.

The refugee label has framed and limited the conception of a refugee as a victim and helpless agent, denying any individuality and converting into a silent mass, plus the portrayal of constant suffering and need (Rajaram 2002, 251; Zeus 2011, 268). Consequently, unwanted migration populations are decontextualized as helpless, uneducated, and unfortunate victims (Szczepanik 2016, 29). Similarly, Shawna Shapiro signals one of the main consequences refugee-background students face while being exposed to these decontextualized narratives is their resilience, and agency attributes get lost in the labor market and educational spheres (2018, 3). In similar arguments, international organizations and researchers argue that policymakers, the state, media, universities, and donors overlook the intellectual and working skills of young adults in a displacement context (UNHCR 2003, 4; Zeus 2011, 271; Betts 2010, 23). At the same time, Prem Rajaram criticizes the top-down analyses about the refugees' experiences and supports an individual approach that considers necessities and particularities of each voice (2002, 249-252). Therefore, I argue that a form to humanize and counter the refugee label in the HE environment is not only necessary to consider a bottom-up approach, but also to recognize the intellectual value and skills each individual brings to this context.

2.1.2 Higher Education in Emergencies

Education, at any level, is crucial for displaced individuals to enhance their agency and integrate constructively and actively in the host society, helping them to regain a sense of agency and improve their resilience process (Wieviorka 2014, 635). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has provided an optimistic approach to HE. According to the organization, HE can be translated into the formation of future leaders and peacebuilders in host and communities of origin, as well as reduce their dependency on humanitarian aid (UNHCR 2019, 41-43). Additionally, the psychosocial benefits from a complete education allow children and the youth to build a future and be productive members

of society (Ibid.,1-2). Ideally, tertiary education institutions will enable the production of knowledge and free space of thought and expression for individuals as well as the promotion of diversity, social integration, and citizenship between refugees and the host community (Zeus 2011, 259; Bircan 2018,162). Yet, there are discrepancies about the extent of these benefits.

On the one hand, Alastair Ager and Alison Strang argue that on a theoretical level, education is a crucial element for integration processes and the comfortability into new societies (2008, 172). On the other hand, Richard Alba and Mary C. Waters' book "The Next Generation" challenge these arguments (2011). Through quantitative and qualitative studies on second generations of migrants, the authors exposed that accessing HE in the United States and Europe occurs on unequal systems, facing social disadvantages questioning the ideal of schools as an encouraging environment (Alba & Waters 2011, 27). Although the authors base their research on second generations, their research criticizes the viability of accessing education to immigrant background students. Thus, I argue that similar research is required to understand the tangible effects of HE on displaced and refugee background students.

The UNHCR and diverse humanitarian organizations facilitate some of these necessities. Yet, these are a short term response. Additionally, in either refugee camps or host country settings, decades could pass for displaced populations to access long term rights as employment, citizenship, mobility, and education services (Ullah 2014, 95). According to Katy Long, the refugee regime durable solutions, repatriation, local integration, and resettlement, are still not providing a dignified and secure life (2014, 5). This failure to guarantee political inclusion should lead to re-thinking better solutions and forms of protection. Diverse authors signal an increase in governments and civil society organizations to recognize education as the fourth pillar of humanitarian response (Sinclair 2001, 2; Zeus 2011, 257; Sengupta & Blessinger 2018, 4). Thus, since 2000, the idea of education in emergencies (EiE) has been to facilitate access to educational systems to children in volatile situations, regardless of their legal status (Dryden-Peterson 2011, 19). Hence, higher education in emergencies for displaced and refugees could be one of the new areas for re-thinking long term solutions.

Sarah Dryden-Peterson, one of the prominent academics exploring policy level implications of EiE, argues that even though this theme has become a significant priority for some governments and organizations, its results, as well as its challenges, remain unexplored (2011, 54). To this, Tuba Bircan points out the attention and investment for younger adults enrollment in HE is comparatively lower than projects and efforts concerning primary and secondary levels (2018, 162). Even if young adults could experience similar risk situations like the children population, governmental and academic agendas dismiss the necessities, abilities, and aspirations of young displaced and refugee background populations. The efforts to place HE as a global objective under the context of emergencies were seen until the 2030 United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals as part of Objective Four (UN n.d.). This panorama indicates a late response from governments and humanitarian organizations to create policies concerning scholarships and programs to guarantee tertiary education to refugees and displaced people (Bircan 2018, 173). Therefore, several decades have passed not only for tertiary education to achieve international recognition, but to move on from declarations and rhetoric into tangible actions. Georgina Ramsay & Sally Baker distinguish that since 2011, there is primary growth of research and initiatives concerning tertiary education and forced migration (2019, 60). In the last decade, academics and policy makers point out that young displaced and refugee populations find in HEIs a getaway mechanism not only for educational purposes but also to rebuild their lives.

2.2 Higher Education in Emergencies: Initiatives from the global north

In their meta-coping study, Ramsay and Baker trace back the growing interest of HE for refugees and displaced between the 1999s and the 2000s (2019, 71). It is a reflection of migration emergencies from the post-Cold war conflicts, mainly from South Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Burma, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, Eritrea, South Africa, Romania, Serbia, Buthan, Bosnia (Dryden-Peterson 2011, 17; Ramsay and Baker 2019, 71). Yet, Elizabeth Buckner & Mozynah Nofal argue that the 2011 Syrian outbreak was a turning point for educational sectors to become a priority in the governmental and non-governmental levels (2019, 56-58). The current waves

of young Syrian population[7] searching for HE programs have gained attention in the policy level and academia. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh points out that a hypervisibility effect took place when, in the eyes of the global north states, Syrians became the "perfect refugees"[8] (2016, 459). In similar lines, research in Europe by Seth Holmes and Heide Castañena remark that highly educated Syrian refugees are perceived in the public space to be more entitled to receive protection and help (2016, 17-18). Therefore, the hypervisibility of the Syrian conflict brought a considerable establishment of new projects in global north settings.

Various northern governments and universities offer scholarships camp-based or with the opportunities to study abroad (Crea 2016, 14). To name a few are the Albert Einstein German Academic Initiative (DAFI), the Student Refugee Progam at World University Service of Canada (WUSC), the Windle Trust International, the Australia Catholic University (ACU) program (Ibid.). Others, such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) launched the Platform for Education in Emergencies Response, offering Syrian applicants contacts to programs from worldwide universities, institutions, and organizations (IIE n.d.). Sally Baker's annotated bibliography on HE for refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds demonstrates that northern scholars and institutions dominate not only this field of study but also the initiatives (Baker 2019, ii). To address this gap, in the upcoming subsections, I discuss the global south context where HE in emergency initiatives take place.

2.3 Global south initiatives for Higher Education in Emergencies

During my review of books, reports, and articles, I found that the majority of research on HE programs take place in Australia, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, among other global north countries (Roque et al. 2018, 222; Ramsay and Baker 2019, 76; Robertson 2013, 15). By contrast, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that

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[7] In the case of the Syrian population prior to the conflict, there is a rough estimate of 110, 000 individuals with qualifications to enroll in tertiary education, in the age range between 18-22 years old (Aristorenas et al., 2018, 130).

[8] Further discussion, see: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena. 2016. "Representations of Displacement from the Middle East and North Africa". *Public Culture*. 28 (3): 457-473.

although programs from the global south are not new in practice, they are "absent from the literature" (2015, 4). The author criticizes that non-northern humanitarian responses are mainly "neglected" in academia debates (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 14). The attention of EiE to tackle the 2011 Syrian migration waves derived on studies focusing primarily, but not limited, in the educational policy response from neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Avery and Said 2017; Al-Rousan et al. 2018; Al-Mabuk and Alrebh 2018).

Although research has increased on the experiences of diverse displaced backgrounds enrolled in tertiary programs and initiatives in the MENA region, other Southern contexts are missing in the academic and policy levels. In this line, a barely mentioned reference in academia is the Cuban governmental scholarship program for MENA refugee students between the 1970s until the early 2000s. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh is the main academic who analyzes generational experiences of mainly Palestinian and Saharawi refugees' experiences studying in Cuban HEIs. Her research describes as partially successful the viability and enrollment of diverse MENA students, including Syrians, in the Cuban HE system (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 23). Despite the fact this program is no longer in existence, her research demonstrates a precedent of higher education initiatives for MENA refugees in a Caribbean context. Recently, Liliana Jubilut explores the Brazilian universities' response towards refugees, denouncing the lack of inclusion of Latin American responses and academic research within the Anglophone academia (2020, 243). Jubilut evaluates the network of twenty-two Brazilian universities that, in 2019, started flexible measures to allow refugee-background students to enroll in their programs, such as affordable fees, reserved spaces, and separate admission exams (2020, 240). Although her research does not specify the place of origin of the refugees, it provides evidence of the latest attempts on the academic and policy level in Latin America to open spaces for higher education in emergencies.

2.3.1 The Latin American Response to the 2011 Syrian Migration Waves

Even though my thesis does not pretend to do a discussion on the state level approach, to situate the Mexican initiative the Miga Project, one has to bear in mind a brief scenario of

Latin American countries' response to the 2011 Syrian migration flows. Because in academia, there is still a limited in-depth work concerning the results of some Latin American governmental responses, Cecilia Baeza's (2015) brief review is an essential reference. Between 2013 and 2015, a policy of "welcoming" to Syrian refugees became part of the official presidential declarations in Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, Panama, Chile, and Paraguay; (Baeza 2015, 1; Balloffet 2016, 9). Some of the measures offered by these countries were humanitarian, resident and tourist visas, and restricted resettlement programs (Ibid., 2). However, Baeza's analysis does not include the experiences of any of the Syrian refugees accessing any of these programs. Plus, Mexico was absent to provide similar conditions (Ibid., 2015, 3). Hence, the Miga Project is a relevant global south initiative within the context of HE for emergencies for young adult populations. In the upcoming section, I will discuss in detail the challenges in northern and southern settings, providing diverse research concerning the students' processes into tertiary institutions.

2.4 Transitional Processes through Higher Education Initiatives

To understand the experiences students face before and during their journey to HE, Loshini Naidoo et al.'s (2018) book *Refugee Background Students Transitioning into Higher Education* becomes relevant. The authors propose to approach transition as a holistic process and analyze together the structural university setting with individual students' needs (Naidoo et al. 2018, xxi). In this line, through life story analysis, the authors argue the need to add individual perceptions and voices in their processes starting HE programs. Jane Wilkinson, based on the life stories of refugee students from South Sudan and Buthan, argues the students face the transitions of *getting into* university as the first arduous steps as well as *getting through* tertiary education (Wilkinson 2018, 99). Hence, during these processes, there is still a gap in research concerning the diverse challenges, benefits, and areas of improvement exposed by the student's voices from different university settings established worldwide.

