

Duped by Dream Sellers:
A Case Study of Student Immobility, Precarity, and Profit in Northern Cyprus

by
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Young migrants arrive in Northern Cyprus seeking opportunity and safety through international higher education. Instead, they find themselves in a state of continuous precarity as financial benefactors sustaining complex legal liminalities of a de facto state. What happens when systemic marketing of an affordable, internationally recognized education and work opportunities targets individuals from countries in active war, extreme poverty, and political unrest? With safety concerns in their home countries, low-ranking passports, and limited international options, student migrants continue to arrive in Northern Cyprus despite its difficult living conditions.

Drawing on 29 qualitative interviews, this thesis examines how student migration both responds to and sustains the political and economic structures of Northern Cyprus. It shows how education, labour, and legality intertwine to produce a system that depends on students' presence and their restricted mobility. By situating student migration within the political economy of an unrecognized state, this thesis contributes to empirical research on the governance of mobility and the production of precarity for non-elite, de facto refugee students, facilitated through higher education and its institutions.

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Introduction

International higher education has become an increasingly important, yet precarious, migration pathway for people navigating constrained visa and asylum options. In this thesis, I examine how participants fleeing conflict-affected regions in the Middle East and Africa manage their displacement as international students in the politically unrecognized state of Northern Cyprus. Across the 29 interviews I conducted in 2025, many students assumed *or hoped* that the political status of the territory would be marginal to their experience. After all, they arrived through an international airport and had access to Wi-Fi, SIM cards, buses, their campus, and almost everything they had expected to see. However, this assumption unravelled for most over time. It did so for Amjad when he went looking for something like McDonald's or Starbucks but only found local food joints he had never heard of and a spot called NFC that looked a lot like KFC. For others, it was when they could not renew their passports, find legal employment, or even apply for asylum. Many of these rights and services are suspended and only accessible across the wall separating the island since 1974 (*see map in Appendix A*). South of that is the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), a member state of the European Union (EU) since 2004 and globally recognized to have sovereignty over the entire island. Where they were, on the other hand, was the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a de facto state¹ recognized only by Turkey (Bryant 2021; Achiri and Klem 2024; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Fischer 2020).² As a result, many of the students' needs were mediated through a series of locally improvised replacements like NFC. They relied on

¹ A de facto state is a geopolitical body that operates like a sovereign state but lacks official recognition under international law (Pegg 2021; Bryant and Hatay 2020).

² The United Nations Peacekeeping Force (UNFICYP) established and maintained a 180 km long buffer zone known as the Green Line after a violent conflict peaked between Turkish and Greek Cypriots in 1974 (Bryant 2021; Achiri and Klem 2024; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Fischer 2020). It separates the island and acts as a de facto border to the EU (Dağtaş and Ilcan 2025).

unregulated Facebook groups instead of realtor offices, pirate taxis in place of Uber, and the RRA (Refugee Rights Association) instead of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Institutionally, the higher education sector facilitates cross-border migration for participants by acting as both a pull factor and a formal pathway into the territory. Like institutions in recognized states, those in Northern Cyprus hire recruitment agencies to attract international students whose tuition, housing, and everyday spending contribute up to one-third of the local GDP (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024; Achiri and Klem 2024; Hatay 2025). Having the world's highest proportion of international students per capita, Northern Cyprus attracts a population that includes displaced individuals within the region, particularly following the Arab Spring (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024). The complexities of this type of education migration sometimes make news headlines. For instance, in 2022, it was reported that over 19,000 individuals—most of them holding student visas—crossed from Northern Cyprus to claim asylum in the RoC (France 24 2023).

Without further context, such estimates risk flattening students' motivations for studying in the TRNC or delegitimizing their asylum claims in the South. Therefore, I trace how Northern Cyprus came to be imagined as a possible destination for the participants and what they hoped it would offer. I draw on their accounts and lived experiences as *de facto refugees*³ to bridge how their displacement intersects with the shrinkage in formal asylum avenues,⁴ personal aspirations, the dreams recruitment agencies sell, and the marketization of higher education in Northern

³ 'De facto refugee' is an operational term describing individuals who may in effect be refugees fleeing war or persecution but are not recognized as such due to one or a combination of reasons. For instance, the absence of an asylum mechanism in the north of Cyprus, limitations of the international asylum system and lack of proactive protection processes, or a lack of association with refugee status due to personal or social influences.

⁴ Delays and deferral in asylum procedures, policies of containment, and technologies of deterrence are some of the ways that access to international legal status or temporary legal protection is restricted for displaced people. See Squire (2009), Mountz (2020), and Martinez (2023) for more.

Cyprus. Within this context, I examine how academic infrastructures operate as both migration regimes and sites of financial and legal vulnerability (*precarity hereafter*). I argue that unregulated recruitment agencies can tie student survival to that of *often exploitative* networks collaborating with educational institutions and local landlords.⁵ This integration compels some students to participate in sustaining and reproducing these networks, while others develop everyday strategies of adaptation through their engagement with peer-based economies, information sharing, and advocacy. By situating student migration within the political economy of an unrecognized state, this thesis contributes to empirical research on the governance of mobility and the production of precarity for de facto refugee students.

⁵ Smugglers in Northern Cyprus also benefit from international student arrivals by promoting their operations through informal networks and organizing irregular crossings between the north and south of the island.

Literature Review

In a matter of decades, educational institutions have reshaped migration routes, more than doubling the number of students on the move globally (Alves 2022; Brooks and Waters 2022; Baas 2019; Moskal 2017). Scholarship on international student mobility (ISM) traditionally examined flows from the Global South toward Western states, often characterizing foreign students there as an *elite* group of migrants engaged in strategies to (re)produce class advantage (Brooks and Waters 2022; Saarinen and Ennser-Kananen 2020; Yang 2018). This framing, though dominant around the early 2000s, drew on Bourdieusian concepts⁶ and was later criticized for privileging Western norms. Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, for instance, found it “habitually valorised particular parts of the world as centres in the production of knowledge, at the expense of others” (2022, 520) and Taina Saarinen and Johanna Ennser-Kananen argued it risks a further “Westernisation and Anglicisation of higher education” in international settings (2020, 117).

While these critiques rightly challenge the Eurocentric focus of early ISM scholarship, they also show how institutional and state policies linked Western destinations to particular imaginaries of upward mobility. I find the relationship between state policy and individual aspiration to be recursive, as student and familial aspirations, along with hopes for upward mobility, are shaped by structural and marketized conditions in higher education. For instance, Western universities, facing budget cuts from the 1980s onwards (Baas 2019, 224), kept their doors open for applicants willing to pay higher tuition fees in exchange for the prestige associated with these credentials and the potential for permanent migration (Baas 2019).⁷ This selective openness dovetailed with a wider

⁶ Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework became prominent in ISM scholarship to describe elite-student mobilities (Yang 2018).

⁷ Michiel Baas (2019) traces how higher education shifted from foreign aid to a source of revenue, particularly after Australia introduced an additional charge for international students. This shift reframed education as a “personal investment” with a “price-tag” along with the global shift towards neoliberal ideals (2019, 226).

neoliberal shift in economic ideology that favoured the privatisation of institutions and the creation of profit-making opportunities through education (Slaughter and Rhoades 2010, 31; Lee et al. 2017; Baas 2019). The combination of neoliberal ideals and the attributed prestige to Western institutions structurally reproduced *the elite student*—further closing more doors to those without substantial economic capital (Brooks and Waters 2022; Yang 2018). Therefore, academic capitalism became an important lens to frame and understand the marketization of higher education, particularly in relation to institutional attitudes and practices that reduce students to profit-making commodities (Kang and Hwang 2022, 3; Slaughter and Rhoades 2010; Feng and Horta 2021).

Following similar market logics, “countries as diverse as China, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Korea and even Indonesia have started developing and marketing themselves as study-abroad destinations” (Baas 2019, 223). In doing so, they construct hierarchies of ‘desirable’ and ‘unwanted’ migrant students based on how the state hopes to benefit from their presence beyond the confines of education. Within this context, global higher education became increasingly stratified as it overlapped with migration. As a result, new and *more accessible* doors opened for prospective students who were *othered* in the process. Scholarship centred around class reproduction and prestige was insufficient for understanding student motivations driven by other forms of exchange, such as a search for physical or legal safety. In response, ISM scholarship also broadened its focus to include the pathways non-elite students can actually take, which Francis Collins and K.C. Ho (2018, 682) conceptualized as discrepant knowledge mobilities. These were typically horizontal movements between similarly positioned educational systems shaped by policies and social conditions rather than prestige or preference (Yang 2018; Collins and Ho 2018; Feng and Horta 2021; Kim and Cho 2022). For example, Vanessa Fong’s work focused on Chinese

students' pursuit of opportunities for education and flexible citizenship in the absence of viable local alternatives. She examined how mobilities for Chinese participants were often constrained by visa requirements, leading them to "settle for the developed country that was their next choice, fifth choice, or even last choice" (2011, 7). Similarly, Peidong Yang (2018) conducted an ethnographic study focused on how multilayered constraints led non-elite medical students from India to provincial China, and how receiving institutions maximised tuition revenue despite their limited international accreditation. Yang (2018) rationalised the relationship between students and host institutions as one of compromise and complicity. Students coming from constrained circumstances make informed decisions about what they agree to overlook in educational quality in exchange for simpler admission processes, accessible education, and guaranteed credentials.

I situate the participants' mobilities toward higher education institutions in Northern Cyprus as a case of discrepant mobility. This makes visible the type of capital exchange the participants partake in within the context of this thesis. Unlike Bourdieusian frameworks focusing on the accumulation of cultural capital for institutional prestige, the exchange made was financial capital (tuition fees) converted into legal capital in the form of a student visa, providing temporary shelter and legal status. In this context, the "conditions of uncertainty and relative deprivation" that characterize discrepant knowledge mobilities (Collins and Ho 2018, 682) represent the systemic exhaustion of formal legal protection avenues (as I later discuss) and the reality of protracted conflict in the participants' countries of citizenship. The choice to study in Northern Cyprus therefore involves more than just education and prestige, but also considerations of how the territory's position on the edge of the EU might facilitate future mobility or provide immediate

shelter and legal capital. By entering this space, participants navigate this legal liminality, and are sometimes drawn to it by unregulated academic agents (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024).⁸

Furthermore, in this thesis, I adopt Yang's framing of compromise and complicity to examine what trade-offs the participants make in migrating to a de facto state for education. I also utilize academic capitalism as a broad frame in the analysis section to convey how students' livelihoods and precarities become monetized on the island. This lens helps articulate how the rapid expansion of universities in Cyprus over the last decade (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024), and the recruitment practices adopted by university intermediaries, are part of a global neoliberal trend in higher education (Slaughter and Rhoades 2010; Feng and Horta 2021; Kang and Hwang 2022). While these market logics are global, they are concentrated in Northern Cyprus as its economic isolation makes it dependent on the continuous arrival of displaced international students.⁹ Therefore, despite this growing work on discrepant mobilities and academic capitalism, there is a need to further understand how global market logics in education intersect with issues of regional displacement and forced migration flows towards Northern Cyprus. To make sense of de facto refugees' mobilities toward an unrecognized state, it is necessary to consider how those educational institutions exist and are able to sustain flows of international students despite—and *because of*—Northern Cyprus' political non-recognition. Therefore, I turn to scholarship on migration and legal liminality in Cyprus to contextualize these dynamics.

Building on Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay's (2020) conceptualization of Northern Cyprus as an interstitial legal space, Emmanuel Achiri and Bart Klem (2024) argue that

⁸ Chabre (2021) examined how higher education functions as a medium of recognition for the de facto state and Hoch and Heinz (2024) assessed the inconsistent quality and politicized accreditation of institutions in Northern Cyprus.

⁹ This is especially consequential as Northern Cyprus already operates outside the frameworks of international law. There is no formal legal framework through which they are obligated to provide aid or support displaced students once they no longer can support themselves.

overlapping, partial, and suspended legal regimes produce unresolved challenges for refugees as all laws for asylum become suspended north of the Green Line. This occurs despite the entire island of Cyprus being signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent protocol (UNHCR 2023a; Achiri and Klem 2024; Dağtaş and Ilcan 2025; Fischer 2020). Within this legal void, Achiri and Klem (2024) use liminality as an analytic to examine how laws are unevenly applied and suspended north of the Green Line. This regulatory ambiguity presents refugees with an amalgamation of threats and opportunities for legal safety (2024, 1). At the same time, however, liminality almost situates issues like asylum deterrence as features of the island's division, rather than tools of governance. Thus, I draw on Chabre's (2021) understanding of higher education in Northern Cyprus as a medium and tool, outside of diplomatic ties, through which the TRNC can platform itself and connect with the world, provide a temporary pathway to shelter, and economic opportunity for profit. In other words, higher education provides Northern Cyprus with legitimacy despite the lack of formal international recognition as it compels other states to engage with its institutions, even indirectly (Chabre 2021; Kyris 2020; Bryant and Hatay 2020; Achiri and Klem 2024).

