

Article

‘Uncertain Futures’: A Capabilities Approach to Structured Inequalities in the Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs in Türkiye

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Abstract

This study explores the educational transitions of university students with special educational needs in Türkiye, focusing on their experiences of moving from secondary to higher education and their expectations for the transition from university to employment. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 15 university students with special educational needs, including two participants with immigrant backgrounds. Findings primarily reflect the experiences of the overall sample, while the accounts of the two participants with immigrant backgrounds are interpreted as exploratory observations. The interview questions focused on resources, transition-related experiences, and expectations. Guided by the Capabilities Approach, the analysis explores the barriers to a smooth transition process and their implications for career choices through the lens of central capabilities. The findings reveal that participants face a range of challenges during transition processes, including limited and inconsistent institutional support, barriers in accessing educational and vocational opportunities, and difficulties in navigating key transition stages. The two students with immigrant backgrounds additionally described challenges related to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the education system, and limited access to support networks, which appeared to further complicate their individual transition experiences.

Keywords: special educational needs; educational transitions; immigrant backgrounds; equity



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1. Introduction

Each individual’s academic journey involves a series of transitions across educational levels, beginning with the move from early childhood education to primary schooling and continuing through secondary and higher education. Within this broader trajectory, the transition into and through high school is a particularly significant developmental stage, as students often begin to clarify their future aspirations and consider potential career pathways (Schoon & Eccles, 2014). The decisions and goals students form during this transition influence their next stage of development. These career goals show how young people see themselves, and the aspirations they set based on their interests, abilities, and needs help shape both their future work lives and their personal identities (Gutman & Schoon, 2018). The higher education period requires students to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired until this point. Each student can have different experiences according to their differences and needs (González-Rodríguez et al., 2025). However, transition processes

do not occur under equal conditions for all students. These inequalities are especially pronounced for students with special educational needs, whose access to institutional support and higher education opportunities may be constrained by structural conditions and unequal opportunity structures (Biewer et al., 2015). Nevertheless, how students who carry both special educational needs and immigrant status experience these transition processes remains insufficiently addressed in the literature. This gap is particularly salient in contexts such as Türkiye, where the intersection of these two conditions has become an increasingly visible reality.

Students with special educational needs have historically faced systemic inequalities in both education and employment. For example, they often have lower success rates than their peers when it comes to entering university, securing post-school employment, and achieving independent living. As a result, they are more likely to encounter persistent inequities across these areas (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2011). Moreover, transition experiences are not homogeneous even among individuals with disability (Stepaniuk & Onipede, 2025). In particular, individuals with special needs who have experienced forced migration or refugee backgrounds may encounter additional challenges during this transition (de Miguel-Luken & Solana-Solana, 2017). These difficulties may include challenges related to the development of multilingual language proficiency, coping with the effects of post-traumatic stress, and managing differences in cultural expectations between the family and the school environment (Singh et al., 2017). This highlights that transition processes should be understood through the intersection of special educational needs and migration.

In the Turkish context, the intersection of migration and special educational needs has become increasingly significant. Türkiye is one of the largest host countries for refugees worldwide (Kondakci et al., 2023). As of 2025, the number of foreign nationals legally residing in the country is 3,611,218, of whom 2,375,909 are Syrians under temporary protection and 147,629 are individuals from other nationalities who have applied for international protection (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2025). These categories carry specific meanings, and we therefore clarify the terminology used throughout this article. Following the IOM Glossary on Migration (International Organization for Migration, 2019), immigrant refers to a person who moves into a country other than that of their nationality or usual residence, without implying any particular legal status; refugee refers, in the sense of the 1951 Convention, to a person outside their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of persecution; forcibly displaced refers to those compelled to flee their homes, particularly to avoid the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations; and international protection refers to the protection accorded to persons who cannot return home without infringing the principle of non-refoulement.

In Türkiye, these categories are further specified by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No. 6458). Because the geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention is maintained, refugee status is granted only to those fleeing events occurring in European countries; those arriving from other regions may be granted conditional refugee status or subsidiary protection, while temporary protection is applied on a group basis and currently to Syrian nationals. Legal categories therefore do not correspond directly to nationality. Accordingly, the term immigrant is employed throughout this article as an umbrella term encompassing individuals of differing legal statuses, including those under international protection and those residing on other legal bases such as residence or student permits. It is likewise applied to the participants of this study, whose legal status was neither examined nor verified in the course of the research. Where prior research or legal provisions employing other terms are reported, the terminology of the original source is retained.

These legal distinctions may contribute to differences in the forms of protection and support available to different migrant groups in practice. Research indicates that Afghan

nationals in particular face significant challenges related to registration processes, legal documentation, and access to protection mechanisms, contributing to heightened precarity and vulnerability in their daily lives (Almasri, 2023). Furthermore, aid and integration policies for refugees in Türkiye have largely focused on Syrian refugees, which may result in more limited access to existing support mechanisms for other groups (Almasri, 2023). In addition, applications from Iranian nationals rose sharply in the years following 2009, and according to 2024 data, Iranians rank third among nationalities applying for international protection in Türkiye, after Afghans and Iraqis; those recognised are granted conditional refugee status, which permits temporary stay pending resettlement to a third country while limiting access to the rights attached to refugee status and to citizenship (Dinçer, 2025).

Particularly following the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye has become a setting in which the individuals who hold both refugee status and a disability designation constitute an increasingly visible population (İstif İnci et al., 2026). Within the education system, this complexity is reflected in the scale and diversity of students requiring support. According to the Turkish Ministry of National Education, as of December 2025, 603,184 students with special educational needs were being served across three distinct provision models (General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services, 2025). The first is mainstreaming and inclusion, in which students with special educational needs are educated alongside their peers in general classrooms at all levels of schooling; 436,561 students were enrolled in this model. The second is special education schools which are standalone institutions established specifically for students with special educational needs; 67,786 students attended such schools. The third is special education classrooms which are separate classrooms within mainstream schools for students who require more intensive support; 98,837 students were placed in this model (General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services, 2025). However, reliable and disaggregated data on the number of migrants with special educational needs in Türkiye remains limited, as official statistics typically report on migration status and disability separately rather than in an integrated manner. Existing evidence on disability among refugee populations is similarly scarce. A small number of reports suggest prevalence estimates ranging between 1% and 5%; however, the methodologies underpinning these estimates are often unclear (Polack et al., 2021). Moreover, these figures may capture only individuals who have formally registered their disability status through social protection schemes, thereby excluding a substantial proportion of the refugee population whose needs remain unrecognized in official records (Polack et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No. 6458) formally recognizes “persons with special needs” within the refugee population and stipulates priority access to rights and services for these groups (Law on Foreigners and International Protection, 2013). For instance, in Türkiye, it is a legal requirement for universities to establish Disability Support Units responsible for organizing the academic, physical, and social support of students with disabilities, including both local and immigrant students, and ensuring accessibility (Council of Higher Education of Türkiye, 2010). Memişoğlu et al. (2021) report that these regulations, although intended to facilitate access to higher education, remain limited in their effectiveness for refugee students with special educational needs. Access to these supports depends on the provision of official medical reports, such as DHBR (Disability Health Board Report for Adults) or SDRC (Special Needs Report for Children) (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services & Ministry of Health, 2019). At the same time, refugees frequently encounter language barriers and difficulties in accessing information and services, which may complicate their access to disability-related support systems (Memişoğlu et al., 2021). In addition, a structural disconnection appears to exist between institutions working in the fields of migration and special educational needs.

