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Bordered Trajectories: The Impact of Institutional Bordering Practices on Young Refugees' (Re-)Engagement with Post-15 Education in Greece

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Abstract: Greece has been a site of various crises in recent years: firstly, the financial crash of 2008; secondly, the ongoing 'refugee crisis', which peaked in 2015; and thirdly, the current COVID-19 pandemic. This paper addresses the first of these crises, and particularly how state responses to increased migration flows shape young refugees' (aged 15–25) (re-)engagement with post-15 learning opportunities upon arrival in the country. It is based on semi-structured interviews with young refugees living in Thessaloniki, conducted as part of an ethnographic doctoral project on educational decision-making. The findings reveal that three key institutional bordering practices in Greece—namely the bordering of space (via encampment), time (via enforced waiting), and public services (via administrative barriers)—played central roles in young refugees' (re-)engagement with post-15 education; often causing their dreams to be diverted or downgraded. However, with determination and the support of willing gatekeepers, refugee youth found ways to (re)construct adapted learning trajectories despite, and in response to, these arrival challenges.



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1. Introduction

Sayed is a young man from Iran in his early 20s. His is a recognisable face in the various language, arts, and sports courses run by solidarity initiatives around Thessaloniki, which were established in response to the financial and refugee crises in Greece. He is an energetic character who does everything at full speed and with maximum effort: whether it is hammering out old songs on malfunctioning keyboards or excitedly explaining the Farsi roots of English words. During his time in Greece he has tried to get involved in as many learning activities around the city as possible, as both a student and volunteer, to gain friends and work experience. However, especially in the beginning, he said that it had not been easy to find and access these opportunities. He complained that a number of forces worked against him and other refugees¹ in Greece, trying to keep them 'out of society', saying, 'It's as if that they are controlling, to not let them get in society or improve themselves—or there are no chance to do that'. This control could involve asking for particular documents to enrol in schools, which many refugees simply cannot provide, or, as Sayed explained, keeping refugees in isolated spaces and uncertain legal states.

The aim of this article is to explore the impacts of these state responses to newcomers and particularly to show how they impact young refugees' (re-)engagement with post-15 education after arrival in the country. These practices are conceptualised as examples of *institutional bordering*; drawing from the geographical literature which understands that borders are not just static physical entities at the state periphery, but also active processes of exclusion taking place in everyday life and spaces *inside* the state (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2018). The article follows Strasser and Tibet's (2020) proposition that the border crisis at the margins of Europe has resulted in intensified political and legal controls that trickle down into the everyday lives of young migrants. It attempts to expand upon the 'daily, soft, lived, and unspoken realities' of these controls, which the discourse of

overlapping crises often renders invisible (Carastathis et al. 2018, p. 29), with a particular focus on how education is implicated. Furthermore, it explores how youth respond to and navigate these controls, with the support of willing ‘gatekeepers’. In doing so, it aims to add to the limited literature on young refugees’ expressions of agency, particularly as they encounter hosts, school systems, and other forms of education (Guo et al. 2019; Pace 2017).

In terms of structure, the article first sketches out the socio-political landscape of ‘Crisis Greece’ today, young refugees’ educational opportunities within it, and their known challenges and supports. It then lays out the theoretical framework underpinning the discussion and the methodology of the wider study. The article then presents and discusses findings from the study which demonstrate how youth are forced to navigate multiple forms of institutional bordering that impact their post-15 educational trajectories, and the role of non-formal education² (NFE), ‘gatekeepers’, and other everyday social actors in this process. It concludes with implications for research, policy, and practice.

1.1. Refugee Youth in Greece: A Context of Intersecting Crises

To understand young refugees’ challenges and their educational impact, it is first necessary to sketch out the nature of the ‘critical times’ Greece is experiencing (Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2018), as well as refugees’ place within them. As a key entry point into the continent, Greece took a central role in what has come to be known as the ‘European refugee crisis’ (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017); referring to the heightened numbers of arrivals seeking refuge in Europe in recent years. Since 2015, more than one million people have entered the country, with the majority seeking asylum (Clayton and Holland 2015). In the early days of the ‘crisis’, most passed through and continued their journeys to Northern and Western Europe; however, due to the closure of borders and other ‘migration management’ strategies, 177,463 people are now currently trapped (Afouxenidis et al. 2017; Crawley et al. 2016; Stathopoulou 2019; UNHCR 2021). As of May 2020, an estimated 45,300 of this number were under the age of 18 (UNICEF 2020). While the majority of minors have been arriving with their families and are gender-balanced, around 12% are unaccompanied; being mostly 15 to 17-year-old boys (UNHCR 2020; UNICEF 2019).

The majority of the refugee population is on the mainland, in a somewhat better situation than those left behind in the notorious conditions of the island ‘hotspots’, but many are still in overcrowded camp conditions which the Ministry of Education has previously admitted are ‘horrendous’ (MoERR 2017, p. 14). Camps and Reception and Identification Centres (RICs)—such as those outside Thessaloniki—are often in remote locations, with little infrastructure and insufficient resources (Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis 2020). As of May 2020, 28% of all registered refugee children (under 18) were accommodated in such camps; 24% in RICs; 31% in hotels and apartments for families; and the remainder in shelters, hotels or ‘safe zones’ for unaccompanied youth, or ‘informal arrangements’ (UNICEF 2020).

One of the fundamental issues is that newcomers have entered a country still struggling with the aftershocks of the ‘financial crisis’ of 2008. This has caused high levels of unemployment and severe cuts to public sector funding, meaning that it was a country already experiencing economic instability, social tensions, and an increasingly prominent far-right voice (Christodoulou et al. 2016). While it has been suggested that Greece is ‘accustomed to refugee crises throughout its history’, which have traditionally been met with ‘a stance of hospitality towards the stranger’ (Lazaratou et al. 2017, p. 800), the recent heightened numbers, diminished welfare provision, and enduring nature of both ‘crises’ have led to personal and community insecurity, which has lessened ‘the chance of integration’ (Vergou 2019, p. 3165). Therefore, despite etymologically denoting critical, decisive moments, the current ‘crises’ have instead led to an enduring state of risk and uncertainty (Kowalczyk 2018)—what Veizis (2020, p. 264) calls a situation of ‘chronic emergency’. Before the COVID-19 pandemic added a further crisis, this meant that material, political, and social conditions were already deteriorating, impacting the inclusion of young refugees in Greek schools (Lazaratou et al. 2017).