Finally, given my interest in examining the lived experiences of the participants—particularly what it means for them to navigate the challenges that bring them to migrate to Northern Cyprus—I turn to the concept of precarity. Ilcan et al. define precarity as encapsulating “both a condition of vulnerability and an element of ambiguity” (2018, 55). This definition converges in essence, with how Collins and Ho (2018), Fong (2011), Yang (2018), among others, describe motivations behind discrepant mobilities. I understand precarity to have somatic, social, and legal dimensions, and use it to illustrate how I have come to understand the dynamic relationship between migration, refugeehood, and liminality as they take on several roles in the

context of this study. It is simultaneously a push factor for participants' migrations, an ongoing condition after their arrival, and a tool and mechanism for monetary extraction. I am especially interested in theoretical frameworks such as Ilcan et al.'s "ambiguous architecture of precarity" (2018), as it describes how its different forms (status, space, and movement) can dovetail and create a system of governance in a given setting. Within this thesis, status and financial precarity are constructed by different actors through opaque academic enrolment processes, as well as ambiguous housing and employment regulations. These conditions expose de facto student refugees to exploitation and vulnerability.

This thesis builds on this existing scholarship about higher education and migration in Northern Cyprus to examine how student precarities and (im)mobilities become conditions and tools for governance. By situating student migration within this context, this thesis contributes a case study of discrepant mobilities in higher education within the growing, yet, under-examined context of Northern Cyprus. It also provides empirical data on how academic capitalism takes shape in an unrecognized state (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024; Coppieters 2023; Hoch and Rudincová 2015). Finally, it advances theoretical debates on the governance of migrants, students, and refugees, amid everyday acts of bordering and shrinking avenues for safety (Mountz 2020; Ilcan et al. 2018; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Khosravi 2011).

Higher Education as a Surrogate Economy

While states do not formally recognize the TRNC, they are forced to coexist with its presence and the material effects of its institutions.¹⁰ In this sense, de facto statehood in the TRNC is not vastly different in practice from that exercised in the RoC or elsewhere in the world (Bryant and Hatay 2020). Adrian Florea similarly describes de facto states as durable entities with institutional capacities to govern territories that sometimes “prove more effective at developing administrative structures than does the nominal territorial sovereign” (Florea 2017, 338). Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) conceptualized sovereignty in Northern Cyprus as a performance that is never achieved, but in a constant state of becoming. In her ethnography *The Make-Believe Space* (2012), Navaro-Yashin presents it as an active state of collective imagination that is legitimized through material realities. Similarly, Nina Caspersen (2011) notes that unrecognized states often mirror institutional forms of recognized states, as their survival depends on their ability to perform statehood. These scholars all show examples of how institutions perform sovereignty through everyday procedures and bureaucratic acts, like issuing passports and managing borders. At the same time, foreign actors continue to engage with the TRNC through proxy organizations like the student-led initiative VOIS and the involvement of other NGOs¹¹ funded by the EU and the US Embassy (VOIS 2023; 2022). City development projects are also funded by the EU as part of a broader preparation strategy for a possible reunification of the island. George Kyris describes such acts as “engagement without recognition” (2020, 355). This all goes to say that the unrecognized ‘TRNC’ is both seen and unseen, deliberately. I adopt this view of the TRNC as I

¹⁰ For instance, Canada’s immigration advisory issued a level 2 travel warning for the TRNC despite claiming to not recognize its legitimacy (Government of Canada 2025a).

¹¹ Some student participants have been active with such organizations over the years.

consider how responsibilities and failures of *international laws*, rights, and norms colour what counts as visible, legitimate, and worthy of intervention.¹²



Figure 1 NGOs and development projects (photos by Aicha Lariani, May 2025).

Yet, the ‘TRNC’s recognition—as a *byproduct of coexistence with other states*—does not include trade or international economic relations. In fact, the *state* could not have declared its independence in 1983 without the financial aid provided by Turkey following its military intervention in 1974. With an estimated population of around 400,000¹³ (CyprusMail 2023), the territory’s small domestic market is further encumbered by severed trade ties and trade embargoes. These factors further isolated the North from the international community, crippling its economy and keeping it highly dependent on Turkey (Ekici 2019; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Bryant and Hatay 2020; Kyritsi and Christofis 2018; Demetriou 2018; Hoch and Heinz 2024).

¹² The TRNC’s non-recognition means that migration procedures in the North remain largely ambiguous and outside the jurisdiction of international law. This contrasts with the RoC which, as an EU member, is subject to the UNHCR asylum framework (Achiri and Klem 2024; Dağtaş and Ilcan 2025; Fischer 2020). The North’s legal vacuum allows higher education to function as an unregulated accessible migration method.

¹³ There is a lack of an official census about the population of migrants in the North (CyprusMail 2025b).

Tufan Ekici argues, however, that policymakers relied too much on these political circumstances to explain away their misuse of freely given Turkish aid, particularly as they channelled it toward state economic enterprises (SEEs) to maintain political patronage. This practice, in his assessment, stifled local development by creating unnecessary civil service jobs and hiring people with little regard to their qualifications, in exchange for votes (2019, 73). This system of clientelism,¹⁴ where *who*, rather than *what* you know, earns you a position in the public sector, slowed down productive investments and stunted the growth of a forming economy. The absence of a functional export market, “combined with Northern Cyprus’s position outside the international order, meant that “getting by” was often about taking advantage of its interstitial position” (Bryant and Hatay 2020, 245). Today, the “economy thrives on its ability to attract people and offer them paid services, ranging from university education, to tourism, to medical care, to casinos and brothels” (Achiri and Klem 2024, 6).¹⁵ In this context, higher education became an important economic sector that scaled over time alongside shifting regional influences. This growth was notably accelerated by the instability following the 2011 Arab Spring, which redirected displaced students from Syria and Libya towards the North (Chabre 2021). These arrivals continue to provide an influx of foreign currency through tuition, rentals, and living expenses, all of which help sustain an otherwise isolated local economy (Mehmet 2014; Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024; Ekici 2019).

Generally, educational institutions in the North gain their accreditation through the Turkish Council for Higher Education YÖK,¹⁶ which makes them a part of the Turkish Education system

¹⁴ A reflection of this concept will become apparent in the networks of intermediaries I later discuss.

¹⁵ During my time in Northern Cyprus, I certainly noticed that casinos were seemingly everywhere across Lefkoşa’s quiet neighborhoods as well as the busy touristy areas in Girne and Famagusta.

¹⁶ For a current list of accredited institutions see (Yükseköğretim İletişim Merkezi 2025).

and therefore recognized by extension in *most* states.¹⁷ This arrangement made the North a popular destination among wealthy Turkish citizens, as it provided a more accessible path to a university education than the competitive local options at home (Hoch and Heinz 2024; Chabre 2021). About two public universities were established between 1983 and 2001, alongside three private institutions and one satellite campus of a Turkish institute called the Middle East Technical University (METU) (Chabre 2021, 6; Hoch and Heinz 2024, 213). However, after the intense neoliberalization of Turkey in the post-2000 era, private universities began to increase in number and dominate the market (Alemdaroğlu 2022, 11). As such, recruitment targets for Cypriot institutions broadened beyond Turkish citizens to include students from Africa, the Middle East, and Turkic countries (Hoch and Heinz 2024, 209; Waruru 2023; Chabre 2021, 16). Between 2011 and 2020, 11 new universities were established (Hoch and Heinz 2024, 213).¹⁸ This increase coincided with the Arab Spring, which as Chabre noted, redirected new flows of students from Syria and Libya toward the North and in turn “proved to be beneficial for the Turkish Cypriot HE institutions” (2021, 15). Hatay (2025) conceptualized this rapid growth as “Dubaization,” drawing a parallel to the development model in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In this framework, the economy depends on the constant circulation of non-resident capital and bodies, rather than means of local production. This *Dubaization* of education in Northern Cyprus mirrors broader global patterns of academic capitalism seen in many recent education hubs like Malaysia, South Korea, and China. In these contexts, higher education also leverages regional mobility to bolster their

¹⁷ This recognition is not static, as some universities have lost their recognition due to violations. For example, 29 programs were suspended in KSTU, and its recognition is subject to change following the “fake diploma scandal” (CyprusMail 2025a). Other states like Zimbabwe have outright revoked some institutions in the North (Education Today 2024). Actors in Nigeria have called to boycott HE in the North because of cases of alleged killing of students from Africa (The PIE network 2023). A participant from Morocco found that his degree was not recognized there at all. Overall, recognition of HE institutions in the North is ambiguous and subject to quality concerns and political pressure (Achiri and Klem 2024; Hoch and Heinz 2024).

¹⁸ For additional details on these institutions see YÖDAK (2025).

local economies and soft power (Kang and Hwang 2022; Hoch and Heinz 2024; Slaughter and Rhoades 2010; Kang et al. 2022).

Widely described as the “*land of international universities*” (Yazıcı 2015, 3), today a third of Northern Cyprus’ GDP comes from these institutions alone (France 24 2023). According to Hoch and Heinz, “in the academic year 2021/2022, international students made up 87% of all HE students in the state” (2024, 212). With a land area of just 3,355 km², Northern Cyprus has 22 operational universities in the territory (YÖDAK 2025). Northern Cyprus has one university for approximately every 18,000 people, and a density of about one university per 152 km². This is a high number of HE institutions in one country, especially relative to its size and population. This expansion traces the aforementioned patterns of academic capitalism, where universities become commercial ventures rather than intellectual spaces for learning (Slaughter and Rhoades 2010; Feng and Horta 2021; Kang and Hwang 2022). This perspective situates the Northern Cypriot case within the larger already existing global trends that monetize people’s aspirations and precarities.

The fragmented sovereignty of the ‘TRNC,’ its economic isolation, and patterns of forced migration may seem like vastly different forces—and they are. Yet, they converge in the lives of the participants, particularly as the opportunity that makes their mobility possible also comes from the political and economic needs of the de facto state. In closing this section, I want to note that this study does not explore the quality of education in Turkish Cypriot institutions. While some universities have dubious and ambiguous accreditation,¹⁹ others are well established including satellite campuses of well-respected universities based in Turkey, like Bahçeşehir University (BAU), which has international branches in Berlin, Toronto, Washington D.C. (BAU Global 2025). The accounts I later share speak to exploitative practices and deception that create financial and

¹⁹ For more in-depth information on the politicized accreditation and quality of higher education institutions in Northern Cyprus see Hoch and Heinz (2024).

status precarities for participants. These accounts refer to individual actors and third-party recruitment intermediaries and their networks. Nevertheless, some participants shared that their education experience on campus was meaningful and rewarding.

Fieldwork and Research Methods

In this study, I conducted short-term ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Cyprus for two weeks between May and June 2025. My entry to this field was driven by an interest in understanding how displacement takes shape in the northern part of the island. While the RoC has consistently received some of the highest asylum applications per capita in Europe since 2018 (Fischer 2020; Aida 2022; MMC 2024), these statistics do not represent arrivals of the same groups of displaced individuals to Northern Cyprus.²⁰ Therefore, I was looking to understand how forcibly uprooted people arrive in Northern Cyprus and under what circumstances they may remain.

One month before my travel, I circulated a research invitation on Facebook to connect with “refugee” communities living there. Some responded with confusion saying, “there are no refugees here,” others advised me to “go to the South” which is where the UNHCR operates. These reactions immediately reflected the legal liminality of the context, namely the coupling of refugeehood with the formal refugee status given by the UNHCR. Since the de facto state lacks a formal asylum mechanism (Dağtaş and Ilcan 2025; Achiri and Klem 2024; Fischer 2020), the word refugee, even in its Arabic equivalent (لاجئ), was rendered meaningless. In response to this friction, I decided to read through Facebook groups for migrants to observe how individuals characterized themselves, as well as the topics and concerns they raised. I found a post written in Arabic that condemned education agents in Northern Cyprus for deceiving people (*Appendix B for a translated version*). Many in the comments section agreed and shared similar sentiments. This online encounter completely shifted the direction of this project. I messaged the original poster and all commentators, which led to more grounded conversations and exploratory questions. Instead of

²⁰ The 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent 1967 protocol established the legal right to asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. While the RoC is a signatory to this framework, this agreement is not extended to the North (Achiri and Klem 2024).

fixating on “displaced people” or “refugees,” I began listening more carefully to how people defined their own circumstances, tracing how their experiences led them to higher education in a de facto state, and considering what that says about international (im)mobility.