While migration-focused institutions may lack sufficient expertise regarding disability, professionals working in the field of disability may not be adequately informed about the needs and legal rights of migrant populations (Istif Inci et al., 2026; Memişoğlu et al., 2021). As a result, individuals at the intersection of special educational needs and migration may fall into gaps between institutional structures. Nevertheless, systematic evidence on the concrete effects of these structural barriers on the educational transition experiences of immigrant students with special educational needs in Türkiye remains scarce, pointing to a significant gap in the existing literature.

2. Higher Education, Special Educational Needs, and Migration in Türkiye

Türkiye's role as a major refugee host country, together with its legal frameworks for special educational needs, makes it especially important to examine students with special educational needs' access to and experiences in higher education. Yet access to higher education for these students remains significantly restricted. Although the university entrance rates of students with disability have increased in recent years, they remain significantly lower than those of their peers (Cheatham & Randolph, 2022; Park et al., 2017). Despite the broad interest in providing basic education for migrants, there is insufficient attention at the global level to their access to higher education. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that only 3% of refugee populations can access higher education (Kondakci et al., 2023). In the Turkish context, statistics related to this issue are not publicly available. Being both a student with special educational needs and a migrant render these processes multi-layered. Within higher education, the intersection of disability and refugee status may result in individuals being overlooked by support structures due to the insufficient recognition of the challenges they face (Rfat et al., 2023). Therefore, transition processes should be conceptualized within a broader structural framework, rather than being reduced to individual effort and adaptation. In addition to individual differences and aspirations, students' trajectories are shaped by institutional arrangements and opportunity structures, which influence access to resources, guidance, and postsecondary pathways, as well as the accessibility and continuity of institutional supports (Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

Migrants with special educational needs are often overlooked in terms of their social, economic, cultural, and gender-based experiences and are therefore described as constituting a "shadow population" (Burns, 2017). There is a limited number of studies examining the transition experiences of migrants with special educational needs in education and their experiences in entering employment. Existing studies indicate a range of systemic and institutional barriers in workplace transitions. These include the limited effectiveness of employment-oriented policies, difficulties in the recognition of prior qualifications, lack of inclusive orientation programs, and exclusion from employment services (Rfat et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals may adopt coping strategies such as concealing their special educational needs to remain employable, while still being exposed to precarious working conditions and stigma in the workplace (Duda-Mikulin & Głowacka, 2024). In addition to these findings, the existing literature predominantly consists of studies that address either migration or special educational needs in isolation. For instance, while there are studies examining the transition experiences of refugee youth in education and the challenges they face entering the employment, most of these studies focus primarily on refugee populations without special needs (Beiser & Hou, 2001; Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023; Singh et al., 2017). Similarly, research addressing transitions and the barriers in higher education for individuals with disability rarely considers the experiences of those with refugee backgrounds (Stepaniuk & Onipede, 2025). Notably, studies conducted in the Turkish context have been carried out primarily after the Syrian Civil War, and their number remains quite limited (Istif Inci et al., 2026; Kondakci et al., 2023).

Given the limited literature on these transition processes and support services in Türkiye and internationally, this study explores the transition experiences of students with special educational needs as they move from high school to university and from university to employment, and how structural conditions shape these experiences. Within this overall sample, it pays particular attention to the experiences of two participants with immigrant backgrounds, whose accounts are interpreted as exploratory observations on how immigration status and special educational needs may intersect in transition experiences. Therefore, the research questions are;

1. How do students with special educational needs navigate the transition from high school to university, and what factors shape these experiences?
2. What barriers and support needs emerge during the transition from university to employment, and how do students with special educational needs navigate them?

3. Theoretical Framing: The Capabilities Approach

To interpret the findings of this study, this paper draws on Martha Nussbaum's adaptation of the Capabilities Approach (CA; Sen, 1999). Nussbaum (2011) explains the CA as a normative, evaluative framework that assesses wellbeing from two ethically foundational principles: dignity and respect. The CA provides a multidimensional framework that has been widely applied to the evaluation of wellbeing, theories of justice, and human development (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1999). It does so by focusing on what individuals are substantively free to do and be (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1999). Sen (1992) contends that the notion of standard of living extends beyond income, wealth, and utility-based assessments, focusing instead on the capabilities individuals have to achieve valued ways of being and doing. Rather than assessing quality of life solely in terms of resources, utility, or achieved outcomes, it centers on capabilities, that is, the real freedoms people have to pursue lives they have reason to value (Nussbaum, 2011). Within the CA, Sen emphasizes the kinds of lives people are able to lead, focusing on their real opportunities to act and achieve, and on the states of being and activities they are able to realize.

Two fundamental elements lie at the heart of the CA: capabilities and functionings. The concept of *capability* refers to a person's real or practical opportunities—the genuine freedoms they have to achieve different ways of being and doing (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 71). *Functionings* denote the realized aspects of life: what a person actually manages to do or to be (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 72). While the term “functioning” is often understood as an activity, it is used in a broader sense to include both actions and states of being, such as being well-nourished or being free from disease (Sen, 1992). For example, having the genuine opportunity to obtain a quality education constitutes a capability, whereas actually receiving that education and becoming educated represents a functioning. Our ability to convert our resources, capabilities, or protection into valuable “functions” plays a crucial role here. The level of functioning, therefore, varies on a spectrum from restricted to sophisticated (Sen, 1992). For instance, a student being unable to follow classes or leaving education early due to lack of support indicates restricted functionings, while being able to find internships and a smooth transition to the job market with appropriate support exemplify more sophisticated functionings. The disparities arising from these differences are fundamental to the CA and must be considered when responding to the requirements of equality (Terzi, 2005).

Moreover, the ability to achieve capabilities is shaped by contextual factors. The “cost” of converting capabilities into functionings varies depending on an individual's environment, including the level of resources and infrastructure within a given society (Sen, 2010). For example, consider a person with a visual impairment. In a context where vehicles are equipped with advanced assistive technologies and transportation systems are designed to accommodate such needs, this individual may be able to achieve the function-

ing of independent mobility, including driving (Terzi, 2005). In this case, environmental and technological supports enable the conversion of capability into a realized functioning. Therefore, the CA places less emphasis on wealth-based indicators of inequality, such as income levels or Gross Domestic Product (GDP), because financial resources alone do not ensure genuine inclusion or equality, even if they can contribute to them. For instance, even if an individual with visual impairment has access to a specially designed vehicle, achieving mobility may still depend on broader social and environmental conditions, including accessible infrastructure, supportive policies, and the availability of assistive technologies. This illustrates that mobility is shaped not only by individual resources but also by the societal arrangements that enable those resources to be effectively used.