1.2. Young Refugees' Education in Crisis Greece: Opportunities and Challenges

In theory, young refugees beyond the Greek compulsory schooling age of 6–15 have various educational opportunities. A 'reception class' system (DYEP³), for example, was established by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs to gradually introduce newcomers into public school settings (Leivaditi et al. 2020). These reception classes, offered from the primary (δημοτικό σχολείο) to senior high school (λύκειο) levels, cover a 'core curriculum' of language, mathematics, information technology, arts, and sports and are taught by specially appointed substitute teachers. Youth can also opt for vocational high schools and can register at any point during the academic year (Leivaditi et al. 2020; Palaiologou et al. 2019). This process is aided by Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs), i.e., seconded teachers from the public system who have been tasked with liaising between refugee families, schools, camp management, social workers, and other actors to support enrolment (OECD 2018). Alternatively, those over 18 can join a Second Chance school for two years, taught in Greek, to obtain the equivalent of a junior high school (γυμνάσιο) certificate (Leivaditi et al. 2020).

Aside from these state-organised opportunities, young refugees can also attend various free NFE offers in camps and urban settings run by intergovernmental organisations such as UNICEF and by civil society, ranging from 'catch-up' courses and homework clubs (supporting formal schooling) to language, employability, arts, and parenting skills training (INEE 2020; OECD 2018). The recent HELIOS project from the International Organization for Migration also ties housing to six months of adult education, covering language, culture, and employability and life skills (IOM 2019). In large metropolitan areas such as Thessaloniki—where the research described below took place—the higher number of refugees, greater presence of international humanitarian actors and solidarity initiatives, and nature of local policy responses have meant that a wide range of such educational opportunities are available (Dicker 2017; IOM 2021; Sabchev 2021a).

However, in practice, participation in these opportunities remains low. Only half of the 15- to 17-year-old age group in managed accommodation⁴ across the country were enrolled in public schools by 2019, and of this number, half were said to eventually stop attending (Tzoraki 2019; UNICEF and REACH 2017; ESWG 2019). Engagement in higher education is also said to be very low (Leivaditi et al. 2020). Even in NFE, which many youth have said they prefer, participation has also been inconsistent (UNICEF and REACH 2017). Various reports have attributed these figures to challenges such as delays with implementing secondary-level reception classes; a lack of support with complicated enrolment procedures; a lack of capacity, coordination, and sustainability; fragmented responses; and insufficient teacher recruitment, skills, training, and working hours (Leivaditi et al. 2020; MoERR 2018; Papapostolou et al. 2020; Tzoraki 2019; Vergou 2019). There have also been reports of local parents' loud objections to young refugees' enrolment, particularly in primary schools, due to unfounded fears of insecurity and health issues—mostly associated with their residence in camps (Nagy 2018; Vergou 2019). This has led to fear and mistrust among refugees and their families, which reduces the likelihood of participation (OECD 2020).

While there is therefore some understanding of how macro-level, structural issues prevent educational access, only rarely are the impacts of state responses *beyond* the education system discussed. Few studies have drawn a line between practices such as encampment (Vergou 2019; Vergou et al. 2021) and legal uncertainty and young refugees' education, especially at the post-compulsory (15+) level. Even less research has explored the 'non-typical' educational routes refugee youth may choose to take instead, such as in non-formal settings (Palaiologou et al. 2019), from the perspective of youth themselves. Moreover, young people's situated experiences of state practices—in specific cities and regions, with their highly varying local-level responses and socio-spatial characteristics (Sabchev 2021a, 2021b)—could also be further explored.

This article aims to contribute towards filling this gap by adding to the literature on how refugee youth experience and navigate state-level bordering practices in the everyday. It aims to answer the questions:

- How does the institutional treatment of young refugees upon arrival in Greece impact their (re-)engagement with post-15 education?
- How do youth navigate (the impacts of) these practices, and what supports them in this process?

In doing so, it is hoped that the paper will enable a better understanding of young refugees' decisions to stop attending learning settings, to not enrol in the first place, or to opt for non-formal offers; as well as identifying resources and relationships that can be leveraged to support them to continue.

It is based on the belief that participating in education after the age of 15 in Greece can offer youth the benefits of more employment opportunities, better health outcomes (for both them and their children), and ownership of a 'safe space' in which they can rebuild their aspirations and grow emotionally and socially; all of which contribute to more positive well-being (Ben Asher et al. 2020; Iraklis 2021; Leivaditi et al. 2020; Rezaian et al. 2019). Beyond this, for the wider community, it can play an important role in creating the conditions in which diversity in social life is accepted (Pastoor 2017).

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Bordering

This paper is based on an understanding of *bordering* as an active process of social, cultural, political, and economic exclusion, rather than only the delineation of physical or drawn territorial boundaries (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). While bordering can be performed symbolically by everyday social actors—for example, when teachers establish an 'us' and 'them' that excludes newcomers from the 'national community' (Paasi 2013)—this paper focuses primarily on the Greek state's macro-level practices towards new arrivals. Following Dimitriadi and Sarantaki (2019), the paper refers to *institutional bordering* to conceptualise this process. However, while Dimitriadi and Sarantaki's definition of institutionalised bordering ranges from the actions of border guards at the periphery to exclusion in the housing sector, this paper focuses solely on how bordering processes operate *within* the state after newcomers have entered the country. As such, it aims to explore how, institutionally, even after young refugees have crossed the physical border, they continue to be kept 'outside' of society—behind camp walls and legal and administrative borders. As Dimitriadi and Sarantaki (2019, p. 21) put it, 'If borders determine one's mobility, while in the country inclusion and exclusion are managed through administrative processes, legislation, access to employment, health care and living conditions to name a few'.