Sampling

The exchanges I had prior to my travel carried over to my fieldwork. I had my first few formal interviews, in person, with some of the people I connected with online. They helped introduce me to many more interlocutors by sharing my contact information with their networks and adding me to WhatsApp groups for international university students. Through these referrals, I was able to conduct snowball sampling—also known as “chain referral”²¹ (Bernard 2018, 149)—which is a non-probability sampling method suited for in-depth, small-scope studies like this one. I interviewed 29 individuals in total (25 in person and four remotely). The majority of participants were international students between the ages of 21 and 31²² (*for more on the remaining three participants, see Appendix C.1*). Specifically, 13 were women and 16 were men from various countries such as Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Somalia, Cameroon, and Kenya. Only two of the participants (one from Morocco and another from Kenya) felt their countries of citizenship were safe. I found this exception further contextualised the issues of (im)mobility many others experienced, *as I later discuss*. Naturally, my sample is predominantly students, because my referral chain began with and circulated through student networks. This is notably one of the limitations of snowball sampling, as it can result in a biased sample, over-representing closely connected networks and under-representing those outside initial referral chains (Bernard 2018).

²¹ Notably this method was especially useful for connecting with female participants, as it was challenging, *in my experience*, to gain their attention and trust via online messaging.

²² As part of my snowball sampling approach, I was open to speaking with anyone who expressed interest in sharing their experience.

While I take those limitations into account in my analysis, I also recognize that this method opened doors to organic connections between migration, displacement, higher education, and international (non)recognition that I would have entirely missed otherwise.

Data Collection

I met most interviewees in public cafes and on university campuses. The interviews were semi-structured with some planned guiding questions. I asked what led them to migrate, how they heard about Northern Cyprus and its education system, why they chose it—especially if other options were available—and what happened upon their arrival. My follow-up questions centred around the stories and experiences they decided to tell. This approach enabled the research problem and core themes to emerge from the material. Conversations ranged from 1.5 to 4 hours. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic,²³ and interviews with those from Cameroon and Kenya were conducted in English. All participants consented to have their interviews audio-recorded, with the exception of one participant, who allowed me to take notes and use direct quotes. I transcribed and translated all relevant excerpts. I changed all participants' names and flagged any identifying information I needed to avoid, including the universities they attended and the agencies they encountered.

Data Analysis

I used a thematic coding method to identify core patterns across the interviews (Saldaña 2009, 3). I assigned qualitative codes (e.g., immobility, information asymmetry, financial precarity) and organized coded excerpts across three analytic phases: Recruitment (drivers of migration to Northern Cyprus), Retention (conditions that influence participants to remain), and Reproduction/Resistance (actions taken in response to the Retention phase). I compared

²³ Arabic speakers were from Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, and Morocco.

convergences and divergences across participant accounts and noticed that not all fit neatly within this arrangement. I incorporated those divergences as productive, context-relevant exceptions in my discussion.

Researcher Positionality

In her seminal work on sociolinguistic methodology, Nessa Wolfson (1976) conceptualized the interview as a dynamic social encounter where narratives are co-constructed between the researcher and the participant. She argues that a participant's perception of the most appropriate or expected narrative is dictated by the non-neutral and contextually contingent social norms of the occasion. Given that interviews were my primary method for collecting information, it is important that I consider how the specificities of my own positionality influence what participants shared with me and how I represent these accounts in this study.

As a researcher traveling from a Canadian university, my ability to enter and exit the territory contrasts with that of the participants. No doubt, there is a distance between my role as a researcher and the consequences attached to sharing these stories. This distance creates an asymmetric risk factor for interlocutors that understandably shapes what they deem to be appropriate to share. At the same time, I was close in age to most and had cultural and linguistic commonalities, including a shared background with a few that were also born in Saudi Arabia. This dual dynamic sometimes built rapport and trust, yet also visibly limited what participants were willing to reveal about themselves. Some omitted details about the informal work they engaged in, and their intentions to cross the buffer zone to the RoC. Sometimes participants expressed particular sentiments in isolation that, *upon reflection on the interview as a whole*, suggested more complex and multi-layered meanings. For instance, a participant from Yemen said

he had never considered claiming asylum in the RoC. Yet, at the same time, he seemed to know a lot about the process of crossing the Green Line, including how to get in contact with smugglers. He also knew the exact value of welfare stipends provided by the UNHCR to asylum applicants. While he distanced himself from any intention to cross, his familiarity with the process suggests he had encountered the idea but decided to withhold how he came to know about it and the extent of his interest during our conversation. Another participant said that he does not work in Northern Cyprus and receives an allowance from his family abroad. At a later interaction, he offered to drive me across the city, disclosing to me that he works as a pirate taxi on a daily basis. It is likely that the interview setting and personal risk assessment influenced many more conversations (*see Appendix C.3*). I see these interactions as filtered through the speech event (Wolfson 1976), rather than an objective data source.

What I find to be analytically important is the meaning each interlocutor assigned to Northern Cyprus in relation to their hopes, dreams, and experience of displacement. Those ‘meanings’²⁴ are situated in the tension between participants’ accounts at face value and what is left unsaid or hidden during the interview. By analyzing this tension, I acknowledge that my interpretation of these encounters shapes the final story. Therefore, I further consider ethical questions about how to relay my findings in a way that least perpetuates harmful or essentialized narratives.

²⁴ By *meanings* I refer to the collective reflections, conceptual framings, and theories that emerge from social research, in a somewhat similar vein to Dolson’s conceptualization of polyphony (2013, 202).

Methodological Reflections on Representation

Any research concerned with *telling about* individuals also necessarily involves an omission of some element of truth (Becker 2007, 21). Representation is thus an ethical responsibility that requires, at the very least, a cognisant understanding of what is being told and omitted, and the harmful exclusionary biases entrenched within them. Having read countless news articles about tragic border and boat crossings, I admit to having a preconceived understanding about displacement as necessarily involving victimhood and suffering. Mark Dolson offers a valuable cautionary tale about how “knowing too much about the wrong sorts of things” (2013, 230) can completely derail a project. Taking his caution seriously, I recognize that unless I revisit my preconceptions and approach student displacement with more openness, I risk uncritically contributing yet another publication to anthropology’s repository of *the suffering subject*. This would be problematic on at least two fronts: first, this trope reduces research participants to victims devoid of agency; a trend anthropologists Joel Robbins (2013) and Harris Solomon (2022), among others, fervently criticized (and rightly so). Migration literature is no exception to this trend as Otieno Kisiara notes, “[t]he image of the suffering, helpless, and needy refugee has therefore become a fixture in refugee representation” (2015, 163). However, a significant body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of migrant agency as a counter-narrative to victimization. Prominently Vicki Squire (2017), Peter Nyers (2015) present examples for how displaced individuals actively negotiate and contest the borders they encounter. Yet, overly simplistic representations of any kind, leave very little room for genuine understanding of people’s contradictions and complexities. Because migration is not linear, and victimhood and resistance are not fixed, it is important to balance agency without portraying migrants as merely ‘resisters’

(Ortner 1995).²⁵ *As you will come to read*, participants in this research complicate the distinction between suffering and its reproduction. The grey range between ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ is where the brokenness of taken-for-granted international education, migration, and asylum systems comes to light. This leads to the second issue concerning how the asylum application and interview processes in turn expect and accept only certain narratives as legitimate and deserving of refugee status. Excluded from those narratives are individuals with non-linear experiences of displacement, like some international students and second-generation de facto refugees in this research, or those who appear to have agency and autonomy (Riva and Routon 2020; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). These images, when translated into legislated categories, can force displaced individuals “to conform to an institutionally imposed stereotype”²⁶ (Zetter 1991, 45). I am concerned that uncritical representations of the *suffering image* may contribute to a harmful process of ‘subject making,’ as conceptualized by Aihwa Ong et al. (1996),²⁷ thereby sustaining a system that actively reproduces categorical exclusions designed to keep individuals in the asylum system forcibly dependent on, and vulnerable to, precarious legislation (Zetter 1991; Riva and Routon 2020).

How does this theory-laden rhetoric become a methodological problem? As Nicholas De Genova, argues, “[w]e, as researchers or scholars of migration, are indeed ‘of the connections’

²⁵ Current migration scholarship across anthropology, sociology, political science, and geography critiques this kind of binary understanding. For more, see Griffiths (2014), Landau and Freemantle (2010), Leon (2015), Berg (2020), Benchebkroun (2023), Casas-Cortes et al. (2015).

²⁶ Nadeem, one of the participants, eventually crossed to the RoC to apply for asylum, after having been a student in the North for about a year. He recalls people in the camp advising him “saying I should have tears in my eyes, try as much as possible to show that I am in a pitiful state. I already came in a pitiful state. How can I show more than this? They say they (United Nations staff) are not affected by your words; you need to try to speak in a certain way, I mean give them a certain facial expression, cry a little.”

²⁷ Ong et al.’s (1996) concept of ‘cultural citizenship’ describes how internal social categorizations can shape social perceptions pertaining to migrants and their positioning within the political and legal structure of a state. They argue that non-citizens are socialized into categories based on their perceived value through an ongoing systematic process of ‘subject making.’ They describe this relationship as “a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (1996, 738).

between migrants' transnational mobilities and the political, legal, and border policing regimes that seek to orchestrate, regiment, and manage their energies" (2013, 252). Similarly, Maurice Stierl (2022) centres researchers as active agents in migration issues. He argues that academics who uncritically engage with labels and categories in pursuit of well-funded, policy-relevant publications neglect their responsibility to do no harm, by inadvertently reinforcing social and legislative exclusions. These critiques of policy-relevant research point to an important unresolved methodological problem for my thesis: how should I ethically engage in research that is both useful to participants and effective in conveying their precarities, needs, and claims to legislators, without at the same time reinforcing the very architectures of governance that make them vulnerable to begin with? Tom Boellstorff suggests that researchers must go beyond the ethical principle to "do no harm" and instead "take good care" of their participants (2012, 130). Perhaps what constitutes as 'good care' in my research can look like a process of challenging my own capacity to think outside commonly used policy-oriented framings.

In this thesis, I continue to *loosen my attachment*²⁸ to rigid legislative framings, partly because they are not useful in Northern Cyprus,²⁹ where "the foundation of law is itself subject to ambiguity, suspension, and contestation" (Achiri and Klem 2024, 2), and to widen representations of refugeehood beyond the familiar trope of the suffering subject. I proceed to situate the interlocutors' circumstances within international migration logics in my findings, to become

²⁸ Harris Solomon's (2022) discussion of the *suffering subject* called on anthropologists to loosen their attachments to terminology or ideas like 'the wound,' which he argues is typically understood as a physical, and therefore temporary harm. He adds anthropologists should provide ethnographic accounts that acknowledge bodily, psychological, cultural, and collective harm, without fixating on them.

²⁹ Legislative framings beyond the context of Northern Cyprus are important as they facilitate a pathway for granting legal protection for some. However, their rigidity and decoupling from experiences on the ground create hierarchical stratification systems that privilege the refugee label above all other categories. These stratified framings not only fail to capture the complexities of mobility, but actively obscure the subjective bureaucratic process of granting protection (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). It is important for international asylum laws and policies to be responsive to the messy non-linear experiences of displacement on the ground.

legible, so to speak, to policymakers with regard to how such frameworks fail in the context of the study. Additionally, given that most interviewees were compelled to migrate out of necessity rather than choice, I use the operative term ‘de facto student refugee’ to better articulate the impossibility of the participants’ safe return to their countries of citizenship. I further discuss these dynamics in my findings and continue to present them through the same contradictions and experiences that emerged from the fieldwork itself. In doing so, I attempt to provide thick descriptions³⁰ of their circumstances, without erasing their identities as international student migrants.

³⁰ Thick description is a concept introduced by Clifford Geertz (2009) that refers to an ethnographic method focused on an in-depth, context-rich, detailed observation and portrayal of social phenomena.

Not Refugees, Not Just Students. Displaced Beyond Labels

“It’s true we are coming from different horizons, but one thing in common is we know people, or the majority of us, are coming from countries in crisis.” –Silvan 31

Silvan generously spared some time to speak with me, in between his meetings with Cameroonian government representatives. At the time, some students were stuck in Northern Cyprus with expired passports³¹ and he was adamant on helping them. Though he currently keeps busy advocating for migrants through his own foundation, he first came to Cyprus in 2019 to pursue a degree in business management. Silvan saw both the need to build a future for himself and the impossibility of doing so in his country. He explained that in “most African countries...the government system, is not working. Nothing is working right, especially in Cameroon,” and felt migration was his “only chance” to acquire skills and advance his career. Stifling systemic failures, stagnation, and lack of opportunities are common drivers of discrepant knowledge mobility (Collins and Ho 2018). They also represent the precarious everyday realities shared by interlocutors in this study. The severity of systemic blockages varied from structural exclusions to a complete collapse of infrastructure, educational institutions, and basic safety. Even so, they led to the same outcome. A pressing need to migrate. Nadeem, for instance, arrived in Northern Cyprus just two months before war began in Sudan.³² His migration followed prolonged impasse³³ and compounded crisis:

I studied six semesters of IT (information technology), and I couldn’t complete it, why? Because whenever I wanted to do anything, something bad happened. COVID came, then came the demonstrations, then the war, even when I went back to complete thlle year and

³¹ Because Cameroon does not recognize the TRNC, there is no embassy for citizens to update their documents.