While this focus may appear straightforward, it in fact raises a deeper normative challenge: how to respond fairly and equitably to human diversity and aspirations within contexts marked by structural injustice and inequality (MacKenzie et al., 2023). In this respect, the CA moves beyond a narrow concern with resource distribution and instead examines whether individuals genuinely possess the substantive freedom to achieve particular ways of living. That is, it considers both the opportunities available to individuals and their ability to convert these opportunities into valued functionings (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 71). Consequently, the approach emphasizes the importance of identifying and removing barriers that constrain human potential, including forms of oppression such as limited access to education, poor health, inadequate resources, and restricted civil and political freedoms (Sen, 2001).

Therefore, from a capabilities perspective, achieving equality does not necessarily entail identical treatment; rather, it may require providing additional support to disadvantaged groups. For example, individuals who experience discrimination in healthcare or education on the basis of race, gender, disability, or other social factors may need targeted interventions to access the same opportunities as others (Sen, 1999, pp. 70–71). Sen (1990) complicates this view by questioning approaches that rely solely on individuals' expressed preferences. He introduces the concept of "adaptive preferences," arguing that people's desires are often shaped by the constraints they face. When opportunities are consistently denied, individuals, especially those in disadvantaged positions, may adjust their expectations and no longer aspire to what seems unattainable. Nussbaum (2011) further develops the concept of adaptive preferences within her version of the Capabilities Approach. She argues that the key issue is not just what individuals prefer, but also why they hold those preferences and the factors that shape them. In response to these concerns about adaptive preferences, Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of expanding capabilities, understood as widening people's real choices and their freedom to act, as a foundation for human flourishing. In Ancient Greek thought, *eudaimonia* was understood as human flourishing; the full development of one's potential and the pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling life. This ideal was closely linked to virtue, excellence of character, and practical wisdom (Aristotle, 2009, p. 5). According to Nussbaum (1987), the concept encourages us to assess political arrangements by examining individuals' actual functioning, their actions, ways of being, and what they are effectively able to do, and to consider whether such arrangements enable them to live and function at their best.

Nussbaum's account of essential political rights is grounded in a definitive list of central capabilities, which she advances as fundamental standards for justice and human dignity (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 76). These central capabilities are based on the notion of "truly human functioning" and are firmly rooted in the principle of respect for human dignity. Moreover, the list is intended to guide governments, policymakers, and international institutions in shaping just social arrangements. In this way, it operates as a normative framework designed to ensure that all individuals are provided with genuine opportunities

to lead lives that are both meaningful and flourishing. The central capabilities include, for example, Life (Capability 1), Bodily Health (Capability 2), Bodily Integrity (Capability 3) and Senses Imagination and Thought (Capability 4). The ten central capabilities are intrinsically interconnected and cannot be hierarchically substituted for one another. Regardless of an individual's circumstances, no single capability, such as *play* (Capability 9), can be considered less important than others, including emotions, practical reason, or affiliation (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 76–77). Rather than functioning in isolation, these capabilities are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Each contributes to the development and realization of the others, forming an integrated framework that underpins human dignity and flourishing within Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach.

Such a relational interpretation is especially relevant in educational contexts, where recognition, belonging, and institutional support significantly influence young people's real freedoms. This is particularly apparent in the experiences of students with special educational needs, whose capability development can be restricted by exclusionary practices, stigma, or insufficient accommodations. In this way, the CA offers a particularly valuable framework for analyzing educational trajectories, especially for young people with special educational needs and immigrant students with special educational needs, whose transitions are shaped by structural inequalities, institutional arrangements, and relational dynamics.

4. Method

In this research, a qualitative research design was used to explore the transition experiences of university students with special educational needs as they navigate the shift from high school to university and from university into the workplace. The study also examines their expectations, perceived challenges, and support needs across these critical educational and professional transition stages.

The data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews. To ensure the generation of meaningful and relevant data, the questions were designed in line with established qualitative research principles. Following (Creswell, 2013), five to seven open-ended questions were included to encourage thoughtful and reflective responses. The questions were carefully phrased to be clear, neutral, and non-leading, and were organized in a logical sequence to create a comfortable environment in which participants could freely share their experiences and perspectives. Prior to data collection, the interview questions were developed by the researchers and refined based on expert feedback. Sample interview questions included: 'Thinking about the last examination you took, how did you experience that process, and what factors made it easier or more difficult for you?'; 'When you think about the transition from university to employment, what kinds of support or preparation do you feel you need most?'; and 'How would you describe the career guidance or employment support you have received at university, and to what extent has this support been helpful in shaping your plans for the future?'

4.1. Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2014) to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experience of transition processes. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) having a special educational need and (b) being currently enrolled in university. Special educational needs were established in line with the two recruitment routes. Students reached through disability support units were registered with these units, as students must officially disclose their special educational needs and provide the required documentation in order to access disability support services at their universities. Students reached through academic colleagues self-identified their needs and described them dur-

ing the interview. Sample size was determined using the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than data saturation. The study is guided by an established theoretical framework, the Capabilities Approach. The sample is also highly specific: every participant was a university student with special educational needs who had personally experienced the transition from high school to university. Because most participants held experience directly relevant to the research questions, fewer participants were required than would be the case with a more loosely defined sample. The aim of the study is likewise clear and focused: to examine the transition experiences of a specific group of students. Taken together, these features indicated that 15 participants would provide sufficient depth to address the research questions.

The research team contacted the disability support units of major universities across different regions of Türkiye, provided information about the study, and asked staff to forward the invitation to students meeting the inclusion criteria. In addition, academic colleagues at some of these universities were informed about the study and, where appropriate, asked to share the invitation with eligible students. Students who wished to take part then contacted the research team directly. Although the invitation was distributed nationally, recruitment was most productive at three universities in a city in central Anatolia, where existing institutional contacts allowed more direct follow-up; consequently, 13 of the 15 participants were studying at universities in this city. Because initial contact was mediated by disability support units and academic colleagues, the students who reached the research team had already indicated their willingness to take part, and all of them were included in the study. Through this process, only two students with immigrant backgrounds took part in the study. This is likely related to the geographical concentration of recruitment: the city in which most participants were studying is not among those where the immigrant population in Türkiye is most concentrated. It may also reflect the fact that recruitment through institutional disability support units reaches only students who are registered with these units, and immigrant students may be less likely to be registered.