Regarding administrative processes, there is a growing literature on how everyday bordering operates via public institutions, most of which builds on the seminal work of Yuval-Davis et al. (e.g., 2018). This literature focuses on how everyday social actors such as university and school administrators come to function as local-level border guards—through devolved border controls—in a direct relationship between education and state border governance (Jenkins 2014; Lounasmaa 2020). Rodriguez et al. (2020) refer to schools themselves as a 'borderland': a space in which the humanity of the 'other' may be denied but also in which, drawing on Anzaldúa (1987), processes of domination can be challenged and transgressed. In this space, they argue, school staff have the potential to escort migrant youth across everyday borders. This paper explores how these dynamics of institutional bordering and support operate in Greece, and how refugee youth have navigated them to (re-)engage with post-15 education. In doing so, it responds to calls for more research analysing the subjectivities of those 'on' or 'outside' such borders; and how young refugees in particular experience border regimes both inside and outside of schools, and the impact this has on their learning trajectories (Lafazani 2021; Oliver and Hughes 2018; Strasser and Tibet 2020).

2. Methods

2.1. The Project

This article draws on data from a qualitative doctoral project on young refugees' post-15 educational decision-making in Greece. Ethnographic methods were used to obtain a deeper understanding of young people's relationships with their social context while

avoiding recreating the experience of asylum interviews (Rodgers 2004; Tudge and Hogan 2005). Data were generated via individual and paired semi-structured interviews with refugee and asylum-seeking youth and educational stakeholders in the city of Thessaloniki. In order to triangulate findings, enable ‘thick description’ of the situation, and improve the validity and reliability of the study (Long and Johnson 2000), participant observation was also carried out during the eight months of fieldwork. Having a teaching background, the author volunteered as both a teacher and educational assistant at three NFE sites several times per week, as well as observing one further programme. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

The participants in the interviews were a ‘core group’ of 12 refugee and asylum-seeking youth, aged 15–25, and 38 educational stakeholders with first-hand knowledge of their experiences. This latter group included refugee parents, teachers, educational assistants, RECs, education programme coordinators, social workers, ‘caretakers’, and cultural mediators from both the public and non-state sectors. All were delivering, coordinating, or otherwise supporting educational programmes (for example, by arranging access). All were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. This meant that initial participants were identified and selected as those with knowledge related to the phenomenon of interest and were then asked for recommendations for further participants—thus facilitating access to the population with target characteristics (Parker et al. 2019; Patton 2002). As this paper focuses on the young participants’ perspectives and specifically their retellings of their learning trajectories from just before and following their arrival in Greece, the remainder of this section details only the youth’s backgrounds and the methods carried out with this group.

2.2. *The Young Participants*

The criteria for inclusion of the young participants was that they fell within the 15–25 age range, had arrived in Greece during or since the peak of the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, and were attending at least one educational activity per week. The 15–25 age parameter was intended to align with that of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other educational initiatives in Greece offering non-formal activities which target youth. However, it should be noted that ‘youth’ can refer to as broad an age range as 15–35 in Greek policies and literature (Perovic 2017). The arrival requirement meant that the study could investigate experiences of laws and policies implemented as a response to the refugee crisis, as well as the impact of the ‘crisis’ discourse among the public and media. The attendance requirement was set as the study sought to better understand young refugees’ experiences of and supports for participating in educational activities.

The 12 young participants who agreed to take part in the interviews identified as Kurdish (4), Iranian (3), Iraqi (2), Syrian (2), and Congolese (Kinshasa) (1). The majority were young men (9 young men, 3 young women), reflecting the fact that the majority of learners attending lessons in the observation sites were indeed young men. All of the young participants had either applied for or received refugee status. They were either living in apartments in Thessaloniki (provided via an accommodation scheme) or in camps one to two hours outside of the city by bus. The majority (9) had travelled with at least one family member or had joined family in Greece, while the remainder (3) were alone. To protect their identities, pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

2.3. *Data Generation and Analysis*

While in Greece, two in-person pair interviews were conducted with youth aged 15–18. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and associated restrictions, the remainder of the data generation took place online and involved individual interviews with the remaining eight young participants (all aged over 18). These were carried out using platforms such as Viber, Skype, and WhatsApp, depending on participants’ access and preference. The same semi-structured schedule was used for both the in-person and online interviews to minimise the

effects of the change in approach on the results. The 12 youth participated in one individual or pair interview each. Despite being reminded that the interviews could be carried out in a language of their choice, with an interpreter of their choosing present, all decided to proceed in English. However, pictorial information sheets and consent forms were provided in various languages. The interview schedule was centred around educational aspirations, preferences, challenges, and supports and included prompts such as, 'Does anything make it difficult to go to classes?' and 'What do you enjoy about going to classes?' The interviews ranged in length from 25 min to over one hour, with an average time of 40 min. In total, just under eight hours of audio were recorded with the young participants.

The data from the wider study were analysed according to the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). In line with these principles, interview transcripts and field notes were immediately entered into NVivo and coded by the author using an open coding technique (based on participants' own words). Following this, a process of axial coding explored the relationship between the initial codes to create categories which were then organised into themes. New codes were compared with the existing ones, to refine the characteristics of each category, in a process of 'constant comparison'. Data were generated and analysed iteratively until theoretical saturation was reached. This paper focuses on the key institutional factors shaping the young participants' (re-)engagement with education upon arrival in Greece, as identified in their responses. Due to the nature of the study design, these findings are not generalisable to other contexts or populations but offer themes for further investigation. These themes, which are detailed below, are *spatial bordering*, *temporal bordering*, *administrative bordering*, *bordered aspirations*, and *navigating borders*.