³² Nadeem was certain a war would break soon. He described living in Sudan as a constant wait for “calamity” to strike.

³³ Here I use the concept of impasse from Greg Beckett’s work (2025) to refer to a condition of political deadlock, where forms of authority are dispersed, contested, and unstable. In Sudan, this is reflected in the collapse of central governance, and the dispersion of authority between military and paramilitary forces (Al Jazeera 2025).

my degree I couldn't, because until now the university [is] closed. Everything has been bad for a very long time.

Like him, Soha left Sudan as civilians were being increasingly targeted by militias. More students were reported to have followed after the war, just as waves of students from Syria, Yemen, and Libya, among others, had before them (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024). Conflict, imminent or active, has been a common cause of blocked futures and a driver of migration for many across the accounts. Leena said she saw “no future” for herself in Gaza, similar to Kamal from the West Bank. Both migrated just before the ongoing siege intensified in 2023. Khalid left Yemen saying the “situation was just terrible, it was just not a living situation.” Five other interviewees who had been living in Yemen felt the same. Yet despite the circumstances that led to their arrival in the North, everyone was governed as an *international student migrant*. Not only is the label not neutral,³⁴ but it positions their migration as one of choice and privilege. This framing legitimizes their treatment as affluent “walking money bags,” whereas in reality, they are “operating from a place of survival” rather than preparation *as one student activist put it*. The disconnect between their ‘status’ and lived experience is part and parcel of how displacement on the ground differs from and complicates dominant logics of migration categories.

Labels such as *refugee*,³⁵ *asylum seeker*, and *migrant* have formalized definitions within organizations like the UNHCR, supranational bodies like the EU, and other states, all associated with differential protections. Yet, on top of their gross disregard to questions of self-identification,

³⁴ Importantly labels are not neutral but function as tangible representations of policy and bureaucracy (Zetter 2007), and in turn, they participate in processes of subject-making that position migrants within wider webs of power (Ong et al. 1996).

³⁵ The UNHCR defines refugees as “people outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require ‘international protection’” (UNHCR 2023a).

these labels do not adequately capture the non-linear lived experiences of displaced individuals.³⁶ At the same time, politicians and policymakers fixate on these categories and depend on them to distinguish between people on the move (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Stierl 2022), almost as if one cannot possibly embody more than one categorical framing at the same time. This “categorical fetishism” as conceptualized by Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis (2018) is exacerbated by how labels, even when they apply to people in definition, often fail to translate into accessible tangible protections for individuals like Khalid and Nadeem on the ground. Restrictions ranging from border policies to local regulations (*or lack thereof*) limit their rights to travel and arrive on sovereign grounds, where they can apply for asylum.

Alison Mountz aptly describes this institutional failure as an “ontological death” of asylum, where the shrinking of legal avenues for refuge makes the very act of becoming an asylum seeker impossible (2020, 131). The interlocutors were living in Cyprus, which is internationally recognized as part of the EU and signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and 1967 protocol.³⁷ However they can only apply for asylum by being in the South, even though the RoC claims sovereignty over the entire island. Effectively, they are rendered invisible, caught in a dynamic of ongoing (non)recognition and lack of cooperation between the North and the South that sometimes facilitates the deterrence of asylum.³⁸ On top of the aforementioned limitations and subjective biases in the asylum system, categorical legal framings in migration fail most clearly at

³⁶ I reference asylum claims that have been questioned or rejected because the applicants passed through ‘safe’ countries prior to seeking asylum, and are therefore assumed to be migrants rather than *genuine* refugees (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

³⁷ As discussed by Achiri and Klem (2024), the UNHCR does not acknowledge the TRNC’s sovereignty or its government and therefore has little to no influence there.

³⁸ Asylum deterrence is illegal under international law (UNHCR 2001). A material instance of apparent deterrence by (non)recognition occurred in 2020, when the TRNC received a boat carrying 175 displaced Syrians rejected by the RoC. After the crowded boat capsized near the Northern coast, TRNC authorities took in the passengers and promptly detained them all, including the 69 children among them, without formally recognized legal grounds. Despite calls from several human rights advocates for the RoC and EU to process the detainees into the asylum system, no collaboration efforts were made (Human Rights Watch 2020).

representing individuals experiencing displacement in states with no asylum mechanism. For them, though migration has occurred, legal recognition and protection have not been granted. Such dynamics are reflected in the experiences of the following group.

Zane, a Yemeni student has lived as a dependent with a temporary resident permit in Saudi Arabia for most of his life. Participants like him are the children of parents who escaped war or political unrest in their countries of origin. For example, Tasha's father was a political refugee from Somalia and was informally recognized as such but only received a temporary residence status in Saudi Arabia. Marwan's father migrated with his entire family to the country, after receiving threats from Sudan's previous Al-Bashir administration. Amjad's family was displaced from Palestine and migrated to Jeddah before his birth. More interlocutors from Somalia, Yemen and Sudan have lived their whole lives as second-generation refugees in Saudi Arabia (*sometimes without realizing it*). They have little to no ties to their countries of origin as they are not safe to live in (UNHCR 2024). Although they read as very Saudi to me,³⁹ their passports were not. Under the local migration system, there is no asylum pathway—instead, adults are governed the same as labour migrants (Lysa 2023, 254, 255). The legal statuses of all foreign children are tied to their parents' sponsorship (Menon and James 2023). As some in my fieldwork described, when boys turned 18, they had to either transfer their sponsorship to an employer or educational institution or lose their legal status. Women after 18 can remain as dependents, but like their parents, their stay was temporary, revokable, and precarious.⁴⁰ As a result, some had irregular statuses before they

³⁹ I connected with this group of participants and built rapport easily, as I was also born in Saudi Arabia. We joked in the distinct Saudi dialect mixed with foreign flair like adding -ing to the end of Arabic verbs. When recalling their experiences, they would say *you know how it is there* to convey feelings of exclusion. *This is to note that some of my subjective interpretations influence this information.*

⁴⁰ Migrants in Saudi Arabia are governed under the *kafala* system, which links their residency and employment to a Saudi sponsor with the discretion to revoke it at any time. Andrea Wright's (2021) ethnography on Indian labour migrants in the Gulf traces how such systems construct forced dependencies and questions the moral and political logics of sponsorship and custodianship.

left, as one told me “we were irregular migrants there for three years. No health insurance, no Iqama (resident permit), no driver’s license, nothing.”⁴¹ With no clear pathways to citizenship or permanent residency, the individuals I spoke with remained structurally excluded from public systems like education, especially because access to tuition-free higher education is mostly restricted to local citizens.⁴² These factors push non-citizens including those born in the country toward private institutions where tuition fees are often prohibitive. Yet, without legal permission to work under dependent visas, the participants could not earn the income needed to afford these fees or legally remain in the country. These overlapping legal, economic, and institutional constraints had Zane, and Tasha, among others, completely stuck after completing high school.

In effect, this group of interlocutors was experiencing *protracted displacement*, which Roger Zetter (1991) conceptualizes as long-term forced migration without sustainable solutions. Here, Zetter’s temporal framework of displacement intersects with, but also differs from Mountz’s focus on geographical and legal blockages in asylum. Understood together, they make clear how this group experiences displacement with no resolution across time and generations. The parents could not access sovereign grounds to claim asylum,⁴³ therefore, their displacement along with that of their children was delayed rather than resolved. Eventually, the participants had encountered a point of stagnation that compelled them to migrate abroad for, and *through*, higher education.

Through these framings I mean to convey how technologies of categorization, ‘international’ agreements, and acts of (non)recognition can complicate, curtail, and control access

⁴¹ *I felt an incredibly pervasive shared feeling of foreignness and non-belonging among this group. As one of them put it, “the thing about the Saudi system is that you will always be reminded that you are a migrant. Period.”*

⁴² Most public institutions specify “[t]he applicant must be a Saudi national or be born of a Saudi mother (for non-Saudis, they can apply through the scholarship program)” (Madhesh 2023, 3).

⁴³ Though I cannot assume those parents would have applied for asylum, if given the opportunity, such an option was not available in Saudi Arabia.

to asylum processes. For Tasha, Zain, and others, displacement has happened, but it occurred outside formal asylum systems. Sometimes because protection was inaccessible, others because migration through temporary education or labour—in the case of their parents—was the only available option for safety. Yet the ‘international student’ label does not negate the indefinite continuance of the participants’ displacement or their lack of access to long term stability. As OECD notes,⁴⁴ study permits can function as “[c]omplementary pathways for humanitarian migration,” though they are “no substitute for asylum” (2022, 125). Importantly the OECD has 38 member countries, the vast majority of which are positioned in the Global North (OECD 2025). Who, then, is *still* left out from such complementary pathways for shelter?

Visa regulations further shrink pathways for mobility through education. Interlocutors from various backgrounds reported being met with stacking travel restrictions and visa rejections that make education migration to much of the West—and *access to their asylum systems*—near impossible. Tasha explained that she “cannot get into any country easily” because of her Somali passport, and Amjad’s Palestinian travel documents are sometimes not recognized by immigration officers altogether. Hasan from Yemen and Asma from Somalia already received repeated rejections from Germany and Canada. One of the requirements for study permit applications in those destinations include “proof of financial means to support living expenses” (OECD 2022, 150). Canada, for instance, requires applicants to provide proof of funds of at least 22,895 CAD per year (Government of Canada 2025b) along with proof of ties to country of habitual residence as well as travel history among other documents.⁴⁵ While such requirements can protect migrants themselves from precarious living conditions once they arrive, they also narrow education

⁴⁴ The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) publishes data and analysis on higher education and student mobility (OECD 2022).

⁴⁵ For more detailed examples, see McCaughey et al. (2023).

pathways inadvertently filtering out non-elite migrants including under-privileged de facto refugees. Notably, collaborative efforts between organizations like the UNHCR and OECD are important in expanding routes for humanitarian migration through education (UNHCR 2025c; OECD and UNHCR 2023). At the same time, they prime the same framings that othered the participants in the first place and are therefore not the right type of solution for their circumstances. Entry barriers are common for competitive destinations in the “Global North” but not limited to it. Khalid for example considered travelling to Turkey or living in Malaysia but felt it would be too “complicated document wise” for him and his wife.⁴⁶

Institutionalized exclusions and acts of bordering, combined with exorbitant financial costs represent structurally produced barriers upheld by various actors. These barriers converge to create extremely narrow options for destination countries (Collins and Ho 2018; Yang 2018). This study, therefore, traces the stories of students driven by precarity and hope, forced to seek out affordable destinations that would at the very least grant them a visa.⁴⁷ As opportunities closed their doors, many in this study went to Northern Cyprus as opposed to other destinations with similarly lowered entry requirements like those described by Yang (2018). What were their reasons, and what dreams were they chasing in Cyprus?

⁴⁶ Leena was able to travel to Turkey and favored that option but had to change her plans as she found the common language of instruction was Turkish. Language of instruction in Northern Cyprus, English, was another major pull factor for many of the participants.

⁴⁷ Given the West has been structurally positioned as an ideal destination for prestigious education (Slaughter and Rhoades 2010), it is important to consider how participants differentially value education destinations. For instance, Tasha’s comment about the limitations of her passport overlooks the few countries that accept Somali travellers with minimal visa requirements (Passport Index 2026). Here, the countries she might be referring to seem to signify places she associates with value, opportunity, legitimacy, prestige, and protection. In future work, I would like to explore how such valuations are constructed, and how they shape and are shaped by Northern Cyprus as a proxy to Western-oriented imaginaries for the participants.

What Brought ‘De Facto Student Refugees’ to Northern Cyprus?

When Silvan was approached in Cameroon by an agent promoting higher education in Northern Cyprus, he was told it was a thriving hub for international students, with a simple visa process that required nothing more than an acceptance letter from a university. As such, he saw an accessible chance to gain skills abroad and further his career in what he perceived to be a safe and affordable place. As Silvan expressed interest, he got referred to another agent in Cyprus to submit the required documents. Upon arriving in 2019 however, he realized he had been “duped by fake agents” who entirely misrepresented the university degree he intended to pursue. Those “dream sellers” *as he called them*, registered him in a vocational college program with a much shorter duration of two years, compared to the standard four-year university degree he had paid and signed up for. Knowing very little about the available institutions in the North, this happened not only without Silvan’s consent, but after the agent gave him multiple assurances about the status of his paperwork with the university. He said, “I noticed that I was duped, and I really got upset and I found out that I wasn’t the only one. There were many of us here in the same situation.”