John Field's (2012) research does not focus on refugee-background students; it provides attention to understand the role of physical spaces where non-conventional students are placed and its relation with their transition into HE. His discussion about students from low-income, disabled and ethnic minority groups in Scottish universities provide the argument of

the university's role as a physical space in connection with the students' academic performance (Field 2012, 8). In the same line, Diana Amudsen's (2019) cross-cultural research on indigenous Maori students' experiences exposes the challenges in New Zealand universities. Based on interviews and focus groups, the author points out the "Western-style" university reflected the socio-economic background differences (Amudsen 2019,427). In this same line, Thomas Crea's (2016) mixed-method research focuses on the benefits and obstacles 122 students find in the Jesuit Commons' pilot initiative in refugee camps in Kenya and Malawi, and urban setting in Jordan (2016, 13). By contrast with the students in Amman, students in the refugee camps described the obstacles were related to infrastructure and lack of resources (Crea 2016, 17). In Mexico, Sonja Wolf exposes in very simple terms some of the obstacles Syrian students face by being placed in "rich kids schools" (2019b, 107). Thus, just as Field noticed, students with a different background encounter main challenges while navigating physically their new educational settings. Nevertheless, this feature concerning refugee and displaced populations and the role of the university setting is missing from research across global north and south initiatives.

In the previous subsection, I exposed the theoretical benefits of students accessing HE in emergencies. Yet, recent research on these initiatives and programs indicates that in reality, complicated structural systems, socio-economic and personal challenges surround students' processes through the educational systems. Concerning language skills, all students during Naidoo et al.'s book pointed out English proficiency in their academic fields is one of the most onerous barriers, alongside balance and ongoing learning of "social" language in everyday life environments (Adoniou 2018a, 112). In two university campuses in Australia, Andrew Harvey & Mark Mallman conducted a qualitative study with refugee-background students from Afghanistan, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe (2019, 662). For these students, language courses represented a primary challenge and motivation, with direct consequences to their confidence. Hence the authors call for the improvement of pedagogical practices and teaching quality of the English language (Ibid., 667). Similar experiences are found in the German context. Michael Grüttner et al. conduct a case study, including interviews with refugees, university staff, and academic experts (2018, 124). Although the authors do not provide the origins of the refugee students, they all pointed out frustration and anger in their attempt to dominate the German

language (Ibid., 26). Lynn Schneider (2018) brings the concerns of Syrian asylum seekers in their preparatory courses into HE. Similar to Grütrner et al., the author argues language represents an obstacle, yet it becomes a personal and satisfactory goal to pursue (Ibid., 465).

About the Spanish language, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's generational research discusses individual narratives of students from Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, and the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) enrolled in Cuban universities (2015). These students had to learn Spanish in their first year to speed up their integration, implying learning a third or fourth language. However, students from the SADR had the advantage of knowing this language from their time in Spanish refugee camps (2015, 50). By contrast, Wolf denounces the lack of preparation and professionalism of the volunteers teaching the Spanish language course for displaced background students in Mexico (Wolf 2019a, 91). Nevertheless, Wolf 's research does not provide an in-depth discussion of how these courses are related to the students' educational transition. Nor does Fiddian-Qasmiyeh explains details about the conditions of these language courses in Cuba. To this, Lisa Damaschke-Deitrick et al.'s (2019) research provides a short glance at the physical environment and the language course. The authors perform a comparative gender analysis, based on the reflections of women with different forced migration statuses accessing HE in Germany, Egypt, and Kyrgyzstan, sponsored by governmental or institutional scholarships such as DAFI (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2019, 158). In Egypt, Syrian women in private universities pointed out taking courses in English represented their main obstacle (Ibid.,173). Although the author does not discuss further these implications, it provides a feature to consider language training and the physical setting where it takes place.

The psychosocial and economic well-being of the students in the initiatives is a significant factor for the success or obstacle for the students' academic performance and success. For Wilkinson, scholarship and financial assistance from Australian faith-organizations were substantial sources of support for the students' relief (2018, 104). By contrast, students in Amman identified problems in balancing work, study, and family responsibilities (Crea 2016, 17). Meanwhile, in the refugee camps, students complained in terms of money and transportation (Ibid. 14). According to the students' testimonies in Cuba, the effects of the economic embargo in the lifestyle were the primary obstacles to improve

their life conditions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, 146). Hence, in comparison to the support of Northern programs, students enrolled in Southern educational programs find more economic disadvantages.

An ongoing obstacle students experience is discriminatory and racist practices. At German HEIs, authors point out an environment of xenophobia has negative consequences in the students' academic and social spheres (Schneider 2018, 467; Grüttner et al. 2018, 125). Similarly, Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2019 argue that in Germany and Kyrgyzstan, women had negative experiences due to their migratory status, learning or lacking language skills, and different degrees of discrimination and isolation (Ibid., 180-182). While in Egypt, Syrian women's discriminatory acts were evident in public universities (Ibid.,173). In Cuba, misleading and wrongful conceptions about Islam created social barriers for Muslim students from the MENA region (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, 147). By contrast, in Mexican universities, racism was not a theme of concern for the students (Wolf 2019a, 90). Nevertheless, the author does not include a discussion about the class element and its connection to the students' socialization process.

Students going through HE in emergencies are not exempt from the refugee label consequences. An essential remark of Schneider's research is the binary identity between student and refugee (2019, 471). The author argues HE improved the students' sense of agency to describe themselves as students even though they are aware of their refugee status. Crea concludes that despite the initiative's deficiencies, there is a high self-sense of success among the graduate and current refugee-background students (2016, 20). For Amudsen, students could navigate the unequal structures by their motivation and potential at their courses (422-425). Similarly, based on the students' experiences, Harvey & Mallman's signal process of resilience counter feelings of inferiority and discriminatory practices at the universities (2019, 663). Following this argument, diverse authors coincided access to HE is a motivation factor and means to construct a student identity with aspirations for their future, allowing them to feel free (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2019, 184-185). On the same line of these authors, Wolf stresses that through educational programs it is possible for the student to construct an identity while avoiding relying on the refugee label (2019a, 90). Plus, educational settings provide individuals an environment of freedom and independent life

(Ibid., 90-91). To this, Wilkinson argues the capacity to aspire for these students translates into social capital that could help them achieve their professional and personal objectives (2018., 100). On a similar note, Misty Adoniou's analysis points out the need to recognize the diverse socio-economic backgrounds and language abilities of refugee background students (2018. 51). Hence, avoiding generalizations is essential for universities, lecturers, and staff to ignore the students' experiences, skills, and social background (Ibid., 53, 62). Adding a different feature, Grüttner et al. point out students starting their studies at an older age causes insecurities and frustrations during the students' learning processes (2018, 125). Thus, the value of students' backgrounds can ease their path on their student identity while transitioning to HE and improve their academic and personal development.

2.5 Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, I have exposed the role of higher education as an alternative long term solution for the forced migration waves. With the increase of the 2011 Syrian migration flows, diverse educational institutions, policymakers, academics, and governments started considering the value of HE in emergency contexts as a long term solution. Nevertheless, as these programs are emerging, research on the students' everyday life processes going through HE is further needed. As I have discussed during this review, by presenting qualitative research on the students' experiences through HE, authors can identify particularities concerning obstacles and benefits across diverse programs and initiatives worldwide. However, the vast academic research on HE for refugee and background students relies on global north initiatives. Thus, the voices from students enrolled in tertiary education programs in the global south are missing from the academic debates. Therefore, dynamics from Syrian displaced backgrounds in a different context, such as the Mexican private higher education, can provide new insights to understand their transitional processes.

3. Methodology

This chapter will address the methodological process, justifying and explaining my decision to use ethnography as my research strategy and the multi-methods applied. An ethnography approach attempts to analyze human behavior in their social and cultural context (O'Reilly 2015, 49). To avoid treating my participants as one mass of displaced students, I rely on an ethnographic approach to expose their individual experiences in their natural setting. Therefore, my research is based on semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and photographs. For this thesis, I recognizing every Syrian student has different understandings of their transition process into Mexican Higher education sponsored by the Miga Project.

3.1 Access to the field

The Miga Project provides scholarships to displaced-background students from Syria to pursue higher education in Mexico. Therefore, to facilitate my access to the Syrian students, I decided to contact the organization directly. My fieldwork consisted of six months in Mexico from June to December 2019. In the first three months, I waited for the organization's permission to visit the headquarters and communicate with the students. During this time, we maintained communication via email and phone to plan my visits and interviews according to their schedule. In the last three months, I twice visited the Miga Project headquarters in Macondo City (pseudonym). My first visit was from November 5th to 9th. Most of the students who confirmed their participation preferred to wait until the end of their academic semester to schedule the interviews, hence I returned for a more extended period from December 1st to 20th. I stayed with the students at their residencies at the Maya House (pseudonym). Because of this short-term interaction with the participants, this thesis can be considered a "micro-ethnography" (Bryman 2012, 433). Nevertheless, staying at their house allowed me to have a deeper interaction with the students and understand the references mentioned during their interviews, as well as increase my participant observations. Moreover, this also facilitated establishing a trust relationship, mainly with students and team members in a short time.

3.2 Participant's selection

The Miga Project's general coordinator warned me that the Syrian students had been interviewed several times by the media and for academic purposes, causing a fatigue effect on them. With this in mind, I also had conversations with the team members and Spanish language lecturers that could amplify the understanding of the Syrians' transitional journeys. Concerning the students, there are two main groups: The beneficiaries learning Spanish at Macondo City living in Maya House, and the ones who are already in universities across Mexico. Thus, I wrote an invitation letter in Spanish and English, approved and distributed by the organization, to all thirteen current students. Some language lecturers acted as gatekeepers to ease my approach to the students (O'Reilly 2015, 91). Through their help, the students started trusting me and felt secure to participate in my research. Other students agreed to participate after I spent time with them in external social activities. In total, my sample consisted of seven Syrian students who agreed to participate. The student's age range is from twenty-two to twenty-nine years old, enrolled in diverse programs within the health area, social sciences, and design. Within the organization, the majority of the students are male. Thus I recognize the majority of the experiences in this thesis have a male gender bias.

3.3 Multi methods selection: Interviews, participant observations, and photographs

Based on ethnographic methods, I used semi-structured interviews for participants to use their own words to reply as freely and extensively as they wanted (Flick 2015, 99; Yin 2016, 143). In the case of the Syrian students, Arabic or Kurdish is their native language. However, all of them speak English, and the majority speak Spanish fluently. I am a Spanish native speaker, but I do not speak Arabic or Kurdish. So, I let participants choose between Spanish or English for our interviews so that they could feel the most comfortable expressing themselves. Four students decided Spanish as a way "to practice" their language skills; on occasions, they used certain expressions or words in English to remark specific points. Only three interviews were held entirely in English.

On average, the interviews lasted between 45 to 160 minutes; I transcribed them directly into English. Yet, I am aware some expressions could get lost in translation from Spanish, and I have the primary responsibility to give the closest and most accurate meaning.