3. Results

For youth in the study, the treatment they received upon arrival in Greece had a substantially disruptive and diverting effect on their (re-)engagement with post-15 education. The key factors shaping this process are conceptualised here as the institutional bordering of space, time and public services, with a mediating role played by 'gatekeepers' and other everyday social actors. These bordering practices and actors, and their impacts on young refugees' aspirations and consequent learning practices are detailed below.

3.1. Spatial Bordering: Encampment and Accommodation Instability

The lack of legal routes for asylum seekers to safe countries in Europe meant that youth in the study had had to leave their home countries via irregular means, arriving in Greece either via the land border with Turkey in the north-eastern region of Evros, or via the stretch of sea from the Turkish coast to the Aegean islands. After doing so, they faced the Greek state's practice of encampment of newcomers, which, in some of their cases, had lasted for several years. Depending on when and via which border they had arrived, the youth were held in camps on the Aegean islands (and later transferred to the mainland); in isolated locations in the north west; near the Idomeni crossing to North Macedonia in the north; or in one of the camps outside Thessaloniki. Some of these sites have since either been closed down due to safety concerns (Owens 2017), or, in the case of Moria camp on the island of Lesbos, burnt down (BBC News 2020). Those around Thessaloniki have been described as not meeting international standards and being 'located at significant distances from urban centres, within industrial zones where residential use is not permitted' (Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis 2020, p. 163). For youth in the study, being placed in such camps—and the social and material conditions of the specific sites—played a large part in shaping their (re-)engagement with education after arrival.

Firstly, the camps were described as overcrowded, noisy, and tense spaces. This is how Jilwan, a 25-year-old from Kurdistan, recalled the conditions in a camp he had been in on arrival, in which he lived in a tent with the other eight members of his family. He grimaced and said that 'Life in camps terrible. Many times have fighting . . . Maybe because it's more louder'. Youth said that they could also be moved at short notice, causing them to

experience greater instability and uncertainty and adding to this tension. Before being moved to camps and apartments in Thessaloniki, Jilwan said that he and his family had already spent a year in a camp in Alexandria; Reza, a 16-year-old from Iran, had been in an isolated camp near an unwelcoming village; and Karvan, a 19-year-old from Iran, had spent time on Samos and near Idomeni. Most had stayed in more than one city or village in their short time in the country, meaning that they did not know whether they should try to enrol in local schools or NFE programmes or to bide their time until being given more stable accommodation or, indeed, being resettled in another country. This uncertainty left them unwilling to invest time and energy into starting programmes if they were to be moved after only a few short weeks or months.

The poor social and material conditions meant that even when learning opportunities were available in and around the camps, many of the young people's minds were elsewhere. Karvan expressed how he had found it difficult to engage in learning in his early days in the camp, saying, 'The only thing you're thinking is just to leave from that island... just to go. So I don't think you can focus on the Greek, or learning'. Hamid, from Kurdistan, agreed, noting that his family's move into an apartment in Thessaloniki was a definitive turning point in his trajectory. He groaned and said, 'You know, camp—it sucks. A lot of people, and all are refugees . . . I didn't do nothing, first six months. But then they give us a home—*spiti* [home], ha—and then I start . . . school, a lot of organisation . . . I forget some!'

The other aspect of life in the camp is that in a situation in which newcomers have little access to information (in a language they understand), they follow the lead of others around them, with both positive and negative consequences for their education. Hasan, a 25-year-old from Kurdistan, said of his co-residents in his first camp:

Generally, they follow each other . . . Because the community, someone is from 2017 is here. He said, 'no, is Greece very bad, and Greece very not good educated', and he don't know it's truth—he have to follow this. So he said again this words, and this word will spread: 'not good education, not good', like that. 'No have classes, no one helping you', that stuff. And then—he will listen like that. He know it like that. But after that he said, 'oh my god'—like from my side, I'm saying, 'oh my god' . . . I spend some time is for the sleeping! I am very regretful this time.

Beyond the fact that his co-residents were dissuading him from learning, he recalled how 'Everyone say, "oh, Greece is very hard life, you cannot stay there"—and who is trying to find good money kind of left'. He had listened, in the beginning, and decided not to spend his energy seeking out unbeneficial learning opportunities, especially if he was going to leave the country. Marwa, a 25-year-old from Syria, admitted to being one of those people in the camp who had influenced others, saying that she had told people not to bother learning Greek and to focus on English instead. However, she regretted this deeply, after realising that many people would not be able to leave:

I used to work with women protection. But usually I was like, 'no no, learn English, English is more international'. And now I am like, oh my god, you are staying in Greece, how did I say this? Ha. They need their country language! Why did I said them English and not learn Greek!

On the other hand, others in the camp could also be an important source of information on the learning opportunities available, particularly in the non-formal sector. Hasan slowly made friends with other young people who had arrived previously and who then encouraged him to join the youth programmes being offered: 'They told me that a organisation [did] theatre, music, arts . . . and we try to meet with someone there, and we doing that project'.

However, on the whole, the young participants reported that opportunities—especially for language education—were severely lacking in and around the camps. Hasan described his disappointment at the limited offering from NGOs, who struggle to sustain long-term funding and volunteers. As he put it, 'They have education, like small . . . Greek language,

and English, but there is not enough—because three times per week and half hour’. As a result, he felt that ‘School—you know, inside the camp—it’s very, very not good enough for the learning languages’. One of the issues was the young people’s age on arrival and the lack of offers for adults. As Jilwan explained, there were language classes ‘only for people under 18, and for over . . . it was only one time on week—for Greek one hours, and for English one hours’.

3.2. Temporal Bordering: Legal Limbo and Uncertain Futures

Another aspect of life in Greece was that it became, unexpectedly, just that: a life in Greece. Many of the youth said that they and their families had initially aimed to travel on to Northern and Western Europe, either to reunite with relatives or due to a belief that they would have more (and higher-quality) work and educational opportunities. However, due to the time taken to process their asylum claims, they had become caught behind legal (and consequently, physical) borders. As Hasan recounted:

When we are come in Greece . . . we don’t, like, to make a plan for living here forever. Everyone’s said okay, maybe the European Union, they will decide to take it immigration from Greece, to other European country . . . Then, day by day, our time is free time . . . Now it’s two year passed and I’m still in Greece!