This paper presents the experiences and expectations of university students with special educational needs, including Turkish nationals ($n = 13$), one Afghan national ($n = 1$), and one Iranian national ($n = 1$). The sample included two participants with immigrant backgrounds. Given the small number of participants, observations relating to these accounts are presented as exploratory rather than representative of immigrant students with special educational needs in Türkiye. Detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

	Sex	Age	Nationality	Disability	Fields of Study
Participant 1	Male	25–27	Turkish	Spinal Muscular Atrophy	Education
Participant 2	Female	22–24	Turkish	Visual Impairment and physical disability	Education
Participant 3	Female	22–24	Turkish	LD	Health Science
Participant 4	Female	22–24	Turkish	LD	Social Science
Participant 5	Male	25–27	Afghan	Visual Impairment	Education
Participant 6	Male	19–21	Turkish	ADHD	Education
Participant 7	Male	22–24	Turkish	ADHD	Education
Participant 8	Male	19–21	Turkish	ADHD	Education
Participant 9	Male	19–21	Turkish	ADHD	Education
Participant 10	Female	22–24	Turkish	LD	Education
Participant 11	Female	19–21	Turkish	LD	Social Science
Participant 12	Male	19–21	Turkish	Albino and visual impairment	Education
Participant 13	Female	22–24	Turkish	ADHD	Education
Participant 14	Female	19–21	Turkish	LD	Vocational Programme
Participant 15	Male	19–21	Iranian	ADHD	Humanities

Note. ADHD = Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder; LD = Learning Disability.

The interviews were conducted by the first author in Turkish via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 min. The interviews were transcribed in Turkish and translated into English by a translator. The accuracy of the translations was verified by the second author who is bilingual in Turkish and English. All participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts; however, none requested a copy. With one exception, the first author had no prior relationship with the participants. One participant was enrolled in the same department as the first author; however, as the first author teaches third-year courses and this participant was in their first year, there was no teaching or assessment relationship between them. This participant was additionally reassured before the interview that participation was voluntary and that the decision to take part or withdraw would have no bearing on their academic standing.

4.2. Data Analysis

Both researchers bring distinct professional and disciplinary backgrounds that may have influenced the design and analysis of this study. Both authors are researchers with experience working with individuals with special educational needs. While the first author is based in Türkiye and brings knowledge of the Turkish education system, the second author contributes an international perspective informed by research conducted across different national contexts. These complementary experiences contributed to an analysis that is both locally grounded and internationally informed. Nevertheless, the researchers remained aware of the potential influence of their professional backgrounds on the interpretation of data. To this end, regular discussions were held throughout the research process.

The sample was heterogeneous in terms of type of need, field of study, and year of study. Participants with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($n = 6$) and learning disabilities ($n = 5$) formed the largest groups. Three participants had visual impairments and two reported a physical disability, including one participant who described both. We did not treat students with special educational needs as a homogeneous group. Most themes reflected experiences described across the sample. In some instances, however, accounts related more closely to a particular type of need: participants with ADHD described difficulties with planning, organization, and task management, while participants with visual or physical impairments described barriers to physical accessibility.

Data were analyzed using an inductive codebook thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The analysis followed the phases of familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo (Version 1.7.2) in Turkish to facilitate data management and coding. The second author and the first author independently coded four transcripts (20% of the dataset) at the level of meaningful units of text relevant to the research questions. The independently coded transcripts were then compared, and any differences in coding were discussed until consensus was reached. This process was used to refine code definitions and develop a shared codebook. The second author subsequently applied the agreed codebook to the remaining transcripts in NVivo. Following completion of coding, the second author iteratively reviewed and grouped related codes into preliminary themes. These themes were then discussed within the research team to refine their scope, ensure they adequately addressed the research questions, and agree on their final names and definitions. Instances that diverged from emerging patterns were considered throughout theme development to ensure that the analysis captured variation across participants. Coding was conducted inductively to allow themes to emerge from participants' accounts, while the Capabilities Approach served as an interpretive lens for interpreting and discussing the final themes

rather than directing the initial coding process. Examples of the coding process are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of Coding.

Interview Excerpt	Initial Code(s)	Theme
"My family was supportive, but we all knew that I was unlikely to get into a good school."	Family Support Low educational expectations	Support Dynamics
"Sometimes my exam locations were assigned to places far from my home and not accessible by tram, so I had difficulty getting there. For example, once I went to a school that had a ramp. Yes, there was a ramp! But it was actually harder for me to use it. Taking the stairs would have been easier for me."	Physical accessibility barriers	Access to Education and Career Opportunities

4.3. Ethical Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Eskişehir Osmangazi University prior to data collection. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and written informed consent was obtained electronically from the participants before the study; for participants with visual impairments, the information sheet and consent form were read aloud and consent was given verbally. Participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded, and their consent for recording was obtained separately. During the informed consent process, participants were also informed that their demographic information would be collected, the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed, the interview transcripts would be securely stored for five years, and anonymized verbatim quotations from the transcripts would be used in scientific reports and publications. Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason. Participants provided their informed consent after receiving this information. The participant information sheet and informed consent form were provided in Turkish. The two participants with immigrant backgrounds were not native speakers of Turkish and had been living in Türkiye for some time, where they communicated in Turkish. Before obtaining informed consent, the researcher explained the study procedures, answered participants' questions, and clarified any points that were unclear. Informed consent was obtained only after ensuring that participants understood the study, the consent process, and their rights as research participants. In addition, participants were not asked to elaborate on experiences of migration beyond what they chose to share. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts before any further processing, and participants were assigned participant numbers. Transcripts were stored on an institutional external hard drive. All data were handled in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and anonymity.

5. Findings

The findings are organized into three main themes: (1) Support dynamics, (2) Access to Education and Career Opportunities, and (3) Structural Gaps in Career Preparation and Transition Processes. Across these themes, participants' accounts highlight the challenges they experience in navigating transitions from secondary education to higher education and into employment.

5.1. Theme 1—Support Dynamics

5.1.1. Family Support

Family support was one of the most frequently mentioned themes among the participants. Most participants spoke about the positive role their families played in their

educational and transitional journeys. This support appeared in several forms. Many participants explained that they needed additional materials, private instruction, or transportation support in order to have better transition experiences. In response to these needs, families often tried to provide the necessary resources despite their limited financial means. Several participants noted that the support they could not receive from their schools was instead provided by their families. However, they also acknowledged that meeting these needs placed a financial burden on their households. In some cases, parents arranged extra learning materials, private tutoring, or transportation so that the participants could attend school and keep up with their studies.

I honestly didn't receive any career guidance in high school, and they didn't really do anything special in terms of classes either. My family supported me. They found and bought the materials I needed. Without my family, I would have really struggled. Thankfully, they were always there. They searched for the materials I needed, and when necessary, they took me to school. That's how I finished high school and made it to university. They are still supporting me now. (Participant 12)

The two participants with immigrant backgrounds described additional challenges within their educational transitions. Both had come to Türkiye following conflict and political instability in their home countries and were living apart from their families. They described the financial difficulties their families were experiencing and the pressure they felt to provide economic support. For these two participants, studying in a new country was therefore shaped by separation from their families as well as by the responsibility of supporting them financially.