During these interviews, I resorted to note-taking on a journal. The interviews took place in places where participants choose comfortable enough to talk, such as cafés, classrooms, and Maya House's living room. For privacy considerations, I made sure the interviews took place in spaces and times when no other team members, students, or lecturers were present in the room. One interview was via Skype; for privacy considerations, I demonstrated my interviewee there were no other people in the room, as well as closed doors and windows to avoid distractions.

Yet, as interviews do not provide a complete picture of their interviewees' reactions, participant observation is relevant for gestures, social interactions, and scenes on their environment (Yin 2016, 139-140). During my stay in the field, my participant observations consisted of being at the office without restrictions, including task meetings and lunch breaks. Additionally, I attended the students' Spanish class and social service[9] in Macondo City, as well as different ceremonies, cultural events, and a conference organized by the Miga Project. During these events, informal and spur of the moment conversations occurred, which I also included in my data analysis, I wrote these field-notes in my journal.

In addition to interviews and participant observations, I relied on photographs to display and give insights into the social and cultural structures of the setting (Flick 2015, 155). I obtained permission to take pictures of the office, the Maya House, and the previous activities mentioned. The photographs provided a supplementary understanding of the findings during my research, mainly the participants' references during their interviews, as well as complementing my participant observations.

3. 4 Data analysis and Coding

To analyze the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, my field-notes, and photographs, I choose reflexive thematic analysis[10] (TA). This analysis helps me identify

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[9] At the moment this research was conducted, for the Miga Project the social service is a volunteer activity designed for the Syrian students to visit a federal university, they prepare workshops for the Mexican students in English and Spanish.

[10] Further discussion on the three approaches within Thematic Analysis, see: Braun, Virginia, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, and Gareth Terry. 2019. "Thematic Analysis." In Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences, 843–60. Singapore: Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_10.

recurring patterns of the participants living and behavior (Aronson 1994, 1; Braun et al. 2019, 844). During TA, my role as a researcher is to actively engage with the data to allow the voices of my participants to be heard (Braun et al. 2019, 845). As my objective is to expose the experiences of Syrian students, TA has been used to address similar studies focusing on the description of "lived experiences" through interviews (Ibid., 850). After the translation and transcription of the interviews, I manually coded and identified the patterns and constants in my participants' responses. Even though students had different experiences depending on the Project's stage, TA helped identify the main shared understandings. However, these contrasts among these experiences also brought light to different aspects of their transitional experiences into Mexican private HEIs. Together with the seven interviews, I also coded my field-notes, interview-notes, and photographs. In *Table 1*, I present my process of open and axial coding. At the final stage of the coding, I identified three overarching themes: Low language training at the higher education transitional process, class and social inequalities at higher education institutions, and agency through higher education.

Table 1 Analytical Coding Process

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
-To experience stress and frustration during the Spanish lessons. -Lack of specialized professors and materials. -Few hours of teaching. -Slow improvement over the years. -No Spanish, No University. - Language improvement at the university. -Urgency to learn technical terms for their careers.	-Disorganized teaching course. -Need to learn the language for the courses. -University as the space to improve their language skills.	-Low language training at the HE transitional process.
-Financial scholarship is not enough. -Expensive rent and transportation. -To feel anger and deceived. -Social activities are limited. -Elite university settings. -Time to Study v.s Time to Work. -Bureaucratic system.	-High living expenses. -Social and economic segregation. -Limited economic capital.	-Class and social inequalities at higher education institutions (HEIs).

-Being a student, not a refugee. -Tangible access to education. - Improved self-esteem. -Free career choice. -Reconstruction of educational goals. -Motivation for future plans.	-Self-identity and be treated as a student. -Increase of social and cultural capital. -High motivation and aspirations to achieve a professional future.	-Agency through Higher Education.

3.5 Positionality

I am aware that my position as a researcher entails power and gender dynamics. My role as a student researcher from a Swedish university gave me a privileged background to have academic access to the Miga Project. I recognize being an outsider of the Syrian culture, social norms, religion, and values. Even though I shared with the students my experiences studying and travels to the MENA region, I did not present myself as an expert in the area. Also, I acknowledge my privilege as a young Mexican female student with the opportunity to study in a private Mexican university and a current Master's program in Sweden without forced displacement circumstances. Even though I have enrollment and transitional experiences in higher education institutions supported by scholarships, I cannot equate the Syrian students' testimonies to my experience. Although sometimes this became present in my mind while analyzing the data, it helped me to recognize my privileges and avoid judging their journeys and challenges. While I was aware of their displaced background, I approach them as students, and we shared our academic concerns and struggles in our respective contexts and fields of study. The small size of the participants and closeness in age helped me to establish a strong trust relationship in a short time with them. Some initially expressed doubts about my seriousness and experience for this research due to my younger physical appearance. Yet, daily interactions and talks about my research supported my motives and serious approach to this thesis. Plus, informal social interactions and common interest topics with the participants facilitated and increased the trust bonds. My nationality also gave me the advantage to know the institutions, services, cultural activities, food, and local slang participants referred to during their interviews or my observations. Yet, the Syrian students provided me with their perspectives, opinions, and understanding of the Mexican context.

Hence, throughout this process of analyzing their experiences, it became a personal and academic challenge to step outside of my familiarity with not only the Mexican higher education, both other economic, social and cultural spheres. Despite I have lived and studied most of my life in Mexico, doing this small ethnography translated into a demanding form to approach and try to explore a reality that is very close to me, while respecting my participants' voices.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Because I focus on the experiences of students with a displaced and refugee background, as a researcher, I tried to avoid the role of the savior (Canella and Lincoln 2013. 170). Hence, my questions and attitudes tried not to treat them as victims. In this thesis, I refer to them as students, although I refer to their displaced and refugee condition when it becomes relevant to the context. I am aware of my position of power as a researcher and being part of a privileged educational and economic sphere in Mexico. I tend to avoid the status of "speaking for" the Syrian students or treat them with superiority, as well as respect when they denied replying to questions that made them remember distress episodes or provide other personal information.

On the one hand, as a former student of a private Mexican university, I am familiar with part of the Mexican private educational system. On the other hand, my research entailed asking international students their experiences in a new educational system for them. Nevertheless, these postures are not mutually exclusive (Babbie 2013, 330). My familiarity with the educational system helped me ask detailed aspects during the interviews. Still, I am aware of possible overlooking themes or questions; hence I sought to step outside of my own experience. Yet, complete neutrality does not exist in qualitative studies (Yin 2016, 146). As a personal supporter of the Project, I tried to keep a degree of criticism when analyzing the data. However, I acknowledge my nuances can be present during the research.

To respect participants' confidentiality and hinder, as much as possible, identities and locations for the readers and among the participants, I used pseudonyms. For the students, I used Arabic gender-neutral names, meanwhile for staff members and lecturers English gender-neutral names. In the same line, I used the pronouns "they/them/their" to avoid gender

identification. Also, I ensured my participants' petitions to remove specific biographical details they requested to prevent professional and personal conflicts. Concerning security measures, this investigation did not represent a high physical or emotional risk for the participants or myself. Some Syrian interviewees avoid giving details about stressful experiences. Plus, I was transparent in how this thesis publication could affect the participants in the future to prevent any wrong depiction (Taylor 2001, 20).

All participation was voluntary and not conditional. I explained to the participants they had the opportunity to drop out of the study at any point in time before the final publications. Thus I gave them my presentation cards, with number and email, in case they wanted to contact me. As mentioned earlier, participant observations, note-taking, and photographic evidence were conducted openly and with consent (Flick 2015, 150). For the photographs, if necessary, I blurred out faces and location symbols to ensure my participant's safety. The analysis of the interviews is based on the consented data collected to avoid underlying meaning (Taylor 2001, 19). My journal and all transcripts are in a locked cabinet, as well as all recorded interviews and photographs are in a hard drive with password protection.

3.7 Limitations

At the time I conducted this research, the Miga Project supports Syrian students with a displaced background to access tertiary education in Mexican private universities. Hence, my sample was limited to focus on the students sponsored by this organization. When my fieldwork took place, the Miga Project sponsored 13 Syrian beneficiaries; hence my sample was limited to invite these students. Because of delays in the participants' responses, I was not able to schedule visits to diverse universities and cities the students are living. Hence, my fieldwork was limited only in Macondo City, as it was the point of reunion for the participants who agreed to participate during their winter vacation period. Because of the anonymity during this thesis, I am not able to provide the student's complete biographical and socio-economic background that could determine intersectionality features. I am aware that diverse interpretations of the data can be made by having a qualitative approach to my research. Finally, a personal limitation was the budget for travel expenses, so I could not extend my fieldwork for more weeks.

Despite the challenges encountered throughout the overall research design, ethnography as a research strategy allowed me to achieve my objective to understand the individualized Syrian students' experiences within the Miga Project as a transitional space through higher education in Mexico. Through this qualitative and constructivist approach, I attempt to do an in-depth understanding of how Syrian students, sponsored by the Miga Project, give meaning to their realities during their transitional processes in private Mexican higher education institutions. In the following section, I discuss Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical approach to habitus, capitals, and field, as well as Anthony Giddens's conceptualization of agency and theoretical discussions about the transitional process.

4. Theory

In the following section, I will discuss three theoretical concepts chosen from my theoretical framework. I decided to use Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical tools on agency, capitals, and field, which I complement with Anthony Giddens' theoretical approach to agency. Lastly, I review the theoretical approach of transition and its application to the education field.

4.1 Bourdieu's Thinking Tools on Higher Education

Pierre Bourdieu's "thinking tools" are widely used to explore educational systems (Rawolle & Lingard 2013; 119). The relevance of his theoretical concepts for this thesis rely on Bourdieu's approach to the reproduction of cultural and social inequalities within education. It must be noticed there are no concrete definitions around his concepts, hence this provides a wide flexibility and adaptability for research. Bourdieu's main tools can be expressed in the following formula: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice] (1984, 101). On habitus Bourdieu expressed that: "Social subjects are modified by social and economic conditions […] Not only the biological conditions of the agents, the relationship with the social world" (Bourdieu 2020).

On the one hand habitus can be understood by our inherited background, for instance nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, and age (Ryan 2005, 5). Yet, habitus goes beyond the biological inheritance, and rather understood as a social inheritance (Grenfell & James 1998, 15). The social structures where we are born and raised shape, to a certain extent, how we interact with the world. Additionally, the family, school and external environments can be part of one's habitus (Burke 2018, 24). Habitus thus, can be understood as an inherent socio-economic background that has shaped our path and actions within the major social structures. Thus, as agents we all have different habitus. As an additional feature of the concept, Burke remarks habitus is a non-static concept (2018, 24). Based on this understanding, an agent's habitus can change over time. Nevertheless, this change will be possible through the interactions with the capitals and field, that would modify the social inheritance. Habitus' flexibility allows to enhance how one's social background and it is

related to our interactions with the world. Moreover, for this thesis, the concept of habitus is crucial to understand the experience of students in a new educational context. Therefore, habitus includes not only a place of origin and family background, but also social and class experiences.