Three key, international ‘migration management’ strategies have led to refugees becoming stranded in legal limbo in Greece: the EU’s approval of the Dublin III Regulation in 2013; the closure of the ‘Balkan route’ in 2015; and the turning point of the implementation of the so-called ‘EU-Turkey deal’ shortly afterwards. Firstly, the Dublin Regulation (EU law No 604/2013) determines that the first Member State that third-country nationals or stateless persons enter in Europe is responsible for processing their application for international protection. This means that refugees must remain in the country until their application has been either approved or denied (unless they decide to leave via irregular means), and in the case of Greece, this may take years, due to a lack of capacity to deal with the overwhelming number of applications it receives (Póczik and Sárík 2018). Secondly, Northern Macedonia and other states to the north closed their borders from November 2015 (Deardorff Miller 2017), sealing off the ‘Balkan route’ and putting an end to Greece’s facilitated transit strategy. This left refugees with few legal routes out of the country (Tramountanis 2021). Thirdly, in 2016, the European Commission made a controversial agreement with Turkey to stem the flow of irregular migration to the European Union. The deal essentially contained migrants on the Aegean Islands and drastically reduced movements (Baster and Merminod 2019). Now, in order to remain in Greece, many refugees have applied for asylum in the country, but due to the additional pressure on an already flawed system—due, for the large part, to the economic crisis of 2008—the process is taking several years to complete (Tramountanis 2021). In addition, gaining refugee status (and its associated protections) is not guaranteed; particularly for youth in the study such as Serkar, who travelled from Kurdistan.

Like Hasan, Serkar had also struggled with how to progress with his education while distracted with being in legal limbo; a state that continued to the time of the study. When he had asked for information from NGO-provided legal services, he was constantly told ‘next month, maybe next week’. He said that due to this, he was still waiting before considering his formal education path in Greece, because ‘if I can’t do it my interview, I can’t do anything . . . we need ID’.

This legal uncertainty—and, consequently, protracted displacement and enforced waiting—had had various impacts on the young people’s visions of their futures. They had come to Europe with a range of aspirations, whether educational or employment-focused, in Greece or abroad. However, with ongoing uncertainty surrounding their legal status, some youth realised that they might be in Greece for some time, facing a number of difficulties. Especially when they were towards the upper end of the age bracket, they felt they needed to build their language skills—in Greek, English, or both—to help them navigate their new environment, by finding work, information, and a social network. This

was evident in Marwa's self-described stress at not being able to communicate with staff and volunteers in the camp, which became her initial motivation to learn English:

it was not easy in the beginning. I mean, when I arrived I didn't spoke any English, I was kind of stress, not being able to communicate with no one. And if someone is going to tell me anything, I'm kind of person, I'm very anxious about things—I keep in my mind what they told me, and if the interpreter has told me in correct manner . . . This was the first step that I decided I need to learn the language.

Hasan, too, said, 'Just being, okay, we are still here, we can learn it English'—but more because 'It would be more benefit, if I left this country', rather than for the present.

However, he and most of the others also aimed to continue their disrupted formal educational pathways alongside, or following, these linguistic efforts. When asked why it had been important for them to continue learning, the young people's responses signalled a deep valuing of education for creating or stabilising their futures. Hamid, for example, and Hala, a 15-year-old from Syria, described educational activities—whether formal, non-formal, or informal—as a way to 'make my life' and 'do my future', respectively. Karvan had the same attitude, saying, 'You should put some things first, and some things second, and some things in a third side of your life. So I think, I believe that education is the first one—because with education, you can achieve whatever you want'.

Marwa had the same attitude to education, but saw it as being more preventative of bad outcomes than promotive of the good. She reflected, 'Education, it really makes sense . . . because I know I will find job later on, because I have experience. But for a person who's not doing nothing . . . he's going always be under risk of being homeless, you know. This sort of things'. Jilwan, too, sought various skills to cover various bases, 'because we don't know how it's going in the future. We don't know after two days how it's going in the world . . . maybe it will help me one day, we don't know'. Besides this 'future-proofing', youth also wanted to engage in learning to avoid 'wasting' time and to spend this period of waiting for asylum decisions 'improving' themselves. Hasan, for example, was determined to 'find the good thing for these migrations' and 'be benefit from this time—not just spend the time for free . . . just sleeping'.

However, while stranded and forced to wait, other changes came into play that diverted their educational plans. Particularly after being moved into more stable apartment accommodation, some youth and their families had warmed to the country and, after a few months, decided to stay. Karvan, for example, said that

In the beginning—this is the truth—I didn't want to stay in Greece. *No one* didn't want to stay in Greece. But after some months, let's say, or after year, I say Greece is a country that I want to live . . . I really like the culture that they have here. The character that they have here, it's near to my character.

Hamid said that his family, too, had changed their minds: 'In the beginning we decided to go 'up'—in first weeks, or month. But change, everything. We didn't know that Greek people will be, like, a very kind people'. This commitment had motivated Hamid and Karvan to learn the Greek language and attempt to gain access to public high schools—with mixed success.

3.3. Administrative Bordering: Accessing Formal Education via Gatekeepers

I was very good student in my country. It was my last year in high school, but we came here. (Hamid)

It is important to emphasise, at this juncture, that the young refugees in the study did not arrive in Greece as a *tabula rasa*; rather, they had diverse learning histories that were disrupted as a result of their flight. Hala, for example, explained that she was supposed to have only one year of high school remaining before she could continue to university, but 'When I come here I lose one year. For that, I have two years more'. Sayed also found himself at the same stage as he had been some time ago: 'About four years ago, at same

level that I am now—in 11th grade of high school—I had to escape Iran . . . I studied psychology, and literature, philology... then we had to leave our country'. This meant that if they wished to continue along a formal educational route, they had no choice but to enter the system at either the same or a lower level than they had already completed.