I first tried to study abroad. I wanted to go to a better university or a better country. We have relatives in Switzerland, but that didn't work out because my family's financial situation was not good. I started studying in Tehran, and I was also working to support my family. When I came here, I didn't really receive much support from my family. (Participant 15)

Although most participants described their families as supportive in many aspects of their lives, six of them also stated that their families were not able to guide them in relation to career decisions. Participants explained that while emotional and practical support from their families was highly valued, the lack of explicit guidance regarding educational and career pathways often created uncertainty about future transitions. As Participant 8 reflected, "My family supported me financially, but they didn't really guide me or direct me". For some, this created a sense of having many possibilities but little direction on how to choose among them. Four participants also mentioned that their parents expected career-related guidance to come from schools or from external educational institutions that provided academic support, such as tutoring centers or preparatory courses. As Participant 7 stated, "My family always said, 'Do whatever you want.' And that's very valuable, but at the same time it gives you this huge range of options. You can get lost easily". In these cases, families were seen as supportive but not necessarily equipped to provide advice about academic or professional pathways.

A similar pattern was reflected in the accounts of the two participants with immigrant backgrounds. For example, one participant attributed the lack of guidance to unfamiliarity with the education system in Türkiye as well as limited educational and career-related knowledge within the family. The participant explained that their family was not always able to provide advice about educational transitions or future career pathways. When this kind of guidance was also absent at school, Participant 5 described feeling uncertain about how to navigate these decisions.

I didn't receive support from my family when moving to university in terms of career decisions. I'm alone here. My family didn't have that knowledge either. They don't know the system here. How can they support me? (Participant 5)

5.1.2. Educational Support and Institutional Practices

School support was frequently discussed in relation to interactions with teachers, lecturers, and school administrators during both high school and university education. However, participants explained that this support was rarely part of a structured or formal system. Participant 15 said, "So, there was a system, but there was no special support for someone like me who has attention difficulties. We were all preparing in the same way for the university entrance exam". Instead, it often depended on the individual efforts of teachers, lecturers, or school administrators. Because of this, the support provided by schools was described as inconsistent and varied widely between teachers and schools. Both participants with immigrant backgrounds reported completing their high school education in their home countries. They also described having received no structured support during this period, an experience shared by many of the other participants in the study.

Participants noted that many school-level accommodations focused primarily on improving physical accessibility rather than providing structured academic support for their transitions. In several cases, teachers attempted to support students with special educational needs through their own personal initiatives during lessons. Similar experiences were reported at the university level. Nine participants explained that, apart from some support from lecturers, they rarely received additional assistance from their institutions. Even this support was described as uneven, sometimes positive and sometimes limited depending on the lecturer.

I didn't receive any formal counseling. But talking one-on-one with some lecturers helps me. I have a few lecturers I discuss things with, especially about which area I should pursue in my profession. That's mostly how my experience has been. (Participant 11)

In addition to these challenges, five participants reported that they either received no support from their schools or encountered negative attitudes from teachers and lecturers.

I couldn't keep up with the writing; my notebook was always behind. One day, one teacher said, 'You will write just like everyone else.' At that time, I felt very stressed. I couldn't ask for more support after this point. (Participant 14)

5.2. Theme 2—Access to Education and Career Opportunities

5.2.1. Physical Barriers to Access

Participants frequently identified physical accessibility as a major factor shaping their educational and career transitions. Transportation difficulties, inaccessible infrastructure, and inadequate support mechanisms affected participants' ability to access educational opportunities and participate fully in university life. These challenges were described by participants across the sample and often influenced decisions regarding school and university choice. Rather than selecting institutions based solely on academic interests, especially participants with physical impairments frequently prioritized locations that were easier to reach, while participants with visual impairments highlighted the importance of environments that were easier to navigate. Participants emphasized that accessibility challenges extended beyond daily transportation. Three participants described institutional practices, such as assigning examinations to different buildings or faculties, as creating additional barriers to participation. Moreover, participants noted existing accessibility measures as not always being usable or effective in practice.

Sometimes my exam locations were assigned to places far from my home and not accessible by tram, so I had difficulty getting there. For example, once I went to a school that had a ramp. Yes, there was a ramp! But it was actually harder for me to use it. Taking the stairs would have been easier for me. (Participant 1)

For the two participants with immigrant backgrounds, limited educational opportunities and difficulties accessing educational settings disrupted their educational trajectories.

As an Afghan, I didn't have many opportunities. My right to education was very limited, and the places I could attend were difficult to reach. After that, I stayed at home for several years. For about two years, I did almost nothing. (Participant 5)

Accessibility barriers also limited participation in extracurricular and career-related activities. Participants reported being unable to attend events such as career days, field trips, and other activities intended to support educational and career development. Participants' experiences suggest that accessibility was not consistently considered when planning these activities. More broadly, participants described a disconnect between formal accessibility provisions and their practical effectiveness, with existing accommodations often being experienced as insufficient in everyday educational settings. As Participant 1 highlighted, "...One of the general problems we experience in this country is that accommodations for disability sometimes exist only on paper."

5.2.2. Absence of Individualized and Accessible Learning Supports

Participants reported significant difficulties in accessing the academic support they needed, particularly during the transition from secondary education to higher education. One of the most frequently highlighted issues was the limited effectiveness of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which are implemented in primary, secondary, and high school settings in Türkiye for students with special educational needs. Participants noted that these plans often failed to adequately support their learning and, in some cases, negatively affected their performance in university entrance exams. Only one participant reported having benefited from an IEP and emphasized its positive impact, particularly in preparing for university entrance exams. However, the majority of participants indicated that even when IEPs were implemented, they were not meaningfully involved in the process. Some participants noted that although meetings were held, their views were neither sought nor reflected in decisions. One participant described IEPs as largely symbolic and lacking practical function.

The two participants with immigrant backgrounds, who entered the Turkish education system at the higher education level, reported having no prior knowledge of IEPs. When asked whether similar provisions existed in their countries of origin (Afghanistan and Iran), both participants stated that such systems were not in place.

At school, there was a term like 'IEP students.' I was one of them, but I never attended any meetings. They would call my parents instead. After each meeting, the guidance counselor would call me in, but I didn't even know whether they were holding formal meetings or just discussions. I never asked my family either. Now that I study special education teaching, I understand much better what an IEP actually means, and I think it would help me a lot if they used it. (Participant 13)

Rather than relying solely on IEPs, participants emphasized the need for all educational materials to be systematically adapted to disability as a baseline provision. In most cases, participants reported accessing adapted materials through their own efforts, which they described as both time-consuming and exhausting. Many participants also expressed experiencing high levels of stress during the transition to higher education, attributing this

to both the lack of accessible materials and insufficient academic support. As Participant 2 echoed, “Our access to exam preparation materials is quite limited. There is now more awareness that we need these resources, but the level of adaptation is still insufficient.”

A further example was provided by participant 5, who described learning Braille independently in Afghanistan and adapting school materials on his own. However, upon arriving in Türkiye, differences in the Braille system created additional challenges, leaving the participant struggling to keep up with coursework. In this case, the transition to a different educational system disrupted previously acquired coping strategies and created additional challenges for academic adaptation.