What Silvan experienced recurred across the interviews. While some enjoyed their migratory experience and newfound independence, the vast majority of participants felt their agents omitted vital information, or “added spices”⁴⁸—embellishing and lying⁴⁹ about the perks of studying in the “student friendly island” (Lefke Avrupa üniversitesi 2020). In doing so, the ‘dream’ of a better future becomes embodied in a set of promises. Central among them are assurances of an affordable, visa-free, European education and lifestyle, with ample job opportunities, and

⁴⁸ Participants sometimes told intensely heartbreaking stories of exploitation with a sense of lightness and humour. Here, Soha was recollecting her experiences with me remotely from a refugee camp in the RoC, completely uncertain about what her status will be or what her future may look like.

⁴⁹ Across the interviews it was clear that most students arrived on false pretenses, and studies by Chabre (2021) and Hoch and Heinz (2024) point to the same pattern.

unlimited mobility across the continent. As Khalid put it, “once you see their advertisements, you’ll be like, oh wow, I’m going to a European country, a part of the European Union...people will be ready to pay 5000, 10,000 dollars/euros, just to come in.” Soha like many, “initially believed Northern Cyprus was a European country,” and Tasha said, “I didn’t know that the North was not recognized until I got here.”⁵⁰ Nadeem recalls wondering “where is the Schengen visa and all of that,” how might “going to Europe be as simple as having an acceptance from a university?” Other students fully expected to be able to support themselves financially through employment, pay their yearly fees, and even support their families at home. Yet reality was different once they arrived. Many were, in Khalid’s words, “surprised to see what they see.”

Access to mobility in the EU, stability, and employment are examples of commodified dreams that intermediaries trade. In this exchange, the dream sellers disrupt the condition of ‘compromise’ which is conceptualized by Yang (2018) as a mutual model between less desirable institutions and individuals with limited options. This disruption is not unique to Northern Cyprus; similar disruptions are documented in established education destinations like the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada. In these contexts, recruitment agents have downplayed the complexities of finding stable employment or receiving a permanent status after a students’ completion of their degree, leaving them financially indebted and vulnerable (Di Cintio 2025; Baas 2019; Moskal 2017; Hune-Brown 2021). Compromise presumes a degree of agency and awareness in exchanges between international students and higher education institutions. This is seen in interlocutors like Maya, 25, who came willingly to Northern Cyprus, aware of the division and its associated challenges, yet constrained by slim alternative options and unstable conditions at home.

⁵⁰ Perceptions about Cyprus varied across the interviews. Most of the participants thought Northern Cyprus was part of the EU. And a few were under the impression that their student permit would grant them entry to Turkey—which is not the case.

Awareness, thus, does not necessarily alter migration flows amidst the structural constraints *de facto* refugees come from. However, manipulation of information unsettles the balance of reciprocity Yang (2018) describes. As a result ‘compromise’ becomes conditional on accessibility of information rather than mutual awareness. Intermediaries in Northern Cyprus disrupt this reciprocity by inflating the status of Northern Cypriot universities and their recognition in some instances, and in others, by actively reconstructing the reality of the *state’s* connection (or lack thereof) to the EU. In other words, while students believe they are engaging in a conscious negotiation, the information required for them to make compromises is withheld. They arrive misled about what to expect and become further vulnerable and exploitable.⁵¹In the context of Northern Cyprus, the political and geographic position are the specific details that some agents choose to manipulate. Just as an agent somewhere else might fabricate other factors to close a sale.

Rising global concern rightly calls attention to unethical practices of unregulated education agents. Particularly as their capitalist interests threaten academic entry standards ⁵² (Feng and Horta 2021; Nikula and Kivistö 2020). However institutions in Northern Cyprus with limited avenues for international outreach end up rewarding these practices as they continue to outsource their marketing to networks of intermediaries (Hoch and Heinz 2024, 209). Meanwhile, the *state* has a “hands-off approach to regulating the business activities of the universities’ owners” (Hoch and Heinz 2024, 218). As a result, participants’ expectations on arrival, and the precarities they encounter, are shaped by intermediaries’ promises and information asymmetries. Figure 2 shows

⁵¹ Notably, a few participants who arrived with no prior knowledge of the island’s political division still felt that information was inconsequential to their decision to come, as they had few alternatives. Hasan said that for him, it did not matter because “Cyprus was the only solution,” amid the war in Yemen. Tasha said her knowledge of the North’s liminality still would not change the trajectory of her migration. Additionally, some participants knew exactly what to expect—in terms of high costs, issues of legal ambiguity as well as dubious recognition of educational institutions and migrated anyway.

⁵² Feng and Horta describe prevalent forms of ethical misconduct across unregulated intermediary networks. These involve paid application essays and fabricated student profiles for the purpose of increasing clients’ chances of enrolment (2021, 258,260).

an empirical example of how academic capitalism and the neoliberalization of higher education applies on the ground in Northern Cyprus. It outlines the application pathways and the intermediaries involved in student recruitment.

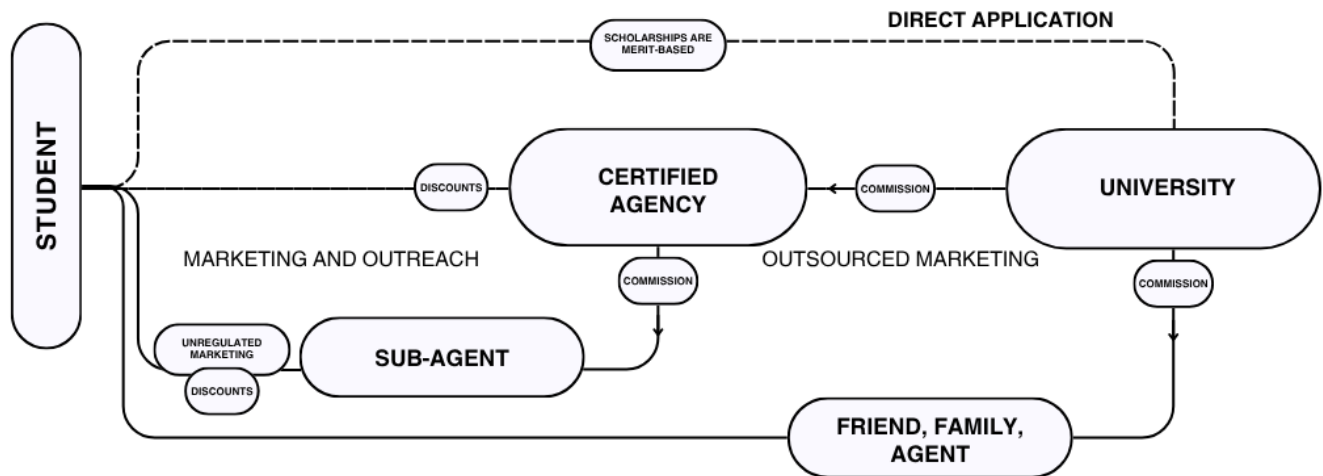


Figure 2 Higher education application pathways.

Students can apply to institutions online directly through their official websites. However, this method is not popular—largely for the same reasons intermediaries are needed, and some reported finding the application instructions to be opaque. Only one interlocutor used this method to join her sibling, who had worked with intermediaries before her. Alternatively, students can apply through personal networks like family members or friends, in which case, the university may offer a commission or a tuition discount to the intermediary in return. The most common method used by the interlocutors by far, was to apply through an agent. Some agencies are ‘certified partners’ with institutions.⁵³ Part of that collaboration involves ‘special agreements,’⁵⁴ ‘exclusive discounts,’ and guaranteed seats or ‘scholarships’ that students can buy. Certain agencies have

⁵³ Information about which agencies were official partners and how many is difficult to verify independently. Multiple participants have said there were three major agencies that were certified. However, there is no third-party registry that lists which agencies are certified and with what institution. Partnerships are declared on the agencies’ individual portals.

⁵⁴ Not all institutions offer special agreements. These observations only pertain to the universities the participants come from (or work for), which make only a handful of the 22 institutions on the island.

monopolies on incoming student populations. Marwan explained, “the universities themselves direct you towards those agents. Even if you want to apply directly to the university, they won’t allow you. That’s what happened to us.”⁵⁵ Beyond such monopolies however, in practice, agents become the easiest and most accessible method for registration. Mehdi, 23 from Morocco, said “there are many offices where one can buy 100% scholarships. Whether it was medicine, engineering, whatever, you can buy it for five thousand euros.” These pre-paid tuition packages differ from typical merit-based scholarships,⁵⁶ they are not influenced by a students’ continued performance throughout their degree.

Without a regulatory body to hold agents accountable, there is no way to know what intermediaries advertise privately. Marwan reflected:

I found it weird that I need to talk to a guy from outside who doesn’t belong to the university in any way, he is just an agent that may apply to another university with your paperwork. When you get here you might find that he applied to another school because they gave him more commission and would tell you that university is better for you anyway.⁵⁷

Moreover, Nadeem, recalling his own experience working in one of these agencies, said that advertised discounts are often inflated and students are not informed of the original tuition fees. He explained that agents have ways of making students “feel like they’ve gotten a good deal when they didn’t get a good deal in reality...they don’t explain things to you, they confuse you.” By obscuring real costs, agents aim to make their packages more attractive than competitors’ in order

⁵⁵ I hoped to triangulate this information through published sources however there is very little public information about agency operations. I reconnected with Marwan to confirm if I had interpreted his words correctly. He confirmed this monopoly saying: “Yes... (the agency) does have a monopoly over Sudanese students at...(university) and what I hear he (Ali the agency owner) also has some influence over at...University since he acquired agency there as well. However, I don’t know if it’s towards a specific nationality at... (the other university) as well or in general.”

⁵⁶ Marwan’s GPA (3.79) qualified him for an academic scholarship. Yet his university did not grant it because his “performance was not seen” during COVID-19. He recalls no such requirement previously stated, adding that “nobody saw anyone here in COVID,” he felt justification was “unethical” and made little sense.

⁵⁷ Marwan personally witnessed an agent attempting to “double his commission” by encouraging him and his brother to transfer to another university saying that they could receive a good sibling discount there. The trick is, he only recommended the second institution after already receiving his commission payment from the first one.

to secure the commissions promised by universities (*see examples in Appendix D*). Another interlocutor from Palestine observed, “anyone can be a recruiter” and bypass the official agent pipeline by using a logo and online promotional material to pose as a representative and submit applications on students’ behalf directly to universities. Overall, even participants familiar with Northern Cyprus through friends or family viewed them as the safest option, especially against the North’s economic instability and frequent inflation. Khalid notes, “if you go through the agency, it’s your money guarantee...if you pay for 100% discount you will get [it].”⁵⁸ Therefore Khalid still purchased a scholarship to bring his wife to Cyprus, this time however, through agents he trusted.

Education recruiters therefore hold an upper hand in appearing to have accreditation, exclusive discounts, and generally more information about institutional processes, compared to students coming from abroad. Jussi Kivistö and Seppo Hölttä describe this relationship as information asymmetry (2008, 331). Most participants had little information about how the system worked at the time of their application, they had no way of authenticating discounts or even differentiating between ‘fake’ and ‘certified’ agencies. The lines are further blurred when these ‘certified agencies’ openly employ and incentivize students to work for them. Hasan was driving me back to my apartment after our interview. He had a borrowed Volkswagen from an agent for a job. To my left I saw the stack of flyers which he would later get paid for distributing. I asked if I could take one. In Figure 3 you can see just one example of what sub-agents are promised.

⁵⁸ Based on the interview accounts, students still need to pay a registration fee and social funds yearly, even for those who paid for 100% scholarships. Across the interviews these fees range between 500-800 euros in different universities and seemed to increase over time.



Figure 3 Student sub-agent recruitment flyers.

In practice, recruiters, as Khalid notes, “are not offices.” Even certified agencies are, in reality, “students...on Facebook, WhatsApp, just social media.”⁵⁹ Hoch and Heinz similarly observed that it “[o]ften it is students themselves who act as agents, with their payment consisting of discounted tuition fees” (2024, 223). Such recruitment methods are therefore embedded in institutionally co-signed and encouraged clientelist systems. As Nadeem put it, “the university knows, and also the university supports it.” With profit driven attitudes from institutions and intermediaries, students often have, *in Khalid’s words*, “nothing guaranteed” if they are cheated. Yet, applications continue to be approved and student arrivals keep rising (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024).