For some, this disruption came at a critical moment. Hasan, for example, explained that 'When I was in Iraq, I took my high school exams. For graduate. But I don't get result, because I left the country'. This timing meant that Hasan did not have proof of his prior learning and could only apply for the first year of senior high school in Greece, rather than university. Sayed explained these rules regarding documentation:

If you studied in your country, the 10th grade of high school, you will be able to get in the high school . . . So if a newcomer come here . . . if he has his previous documents, which is related with his previous education in his country, then he will be able to carry on his studying.

He found this requirement to produce a diploma particularly frustrating, as

One of the other problem that the refugee has, is the word of 'refugee'. 'Refugee' is absolutely different than 'migrant'. The refugee is not able to have connection from his country back. That's unreasonable to ask from a refugee for provide his document. It doesn't make sense for most of us. So that's different. If a person is migrant . . . he can provide the document. For the refugees, it's different.

Marwa had been more fortunate in this regard: 'I had my diploma from Syrian high school . . . and I had another diploma from Iraq. So for me, it was okay. I had like two diplomas—I just had to translate one of those'. This meant that she had been able to apply for a university scholarship directly and bypass the need to repeat high school. While a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees has been piloted in Greece, which is based on an assessment of refugees' prior education, work experience, and language proficiency via 'available documentation and a structured interview' (CoE 2021), the programme's development has been slow, meaning that it had not been an option for any of the youth in the study.

Even when the youth could produce some evidence of their prior learning, however, language was still a barrier to accessing education at the same level they had reached in their home country. As Hasan explained:

We study our country, our language, and we left the country and we came here. What we learned, what's going here, is totally different. Like I'm 12 years I'm study, and just going to pass the exam to go to university—I came here, they said 'no . . . you have to first the language, and then you're going to apply for the high school, and then you're going to university'.

As Hasan mentioned, language was a key issue. Despite arriving with a wide range of first, second, third, and more languages, youth in the study had no Greek proficiency; and especially around 2015, there were no country-wide integration programmes in public schools at the senior high school level to support non-Greek speakers. Part of the reason is that post-15 education is not compulsory for either Greek citizens or newcomers. Therefore, while afternoon shift reception classes were established in primary and lower-secondary schools in Zones of Educational Priority by the 2016–2017 academic year, this was not extended to the upper-secondary level until 2018 (MoERR 2018). At the time of the study, reception classes were still not running in all of the senior high schools around Thessaloniki, as they required a sufficiently large number of newcomers to justify employing a substitute teacher to deliver the programme.

Most of the youth lamented that the key thing they had needed was this form of language support for accessing school and work, but that this had not been provided. According to Sayed, there is still not 'Any proper system to integrate a newcomer who doesn't speak Greek or English. So there is no system how to do integration a new student, in the school, or in the civilisation'.

For those who had wanted to enrol in school but had limited Greek or English skills, the only options were to attend non-formal language lessons or to pay for private tuition. Marwa complained that the lack of accessible and free tuition, especially after the age of 18, was holding refugees back:

I have my family in Germany. My siblings are going to proper language school . . . Here, I understand, because the economy is very weak, and Greece are not able to open language school for refugees. So people are stuck, you know, with the language. You have two option, you either go to the Greek university and you pay 2000 euro for the language school. This is what happened to me. And I was like, no, not because I'm not willing to pay, because I don't have this amount to pay. So the people . . . they just wait, you know, to learn slowly, very slowly.

One option was to travel to NGO offices and community centres in the nearest city to their camps, if they were close to one at all, meaning a considerable investment of both time and money. Zainab and Hussein, aged 17 and 19, respectively, and both from Iraq, said their parents had stopped them from taking the journey to Thessaloniki to attend lessons at one popular NGO for precisely this reason. However, even if youth had the time, money, motivation, and permission to take the journey, the lessons in the city were often over-subscribed and subject to long waiting lists. Hasan recalled that from the point of registering for language lessons at one centre, it had taken four months for them to call and offer him a place on a Greek course. He said in disbelief, 'After four months, they told me, "okay, you can start now from the Greek classes". Ha ha . . . I start already! I learned by myself already!'

One extra factor among this group that complicated matters was, again, their age. For those who had wanted to enrol in senior high school—which, on paper, is for 15 to 18-year-olds—being overage could be a barrier. Sayed explained that for

Single people, older than 18, there are difficult process to get in the high schools . . . If you are older than 18, you should have either your previous school from your country, or be able, very good level of Greek, to get in the high school situation.

Reaching 18, according to Sayed, could be a cut-off point in terms of access to upper-secondary education. He explained that 'You have to arrive here before age of 18, and then you can carry on'; to arrive at 16 or 17 and start from junior high school (for ages 12–15). For him, he said, 'This is the way that I got inside the high school'. For those who had arrived before the age of 15, participation was more strongly supported, due to the fact that schooling is mandatory from the age of 6–15. There are more lessons and support systems in place for this age group, which meant that 'Most of the teenagers, most of the minors are at school' (Sayed).

The young people in the study did not seem to be clear about the specific rules surrounding age, however. As Jilwan summarised it, 'The systems in Greece, I don't know how is. They don't tell us'. Karvan believed it was possible to enter high school even if you are over 18, saying, 'There's no problem . . . If you know English, you can start from *lykeio*, and you should have studied before'. There was evidently some flexibility surrounding the age requirement, but this had not been clarified in law and policy, meaning that often, the young participants' acceptance in upper-secondary education had been dependent upon the willingness of the school director to enrol them. Sayed confirmed this explicitly, saying that their access to schools

depends the person. I mean sometimes, some responsible are very personal, they don't help you . . . They have to clarify this one [the access procedures], because the system is very complicated . . . Management—they do whatever they like, there are judge just like . . . the colour of your skin, and language. So this situation is very bad . . . In this country, which is the 'mother of democracy' as they say, it depend to many things.