“Unfortunately, we didn’t have many opportunities there. So I learned Braille on my own in Afghanistan. Then I came here, and everything changed. The Braille system here is different, and no one seems to understand the one I learned. That’s why I struggle a lot in classes.” (Participant 5)

5.2.3. Challenges in Critical Examination Stages

Participants identified transition-related examinations as one of the most challenging aspects of moving from secondary education to higher education and, later, into employment. While accommodations provided during secondary education were sometimes perceived as affecting their social inclusion, participants emphasized that similar support was insufficient or inconsistent in high-stakes transition exams. In particular, especially participants with learning disabilities and ADHD reported challenges related to exam duration, maintaining focus, sitting for extended periods, distraction in crowded exam environments, and limited access to support mechanisms during exams.

The exam was already very long for me. It was like torture. After about 15 min, I started moving, and the exam observer thought I was cheating and warned me. He said there were cameras watching. It became a very uncomfortable situation. I felt really bad in the classroom. I never even attempted to cheat, but it was a very distressing experience. (Participant 13)

Similar assessment-related challenges were reported by the two participants with immigrant backgrounds. For example, one participant explained that, although he had entered higher education in Türkiye without taking the national university entrance examination, he encountered significant barriers in university-level assessments. Furthermore, after graduation, participants explained that entry into public sector employment required national examinations, where support mechanisms were again absent. Participants also reported having limited knowledge of the Turkish examination system, creating additional challenges when navigating assessment processes.

When I arrived at university, I was very surprised. I had mostly studied in Turkish, and I focused on other subjects, but I hadn’t studied much maths. The exam questions change every year, and I didn’t have any knowledge about that. (Participant 5)

Eight participants reported that readers were sometimes officially assigned during university entrance exams. However, many noted that these individuals were often unfamiliar with their specific needs and lacked adequate training regarding different types of disabilities. As Participant 4 stated, “In the last exam I took, there was no reader. Apparently, there is a one-year limit. That period had expired, so I couldn’t request a reader again.” Participants also reported inconsistencies in accessing such accommodations, as they were not always able to request them repeatedly across exam attempts.

5.3. Theme 3—Structural Gaps in Career Preparation and Transition Processes

5.3.1. Gaps in Career Preparation and Guidance

Many participants reported that they often felt uncertain about what to do during their career transition processes. In particular, they highlighted a lack of structured career guidance during the transition from secondary education to higher education. A recurring pattern was that the guidance participants received was frequently shaped by assumptions about disability. Rather than encouraging exploration of a broad range of career possibilities, advice from family members, teachers, and others often directed participants toward occupations perceived as more suitable for individuals with special educational needs. Participants described such advice as narrowing their perceived career possibilities and influencing their aspirations. As Participant 1 explained:

There is a common attitude around me. People say, ‘You already have a disability, you can just take the EKPSS (*the public service entrance exam designed for individuals with disability*) and easily become a civil servant.’ ...Of course, it was well-intentioned advice, but it made me feel like that was the only thing I could do. So, I prepared for that exam, but I wasn’t happy at all. (Participant 1)

Participants with learning disabilities and ADHD also described how disability-related expectations influenced their career decisions. Several explained that they selected educational or occupational pathways based on what they believed they could realistically achieve given their disabilities, rather than on their interests or long-term goals. This pattern was particularly evident among participants with ADHD, who described repeating negative labels previously attributed to them by teachers or others and explained that these experiences influenced their aspirations. As Participant 14 explained, career choices were shaped by perceived limitations rather than personal ambitions.

I was already seen as lazy; even my teachers used to say that. But working with hair was easier for me, there’s no reading or writing involved. It was a bit of a random choice, but becoming a hairdresser was enough for me. I didn’t aim for anything more. (Participant 14)

Most participants reported that they received little to no structured career support during secondary education. According to the participants, career-related activities were mostly limited to general university visits, which some participants were unable to attend due to their disabilities. In some schools, professionals were invited to introduce their occupations; however, this was not consistent across all schools. One participant described these activities as overly general and emphasized the lack of personalized career guidance. Existing career support mechanisms remain largely generic and fail to address individual needs. Participants indicated that this pattern continued at university. Although some lecturers provided advice and encouragement, support was described as informal, inconsistent, and dependent on individual staff members rather than institutional structures. Many participants felt uncertain about where to seek career-related guidance and whether such services were available. As Participant 5 noted, “I don’t have any experience in that area. If such support exists, I’m not aware of it. ...I wouldn’t want to transition into working life without guidance like I had in high school”.

5.3.2. Limited Practical Experience in Career Transitions

In Türkiye, most university programs include a compulsory internship component in the final year. Participants widely acknowledged that internships were beneficial for gaining practical experience. Participants generally viewed internships as one of the few opportunities to gain practical experience before entering the workforce. However, the benefits of internships were often constrained by barriers that limited participants’ ability to fully

engage in these experiences. For example, participants with physical or visual impairments frequently reported requiring additional support, particularly regarding transportation and accessibility. Participants with immigrant backgrounds described language-related challenges during internships that they felt were not adequately addressed. As a result, they reported relying largely on their own efforts to navigate these barriers.

I am doing my internship at a school where education is in English, but in Türkiye, even in English-medium education, Turkish is often used. For example, immigrant teachers could be assigned as assistant teachers to support both us and the students. (Participant 15)

Participants also described internships as requiring a considerable degree of individual initiative. Many reported being responsible for securing their own placements despite already facing demanding academic workloads. As a result, access to practical experience was perceived as dependent on personal resources and networks rather than institutional support. Several participants suggested that universities could take a more active role in facilitating internship opportunities. For example, Participant 14 explained, “It would be helpful if they could find places where we can do internships or work, because we have to search for them ourselves or rely on personal connections. I already struggle to keep up with my coursework.”

Beyond immediate internship experiences, participants frequently connected the difficulties they encountered during internships to concerns about their future employment. Most participants anticipated that challenges experienced during training would continue into professional life. In particular, participants with ADHD described difficulties with planning, organization, and task management, expressing concern about how these challenges might affect their future work performance. Although some had developed personal coping strategies, these were often viewed as insufficient for meeting workplace demands.

Honestly, I’ve gotten used to living with this inner restlessness, but I can’t really plan things. That’s where I need the most support. Ten ideas come to my mind at once, and I don’t know which one to start with. I make lists, but then I forget to follow them. I even lost the paper I wrote on. What if I experience the same thing at work? (Participant 13)

A few participants stated that they felt confident in the theoretical knowledge they had gained at university. However, they expressed uncertainty about how to apply this knowledge in practice. Many pointed to a gap between theoretical instruction and practical application, noting that this left them feeling unprepared during their internships. Participants therefore emphasized the need for more structured forms of career preparation. Informal support from peers, lecturers, or friends was helpful but generally perceived as insufficient. Instead, participants expressed a desire for systematic guidance, mentoring, and opportunities to learn from experienced professionals before entering the workforce. As Participant 2 stated, “At the same time, there are supports that more experienced professionals can provide, which would be very valuable for me”.