Within the neoliberal rise of academic capitalism, students in private institutions are at risk of being viewed as commodities for “financial and reputational gains” (Lee et al. 2017, 137). In Northern Cyprus however, I see confusion and clarity as profitable constructed conditions of

⁵⁹ This mirrors broader arrangements elsewhere as agencies rely on former students to transition into personal shoppers and brokers (Yang 2018; Feng and Horta 2021).

information asymmetry (Kivistö and Hölttä 2008, 331). When utilized by institutions and individual actors, confusion can function as currency, as Nadeem reflected “the thing about Cyprus is people benefit and take advantage of information. The most sold thing in this country, or rather the basis of this country is built on the chase after information.” On one hand, the legal liminality of Northern Cyprus and lack of accessible information about it online enables recruitment agents to frame education as a golden ticket for individuals typically excluded and marginalized in other states. These failures put in perspective how Silvan came to be “duped” like “many others.” On the other hand, even students like Maya, who came already informed about Northern Cyprus, are vulnerable to intermediaries who may manipulate tuition costs or even sign them up with a different institution. Within this framing, intermediaries decide when and how much information to disclose, omitting details to secure a sale, or revealing important details after students have made financial and emotional investment, putting said students in further precarious situations. Student experiences with agents can vary significantly, leading to different outcomes, as Marwan observed “if you’re a gullible person, he’s (agent) just gonna hang you out to dry. If you’re sharp, you might at least reduce the damage a little bit.” I carry the sentiment of Marwan’s reflection into the following section, particularly as I further discuss how student exploitation extends beyond the initial recruitment process into everyday living on the island.

Monetized Ambiguity, the Essence of Clientelist Networks

“When the student arrives here, he discovers, to his shock, that a lot of money is spent on nothing. There are many things that people get scammed on, which he doesn’t even understand. He is confused.” – Nadeem

If recruitment agents benefit from information asymmetry before students’ arrival, real-estate intermediaries continue to capitalize on it after they arrive. Housing in particular makes visible how participants’ financial precarities were produced and monetized. I first learned of this when I met Zane at a café in Gönyeli. When he enrolled to study dentistry, he expected to easily find accommodation after he arrived. The agent he worked with never informed him that accommodation contracts typically require advance payments of six to twelve months at a time,⁶⁰ an unanticipated huge and consequential financial deterrent for him. He had nothing close to the amount needed to pay for rent, and no place to live. Yet, having paid a lot of money in tuition and flights to come, he cannot simply go back to Saudi Arabia where his status is unstable, or to Yemen, which remains in turmoil. He was structurally immobile. At first, he slept at bus stops by the road, then for two weeks he slept in different parts of the university campus.⁶¹ Eventually an older Cypriot woman accommodated him until his family was able to send money to pay the upfront rent. *The money would eventually come anyway.* Zane’s experience exemplifies how overlapping ambiguities in the recruitment stage—the initial deception—turns into long-term exploitation for de facto refugees. Students who attempted to organize housing in advance had little choice beyond

⁶⁰ These payments, like tuition, and all large payments are only accepted in hard foreign currency to offset the volatility of the local Turkish lira. Based on interviews and my time in Cyprus, the Turkish lira is only used for day-to-day shopping, taxi, and public transportation services. Tourist hotspots like Girne (or Kyrenia in Greek) predominantly take foreign currency.

⁶¹ Zane hoped to receive support from the staff members at the university, or at the very least, fellow Arabs seeing him experience this period of homelessness. Nobody was able to help. He now extends help to anyone in need and has accommodated people stuck in similar precarity in his own room.

working with real-estate intermediaries.⁶² While this is typical of any international relocation, those the participants worked with had no accreditation. They were other students working with house owners, or the same agencies that mediate university enrollments.⁶³ Once again, the interlocutors' search for familiar standardised services, ended in a localised substitution. Those who try to not engage with the system are not always successful. Khalid, for instance found it very difficult to avoid paying commission fees.⁶⁴ He “walked around for many days just to see an ad here or there” but found nothing and eventually paid one month's rent in commission fees to an intermediary on top of the rent and deposit. Access to housing, or information about available apartments, becomes contingent on belonging to profit turning networks. The following vignette is an illustrative example of how precarity—in the context of this study and the experience of its participants—can be systematically reproduced through clientelist ties.

After Marwan decided to pursue civil engineering, he contacted the university about on-campus accommodation availabilities. Mary, an employee in the university, redirected him to an external agency. He noticed it was the same agency he was compelled to use for university admission, but Mary reassured him that it was a reputable and trusted university partner. Then Ali, the agency owner, asked that Marwan pay 4000 USD for six months of rent upfront. Marwan recalled feeling uneasy. This large sum was expected in full, for an apartment he was only viewing through online pictures. Having worked with Ali before to sign up for the university, he already felt uncomfortable about him. He remembers asking many questions and being dismissed and given vague answers. At the same time, he could not find other accessible options to arrange his

⁶² Accommodation arrangements seemed less of a concern for students with trusted networks already in Cyprus.

⁶³ Agencies typically advertise multiple ‘free’ services like enrolment, airport pick-up, and accommodation assistance. This was consistent across interviews, agency websites, and my own communication with them online.

⁶⁴ Two participants described having direct contact with their house owners and therefore they did not have to pay commission on top of their rent.

rent from abroad. Marwan then tried to mitigate his possible losses and negotiated the payment plan down to a total of three months. He paid that on top of two deposits and a commission.⁶⁵ When he finally arrived at the North, he saw the apartment was completely different in layout and size from the pictures. It was a much smaller studio which he felt was in very bad shape. He complained but Ali denied exchanging the accommodation and had to live in it anyway. Tapped on the shoulder one day, he turned to find the familiar face of Ali. He greeted him thinking nothing of why he was there, he was partnered with the university after all. After some niceties Marwan watched him walk towards his car and sit in the driver's seat. Next to him was Mary, the department employee. Baffled, he asked his friends sitting nearby about this and learned that they were married. *'Hang on, wait!'* I interrupted—I wanted to make sure I understood what Marwan was implying. He doubled down and said “she was directing me to him so he can get paid. She was...monitoring the students and directing them to him (Ali) to rent the accommodation and all of that so he can get the money. So basically, she's getting the money.”⁶⁶ That was not all, Ali also had a car dealership and would incentivize students to work for him by loaning them cars as a form of, *in Marwan's words*, “brain washing” making them feel they “have a car and can go anywhere they want,” much like Hasan's Volkswagen that came with employee recruitment obligations.

Silvan, Zane, and Marwan's accounts show different, yet overlapping, examples of constructed exploitation made possible through the institutionalized reliance on unregulated intermediaries and the lack of readily available transparent information. In place of 'compromise'

⁶⁵ Marwan's negotiation process, as he described it, sounded grueling. It was clear Ali had no intention of accepting anything less than what he offered, yet Marwan was able to convince him.

⁶⁶ Marwan's brother was registering at the same time just with a different university. He secured on-campus housing from abroad without any complications. Experiences with private institutions are non-monolithic and vary widely. What appears common across Northern Cyprus is a lack of central control on registration processes and transparent, enforceable rules governing intermediary involvement in admissions (Hoch and Heinz 2024) and, in this study, housing.

(Yang 2018), ambiguity becomes utilised, and, on the flipside, clarity is commodified. I understand the participant experiences as structurally produced patterns existing within a system that allows—or rather incentivizes—networks of people to operate a clientelist surrogate service economy. Ambiguity and information asymmetry function as tools that agents actively use (as seen across the interviews). Every new student arrival is profitable to the economy. This is especially the case for de facto refugees that rely on the limited affordances in temporary legal status that Northern Cyprus has to offer. This group of students continue to pay fees, despite experiencing deception and exploitation. Within this context, accommodation becomes a vital necessity and also a means through which agents, landlords, and the *state* can profit from student's lack of exit options. Whoever can control or gain access to migration facilitating institutions like universities and vital necessities like housing, via intermediary clientelist networks, exclusive agreements, or even marriage, can convert precarity into profit. Furthermore, those who can employ student sub-agents to do the same, can ensure multiple sources of profit and the sustenance of this type of economy. If the sellers themselves are also past buyers of the same dream, what does that say about how deeply precarity circulates?

Financial and Status Precarity, Ouroboros



Figure 4 A billboard advertising multiple services (photo by Aicha Lariani, June 2025).

Drawing from Ilcan et al.'s concept of the 'architecture of precarity' (2018), these profit-turning practices by agents, landlords, and institutions, form a governance system that thrives on ambiguity. Within this system, ambiguity is more than the absence of regulation. It governs a part of the surrogate economy through a deliberate scarcity of information around students' rights and the avenues available to challenge unethical practices. This scarcity structures relations between students and the intermediaries who manage their access to basic needs. Beyond the initial shock many participants endured, their financial precarities exacerbated through everyday living costs in Northern Cyprus. Even after they secure accommodation, uncertainty remains as a long-term condition (Ilcan et al. 2018) that is reinforced by layered financial and status ambiguities. Prominently, participants had no way to adequately plan their future financial commitments. For instance, Maya's house owner gave her and her housemate notice of their rent increase just three days ahead of their contract renewal. Khalid also noted that "no contract in the TRNC would have a percentage of increase for the next renewal, none." Mehdi said his landlord did not give him a

copy of the contract he signed, which prevented him from filing a police report when she “did not return the money for the deposit.”⁶⁷ Nadeem recalled “I swear I’ve been to police stations many times because of housing issues with landlords,” and in his experiences, he felt that students had no recourse and had to just bear these sunk costs. Soha’s experience was similar, she said:

I changed apartments at the end of all my contracts. I moved every six months because I was not comfortable with my housemates. It was hard, and I always lost money. That money paid, they don’t return it to you...this constant housing struggle was a big stress for me and for many people.

Much of the participants’ financial precarity stemmed from these high upfront costs and precarious housing arrangements. However, their abilities to cope, varied depending on their financial preparedness, their transnational networks’ economic standing, and conditions of war in their countries of citizenship. Moreover, the cost of rent paired with rapid inflation of everyday goods and groceries (*see Appendix E*) are further exacerbated by the lack of ‘legal’ work opportunities. The visa that students receive does not permit them to work, not even part-time. They must instead obtain an official student-work permit, through an employer. None of the participants managed to secure one. Based on their accounts it is difficult to receive the permit—a pattern that is consistent with Hoch and Heinz’s study findings (2024, 225). However they observe “[t]hose students with easier access to financial resources, in particular, are generally able to complete their studies without any complications at all” (2024, 226). Indeed, some participants in this study, had enough financial resources to withstand the, mostly, unanticipated sunk costs of accommodation, deposits, and inflation. This stability shielded them from pursuing precarious and illegal employment. Among them were Marwan, Khalid’s wife Sarah, also from Yemen, and

⁶⁷ Participants noted some of these exploitative rental practices were especially concentrated in student areas. Maya said, “there are certain areas where the students are living and it feels like it’s segregated in some way,” Khalid similarly felt that student populations were differentially targeted as student accommodations were always “condensed in certain areas,” which in his observation has caused rent prices to skyrocket in recent years.

another student from Yemen, age 20. However, unlike their findings, the majority within the sample of this study were experiencing financial precarities that necessitated they find ways to earn an income. Silvan for example, fell into further precarity after his mother passed away, as she was his financial sponsor. Her passing led him to realize how “dream sellers” and “fake agents” lure students into living in a space with a completely “lack of support” for “migrants, students, refugees.” He added “there’s a need for organizations, from people from that same background to step up and try to help as much as possible.” Several participants would have definitely benefited from support on the ground, Soha and Nadeem’s families for example were living in an active warzone and no longer had any assets or means to send them money, and what Hasan’s family was able to send was not enough to get him through the month. Eventually the financial precarity started to take a toll for students like them. Nadeem recalls rationing one packet of instant noodles between lunch and dinner. *During the interview he exclaimed*, “guys! How do I catch up? I mean, there are no jobs, or work permits that I could get so I can work, get money and pay all of this.” His situation quickly became extremely precarious. Hoch and Heinz also noted similar circumstances in their work, “the costs of studying and everyday life plunge them (students) into serious financial problems. These individuals end up on the margins of society” (2024, 225).

Participants experiencing these conditions would ‘hustle,’ working precarious jobs just to keep up with day-to-day expenses. Hasan, Zane, Maya, Nadeem, Silvan, Amjad, Kamal, and many more I did not name, all worked several unstable jobs to get by. Even those who received financial support from their families worked, because they felt the money they received was simply not enough, especially as participants needed to convert that currency into euros. Nadeem’s situation is perhaps an extreme case among the participants. He felt a tremendous responsibility towards his family that had lost everything in Sudan, as no one else managed to migrate before the start of the

war. His story foregrounds the importance of international education as an improvised route for shelter, particularly as mobility pathways close for those like him, and the simultaneous legal precarity and limited protections provided by the ‘student’ status. He felt that if he got a full night’s sleep then “the day would be lost, and [his] family won’t eat.” He further said:

I don’t try to think about myself at all. I just try to live so that my family is good. I see myself as a clock, the moment I wake up I calculate everything... I don’t think of myself as a person, only as someone who is working.