In order to navigate the social and economic preconditions, Bourdieu signals the importance of diverse capitals. His theory was influenced by the Marxist economic sense of capital. Economic capital is the tangible access to money. Cultural capital "may be found on educational qualifications" (Bourdieu 2007, 84). Meanwhile social capital is the network of "connections". The latter can be understood as one is recognized to belong to a social group because of the family name, class or school (Ibid., 88). Sociologist James Coleman adds that social capital includes all social networks that could provide a future benefit (2007, 103). Thus, social capital can also be translated in non-economic terms such as status or knowledge (Ibid., 99). Cultural and social capitals can increase ones' knowledge, prestige, and power (Grenfell & James 1998 ,22). As a type of investment, the premise is that higher education, as cultural capital, will be translated into a better job, increasing the agent's economic capital (Ibid., 21). Thus, since not everyone can have access to higher education, it is expected that economic and social inequalities continue to be perpetuated. Hence, like habitus, capitals vary, and are unequally distributed. We acquire part of these capitals within our habitus, yet capitals are also influenced by the field.

Field is then proposed as a way to understand the interactions between habitus and the capitals. Bourdieu's defines field as: "[…] the site of a more or less openly declared struggle for the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the field" (Bourdieu, 1991, 242). A field then can be interpreted as multidimensional social space where power relations take place or a battlefield where the individuals attempt to improve their positions using their different types of capitals (Jenkins 2005, 68; Ryan 2005, 5; Picton and Banfield 2019, 110). Therefore, education is one of the fields where inequalities are present: "The educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give" (Bourdieu 1973, 80).

So far, it has been determined that schools are the fields where inequalities among individuals' capitals and habitus are seen, reproduced, and reinforced. At the end of the

formula, practice can be understood where the interactions or "competition" between capitals and habitus (Rawolle & Lingard 2013; 124). However, a critique on Bourdieu's theory is the structural and deterministic approach. Green points out there is an overlook on the role of the individual's agency (2013, 143). As Bourdieu focuses his attention on understanding and explaining the structure of the fields in relation to the agents' decision, the individual decisions are not part of this concern. Despite agents are being placed in certain fields, they still have the possibility to make choices, yet Bourdieu's concepts rely mostly in the structural conditions (Grenfell & James 1998, 21). Nevertheless, authors have signaled that practice itself is part of the individual's agency (Picton & Banfield 2019, 110). Although Bourdieu does not explicitly refer to it, the practice can be considered as an attempt to balance agency and structure (Ibid., 109). As the relation between habitus, capitals, and fields is in constant dynamic and interaction, the agency can be found within these interactions as a bridge in connection to the social structures (Ibid, 110). In order to expand the concept of agency to answer my research question concerning the student's experiences, I explore Anthony Giddens' conceptualization of agency.

4.2 The Role of Agency

Agency is considered to be the capacity to act independently within the social systems often focusing on micro-level actors (Ryan 2005, 5; Johnson 2000, 6). The concept has been discussed from interactionist's perspectives, where the structure and social systems limit an individual's action[11]. Nevertheless, English sociologist Anthony Giddens in his seminal work *Theory of Structuration*, proposes a duality between agency and structure. Giddens describes an individual as a: "[…] purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities" (1984, 3). And in simple terms he states that "Agency refers to doing" (Ibid., 10). However, it is not only the ability to do things, but also the freedom to act (Giddens & Sutton 2014, 23). Thus, agency concerns an individual's capability of acting, respond to situations and make decisions. Despite the individual's extent of freedom and power, Giddens recognizes there is a scope of control in social spheres to take action (Ibid., 12). While there is

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[11] For further discussion, see Johnson, Allan G. 2000. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology. A User's Guide to Sociological Language.* 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishers.

recognition and space for the agent and his or her actions, these are enabled by the social structure. The social structure is considered the repeated interactions which establish order for society's realms, it is through the agency that individuals can modify the structure (Giddens & Sutton 2014, 24-25). Therefore, structure and agent are not separate entities, but rather a duality.

Agency is accompanied by an individual's exercise of power. The freedom and power that comes with agency rely on the agent's possibilities to choose: "[…] the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (Giddens 1984, 3). All individuals have agency, yet the structures facilitate whether and the extent to which we act and in what ways. Concerning education, Giddens & Sutton recognize schools' structures reproduce social inequalities, yet the authors point out not to overlook the role of agency within the structure (2014, 82). Thus, Giddens' approach highlights how agents act and decide in relation to the unequal conditions of the structure. Both Giddens' and Bourdieu's concepts complement each other when attempting to explore and analyze the extent of individuals' actions. Hence, I consider agency to the ability the Syrian students have to make decisions through their transitional process into private Mexican HE universities. As I attempt to analyze the Syrian students' experience the "Miga Project" as a transitional space on their journey to Mexican higher education, I use three theoretical approaches to the concept of transition.

4.3 Transitional Process

Transition is a flexible theoretical tool that refers mostly to the notion of change and adaptation to a new situation (Volet & Jones 2012, 244). From a psychological perspective, Nancy Schlossberg defines transition as: "An event or nonevent that alters the individual's perception of self and the world, that demands a change in assumptions or behavior" (Schlossberg 1981, 15). Then, a transition phase is a dynamic process that challenges the individual into a new environment or life stage. Transitions such as marriage, starting college, or becoming a parent imply a degree of change and adaptation in one's behavior and self-perception. Each human being experiences transitions throughout life, and its outcomes vary from person to person. Transitions are complex processes that entail a degree of stress, with different positive and negative results (Schlossberg 1981, 4-9). Hence, Schlossberg proposes

to study transitions as individualized experiences, taking into account the personal background, and the external environment where this process occurs (1981, 3). Regarding the external environment, the author points out the physical setting is usually overlooked, yet its role might facilitate or hamper the transition and reflect on the person's well-being (Ibid, 12).

Similarly to Schlossberg's theoretical approach, Pernille Hviid and Tania Zittoun conceptualize transitions as "processes of catalysed change due to a rupture, and aiming at a new sustainable fit between the person and her current environment" (Hviid & Zittoun 2008, 123). Additionally, the shifts or ruptures in one's path entail not only leaving behind old conducts but also ways of thinking and one's self-perceptions (Ibid., 126). Thus, the authors argue that school settings are a primary environment to analyze an individual's transitional experiences because it offers the possibilities for individuals to re-invent themselves (Ibid.). What this conceptualization adds to Schlossberg's approach is that these shifts and ruptures in the trajectory of a person imply a restoration of ones' sense of community and integrity (2008, 123). Nevertheless, John Field's conceptualization on transition expands the application of transition as a useful tool in higher education environments.

John Field (2012) applies the term transitional space to the field of individuals into higher education experiences. Taken from Donald Winnicott's psychoanalyst theory, transitional phenomena refer to the "intermediate area of experience" concerning the stressful separation of a child from the mother (Winnicott 1971, 4). Therefore, this "in-between" space increases the infant's imagination to adapt to a new environment. For Winnicott, this early anxious stage is inherent in all human beings (1971, 11; Praglin 2006, 2). For Field, the "in-between phenomena" occurs when young adults experience anxiety separation from moving to a new stage in their lives, in this case, starting higher education studies. Thus, the author suggests the "university" is a transitional physical space (Field 2012, 8).

Nevertheless, I recognize the theoretical discussion on transition is on constant evolution due to their psychological and psychoanalytical background. Hence, there is not one dominant and consolidated theoretical approach[12]. Plus, the approach on transitional

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[12] For the evolution on the notion of transition, see: Hviid, Pernille; Zittoun, Tania. 2008. "Editorial Introduction: Transitions in the Process of Education." *European Journal of Psychology of Education.* 23

process is recently applied and unexplored to the study of displaced and refugee background students' experiences (Baker et al., 2019, 8). Despite these limitations, research conducted by Field (2012) and Hviid & Zittoun (2008) demonstrate transition can be used in educational studies to understand students' journeys. The three theoretical approaches of transition discussed in this section can expand the understanding the individualized experiences within the structure of higher education. For my thesis, following Field's conceptualization, I refer to the "Miga Project" as the "in-between" tool for the Syrian students to access higher education institutions. As well as applying Schlossberg and Hviid & Zittoun's conceptualizations on transition as processes of shift and change the Syrian students identify in their journey into Mexican HE. Therefore, I argue that Bourdieu's thinking tools, in addition to agency and transition as theoretical concepts, are adaptable to understand the Syrian student's experiences on their path into Mexican higher education institutions. In the following section, I expose and explain my main findings obtained through thematic analysis.

(2): 121–30.

5. Findings

In this chapter, I introduce the main findings in connection with my research question, obtained from my fieldwork in Macondo City, Mexico. In the first section, I present my participant's profile. After these profiles, I discuss the three overarching themes: Low language training at the higher education transitional process, class and social inequalities at higher education institutions, and agency through higher education. For this purpose, I rely on the verbatim participant's quotes obtained from interviews, my field-notes, and photographs.

5.1 Participant's profile

Fajr is twenty-seven years old and identifies as Syrian-Kurdish. Prior to the conflict, Fajr was studying a science degree in Syria. After the violence escalated, Fajr moved to the northern region. There, Fajr worked in local cafés and restaurants, and after one year, was hired by an international humanitarian organization to work with refugees. During their time working at this organization, Fajr applied to higher education initiatives in Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European programs, yet no one accepted their application. Fajr's last option was to apply to the Miga Project. Fajr's friend contacted Taylor, the Project's founder, and started the application process and was accepted. At the moment of this research, Fajr had been enrolled for two years in a BA in finances, with successful results, and was considering applying for the refugee status in Mexico.

Imani is a twenty-four year old Syrian-Kurd. In 2011, Imani finished high-school and participated actively during the first protests against Bashar Al-Assad's government. For this, the participant was incarcerated three times. Together with their father, both walked for a day to arrive at the refugee camps in Iraq. Imani spent five years in the refugee camp working with international NGOs. A friend recommended applying to the Miga Project. Imani told me the decision to choose Mexico involved the curiosity to live in a Latin American country, and the possibility to learn Spanish. At the time of our interview, they were in the second year of a social science program and were considering applying for the refugee status in

Mexico. Imani commented that even though there is a lot of pressure to maintain the grades, so far they are very happy with their career.

Kausar is twenty-eight years old, and is the oldest participant. Kausar identifies as Syrian and Muslim. Before the conflict started, Kausar was studying a technical training program at a Syrian university. A few months after the 2011 governmental repression began, Kausar visited Lebanon to search for job opportunities. After a year, Kausar decided to move to Turkey. In Istanbul, Kausar mentioned not receiving any support from humanitarian organizations or the government. The participant worked and applied to diverse health university programs around the world, but it was not possible to obtain a scholarship. They are the second in the family to pursue higher education. At the time of the interview, Kausar was in the first months of learning Spanish and was highly determined to speak the language as a native. Kausar does not want to obtain the refugee status.