These concerns contributed to broader feelings of uncertainty regarding future employment. Many participants reported low confidence in their ability to successfully navigate career transitions and worried that difficulties experienced during university would be interpreted as personal inadequacies in professional settings. While some participants received support from their families (which was less common among participants with immigrant backgrounds), they nevertheless emphasized the need for professional guidance. Feelings of uncertainty were particularly evident when participants reflected on long-term career planning and their future professional identities.

“Planning for the future has always felt uncertain to me. When I try to think long-term, I get confused. I usually try to manage things on my own, but right now, I am already struggling to take care of myself.” (Participant 8)

6. Discussion

Individuals with special educational needs often encounter additional challenges during transition processes (Newman et al., 2011) and these challenges may become even more pronounced for students with immigrant background (de Miguel-Luken & Solana-Solana, 2017). Therefore, this study set out to examine the transition experiences and expectations of university students with special educational needs, including participants with immigrant backgrounds, across the transition from secondary education to higher education and from university to employment. Rather than reflecting isolated challenges, the findings suggest that these transitions were shaped by the interaction of disability, institutional support, assessment practices, family support, and, for participants with immigrant backgrounds, additional language and system-related challenges.

Although participants shared common concerns regarding educational transitions, these experiences were not uniform across participants with different types of needs. Participants with ADHD more frequently described the influence of negative expectations on their educational and career aspirations, whereas participants with visual impairments highlighted accessibility barriers. One participant additionally described difficulties arising from the transition between different Braille systems. Participants with physical disabilities primarily discussed environmental accessibility, while those with learning disabilities more often emphasized assessment-related challenges. These findings suggest that transition experiences are shaped not only by disability itself but also by the specific barriers associated with different impairment types.

6.1. Navigating Transitions Within Inconsistent Support Systems

Findings indicate that participants frequently experienced inconsistent and unsystematic support during these transitions. Such support was often dependent on the initiative of individual teachers and school administrators rather than being embedded within structured institutional practices. Many participants emphasized the significant role of family support in their transition processes. Families often provided both financial and emotional support, which participants described as highly beneficial, even though it was not enough to guide them. From early childhood onwards, parents of individuals with special educational needs tend to experience higher levels of personal, financial, and familial stress compared to parents of typically developing children (Craig et al., 2016; Findler et al., 2016). This pressure is further intensified by the lack of adequate support from schools, as parents often feel compelled to compensate for the educational support that schools fail to provide, in an effort to ensure that their children can access opportunities comparable to those of their typically developing peers (Hasson et al., 2024).

However, participants with immigrant backgrounds noted that their families were often unable to offer similar support, as structural barriers such as limited familiarity with the education system constrained the guidance they could provide. Participants also reported taking on financial responsibilities within their households, reflecting broader socioeconomic pressures that shaped their transition experiences. These findings align with existing research suggesting that parents of immigrants may face challenges in supporting their children’s education, particularly due to unfamiliarity with the school system (Corazzini et al., 2021), language barriers (Choe, 2022), and socioeconomic constraints (Wu et al., 2026). These factors can be understood as key conversion factors that shape how immigrants with special educational needs are able to translate available resources

into valued functionings. When required support is limited or when individuals are required to assume additional financial responsibilities, their real opportunities to pursue education and navigate transition pathways are restricted. Taken together, these findings suggest that access to support is not systematically guaranteed but unevenly distributed and contingent, thereby shaping students' capabilities to achieve desired educational and occupational outcomes.

Educational gains and losses are not distributed equally, pointing to unequal opportunity structures that shape transition outcomes (Kalalahti et al., 2020). These opportunity structures appear to be less accessible for individuals with special educational needs, regardless of their immigration background. From the perspective of central capabilities, particularly *senses, imagination, and thought*, such inequalities raise important concerns about whether students are provided with an education that enables them to develop and exercise these capabilities in a fully human way. As highlighted by participants, the absence of consistent support, coupled with negative attitudes from teachers and school staff, undermined their self-confidence and, in some cases, discouraged them from seeking further support. In this sense, schools appear not only to fall short in supporting successful transitions but also in fostering the conditions necessary for students' human flourishing. This situation also undermined the central capability of *affiliation*, limiting students' access to the social bases of self-respect and exposing them to experiences that compromise their recognition as equal and dignified individuals.

6.2. From Inconsistent Support to Unequal Opportunities

Variations in the availability and quality of support during transitional phases significantly shape students' experiences and their ability to develop viable vocational pathways. For example, internship opportunities, while valued by participants, were often marked by limited accessibility and minimal guidance, which constrained their potential to function as sites for skill development. Rather than enabling students to convert educational participation into meaningful vocational competencies, these experiences frequently remained under-realized. Consistent with previous research (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2011), participants were often required to navigate transition and job-seeking processes with limited institutional backing, effectively shifting responsibility onto individuals without ensuring the conditions necessary for success. These challenges were not experienced uniformly across participants. For example, students with physical impairments primarily emphasized barriers related to accessibility during internships and transition-related examinations. Participants with learning disabilities described frequently feeling uncertain about how to translate theoretical knowledge into practice during their internships. In contrast, participants with ADHD reported difficulties with planning and organization both during internships and throughout the transition into employment.

These constraints become more pronounced at the intersection of immigration status and special educational needs, where multiple layers of disadvantage interact. Immigrant students are frequently positioned primarily through a language-deficit lens, rendering other dimensions of need less visible and limiting access to appropriate support (Stepaniuk & Onipede, 2025). At the same time, restricted access to information about the education system, admission procedures, and available support mechanisms narrows their capabilities by constraining their ability to make informed choices. Other studies conducted in the context of Türkiye also overlap with these findings; they reveal that immigrant students with special educational needs encounter multidimensional difficulties such as access to documents, admission procedures, language barriers, and discrimination in access to and participation in higher education and career pathways (Kondakci et al., 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2026).

Moreover, opportunity structures are not experienced uniformly; rather, they vary across participants with different types of need, even within the same nationally regulated education system. Participants with different types of need encounter distinct constraints that shape how they are able to engage with key transition points. Entrance examinations to higher education provide a clear example of this unevenness. Participants with ADHD and learning disabilities described difficulties in maintaining concentration and navigating extended examination durations, while participants with physical impairments highlighted barriers related to physical inaccessibility. These challenges were often compounded by overcrowded examination environments and the absence of appropriate accommodations or support. Such conditions restrict the development and exercise of central capabilities, particularly *senses*, *imagination*, and *thought*, as students are not provided with an educational environment that enables them to use their cognitive capacities in a secure and dignified manner. At the same time, limitations related to physical access and exam conditions point to constraints on *bodily integrity*, as students are unable to navigate these spaces with ease and safety. The two participants with immigrant backgrounds additionally described having to navigate language barriers while adapting to an unfamiliar education system, which further intensified these restrictions. Therefore, what is formally presented as a standardized and equal assessment process operates in practice as a differentiated structure, shaping students' capabilities in unequal ways.