He tried to both continue university and work, but he was taking on 16-hour shifts or more on most days, between construction and driving a ‘pirate taxi,’ which is a risky, highly policed, underground transportation service operated primarily by students. This labour was especially precarious when it would cost students time, fines, and risks to their legal status, as authorities can “come and lock you up and make you pay a lot of money” if you are caught.⁶⁸ Financial troubles would exacerbate with expenses (obtaining a drivers’ license, renting a car, rent becoming more expensive, arbitrary fines, and inflation). The overall high cost of living means that the money earned by participants is quickly consumed. Nadeem reflected “what I earned, when I come to measure it in terms of spending, I was exhausting my body for nothing.” Despite how fruitless work may seem in mitigating student precarity, they have to navigate making impossible choices everyday, because as Nadeem said, “you will regret not working and regret not going to university.” This is especially relevant as financial precarity directly influences students’ legal status, “failure or non-payment of fees...international students lose their residence permits and their visas are revoked” (Hoch and Heinz 2024, 225). Financial precarity is then intricately connected to status precarity. Yet legal ambiguities around deportation procedures, as described by many, kept afflicted participants, like Nadeem and Soha in legal limbo. They knew very little about their own rights when it came to

⁶⁸ There were only a few instances where interlocutors requested that I pause my recording; Kamal and another student from Yemen did as they described their work as pirate taxis.

interactions with authorities.⁶⁹ Across the interviews, many felt laws would change day by day and they would only find out through a student-led Instagram news account because the local news was mostly in Turkish. Some participants felt insecure with their student status, especially when deportations have taken place without due process, as several remarked. One student activist and volunteer with the RRA and VOIS said, “now they are deporting people in the absence of a court order, just without any opportunity to challenge the removal.” Nadeem felt similarly, from his own encounters with authorities.

Respect yourself, respect yourself, respect yourself. You’re here in a place where you can suddenly disappear, no one even knows where you are or what happened. There is no surveillance, there are no laws to protect you, no rules, there is nothing... The issue is that Northern Cyprus feels like they are capable of doing anything, and there is no one overseeing or focusing with them to tell them not to do this or that or it would be better like this. You feel like this place is governed by a certain militia or mafia.

Such sentiments shared across the interviews have shown that the precarity and legal vulnerability experienced by de facto refugees are constructed through the North’s contested sovereignty and resulting legal liminality. Especially as those political conditions are what allows such a volume of *discrepant mobilities* (Collins and Ho 2018) to occur in a large and unchecked manner in the first place. The same constraints that brought the majority of participants to Cyprus continue to limit their mobility. This immobility then forces them to navigate the system with its uncertainties, and vulnerability to exploitation. Nadeem sees the students entangled within these pressures as “helpless, they are the weakest link in the whole thing.” Yet, it is their inability to leave precarious circumstances that makes their presence so profitable, in Maya’s words “we bring in the foreign

⁶⁹ Nadeem viewed confusion and ambiguity in Northern Cyprus as a chronic condition, he said “ignorance becomes an acquaintance of one’s life.” Linsey McGoe (2012) conceptualized such conditions as ‘strategic ignorance,’ where the state or institutions benefit from deliberate maintenance of unknown. In this context, it is possible that the lack of translated laws and the opacity of student rights can become mechanisms of governance that keep the foreign student population in a state of manageable dependency.

currency, we rent the houses, we rent the cars, we pay for the groceries, we finance the entire economic system of the island.”

Despite the deception they experience, students are a main pillar in the *state's* surrogate economy. These pressures, sometimes insurmountable, demand a reaction. After only six months in the North, Mehdi was approached by the same agent that recruited him, presenting a work opportunity, to join their agency in recruiting more students from Morocco. He refused their offer, recalling telling him, “I don’t want to deceive people.” Six months later, after having paid 9,000 USD he decided to absorb the sunk-cost and go back to his country of citizenship.⁷⁰ *Months after that, he wrote the Facebook post I saw in the Spring term (Appendix B).* In contrast, the only way through precarity for many of the remaining participants becomes working for the same intermediary networks for higher education institutions and real-estate owners. To illustrate my understanding of this system, I draw on the *ouroboros*, which symbolizes a snake eating its own tail in self-sustaining cycle (birth, death, renewal) (Bekhrad 2017), to visualize the cycle of precarity that appeared as a recurring theme across the interviews. The self-sustaining cycle of student recruitment contributes a third of the North’s GDP and supplements the otherwise isolated local economy (Chabre 2021; Hoch and Heinz 2024; Achiri and Klem 2024). Complicity as conceptualized by Yang (2018) requires that institutions and students be involved in maintaining the reciprocal compromise. In this context, precarity, rather than compromise, is the tool which intermediaries can compel complicity. It is ultimately what helps sustain the profits that institutions are able to make, as is seen in the experience of the participants. In the absence of formal and regulated services in the de facto *state*, the participants are immersed within these substitute

⁷⁰ Mehdi learned Morocco did not recognize his university and therefore could not accept him as a transfer student. He then went to China; his credits were still not recognized but he was given exams to make up for the lack of accreditation and determine his level. He is still continuing his degree there.

intermediary systems on the daily. However, sometimes they have slim options beyond joining them, as Khalid said, “it’s the same students or the same foreign people who were cheated at the start of this European dream, not able to survive, and then they do the same thing that was done to them, you know, find more students that they can bring in here, get some money, keep on going.”

As I met with interlocutors, agents and agencies were topics that naturally surfaced. Yet, some participants treaded lightly around telling me about their involvement in working with the same networks. Having understood the context of extreme precarity in Northern Cyprus I was careful not to make any judgements around students’ choices. I was also careful not push participants to divulge more than they had wanted to, particularly as agents and sub-agents seemed to have a negative social stigma. During the interviews, a few had said they brought a couple of students before, brushing off the details about how many and under what circumstances. Hasan gets paid for creating social media marketing for a recruitment agency and to recruit other students into its labour network. Pirate taxi drivers like Kamal collaborate with agents by driving the new students they recruit from the airport when they first arrive. He also works as a real-estate intermediary and thinks of himself as an honest agent providing students with necessary accommodation in return for commission. Nadeem said, “I used to work in a company in a consultancy here in a nearby area, also recruiting students and such.”⁷¹ *When Nadeem said the students “are the weakest link in the whole thing,”* perhaps he meant to point out the structural position of students within this cyclical system that has become normalized in Northern Cyprus. Perhaps students within the ouroboros are both what keeps it alive and the part it primarily consumes. To be the “weakest link” is to be positioned where the exploitation circles back into

⁷¹ Interestingly, in describing how he would market to prospects, Nadeem would use Arabic wording that was distant, as if he were talking about other people. I tried to word what he said, in the previous section, in a way that reflected that depersonalization.

renewal, where precarity becomes the mechanism that sustains the whole. Within this framing, does the snake know it is eating its own tail? Would it matter if it knew?

The structural conditions that foster complicity and exploitation, simultaneously create counter practices of solidarity and mutual care. Silvan was inspired to “step up and try to help as much as possible” when he noticed the lack of “real support from the authorities and the universities.” He now mediates among marginalized migrants, educational institutions, and civil organizations that promote community building. Marwan, Leena, and Maya, volunteer with local organizations, particularly the student-led initiative Voice of International Students (VOIS). They participated in writing reports and collecting their own data recounting violations of human rights against students in the North, such as documenting labour violations, physical abuse (VOIS 2023), and lack of access to due legal process (VOIS 2022). They also participated in awareness building campaigns to help students navigate housing precarity outlining their rights as per the laws of the ‘TRNC’ in an accessible way on social media. These efforts help mitigate information asymmetry and the monetized “chase after information” that Nadeem noted. At the same time, activists still encounter the same vulnerabilities as everyone else. Maya was brought to the police station and questioned for her “activities.” She no longer feels the same freedom in her advocacy but still engages in the work. Silvan experienced issues renewing his permit and applied for a ‘person of concern’ (PoC) letter, a document that protects against deportation in the TRNC, granted by the RRA (Refugee Rights Association), which is the proxy-organization through which the UNHCR can operate in the North. The RRA cannot grant asylum or protection outside of issuing this letter of acknowledgment (Achiri and Klem 2024).⁷² At the time of our interview, Silvan had not yet

⁷² As the RoC is recognized to have sovereignty over the entire island of Cyprus and is, at the same time, signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it is expected to abide by asylum laws of non-refoulement (UNHCR 2023a). However, the North’s liminality challenges the fulfillment of these laws. Scholarship by Dağtaş and Ilcan (2025), Fischer (2020),

made a decision about onward movement and had no viable alternatives beyond remaining on the island.

During my time in Northern Cyprus, I noticed how students tried to loosen their reliance on the unstable local economy by building and participating in an independent service economy. They use WhatsApp groups to advertise their services and financially support one another by participating in peer-based economies and promoting their friends' small businesses. The businesses I came across were service based, such as home cooked meals, international package deliveries through extended transnational networks, currency exchange, pirate taxis, at-home beauty salons among many others. While some relied on this adjacent student-led economy—such as the Palestinian couple I interviewed—the income was rarely enough to live comfortably day to day, let alone long term. Nadeem's precarity eventually became so extreme that one of his friends, concerned, warned him his situation was not sustainable and suggested that he seek asylum in the RoC.

In the beginning, I'm not gonna lie, it was never my idea to go to the other side. I came to study. Because I don't like to do a lot of illegal things. Or even a few things. But situations have forced me to do many, many wrong things.

Soha's precarious circumstances were born out of the same systemic failures as Nadeem's. She lost her financial resources and became unhoused for some time and unable to afford the cost to renew her study permit. She also applied for a PoC letter with the RRA, see Figure 6.

and Achiri and Klem (2024) elaborates on how dynamics of displacement and international recognition interplay on the ground.

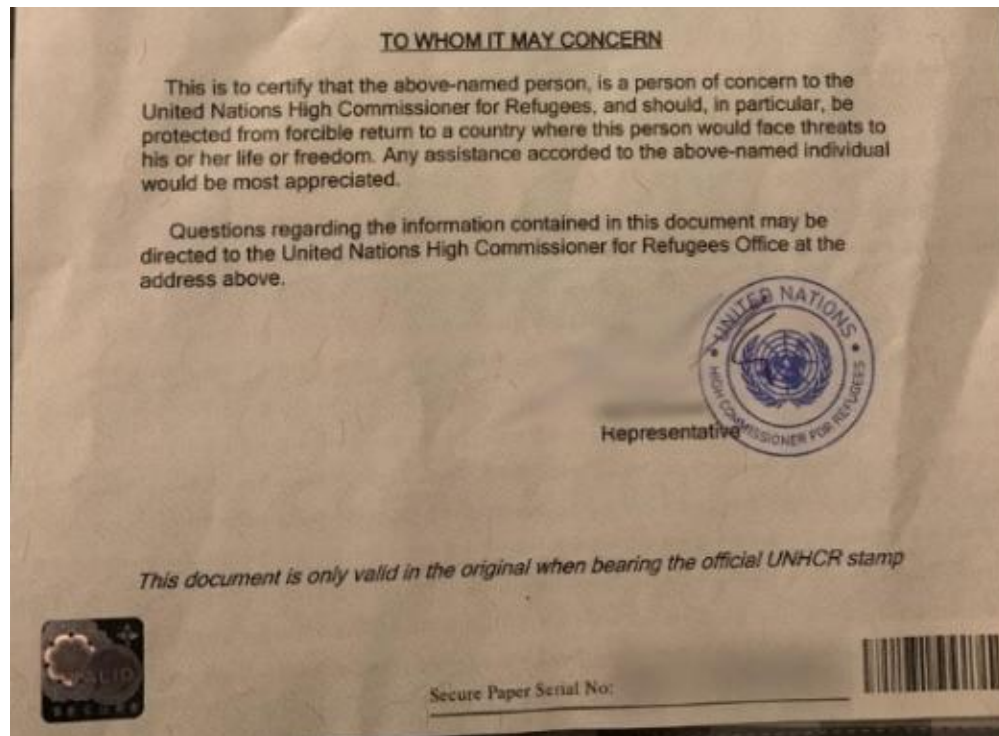


Figure 5. A letter for “person of concern” issued by UNHCR to protect against deportation in the TRNC (photo provided by participant, June 2025)

However, as Achiri and Klem also note, “[b]eing a person of concern is not a category in TRNC regulations; it means being a person that the authorities have informally decided to tolerate on their soil. Until they decide otherwise” (2024, 13). Soha felt the letter was not useful in mitigating her precarity. She too chose to cross to the RoC and claim asylum. Nadeem and Soha’s precarities were not resolved, the Green Line route is risky, and the asylum regimes, structural restrictions and protracted waiting in the RoC produce new, if different, vulnerabilities (Dağtaş and Ilcan 2025). Yet, through collective organizing and advocacy work with intentionality and care, some participants hope to reshape the social and spatial structures that sustain complicity and exploitation. When asked about future plans, every student participant said they would like to find ways to settle elsewhere in the world, as none saw a possibility to build a future where they were. Some mentioned wanting to migrate to Europe, or to one of the Gulf countries, but many had no clear plans and just hoped to reunite with their families in a stable and safe country. In the

meantime, they were buying time, almost literally, by studying in Northern Cyprus. For some, this looks like continuing to stay enrolled as a student for as long as possible. Silvan has been a student for seven years now, and Khalid started off as a master's student and later took a PhD to maintain his status. What the future holds for the other students still studying in Northern Cyprus remains to be seen. Though none have been able to escape their precarity as they waited, many actively worked, using whatever means they could, to exchange one form of precarity for a less devastating one.⁷³

⁷³ In the RoC, Nadeem experienced the brokenness of the asylum system. He continues to cross back and forth by smuggling himself to work on both sides of the island and continue his studies in the North. For more, see Dağtaş et al. (2025).