Malak is twenty-seven years old and identifies as Syrian-Kurdish. Malak had just finished high-school when, together with their siblings and parents, left for a refugee camp in Iraq. Nevertheless, they do not have the legal status of refugee. At the camp, Malak worked for five years with different humanitarian international organizations. During this time at the refugee camp, the participant met Taylor Mendez, the future founder of the Miga Project. Malak recognized the money earned from these organizations was enough; however, they wanted to study and be academically prepared. During the interview, the participant was very optimistic and proud of being enrolled in a BA of economics as Malak is the first one in the family to obtain a higher education degree. At the moment of this research, they were considering applying for the refugee status in Mexico. Malak hopes after finishing the university to meet with the rest of their family in Europe, but does not disregard the possibility of searching for jobs in Mexico.

Nour is twenty-six years old and identifies as Syrian. In early 2011, according to the Syrian educational system[13], Nour was placed an engineering program and enjoyed it so far. In 2013, Nour moved first to a neighboring country, and their siblings arrived the next year. Nour's siblings have higher education degrees. Before going back to study, Nour decided to work

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[13] The Syrian educational system was under the state's control by positioning students in specific programs. This latter did not leave the opportunity for students to make free career choices (Buckner 2013, 450).

for a couple of years in diverse NGOs. They applied for scholarships in Lebanon but described it as very competitive and hard for Syrians to get a place. A year and a half after applying to the Project, they arrived in Mexico. This decided to pursue their dream of studying a design program.

Shams is twenty-five years old. They identify as Syrian-Kurdish and Muslim. At the beginning of the conflict, Shams was able to finish high-school. When the situation became impossible, together with a family member, Shams traveled to the northern part of the country, hoping the border would be open for the people escaping the war. Shams obtained refugee status. During the interview, they remembered very sad details of living in the refugee camps, and the desperation of not knowing when they would be able to leave this place. During the five years Shams spent at the camp, a friend shared Taylor's idea to bring Syrians to Mexico and convinced them to apply for the program. The participant did not apply to other scholarships or programs. At the moment of the interview, Shams is studying a degree related to the health sector. They will be the first one in their family to pursue tertiary education. In the future, Shams hopes to study a specialization to help refugees in Europe, Syria, or Mexico.

Wessam is twenty-two years old and identifies as Syrian. They started higher education in a technical education program when the 2011 conflict erupted. Both of Wessam's parents have a higher education degree. Wessam left Syria and worked with diverse international NGOs to help refugees. Through the internet, they applied to the Miga Project. When I interviewed Wessam, they described being happy and excited to finally be studying a science program of their choice. At the moment, Wessam does not feel the need to obtain the refugee status.

The students come from Aleppo, Damascus, and Al-Hasaka. At the time of this research, the students had a stay between six months to more than two years in Mexico (*see Table 2*). After the beneficiaries arrive in Mexico, the Project is in charge of the administrative process to obtain the student visa permits. All of my participants are studying in diverse private universities across Mexico.

Table 2 Participant's List

Participant's name	Time living in Mexico	Interview language
Fajr	Two years or more	Spanish
Imani	Two years or more	Spanish
Kausar	Six months to a year	English
Malak	Two years or more	English
Nour	Two years or more	Spanish
Shams	Two years or more	Spanish
Wessam	Six months to a year	English

5.2 Low Language Training at the Higher Education Transitional Process

A dominant emerging pattern from most of the Syrian students was their experience in the language course offered by the Miga Project in their transitional space into HE. Once students arrive in Mexico, they have to spend nine months at a Spanish language course in Macondo City. The aim is for students to reach a B2 level so they can be enrolled in HE programs with the universities with which the organization has agreements (field-note). Nevertheless, for many of the students, this was not a reality. The majority of the Syrian participants I interviewed had been in Mexico for more than two years, yet they point out language is still a primary barrier during university. Fajr, in a very frustrated tone (interview-note) expressed:

"My Spanish would have improved, and I would not have struggled that much at the university the first and second year if I had one good year in Spanish."

The students signal the Spanish course in Macondo City was not adjusted to teach international students. Plus, the expectations to reach a B2 level in less than a year were hindered by a low number of class hours per week. As one can see, the importance of a well-designed language course is crucial for their initial stages at university. About this, Wessam, a student enrolled in a science program, commented in a highly upset tone (IN):

"Come on! Four hours a week? I did not imagine the course would be two hours; four hours per week is like…nothing! If it were not for my work, if it were only three or four hours of classes, I would not have learned Spanish. And they [team members] think this is a success, but this is not a success, not all the students have the capacity to teach themselves"

Skyler, a Miga Project team member, recognized this challenge of not having the opportunity to access a better language training program. When the Miga Project started, the coordinator admitted: "If any student would want to say it, it is true. That [Spanish] program did not exist. It was [you] come to Mexico, and when you arrive, we will see what to do". Hence, as Wessam's quote indicated, some students compensated this void of an intensive course with their own efforts and self-teaching. Alongside personal efforts, and despite a negative experience with these language courses, for a lot of students, the university campus helped them to improve their Spanish skills. Imani, a student enrolled in a social sciences program, confirmed:

"I learned more at the university than here [Macondo City], because I have two classes every day, of four hours, then one hour with my friends, and all is Spanish"

Equally, Nour, who studies in a design program, pointed out: "My Spanish improved at the university." Thus, for many students, spending most of their time speaking and reading in Spanish and socialization at the university impacted positively on their language skills. Because of their hours invested attending their courses, the students had no other option but to rely on Spanish (FN). However, learning their career's technical terms is a significant concern among them. For instance, Shams, a student in a health program, said:

"In my second semester, it was very hard with six courses, my Spanish was better, but I needed the [technical] terms."

For some students, in terms of language, social-daily interactions might not present a big problem anymore, yet the technical terminology for their careers is still a disadvantage. During my stay in December, the Miga Project looked for volunteers in the areas of the students' careers to teach specialized terms. However, the organization struggled to find someone available to do it (FN). Yet, on one occasion, Shams recommended Kausar, another student enrolled in a health program, to learn 30 technical words per day as a self-teaching

technique (FN). Once again, the students relied on themselves and shared how to overcome the technical language barriers. However, not everybody could enjoy having support from other students. Wessam, who took the Spanish course at Maya House, recalls not being able to practice his Spanish or being able to socialize with other students:

"I was alone. It was bad because you have nobody to talk to and there is no contact to meet new people. Where the hell am I going to meet new people? If it's not in a class where? And they [team members] didn't consider it; the first months were the worst months of my whole life."

Not only the course design became a challenge; also the socialization and support network the students can find in the classrooms. An improvement to the professionalization of the Spanish course started in mid-2019. Macondo City's private university opens its doors to Syrian students to join a "Spanish for foreigners course" (FN). Nevertheless, when the students joined the course, the level was A2. Thus, the Syrian students started learning Spanish without the first A1 level course. Kausar identified this gap as a constant stress factor:

"We started at university with level A2, because they didn't have A1… we are suffering, we are suffering a lot, but we are trying our best to talk."

Some nights in Maya House, I helped Kausar with homework from their Spanish course, yet it was evident they struggled to understand and figure out grammatical rules from A1 material on their own (FN). During my visit to their Spanish course, *Image 1* and *Image 2* demonstrate an upgrade from the physical space where some students used to take their classes, from Maya House's living room to a proper language center at a university campus. Plus, they were able to receive intensive specialized teaching hours with access to more material resources and extra-curricular activities to practice the language (FN). Another point of improvement was the socialization during the language course. Students who attend this university course have developed friendship relationships with Japanese classmates, fostering a more encouraging learning environment (FN).

Image 1. Maya House's living room. After the establishment of Maya House, this became the space where some Syrian students used to take their Spanish courses.
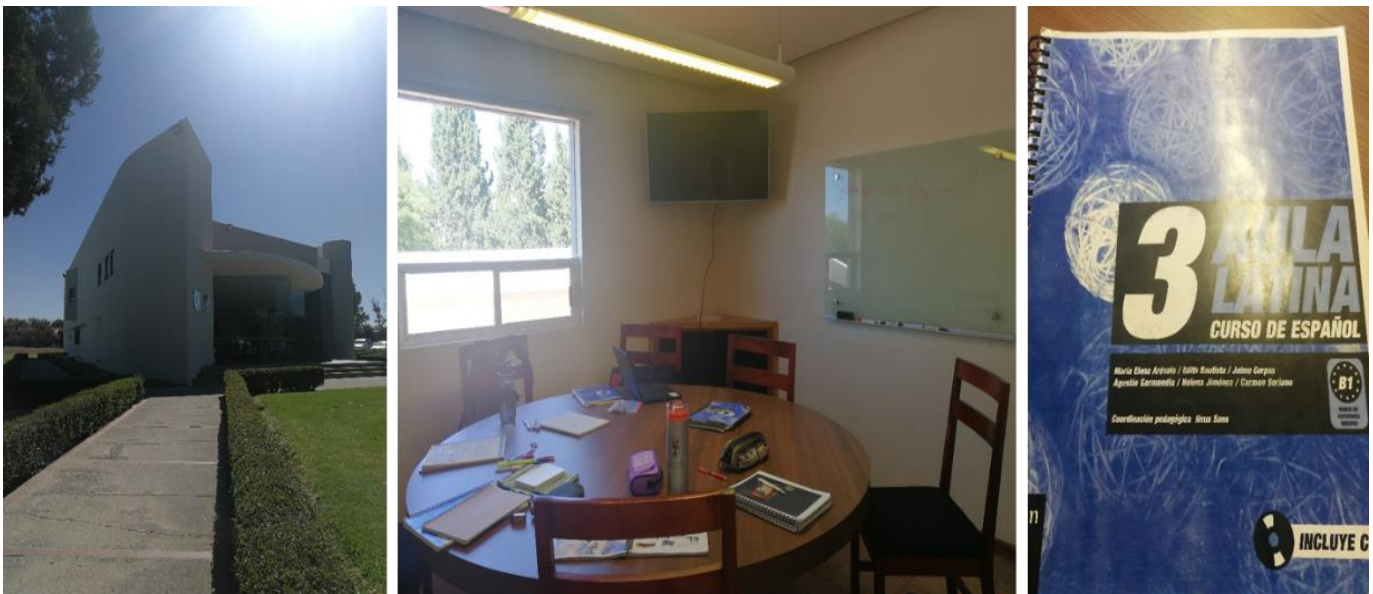

Image 2. From left to right: University language center in Macondo City, Spanish course classroom, specialized Spanish book course.

Wessam, who has seen this improvement from a distance, recognized the positive changes for the future students, yet they still pointed out their disappointment about their own experiences:

"Now the new students are going to this university. I hope they will be good because people [there] know what they are doing. But the problem is with us, the ones before."

All students experienced language training differently. However, through the voices of Wessam, Fajr, and Imani, one can identify main obstacles like a lack of design, professionalization, and a proper environment left them disappointed and caused concerns during their transition to HE. This low preparation continues to affect some students, as Shams, in their university, mainly in the technical language for their courses. Although students such as Kausar, have access to a better program, the Miga Project still lacks ensuring an essential structure for the language training program. This challenge can delay the students' transitional progress significantly into their higher education institutions.