These constraints extend beyond limiting what students are able to do; they also shape what they come to want. Career orientations emerge within already restricted horizons, where certain pathways are normalized while others are rendered unthinkable. Participants' accounts can be interpreted as reflecting adaptive preferences, as expectations appear to be recalibrated in relation to what seems attainable rather than what might otherwise be valued. For example, being directed towards options such as the EKPSS, as reflected in the statement "*it made me feel like that was the only thing I could do*," illustrates how institutional and social signals can delimit the space of possible futures. What presents itself as choice is structured within a limited capability set, where aspirations are adjusted downward in line with available opportunities. Students' career decisions may therefore, in some cases, be understood through the concept of adaptive preferences. At the same time, these accounts are also likely to reflect the interaction of limited opportunities, educational and vocational guidance, and broader structural constraints. Moreover, the capability for *practical reason*—the ability to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection on one's life plans—was frequently constrained, and at times severely undermined. Limited, inadequate, and inappropriate resources, coupled with insufficient educational and vocational guidance, restricted participants' capacity to meaningfully evaluate alternatives and pursue desired career pathways. As a result, career choices were shaped less by reflective deliberation and more by the boundaries imposed by available opportunities.

Deprivations in the previously discussed capabilities extend into the domain of *affiliation*, particularly in relation to the social bases of self-respect and freedom from humiliation. Restricted educational opportunities, limited curricula, and constrained transition pathways narrow the range of lives students are able to imagine and pursue. The lack of exposure to different perspectives and ways of living shapes how students come to understand their own place and worth. As reflected in participants' accounts, negative comments from teachers and the internalisation of perceived limitations erode self-confidence and damage self-respect. In this way, capability deprivation moves beyond institutional constraints and takes on relational and symbolic forms, undermining students' ability to see themselves—and to be treated—as equal and dignified individuals.

7. Limitations

This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with a small sample of university students with special educational needs in Türkiye ($n = 15$), which is appropriate for in-depth qualitative inquiry but limits the generalizability of the findings. A key limitation concerns the representation of immigrant students, as only two participants with immigrant backgrounds took part. These accounts should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of immigrant students with special educational needs in Türkiye. Although the invitation was distributed to disability support units at universities across different regions of Türkiye, recruitment was in practice concentrated in a city that is not among those where the immigrant population in Türkiye is most concentrated. The recruitment route itself may also have shaped the sample. Students who have not disclosed their special educational needs to their institution, or who are not in contact with support units, may not have been reached through this route. This group is likely to include immigrant students who are less familiar with institutional support structures. In addition, students who volunteered may differ from those who did not, for example, in their willingness to discuss their experiences or in the strength of their views about institutional support. In addition, the heterogeneity of participants' special educational needs also represents a limitation. Although this diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of transition experiences, the small number of participants within each special educational needs group limited opportunities to explore differences between groups in greater depth. Future research could address these constraints by recruiting more intensively at metropolitan universities and by working directly with immigrant student networks and community organizations rather than relying on institutional support units.

Moreover, language barriers affected the data collection process for the participants with immigrant backgrounds. In some cases, participants had difficulty understanding certain interview questions, which may have influenced the depth and clarity of their responses. While one participant had sufficient proficiency in English and was able to engage with the questions when repeated in English, this was not the case for the other participant. These factors may have limited the extent to which their experiences were fully captured. Future research could benefit from including a larger and more diverse sample of immigrant students across different regions of Türkiye, as well as employing multilingual data collection strategies, such as conducting interviews with the support of trained interpreters, to better capture participants' experiences. Finally, the study reflects only the perspectives of university students. Future research could incorporate the views of family members, educators, disability-support staff, and employers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of transition processes.

8. Implication for Practice

These findings suggest that access to support during transition processes is not systematically guaranteed but unevenly distributed and contingent, directly shaping students' opportunities to achieve their educational and occupational goals. Several important directions for future research therefore emerge. First, how policies and legal frameworks targeting immigrant students with special educational needs operate in practice should be examined, with particular attention to understanding the gap between policy intent and students' lived experiences. Second, research should focus on how accessibility in higher education is experienced by students, recognizing that accessibility extends beyond physical arrangements to encompass academic, linguistic, and informational dimensions. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking students across transition stages would provide deeper insight into how structural conditions evolve over time.

The findings also have important implications for practice. First, collaboration and coordination mechanisms among institutions operating in the fields of migration, special educational needs, and higher education should be strengthened to enable immigrant students with special educational needs to benefit more effectively from existing rights and support services. Second, understandings of accessibility in higher education should extend beyond physical accommodations to include academic adjustments, access to information, and adapted learning resources that support students' full participation in academic life. Third, ongoing guidance, counseling, and career planning services should be established to ensure that students have access to the support they need throughout the transition process, from university entry to post-graduation pathways. Rather than relying on the initiative of individual academics or staff members, these services could be delivered through institutionalized and sustainable structures within universities. Finally, collaboration with municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and other local stakeholders could help provide immigrant students with language support, information and referral services, as well as mechanisms that facilitate the transition from education to employment.

9. Conclusions

This study explored the transition experiences of university students with special educational needs in Türkiye through the Capabilities Approach (CA). The findings suggest that participants' transition experiences were shaped by the interaction of institutional support, family support, assessment practices, internship experiences, and employment opportunities rather than by any single factor alone. Participants described inconsistencies in educational support, limited career guidance, challenges in translating academic learning into practice, and barriers related to accessibility, while some participants also reported additional language- and information-related challenges.

The findings also demonstrate that students with special educational needs did not experience transitions in similar ways. Participants with ADHD, learning disability, visual impairments, and physical impairments described different challenges across educational and employment transitions, highlighting the importance of recognising the diversity of support needs rather than viewing students with special educational needs as a homogeneous group. Although the accounts of the two participants with immigrant backgrounds highlighted additional challenges related to language, access to information, family responsibilities, and navigating an unfamiliar education system, these findings should be understood as illustrative of their experiences rather than representative of all students with immigrant backgrounds.

Viewed through the CA, the findings suggest that participants' transition experiences extended beyond access to higher education or employment, influencing their opportunities to develop and exercise central capabilities. Participants' accounts highlighted constraints on capabilities associated with bodily integrity, practical reason, and senses, imagination and thought, particularly where accessibility barriers, limited guidance, and restricted opportunities constrained their ability to make informed choices and participate fully in educational and employment contexts. These constraints were reflected in participants' reported functionings and, in some cases, may also be interpreted as consistent with adaptive preferences. However, these experiences were shaped by multiple interacting factors, including previous educational experiences, institutional support, financial circumstances, and available opportunities.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening transition support through more coordinated educational, career, and accessibility-related provision. While these findings are based on a qualitative study within one national context and are not intended to be generalized, they provide insights into how more responsive transition sup-

port may better enable students with special educational needs to pursue the educational and career pathways they value.

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