This aligns with previous research, which found that some schools in Greece have invented ‘hindrances’ to try to discourage refugees’ enrolment (Vergou 2019).

Other directors diverted youth in the study away from general high schools, despite them having completed the same level of studies in their home country (albeit with a distinctly different curriculum). Several of the youth over the age of 18 reported being encouraged to apply for the evening ‘shift’ of technical senior high schools instead, with many other refugees, rather than the morning shift of general high schools—which offer an academic route towards university. This had happened to Hasan:

When I came to Greece, and I’m try to can apply for somewhere—like the college or high school in Greece—because of age they don’t accept me. And they told me, you have a chance to go into, I don’t know, it’s like high school but it’s for different things—engineering, with mechanic, any. And I applied for there, and accepted.

Similar reports from Germany have suggested that refugee pupils as young as 10 may be directed towards what are perceived as ‘less demanding tracks’, which are often vocational routes (UNESCO 2019, p. xviii).

According to Sayed, however, in the high school he had recently joined, ‘Fortunately, they have a good manager who is really good, has really good connection with us’. Hala, too, had been fortunate with the school in which she had first enrolled. Her mother had gone straight to the school director—taking their social worker along to translate—and had requested that they accept Hala, even without a reception programme in place. Fortunately, the director had agreed and had permitted Hala to begin attending even before the registration process was complete. As such, high school directors functioned as ‘gatekeepers’ of public services for youth in the study, either escorting them across administrative borders or limiting their ability to pursue the academic routes they had previously imagined for themselves.

3.4. Bordered Aspirations: Diverted Paths and Downgraded Dreams

As a result of the disruption and uncertainty caused by these bordering practices—and with a lack of confidence in their language abilities—most of the youth had lowered their aspirations in response to their perception of their opportunities in the new country. Sayed, for example, mentioned having ‘too many friends who wants to study in Greek university system, but there are many, many obstacle in front of them’. This fact meant that he, and others in the study, had shifted their ambitions onto only finishing high school, rather than the higher degrees they had been aiming for in their home countries. One such case was Hamid, who described how he had been planning to study engineering at university, but in Greece, ‘I can’t’. When asked if he would like to go to university to study another subject, he responded, ‘I don’t think I will. Just if I finish high school. I don’t know, ha . . . not never’.

Most of the youth had two responses to the question of aspirations: the ideal and the more practical. The latter was shaped by the necessity of securing an income, especially for those over 18 and without the support of a family. Sayed exemplified how many youth had had to adjust their ambitions to follow a more ‘practical’ route. While he had enjoyed his studies in literature and philology in Iran, his priority in Greece was to gain vocational skills. When asked if his goal was to find work, he responded:

That’s the point. Because what you going to become? What you are going to get money from? . . . It’s difficult to study what you like but not getting money from it—when you are in Greece, and you are a brown skin. Ha.

Similarly, Reza mentioned that ‘you have to be two ways, and two plans’—especially when you set yourself an ambitious first target.

3.5. Navigating Borders: (Re-)Engaging with Post-15 Education

Amid these various institutional and social influences, all of the youth in the study had decided to get themselves back into learning. As they did so, despite having support from family and friends, they found that a lot of the responsibility for overcoming the borders surrounding education rested on their shoulders. As Sayed put it, 'They don't know how to integrate us, so they put all the pressure on the student, and tell them 'you have to deal with the situation'. Hasan echoed Sayed's sentiment that the pressure was on him to find his own way, including with finding learning opportunities in the first place. He said that in the end, after struggling to find information and support, 'I tried to improve myself by my own . . . to enjoy, what I can find it, and participate on it'. He said that one day he had made a resolution: 'Let's go out from the camp. Go to this town, in Thessaloniki. What they have inside? Like, maybe find a opportunity. And I try to go into some NGO organisation . . . I register my name for the English classes, and Greek classes'.

Karvan, for his part, was steadfast in his belief that a lack of access to structured education does not mean you cannot learn, saying, 'If you want, you can learn. *All the time*'. While searching and waiting for formal and non-formal opportunities, he and most of the other youth had made do with what was at hand. As mentioned above, they believed that language skills would provide a foundation for everything else to follow, whether it was enrolling in Greek high school, accessing information and services from the state or NGOs, or finding work. With a lack of in-person educational offers and unstable mobile internet connections to learn online, youth had drawn from a key physical resource available to them: international humanitarian staff and volunteers. They had picked up language skills either through volunteering themselves and actively trying to build their proficiency or more passively through friendships and everyday encounters.

Marwa was one such case. She explained that after she had decided she needed to learn English, 'It was kind of very fast for me. I learned it, like, two months. Not very good English but okay, I could communicate, I could write little bit'. Her learning mainly came through volunteering and speaking with staff in her camp; a difficult process that she pushed herself through for the sake of gaining valuable skills:

I volunteer with . . . this NGO... and I was keeping asking people 'what is this? What is this?' I was trying to talk with someone, with some English speakers, this what I was trying to do. And for sure it was not professional English . . . When I start talking English, I was looking super funny. Because I was telling very stupid stuff, very wrongly, you know? Like, in a different meaning sometime!

Hasan also spoke of drawing from this key social resource, saying, 'I don't spend my time by playing the game too much . . . First for the language, from the organisation who they working there—I try to spend my time with them. Even I find a half hour with a teacher.'

Karvan, too, had drawn from friendships with Greek students and teachers he had met to develop his language skills. He recalled how he had learnt the alphabet

in 40 minutes on the bus . . . I told my friend, you know, she was Greek. And I told her, 'could you help me with that?' She said 'of course, let's see' . . . When we get out of the bus—I read all the places that it was written by Greek. I didn't know what they mean, but I just read it, and I asked my friend, 'what does this mean? What does that mean?' And you know, I learned like that . . . this was my start.