5.3 Class and Social Inequalities at Higher Education Institutions

Another of the Syrian students' recurrent complaints signaled the insufficiency of the monthly scholarship provided by the Miga Project. Every student receives a monthly scholarship, according to the city where they study, to cover rent, transportation, and food. The highest scholarship covers, approximately, up to $356[14] and the lowest at $222 (FN). Students who spend their first nine months studying Spanish in Macondo City receive $133 only for transportation and food; meanwhile, the Project covers Maya House's rent and other services like laundry and house maintenance (FN). All my interviewees are studying in private universities located in prominent and industrialized urban areas. Many of the students describe as main obstacles the expensive living costs in their cities and their university campuses. Malak, enrolled in a bachelors' economic program, expressed highly surprised:

"It's expensive, so expensive, the place [where] I study is the most expensive area in all city, is one of the most expensive cities in Latin America."

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[14] I converted all money references from Mexican pesos to US dollars.

To this, Imani also exemplified the obstacles of living in these areas:

"I couldn't find a place near the university because it is too far, and near the university is too expensive. The transportation was very complicated. I have to live near the university because I can't spend two hours on public transportation, which means I have to pay more expensive rent."

Most of the students pointed out similar complications between transportation and rent and their limited scholarship. Other students like Nour explained that sometimes only transportation was their biggest expenditure due to the university's location: "There is no public transportation, because it [the university] is very far, so I have to take a taxi. It is my biggest expenditure, last month I paid around $53 per month, $7 the one-way trip."

The location of the universities has complicated the expenses of the students. I confirmed this the day I went with some participants to their Spanish course at Macondo City's private university by public transportation (*see Image 3*). One must keep in mind that public transport in Mexico has no fixed time-table schedules. Therefore, students told me sometimes they had to wait for the bus between 15 minutes "if they were lucky" to 40 minutes (FN). It took us around 40 minutes to arrive without traffic since the university location is on the city's outskirts (FN).

Image 3. Public transportation used by the Syrian students to arrive at Macondo City's private university.

The university is surrounded by parking lots for private cars; meanwhile, the bus stops are not even signaled on the map (*see Image 4*). These stops are located next to the highways where there are no sidewalks or bridges to cross them. Thus the crossing of these highways can be dangerous (FN).

Image 4: Macondo City's private university campus. In red: Spaces at this university for private parking. No bus stops are available around the campus.

The private university settings have caused confusion and, to some extent, segregation experiences between the Syrian students and their classmates. Imani stresses the evident social class division at the university:

"I feel that at the university [they] live in another world, not in Mexico. I prefer not to go out with them [classmates] because they live in another world. I have friends that have never used metro or public transportation, they are kind and amicable, but your mentality and their mentality is different."

From Imani's experience, we can see that sometimes Syrian students seem to decide to limit their socialization time with their classmates due to not belonging to the same or

similar economic sphere. Since the scholarship does not factor in leisure activities (FN), the students express not being able to enjoy a bigger social life. Kausar relates:

"The money is very short. I cannot be freer and enjoy my life more, and it is very hard"

Adding to this response, Jordan, a Spanish language lecturer, suggested that increasing "the money would help them socialize more." Although currently many students have the skills and determination to find jobs, they have to decide between studies or work. This happened to Fajr, who in a disappointed tone (IN) told me:

"My university schedule that I don't control does not fit with working hours. I applied to four jobs, and they [the managers] told me: "We need a person who works from 9 to 13hr or from 13 to 16hr", but I cannot take the job because I have class."

Fajr continues explaining, that working can be hard to balance and maintain excellent performance at the university due to the language barrier:

"What it takes him [Mexican classmate] one hour to study, it takes me three because of my Spanish. And if his grades are 70, my grades have to be 85, because if I am working, I'm going to lose my scholarship."

Thus, the fear of losing their scholarship hinders the opportunity to find a job and having an extra income outside the Project's scholarships. This is further complicated by the extra time students require to study in Spanish. During the interviews, Fajr, Wassem, and Nour coincided, feeling tired and ignored by the team members concerning an increase in their scholarship. In the same line, Imami described the financial stipend as a lost topic:

"I'm tired of talking about it [scholarship] and fighting this with them [team members] because I feel like I don't have to. Since the last summer, we [students] planned to talk with them [team members], but then… we decided not to because they don't listen."

Besides the scholarship, when a student needs to cover expenses due to medical, academic, or extra expenditures, they have to fill up and justify a request to the Miga Project's system (FN). For some students, this system and bureaucracy have become an obstacle in their university courses. In Shams experience:

"There are many materials they [lecturers] ask me the same or next day, so they [Miga Project] tell me to send the request 2 or 3 days before, it can be very complicated, I live one hour from downtown, and sometimes it takes me a whole day to buy materials."

The request system has created an environment of frustration, not only for the students. During the days I spent at the Project's office, I could observe the complications of balancing the whole organization's economic situation (FN). The financial restrictions caused not only stress to maintain the students' scholarships and requests. One day during my stay, a national bank froze the Project's accounts and caused the delay of the team members' salaries and complicated the payment of the students' requests, plus extra expenses such as office and Maya House maintenance (FN). The Syrian students are aware of the organization's funding obstacles, and although they try to be understanding, they criticize their capacity for sponsoring more students in the future. Wessam's words are a reflection of this:

"I saw that they were having financial difficulties, so I said ok, calm down…but at the same time, why did they even bring new students if they're having financial problems?"

Yet, for other students, this request system generates feelings of discomfort and is described as a sign of mistrust. When I asked the participants to describe their experience with the request system, the answer was overwhelmingly upset. Nour talks about how this process has affected them on a personal level:

"It is awful because they make me feel as if I were not an honest person. I have told some of them [team members] that they make you feel that you're stealing."

For many, the need to justify their expenses to the organization directly affected their perception as hard-working people. All of my participants worked after their displacement. Some like Malak Fajr, and Imani, had well-paid jobs from international NGOs (IN). They recognized their motives to apply for the Project was not the monthly stipend, but they consider when it comes to money, the organization's attempt to treat them as "Mexican students" is not the best approach. Fajr, reflects the frustration of being compared to a national student:

"I talked to people that told me "$135 is fine" Who said this? People who have a house, family, and someone who helps in the kitchen, and have a car, the dad pays the gasoline, and besides that, they give them $135 to go to a bar or take a coffee…Don't compare my life with that lifestyle."

The students recognize not having access to a big support network like their national classmates; hence the financial support from the Miga Project is a cause of many disagreements (NF). Nevertheless, during my stay in Macondo City, one of the students started an initiative to join a local café, to sell Arabic coffee (*see image 5*). Other students offer Arabic lessons to their classmates or the public in general (FN). These examples are part of the creative solutions some Syrian students use to counter the lack of a sufficient scholarship without being distracted from their studies.

Image 5. During the winter break, a Syrian student decided to start a small initiative in Macondo City. The student manufactured a home-made hot plate to prepare and sell Arabic coffee at a local café.

5.4 Agency through Higher Education

Part of the motives to start the Project was a combination of ideas between a current Syrian student and Taylor, the Project's founder. Taylor was working at a refugee camp in Iraq alongside Malak. The student remembered:

"Taylor asked me: "I want to help Syrian people; what do you think is good for Syria after the war?" I replied: the only way is education, and we can use education and knowledge to build Syria again."

For some students, the Project offered an opportunity when their applications in other institutions and initiatives were difficult to access or rejected. Malak recalled: "I applied for DAFI in Germany and to other scholarships at Iraqi universities, it was a very long process, and many people apply at the same time, your chance is like five percent." The lack of realistic opportunities to secure their tertiary education in European or neighboring countries led them to consider the Miga Project as a viable option. Although many of the students worked at refugee camps, international organizations, schools, or jobs at markets, HE remained their primary goal. Imani, who was in a refugee camp for five years, pondered their situation of continuing receiving humanitarian aid:

"If I want to work, is better if you teach me than giving me money. You can study, learn, and when you graduate, you can work and help your country."

Although most of my participants had access to some sort of employment at the refugee camps or their country of arrival, it was meaningless without a formal and completed higher education. When asked about their career choices, participants recognized through the Miga Project that they were able to choose their field of study. Nour, who was in their first years at a Syrian university, explained that even though they "enjoyed" their previous career, through the organization was able to select a preferred area of study (IN). In a similar experience, Imani, emphasized not only could they choose their career, but the Mexican universities had more options compared to the programs available in Syria (IN). Cameron, a staff member, told me the students go through a vocational process to expose their skills and the Project, so later they can choose the program and university (FN).

51

An important legal distinction is that the selected candidates stay in Mexico under a student visa. Cameron, one of the Project's coordinators, highlighted: "Technically we don't work with refugees, but with students." Fajr explained their decision to choose the Miga Project over traveling to a European country with the refugee status as many of their family and friends did:

"I'm a refugee here in Iraq, am I going to be a refugee for the second time? It doesn't make any sense. I just want to go to a place where I can finish my studies. I'm not going to be a refugee; I'm only going to study."

Even some students who have the refugee status notice the difference of being a refugee and a student. Shams explained there is a remarkable difference, explaining that their time at the present university allows them to forget about the refugee condition:

"I don't feel like a refugee; I'm here as a student."

Although participants arrived in Mexico through an organization that aimed to help refugee and displaced populations, the legal status as a student and the university environment provided a clear distinction for the participants' identities. The vast majority of the students agreed that accessing HE allowed them to plan and think of a future they once thought was lost. Each participant experienced displacement differently. Nevertheless, all had in common the interruption of their education for a period between five to six years. For instance, Shams in a nostalgic tone (IN), explained:

"I wanted to study so badly because, for five years, I didn't have access to studies."

Derived for this long period away from education, another concern some participants signaled was their age when they started their HE studies. Imani commented:

"I was nervous. I didn't know if I was going to be good enough at university, because I'm not so young…When I arrived, I was 23 years old, and you become a student, so you have to study, and I left school for years."

For Fajr, who spent five years working in an international NGO at a refugee camp, the concerns were similar:

"Can I study again? Can I come back to class again? Again listen to the lecturers?... Because when I started studying, I was twenty-six years old."

Consequently, participants like Fajr, indicated that once they started going to their university courses, some feelings of insecurity on their abilities increased due to their age and having lost touch with the educational environment (FN). Despite this, Kausar's resilience demonstrates that despite all the obstacles, to follow their educational dream keeps them motivated:

"I had the war in Syria, I lost my home, I lost my friends, I lost everything important, but I didn't give up."

Like Kausar, the students, regardless of the difficulties and waiting time, maintained their aspiration to start their HE. Once the participants began to see in reality, the reflection of their effort in the academic courses, this boosted the students' self-esteem and confidence. Shams recalls with a very proud enthusiasm (FN):

"When I arrived here, I thought I was not going to be able to make it. My first semester when I got a 9.5-grade point average, I was like, really?"