Conclusion

In her work on de facto sovereignty in Northern Cyprus, Rebecca Bryant (2021) characterized the territory as “a realm in which the so called real and the so-called fake become almost indistinguishable [sic]” (2021, 52). She describes a space where the ‘fake’ and ‘drag’ permeate society, from the performance of statehood down to the markets of pirated goods and international brands. Much like the merchants of these counterfeit goods, or how NFC emulates the draw of KFC and what it tells about the global, connected, and international, the “dream sellers” I wrote about in this thesis sell a refurbished, or *counterfeit* image of a subjective ideal of reality. Older students among agents lure in other students, many of whom come from circumstances of immense vulnerability. For the de facto refugee participants, this draw often resembled ideas of emancipation from precarity and a way out of their blocked futures. The details of the dreams sold varied. Some in this exchange were promised stability and employment, others were sold a “European dream” as Khalid put it. Tales about access to mobility without restriction, financial and legal stability, and a future for their families. While some were undoubtedly duped by these dressed up realities, others like Maya—and I surmise a few more (see Appendix C.3)—bought into this ‘fake’ with a cynical awareness of its limitations, such as the precarious nature of university accreditations and the *state’s* economic instability. This conscious engagement with the proxy calls into question the very possibility of the opposing ‘authentic.’ If the dream for many is Europe, the choice to engage with a proxy is diagnostic of how exclusionary the ‘authentic’ has become. In this thesis I explored how such replacements, have come to redefine the commercialization of displacement, turning higher education into improvised “pathways for humanitarian migration,” in times of crisis (OECD 2022, 125).

Considering the recent forced migration from Sudan, particularly since the conflict in 2023 (UNHCR 2023b), we see an example of these global redirections unfolding before us. This crisis has resulted in a surge of asylum applications in the RoC (UNHCR 2025b; 2025a). However, in the North, the same displacement flow has translated into arrivals of international students. To understand this, I considered how the *ontological death of asylum*, as described by Alison Mountz (2020), is embodied by the participants, as their mobilities expose limitations in migration policies used by organizations like the UNHCR and supranational bodies like the EU. This *death of asylum* has therefore turned higher education institutions in Northern Cyprus into infrastructures of mobility that similarly regulate who can move, remain, and belong. In my conversations with participants, I tried to understand the unique vulnerabilities they faced situated within the context of their (im)mobilities and the liminal position of Cyprus. I used the concept of precarity to communicate the recursive relationality between the participants' need to migrate and the later inability to exit that plummets them into further precarity. This sometimes compels them to recruit new students to survive. By examining emergent themes from their accounts, I noticed a convergence wherein the TRNC's political isolation and its economic dependence on the continued arrival of foreign currency have become one with regional displacement and shifting mobility flows. Universities, landlords, and local business rely heavily on the financial influx foreign students bring. Participants like Nadeem, Soha, and Zane were drawn into compounding financial precarities but had little choice beyond feeding a local economy that thrives on their precarious circumstances. When taking a step back and engaging with scholarship on discrepant mobilities, as conceptualized by Collins and Ho (2018), for instance, and non-elite South to South education mobilities, it becomes clear how higher education in Northern Cyprus reflects larger global patterns of academic capitalism, wherein institutions capitalize on students' aspirations, hopes, and

uncertainty. In the island's political isolation and economic dependence on international students, higher education cannot be sufficiently understood as just an academic pursuit, or a rationalized exchange of prestige. In this study I understand that it can also be a space where regional displacement can take on one of its most profitable forms.

In closing, I am writing this thesis at a time where international human rights have become overtly subject to politicians' whims and ideologies. The "rules-based order is fading" (CBC News 2026), particularly as recent administrations in the West have overturned long-standing protective laws and procedures almost overnight (AIC 2025). Today, access to asylum is shrinking and political campaigns centred around closed borders and nationalism are growing increasingly deafening (openDemocracy 2021; 2019; The Guardian 2024). Yet, as Didier Fassin (2011) and Nicholas De Genova (2002) among other scholars continue to contend, curtailing movement through increased governmentality and criminalization of mobility cannot stop human migration. Rather they tend to redirect its flows along further precarious pathways, and replacement statuses devoid of protection such as the international student status. Within those pathways are real interpersonal human encounters with continuous uncertainty and vulnerability under the gaze of the international community.

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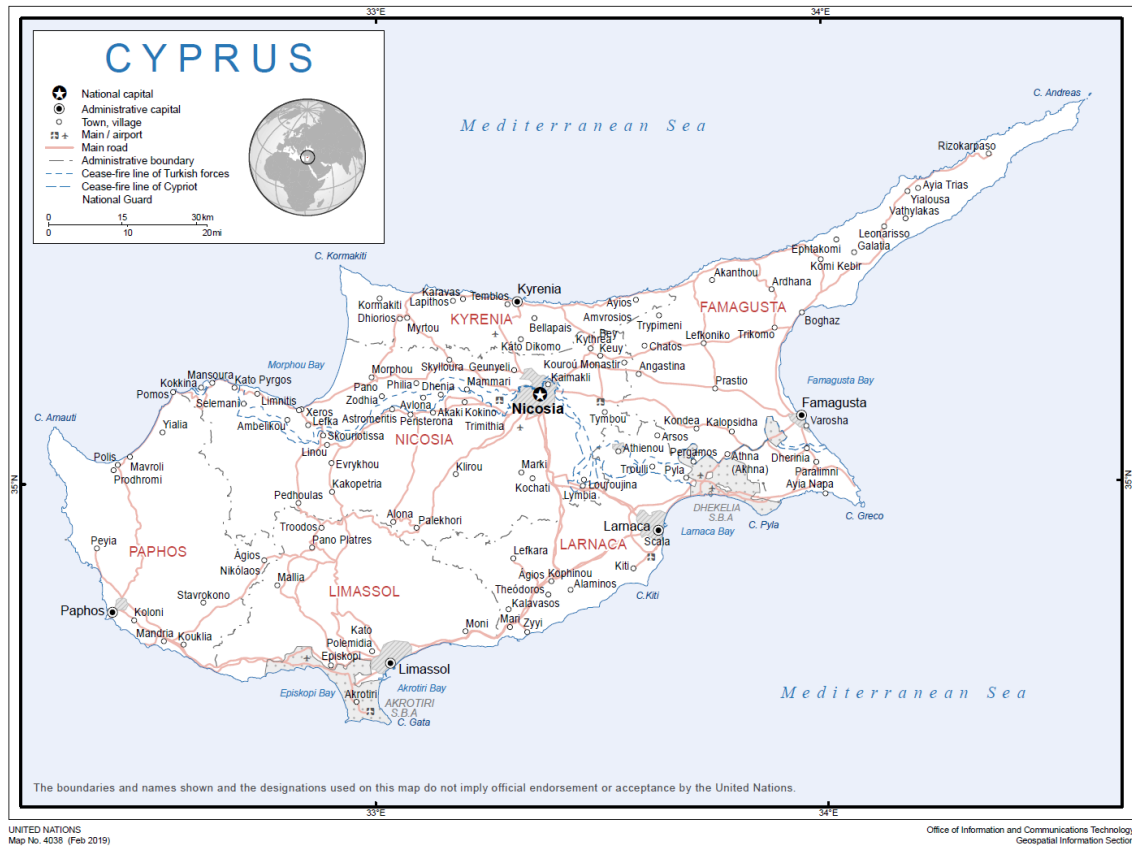
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Appendices

A | Additional Visual Context



Map of Cyprus showing the United Nations 'cease-fire' lines (Green Line) separating the north and south. (United Nations Geospatial Information Section 2020).



Photos of Northern Friend Chicken taken in Lefkoşa.

B | Mehdi's Online Facebook Post

Below is a translated Facebook post I came across on one of the Arab migrant groups for people in Northern Cyprus:

“My message to the agents that recruit students to the Northern Cyprus. Fear god. They tell them it is a European country, they tell them its currency is Euro, that employment during studies is available, knowing that it is all lies, for one reason only, which is to make money from the university. God will not bless this money because you lied to people. It is a very bad country, living expenses are high, rent is high, there are no jobs at all. You can't even enjoy tourism because the infrastructure is terrible. These are things the agent needs to let the student know before they come, the agent needs to be transparent, but most are scammers.”

C | Participants and Methodological Notes

1. This study is part of a SSHRC project led by PI Suzan Ilcan, and Co-I Seçil Dağtaş, titled *Border Frictions: Shaping Transnational Relations via Migrant Journeys, Resettlement and Community Building in the Context of Syrian Displacement*. I updated this study's contribution to their existing protocol and received ethics approval on 20 February 2025.
2. During my fieldwork I had met up with many international students. However, I also met with three participants that came to Northern Cyprus through other pathways. I met a mother of two. She is from Syria and arrived as a dependent to her husband who is an international student as well. She runs an at-home beauty salon. I also met a Palestinian couple in their 50s. They advertised home-cooked meals in student groups. After connecting, I invited them for a formal interview. Though outside the scope of this study, their story taught me of an alternative pathway to migration, through descendant citizenship and how even this status offers little

protection against precarity especially for newcomers. The couple and their children faced severe housing insecurity on their arrival and a period of homelessness (similar to some student participants). A community from the mosque later connected the family with a homeowner who offered his farmhouse for only \$100/month in exchange for caretaking duties while he was abroad.

3. Do education intermediaries always have the upper hand in their exchanges with potential students? I found this question to be one of the most challenging to discuss with participants. Some students were more hesitant or seemed nervous to discuss how they first came across the idea of studying in Cyprus, or Northern Cyprus. Was the story of *not knowing about Cyprus' division* the most appropriate or safe narrative to tell me during the interview (Wolfson 1976)? Did my position as an academic outsider with ties to formal institutions make my participants feel that I might judge the validity of dreams for their futures? Were they worried that I might perceive their arrival to the North as a stepping stone to the South? If they sensed such a judgment, did they view me as a potential risk, or someone who might reduce their experiences to that moment? Rather than taking these silences and hesitations in the participants' narratives as gaps in the information they shared, I see them as acts of agency and refusal that allow them to maintain their personal safety and agency over their stories and futures.

D | Marketing Materials Online



Posts of agencies marketing discounts online.

These promotional materials exemplify some of the posts widely available online. The picture on the far left shows general scholarships that range from 25% to 100%. The next shows discounts that go up to 50% for Arabs. Second to the right shows discounts up to 75% for Sudanese students, while the one on the right was a carousel with ambiguous descriptions of special deals for Syrian students. All of these posts say ‘northern’ Cyprus, as opposed to TRNC or Turkish Cyprus, which happens to obscure information about the island’s division.

During the Spring, I too tried communicating with agents, posing as an interested student. I spoke with two different ‘certified agents’ on WhatsApp and was very quickly given instructions about the required documents. Those were: copy of passport and high school diploma. When I asked for the available courses and which universities were best both responded vaguely. They would say that all specialties were readily available and that the university acceptance was guaranteed. One of the agents told me I should also book a round plane ticket. This was very confusing to me, and I found that most students had to buy a round-trip ticket though they were migrating to study for at least a few years in Cyprus. The agent told me that I would not be let into the *state* without a return ticket. When I finally asked about possibilities for employment, they both assured me there were legal job prospects.

E | Participant Accounts on Economic Instability and Inflation

The conversations I've had often centred around money, and how expensive it was to live in a de facto state. I share a few of the participants reflections on inflation below:

Amjad said, the “prices are not fixed, I might buy coffee today for 100 lia, I might come tomorrow and find the same coffee is 150 TL. The inflation is very exaggerated.” Khalid said \$300, \$400 “cannot get you through the month, half of the month.” Asma, a mother of two from Syria, said “I used to go in and buy the item for five TL and four TL, now the item is 70 TL and 60 TL. Look at the difference,” and “before we used to buy a kilo of meat for 100 TL, now we buy it for 1,200. The increase is not proportional to the currency change.” Alisha said, in reference to rapid inflation, “I'm like, what happened yesterday? It was like this, why today like this? Oh my God. And they (prices) don't go down. They actually keep going up.” Ayusha survives on about \$200 USD monthly from her family, using it for all her bills (internet, water, electricity) and food, often finishing the money before the month is over. She manages high costs by strategizing, buying groceries in bulk, and purchasing items from different stores to save money, such as going to a specific store just for chickens and eggs, and getting other items elsewhere. I certainly spent as much money as I would spend in Canada when paying for coffee, Airbnb, local taxis, and hotels.