In this way, youth took their first steps with Greek, and developed the varying levels of English they already had. Hamid, for example, proudly explained that 'when I came to Greece, I start even English from zero. I didn't know'. Despite a lack of support and bordered access to opportunities, two years later, he smiled and noted his ability to converse 'with someone who's from UK, America'. The youth in the study had persisted in this manner, and at the time of the study, Marwa had sufficient skills to pursue a degree taught in English at a private university in Thessaloniki; Hasan had secured a paid role as a translator; and Karvan had passed the notorious Panhellenic exams at the end of general

senior high school. All of the others were engaged in high school, NFE and/or other work or voluntary activities, with most still engaging in more than one form of learning concurrently.

4. Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that upon arrival in Greece, young refugees are subject to multiple forms of institutional bordering that make it challenging to (re-)engage with an educational trajectory—especially in public high schools. Through the practice of bordering space—predominantly via encampment—youth were placed at long distances from opportunities, faced tense and cramped environments in locations that were often unfit for human life, and were moved at short notice, causing feelings of instability. These factors left them unable and unwilling to engage in learning, even when offers were available. At the same time, social and material influences around the camps left them uncertain about their futures and unable to make firm plans in the country. The effects of this spatial bordering were exacerbated by the prolonged uncertainty surrounding their legal status. As [Dimitriadi and Sarantaki \(2019, p. 1\)](#) put it, since 2015, Greece has become ‘A place of strandedness, limbo, and immobility’. This relationship between time and immobility, as also experienced by youth in the study, supports [Leutloff-Grandits’s \(2019, p. 2\)](#) claim that ‘borders are created through . . . not only spatial and social but also temporal dimensions’. If and when youth sought out formal educational opportunities, they then faced administrative borders; specifically, in the requirement to produce documents proving their prior learning, and in unclear policies surrounding the age limit for enrolment. Their ability to bypass these restrictions was heavily dependent on the support of willing ‘gatekeepers’, such as school directors and administrators.

Overall, the institutional bordering of space, time, and services led to the youth’s motivation and academic or other dreams being downgraded or diverted, as they were denied access or left without information or social and material support. However, rather than resigning themselves to a state of ‘frozen transience’ ([Nagy 2018](#)), they actively navigated and negotiated these conditions. As [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh \(2020, p. 3\)](#) reminds us, ‘People who have been displaced do not merely “experience” displacement, but also actively respond’. The youth drew from any available resource (whether human or technological) to keep learning, as a means of simultaneously ‘future-proofing’ and navigating their new, everyday lives in Greece. However, due to shifting social, legal, and accommodation conditions, the educational trajectories they began to construct for themselves were far from linear. Most engaged in parallel trajectories—learning languages and/or vocational skills alongside high school—and some strategically decided to jump from one path to another, when more beneficial opportunities arose.

These findings raise a number of considerations for future research, policy, and practice. In terms of research, more investigation is needed into the educational impacts of the Greek state’s responses to irregularly arriving youth. This means exploring more deeply the multiple, intersecting forms of exclusion and neglect that impact their life trajectories, along with more overt instances of hostility and abuse, and especially as they are established, maintained, and navigated in everyday educational life ([Lems 2020](#)). The study demonstrates the importance of a bottom-up approach to studying these issues, which centres refugees’ everyday experiences and perspectives.

In terms of policy and practice, the findings suggest that school-level administrators have a key role to play in inviting refugee youth across the threshold of society: acting as ‘gatekeepers’ who manage who is or is not permitted a presence within it. With a clearer policy framework—particularly surrounding age—refugee youth’s access to education will not be so dependent on such social factors. Outside of schools, the availability of NFE—as a welcoming ‘in-between’ offer—needs to be increased and protected from ongoing financial and political threats.

5. Conclusions

This article has explored the question of how institutional responses to young refugees' arrival in Greece impacts their (re-)engagement with post-15 learning. Drawing on data from an ethnographic doctoral study, it found that their trajectories were strongly influenced by practices of encampment, delays with asylum decisions, and administrative barriers to accessing formal education. Borrowing from the geographical literature, and particularly from border studies, this was framed as the 'institutional bordering' of time, space, and public services. These practices were found to reiterate borders in the everyday and to prevent youth from (re)constructing the educational trajectories they had begun or imagined for themselves in their home countries. Alongside these practices, the findings revealed the important role of other social actors whom young refugees encounter—particularly in camps—who either encouraged or discouraged youth from pursuing education during their prolonged period of uncertainty.

To conclude, for youth in the study, (re)constructing their learning trajectories had taken extraordinary personal motivation and strongly supportive social influences to overcome bordered space, time, and access. A large part of their ability to continue learning—which they primarily valued for finding work, contacts, and further study opportunities—seemed left to chance. It was dependent on meeting willing 'gatekeepers' or other refugees with beneficial information, or being in the right place at the right time to learn of funding and other opportunities. There was an understanding that it was their own responsibility to bring about their success—whether they felt this was correct or not—due to limited support measures put in place by the Greek state. While this highlights their impressive ability to navigate institutional bordering practices, the fact remains that poor arrival conditions at the margins of Europe—which were becoming increasingly poor at the time of writing—can severely disrupt the lives youth envision for themselves when fleeing conflict and poverty.

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Notes

- ¹ Here, for brevity, the term 'refugee' refers to both those who have been granted protection under the 1951 Convention and those who have applied for protection (i.e., asylum seekers).
- ² The Council of Europe (CoE 2019) defines *formal education* as that which takes place in educational systems, follows a syllabus and involves assessments, while *non-formal education* (NFE)—despite also being organised and intentional—mostly takes place outside of the formal system and does not result in accreditation. It may be more focused on particular activities, skills, or areas of knowledge and take place in community settings such as NGOs.
- ³ Δομές Υποδοχής και Εκπαίδευσης Προσφύγων.
- ⁴ 'Managed' accommodation refers to Reception and Identification Centers (RICS), 'open sites' (i.e., camps), apartments, hotels, shelters, 'safe zones', and supported independent living (SIL) schemes managed by the state or partners such as UNHCR, as opposed to being private or 'informal' (UNICEF 2020).

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