This enthusiasm was also evident when students started to compare their notes. Dylan, a Spanish lecturer, pointed out a healthy competitive environment boosting the students' efforts and confidence (FN). Additionally, some other interviewees identified access to a qualified university and the opportunity to learn a new language and live in a different country as a motive to apply for the Miga Project. Wessam assured me:

"I've been trying to do whatever it takes to have my education, and I came here because I really loved the university, and I wanted to learn Spanish."

Part of the opportunities of starting their higher education studies allowed them to increase their social relations. At one national conference organized by the Miga Project, I could observe how Syrian students have the opportunity to be recognized and interact with high-level representatives of Mexican and foreign governments, national and international associations, and academics (FN). To this, Jessy, another program coordinator, complemented that "the ones [students] who are at universities everyone knows them, is easier for them to establish more social and academic relations." Besides the invitations to

formal events, I confirmed the increase in social relationships when I accompanied two students to their social service at a federal university in Macondo City. Syrian students hold small presentations to share their stories, culture, and everyday life before the conflict. During the presentations and afterward, the Mexican students showed respect, admiration, and curiosity about the student's experiences and Syrian history. At the same time, national students prepared presentations of Mexican costumes, food, and traditions (*See Image 6 and 7*). A few weeks after they started this social service, the Syrian students stood out, and everyone could recognize them. They were invited by the students to different social events and joined future trips. Some of the Mexican students asked the Syrians to write their names in Arabic, and many exchanged numbers to keep in touch or schedule language lessons (FN). After the visit, the Syrian students confirmed that they enjoyed the welcoming of the Mexican students and being able to socialize with them as a way to counter stereotypes about "Arabs" and misconceptions about the conflict in Syria (FN).

Although some students remain uncertain about their future after university, the majority talked to me about their different future projects and ambitions after their studies. For example, some mentioned during interviews or informal conversations their desires to open their business in Mexico, writing books about Mexico in Arabic, and also pursue their academic goals outside of the country. Just a few of them mentioned the realistic possibility of going back to Syria after they finish their education. The majority of the students are eager to work after their studies and help their families economically and consider the possibility of visiting them. All of them mentioned continuing their studies has enabled them to stay motivated and imagine a future to support themselves and start a new life in Mexico, Europe, or where their academic future leads them.

In the next section, I analyze these three overarching themes in connection with Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical tools, as well as theoretical concepts by Anthony Giddens of agency and theoretical approaches concerning the transitional process.

Image 6. A Syrian beneficiary, presented about Syria before the war, the food, the costumes, religious festivities, and the 2011 conflict to a group of Mexican student

Image 7. Mexican students organized presentations for Syrian beneficiaries to explain costumes, food, dance, and touristic attractions around Macondo City.

6. Analysis

In this chapter, I analyze and discuss the three overarching themes identified in Chapter 5. For this purpose, I use the theoretical tools discussed in Chapter 4 of habitus, fields, and capitals, as well as the conceptualizations concerning agency and transition.

6.1 Challenges in Language at Higher Education Transitions

To analyze the Syrian students' transitional experiences into Mexican higher education institutions (HEIs), I find it necessary to consider their social background or habitus, in connection with their capitals and their educational field. As indicated by Naidoo et al., a more holistic approach is required to obtain a broader understanding of the experiences displaced background students go through their transitional journey into HE (2018, xxi). Habitus, as argued by Burke (2018), includes the external experiences that have shaped the individuals' social background, such as education and family settings. As habitus is a flexible term that embraces one's social background, I apply it to understand my participants' past experiences that have shaped their educational path.

Through the interviews, my participants' habitus includes their experience of being enrolled at educational systems, either high schools or universities in Syria prior to the 2011 conflict. According to the participants' family background, some inherit a habitus to belong to a family with HE studies. Thus this can motivate their path through tertiary education. For other participants, although they do not share this background, they represent the first generation to pursue a tertiary education path. All the participants share a displaced background of being young adults who moved from their homeland under different forced circumstances and times. By consequence, another feature of their past experiences is an average pause in their studies of five to six years, mostly spent working with international organizations in refugee camps, schools, or other formal and informal jobs. Thus, these diverse past educational experiences and social backgrounds have shaped my participants' habitus.

In their everyday lives, my participants' *habitus* and social, cultural, and economic capitals are in constant interactions with different social, economic, political, and cultural

fields in Mexico. I apply Bourdieu's conceptualization of field to denominate the private Mexican higher education institutions. Additionally, I use Jonh Field's conceptualization of transitional space, and use it to explore the students' experience with the Miga Project. I also apply transitional space to the Miga Project to frame the organization as a bridge between beneficiaries and their enrollment at private Mexican universities. The participants use this organization as a transitional space as the mechanism "in-between" to start their HE education in Mexico. Concerning Boudieu's different conceptualization of capitals, I use these terms to understand the cultural capital as the knowledge, language skills, and benefits obtained through education. Thus, my participants use the Miga Project as a transitional space to increase their cultural capital and acquire the language skills to communicate in their daily interactions with Mexicans. As personal growth, participants increase their ability to improve their academic knowledge and success in their bachelor's courses.

In line with the findings in Grüttner et al. 's (2018) and Schneider's (2018) research in the German context, my participants face the language barrier in their transitional process to HE programs. For my participant's context, this barrier is due to the Project offered a low-quality Spanish language course for the students to start their studies in private Mexican universities. My participants' experiences demonstrate the link between the educational process's interactions between the learner and the environment to increase their knowledge and capacity to think (Hvidd & Zittoun 2008, 121). Through the findings, participants' experiences demonstrated the impact of unprepared Miga Project's conditions for a complete learning environment. Some of the main experiences participants pointed were the weak designed program, a few hours of training, a lack of material resources, and a proper physical infrastructure. By contrast, the students' cultural capital of language skills increased when they started physically going to their university courses. Equally, when the private university started providing Spanish language training, students noticed an improvement. Thus, for the participants, the learning space is as significant as the access to the language course.

As observed by Schlossberg (1981), the physical environment plays an important role in transitional processes. For most of my participants, the Miga Project's physical limitations delayed their experience of learning a new language. By not being placed in acceptable physical and pedagogical conditions, the students' transitional process concerning language

was characterized for being a stressful and disappointing phase. In connection with the lack of educational design, the students experienced limited social interactions. Thus, the language training course has a direct relationship with the participant's increase in social capital. During the language course, some students signaled the challenges of loneliness and lack of socialization, not only with other students but also people beyond the Miga Project's team members and lecturers. Coming to Mexico alone represented a challenge for their capitals, as they had to live with a limited social network. Therefore, without the language skills or the possibility to surround themselves with more people, isolation, and lack of confidence in their language process directly affected the participants' well-being and habitus as new students in Mexico.

As a transitional space, the conditions offered by the Miga Project were not ideal for accomplishing a dominance of the Spanish language that would ease their transition process into their HE programs. Mainly, participants agree that another aspect is that the technical language terms for their area of studies remain a primary barrier to their preparation. Thus, the cultural capital obtained through the Project's language course still positioned the students on unequal terms with the Mexican classmates. Despite the frustrations experienced by the participants concerning language training, they demonstrated their agency by making choices to improve their transitional language path. Another way in which participants demonstrated that this agency was when they relied on self-study techniques and supporting each other by sharing studying techniques. Nevertheless, the participants' confidence during their transition to HEIs is affected by the limited conditions to obtain cultural and social capital.

6.2 Navigating Inequalities in Private Mexican Higher Education Institutions

Characteristics of the educational systems become relevant to understand the main obstacles for refugee and displaced background students in HE settings (Field 2012). Experiences and challenges participants face within this field, bring to light the Giddens' duality between the individual's way of acting and the structure. The field of private HEIs in Mexico, where participants are enrolled, is directed to Mexican students with a habitus and capitals linked to the wealthy socio-economic wealthy class. In this field of constant reinforcement of the dominant class, the Syrian students face unequal conditions in habitus and social, cultural, and financial capitals. My participants pointed out the inequalities due

to economic capital restrictions. For most Syrian students, the Project is their primary and sole source of economic capital. However, I can argue that through the dynamics of capital, field, and habitus it is possible to understand the participant's experiences in a detailed framework. Most students felt restricted in their economic freedom to cover the high living expenses related to their monthly financial scholarship. Although the Project, as a transitional space, the design of this bureaucratic system affects the students' self-esteem. The organization's "request system" has triggered the students' feelings of discomfort on the student's self-perception as honest and hard-working individuals. These latter perceptions, combined with their habitus of past work experience, participants have to navigate the field of Mexican HEIs and the Project. Hence, in their condition as students, they feel helpless not to be financially emancipated. Therefore, there is a direct correlation between access to economic capital and the participants' habitus of being autonomous and economically self-sufficient.

One of Wilkinson's (2018) remarks was the financial assistance by the Australian universities scholarships and faith-based organizations to ease the participants' economic burden to focus on their studies. By contrast, during my research, Syrian participants find themselves in constant stress in their new educational environment due to the Project's limited scholarship. The participants expressed anger and disappointment concerning the lack of proper economic support by the Project that increases their unequal conditions in the Mexican private HEIs. Thus, based on participants' experiences, the Miga Project, as a transitional space, has failed to balance high socioeconomic university settings with their habitus and capitals. Thus, instead of providing economic relief to the participants, the Miga Project represented a burden that did not consider enough how to close a gap between their habitus in an educational field of unequal conditions in social, cultural, and economic capital. Echoing Bourdieu's words, the participants continue to face class and capital inequalities on transitional spaces such as the private HEIs and the Miga Project.

As established by Bourdieu, the students face the unequal distribution of capitals in the educational systems where social and financial differences are remarkable. Due to the notorious high economic capital of their classmates, the participants' low desires to socialize and feelings of being in another world diminished their opportunities to increase their social

capital. Nevertheless, participants are in transition to navigate and adapt their habitus and capitals to this educational field. This finding goes in line with Schlossberg's (1981) and Hviid & Zittoun (2008) understanding of the change in ones' self-identity and a rupture of old perspectives in a new environment. During their transitional process to the field of private HE, my participants increase experiences to their habitus, as being international students in elite universities. Precisely, this adaptation process confirms, as indicated by Burke (2018), that participants' habitus is not static, adding new features to the Syrian students' habitus.

Nonetheless, as Giddens observed, the agent is capable of making decisions on unequal structures. According to the theory on structuration, the individual has a range of freedom to encounter disadvantages despite the structural settings. Even though the private Mexican HEIs setting aims to privilege the dominant socio-economic class and the monthly scholarship is a transitional financial challenge, the Syrian students have been able to navigate and try to overcome the differences by establishing alternative streams of income. The participants' agency is translated when participants apply for jobs, start small business initiatives, or teach Arabic lessons. Nevertheless, my participants signaled the difficulties in maintaining their academic performance, some because of the language disadvantage or schedule complications. Without a proper alternative to access another income, these circumstances keep the participants, during their transition to HE, in restrained access to economic capital.

6.3 The Journey of Being a Student Again

Participants in this thesis reflected on their choices to apply for the Miga Project and continue their studies in Mexican universities. My participants had access to education during their time in Syria, hence they had a cultural capital prior to their displacement. However, various external circumstances hindered their opportunities. However, following Giddens' approach to the structure and agency, the participants showed their agency by actively applying and searching programs where they continue increasing this cultural capital. Participants expressed their satisfaction to obtain it by being enrolled at their university programs by using the Project as a transitional space. They were also able to decide, under the Project's opportunities, their field of study according to their interests and abilities. For some of the participants who had previous experience in the Syrian HE system in fields of

study that were not of their main interest or there was no program available, the possibility to decide had a positive impact. The participants who finished high school could decide from fields that were not available in their homeland. Therefore, participants were able to not only exercise their agency but also improve it.

According to Hviid & Zittoun's (2008) and Schlossberg's (1981) theoretical approach on transition, when individuals go through a process of adaptability, there is a possibility to change one's self-identity. Partially, this dynamic was present throughout my participants by avoiding identifying themselves as refugees within the educational sphere. Just as Schneider's (2018) participants in Germany, my Syrian participants can see themselves as undergraduate students transitioning in Mexican HEIs. As many argued, they consider themselves students since they started their transitional process into HE. Nevertheless, I argued that because within their habitus they had an educational background in Syria, accessing to HE is not a complete re-invention of their identities, but rather a continuation of a forcibly interrupted educational process. In simple terms, they are expanding their habitus as students, only this time under the higher education frame. Thus, it allows them to include in their habitus to be an undergraduate student.

Signaled by Schlossberg (1981) and Winnicott (1971), anxiety and stress are part of the individual's complex transitional processes. Following this approach, within my participants' habitus, age, and years of school disconnection were common triggers for their insecurities in their students' transitional process in HEIs. Expressly, students indicated the dynamic between age and learning skills, especially after being away almost five years from an educational setting and the implications of their displacement. Hence, specific features of the students' social and biological background can have a significant weight during their transition. Starting their bachelor studies in their early and mid-twenties, with an average of five years of school disconnection, alongside the psychological implications of dealing with displacement, are some factors that challenge their process and sense as students. Therefore, I argue that understanding displaced background individuals' habitus becomes relevant to their self-perception process as students into HEIs. Despite these insecurities and frustrations, my participants overcame them through their own efforts, skills, and dedication in their courses. This agency allows the students to maintain a high academic performance that has

enhanced their confidence, high self-esteem, and serve as a basis for their aspirations and future projects.

Diverse authors have pointed out the wrongful pre-conceptions and homogenization concerning refugees and displaced populations as uneducated and unskilled masses (Rajaram 2002; Zetter 2017; Shapiro 2018). My findings are relevant to recognize how the participants' social and cultural capitals counter these misconceptions. As previously mentioned, before applying to the Miga Project, my participants' cultural capital included their previous enrollment in secondary and tertiary education. However, there are other forms of cultural capital they brought to their transitional process into HE. All my participants spoke Arabic fluently, some of them also spoke Kurdish, and the majority, on different levels, spoke English. After displacement, most of them worked in an area of humanitarian aid, alongside international NGOs, refugee camps, and schools. These skills and experiences demonstrate that these students had benefitted from having access to resources, training, and education in Syria, which enabled them to work in the competitive and well-paid fields of international development work. Thus it is essential to move from the deterministic approach to their value as individuals only because of their displacement condition and to recognize their inherited habitus and the cultural capitals, as educational level, and language skills.

By the transitional process of the participants going into HEIs, I suggest that it is possible to incorporate Bourdieu's and Coleman's premise of cultural capital acquisition to bring future benefits. For the participants, cultural capital includes language skills. Despite the obstacles in their learning process, participants have been able to increase this cultural capital reflected in their Spanish acquisition as their third or fourth language. Plus, as indicated by Bourdieu, the development of new skills and knowledge concerning their fields of study could be translated into a future economic capital. Although many of my participants were unsure of their long-term plans, others started to demonstrate they could initiate small initiatives and compete for job opportunities. Concerning social capital, the structural setting of private universities and socio-economic standards, partially hindered the participant's opportunities to establish social relations. Hence, the social class inequalities within the private Mexican HEIs are a challenge for the students' possibilities to improve their social network. Even if the participants are physically at the university and other high-

level reunions, this does not necessarily translate into a complete intention to be accepted by these groups. Thus, at times participants manifested social isolation during their transitional process to private HEIs. By contrast, when participants navigate spaces with less structural inequalities, such as the social service they attend in Macondo City, their social capital increased and established faster relationships.

This analysis overlaps the overarching themes concerning dynamics between their educational habitus, social, cultural, and economic capitals with the educational field. Besides, the extent of the participant's decision power in either the HEIs or the Project, reflect Gidden's duality of agency and structure. Through these processes, Syrian participants encounter social and class inequalities, yet they can overcome them by using their agency, and their inherit habitus and capitals prior to displacement. Moreover, Syrian participants demonstrate the connection of accessing transitional spaces, such as the Miga Project, to increase their different capitals and identity as students. Learning from the dynamics that emerge from their social and educational backgrounds into a new educational setting, it is possible to move our understanding of their challenges beyond their displacement background.

7. Conclusions

My research started to analyze the dynamics concerning Syrian students, from a displaced-background, experience the Miga Project as a transitional space to private Mexican higher education institutions. In this chapter, I present my main conclusion in an attempt to summarize the answer to this question and provide recommendations for further research. Through a micro-ethnography, I conducted my fieldwork in Macondo City, Mexico. Based on semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and photographs, I analyzed the voices of seven Syrian students that provide me with three overarching themes concerning language training, class and social inequalities at higher education universities, and the participant's exercise of agency.

Using the Project as a transitional space, Syrian students demonstrated the dominance of language as one of the essential foundations for their lives inside and outside the classrooms. Nevertheless, the students face significant obstacles since the organization was not prepared to provide a complete pedagogical and qualified language course. Consequently, students experienced limitations in increasing the cultural capital which is translated in their constant struggle to study their current degrees in Spanish. The language program is one of the first physical spaces the students live for the first nine months, yet they pointed out a limited increase in their social capital and adverse effects on their well-being. Hence, students experience frustrations by the conditions in which they first gained access to the language, yet they recognize transition to the university settings improved their cultural capital.

The students recognized that economic capital is a constant obstacle to navigating the private Mexican universities' structural settings. On the one hand, students experience constant economic restraints by the organization's bureaucracy and lack of resources to minimize the economic gap from the educational fields' nature. On the other hand, the upper class environments have, to a certain extent, affected their possibilities to socialize within the university settings. Due to their economic dependence with the Miga Project, students find themselves on unequal conditions to transition to HEIs. The Syrian students express

desperation to use their past and current abilities to work, although most of the time, it is an unlikely scenario. Nevertheless, some of them use their agency to find alternatives and gain economic capital and maintain their habitus as skilled and hard-working individuals.

Facing the scenarios mentioned above, the Syrian participants' agency is a constant in their transitional process to HE. By deciding not to leave their refugee or displacement status to define them. While they encounter difficulties due to their age and school disconnection, deciding on their academic program, a high academic performance, and their physical presence at the universities allowed them to identify and feel, once again, as students. Increasing their language and social relations impact the students' self-esteem and their future goals. Therefore, social and cultural capitals are essential for the students transitioning to HE.

Facing the scenarios mentioned above, the Syrian participants' agency is noticeable in their transitional process to HE. Despite their refugee or displacement experiences, students do not rely on these labels. Through the transitional experience, they can increase their agency on educational terms. While they encounter difficulties due to their age and school disconnection, deciding on their academic program, high academic performance and physical presence at the universities allowed them to identify and feel, once again, as students. Hence, to improve our understanding of young adults with a displacement background transitioning into HEIs, academia must consider other features beyond their migratory status.

The path for young adults with a displaced background in higher education systems is gaining attention in diverse initiatives and academic research. Although there is not a single answer to my question, my research sheds light on the gaps concerning the individual dynamics students face while they start this process. As students in Mexico, they experience the social and class inequalities at private universities. Hence, my thesis brings attention to take into consideration the nature of the educational system in which displaced-background students are enrolled. While previous research does mentions common barriers as language and economic difficulties, my results highlight the dynamics derived between students' previous social and educational background and the educational field and the organization providing the transition. Finally, my thesis offers a snapshot of an unexplored connection

concerning current migration flows through education between the Middle East and the Latin American region.

7.1 Further research

In the future, one could follow the journey of Syrian students after finishing their tertiary education and analyze the long-term benefits of accessing higher education. Another point for further consideration is comparative studies between experiences from students, initiatives, and lecturers across HEs in the south and global north settings. Due to the limitations of my study, I was not able to provide a gender approach to the study, and this could draw a different perspective to understand in-depth the transitional process in Mexico's HEIs. Moreover, further research could be done concerning the former students who have abandoned the project and it could bring a different approach to understand different obstacles on their transition to tertiary education.

As the Miga Project is a new and academically understudied organization, this opens the possibility for significant and diverse research beyond my study scope. This thesis echoes the need for further research in southern states, particularly the Latin American responses to displaced populations from other regions, such as the MENA. It is also necessary to have a significant revision of the role and challenges civil society initiatives face in a context similar to the Mexican one, providing access to HEIs. On the policy level, more research is needed on the response and collaboration of the Mexican government towards the entrance of education to refugee and displaced students from diverse backgrounds, such as the MENA region.

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Appendix 1

The Miga Project's Syrian Beneficiaries Travel Route*

*The most common route for Syrian students sponsored by the Miga Project until early 2019. Other past routes have included Yemen as starting point and Ecuador, as a connecting country.

Image courtesy of the Miga Project, November 2019.

Appendix 2

The Miga Project Timeline

Author's creation based on information provided by The Miga Project's Coordinators, November 2019:

2015-2016
INITIAL STAGE

Non-structured organization.
Two formal team members.
Non-existent Spanish language training program (LTP).
No physical office or student's residency.
Financial shortages.
4 enrolled students.

EARLY 2017
FORMALIZATION STAGE

Administrative Coordination established.
Rigorous selection process.
Early stages of Spanish LTP.
4 official team members.
Financial shortages

END 2017
FORMALIZATION STAGE

One residence for headquarters and beneficiaries.
Increased agreements with private Mexican HEIs.
7 more enrolled students.

EARLY 2018
BUREAUCRATIC STAGE

An official hired Spanish language lecturer; mostly volunteer teaching.
Reception and Support Coordination established.
4 more students arrive

END 2018
BUREAUCRATIC STAGE

Increased bureaucratic processes.
Separation of office and student residency.
Financial support from WUSC, Catalyst Foundation, UNHCR.

EARLY 2019
PROFESSIONALIZATION AND GROWTH

Spanish LTP at Macondo city's cultural institute.
Maya House inaugurated: Office and student's residency with distinguished limits.
Reception of 2 more students.
12 official team members

MID 2019
PROFESSIONALIZATION AND GROWTH

Spanish LTP in Macondo's Private University.
Collaborative work with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.