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Educational Processes of International Students in Türkiye: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the educational experiences of international students enrolled in higher education institutions in Adana, Türkiye. Using a qualitative case study design, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews and analyzed them using thematic analysis. The findings show that language barriers were the most significant challenge for participants, particularly in the early stages of their academic journeys, affecting both academic engagement and social integration. Although international student offices were generally perceived as providing valuable support, some participants reported limited communication and interaction with these units. In addition, rising living costs and insufficient scholarship opportunities emerged as major factors contributing to students' financial difficulties. Despite these challenges, most participants demonstrated high levels of academic achievement and expressed overall satisfaction with their educational experiences. The findings suggest that Türkiye offers a supportive academic and intercultural environment for international students. However, enhancing language support services, strengthening financial assistance mechanisms, and expanding initiatives that promote social integration are essential to improving international students' educational experiences. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on international student mobility by providing evidence-based recommendations for higher education institutions and policymakers seeking to develop more inclusive and effective support systems.

Keywords: academic adaptation, higher education, international students, language barriers, qualitative research, sociocultural adaptation, Türkiye

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has undergone profound changes due to globalization, increased economic integration, and socio-cultural interconnectedness, leading to an unprecedented increase in international student mobility. More students pursue higher education abroad in search of high-quality education, international experience, and enhanced career opportunities. The internationalization of higher education has intensified global competition among universities and encouraged countries to develop policies to attract international students. As a result, international student mobility has grown rapidly worldwide. While the number of students studying outside their home country was approximately 4.5 million in 2010, it has increased to around 7.5 million and is projected to reach 20 million by 2030 (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, 2025). Beyond this quantitative growth, recent studies indicate that the geography of international student mobility has also changed. International student mobility is no longer concentrated primarily in traditional Western destination countries; instead, emerging economies have become increasingly attractive study destinations by strengthening their higher education systems, expanding international cooperation, and enhancing their global competitiveness (Kondakci et al., 2018; Hou & Du, 2022; Li et al., 2023). Consequently, international student mobility has become not only a means of academic and personal development for students but also a strategic component of higher education internationalization, contributing to the economic, cultural, and diplomatic objectives of host countries.

International students offer host countries several advantages, including enriching cultural diversity, contributing to the economy, strengthening international relations, and enhancing national visibility. However, increasing student diversity also necessitates restructuring education systems, making curricula more flexible and strengthening student support services. For this reason, many countries are developing both academic and social integration policies for international students (Pusser & Turner, 2004; Levent & Karaevli, 2014, p.99).

Türkiye has adapted to this global trend in recent years and has become an increasingly attractive educational destination for international students with its higher education reforms, scholarship opportunities, international cooperation and university promotion strategies (Türkiye Scholarships, 2025; Higher Education Information Management System, 2025). Being geographically located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East and creating a sense of cultural closeness for international students with its cultural diversity and historical background may also be considered among the reasons why Türkiye is preferred (Topal & Tauscher, 2020, p.314). In addition, state-funded scholarship programs such as Türkiye Scholarships and the internationalization policies of the Council of Higher Education play an effective role in attracting students (Türkiye Scholarships, 2025).

Moreover, the increase in the number of international students has led to a multicultural structure in the education system, making educational environments richer and more dynamic. The knowledge, experience and perspectives of students from different countries increase intercultural interaction in universities, which offers new opportunities for both local students and academic staff. However, maintaining this multicultural structure in a sustainable and healthy manner requires not only the admission of students but also the support of inclusive education policies that consider their academic, linguistic, social and cultural needs. Beyond academic success, international students' psychological well-being has become an important concern for higher education institutions. Recent research has increasingly emphasized that international students' educational experiences are influenced not only by academic performance but also by psychological well-being, resilience, and the availability of culturally responsive support services (Shafaei et al.,2018; Chaliawala et al., 2025; Kim & Zalaquett, 2025; Arshad et al., 2026). In order for international students' educational experience in Türkiye to become more qualified, higher education institutions should develop holistic approaches in many areas such as curricula, guidance services

and campus life. Gündüz (2019) emphasized that for the future of both Türkiye and its youth, it is crucial that relevant institutions enhance their support and enable more individuals to develop themselves on the path toward becoming globally minded students who pursue education internationally and evolve into universal citizens.

In this framework, identifying the experiences of international students regarding their educational processes, the difficulties they face and the support mechanisms they need will contribute to the improvement of current practices. Notably, in recent years, there has been an increasing number of academic studies on this field in Türkiye, revealing various findings on international students' education, integration, language acquisition and social interaction processes.

Studies conducted in Türkiye consistently demonstrate that international students encounter multidimensional challenges throughout their educational experiences. Across different institutional contexts, the most frequently reported issues include language barriers, academic adjustment difficulties, financial constraints, and socio-cultural adaptation problems (Şahin & Demirtaş, 2014; Topal & Tauscher, 2020; Türel, 2021; Gönültaş et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies suggest that international students' educational experiences are shaped by the interaction of academic, social, cultural, and economic factors rather than by a single dimension of adjustment.

In addition to identifying the challenges faced by international students, previous studies emphasize the importance of institutional and individual resources in facilitating successful adaptation. Turkish language proficiency, supportive relationships with faculty members, opportunities for social participation, and institutional support services have been identified as key factors that promote both academic and socio-cultural adjustment (Kıroğlu et al., 2011; Yardımcıoğlu et al., 2017; Karadirek & Kaya, 2021). However, the persistence of communication barriers, adjustment difficulties, and unmet support needs across different university settings indicates that international students continue to require comprehensive and coordinated institutional support throughout their educational journey.

Existing studies on the educational experiences of international students in Türkiye have provided valuable insights into the academic, social, cultural, and economic challenges they encounter. However, the current literature is largely limited to specific universities or student populations and tends to focus on particular dimensions of the educational experience, such as language proficiency, academic achievement, or sociocultural adaptation. As a result, studies that adopt a holistic perspective by examining how academic, social, cultural, and institutional factors interact to shape international students' educational experiences remain limited. Addressing this gap, the present study explores the educational experiences of international students enrolled at public universities in Adana through a multidimensional qualitative approach. By providing an integrated understanding of students' educational processes, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence that can inform the development of institutional support mechanisms and policies for international students in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experiences of international students in higher education have attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Existing research conceptualizes international students' adaptation as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of academic, sociocultural, psychological, and institutional factors. Rather than reflecting individual characteristics alone, successful adaptation is increasingly understood as a context-dependent process influenced by institutional practices, cultural environments, and broader social and political conditions.

Among these dimensions, academic adjustment has received considerable attention in the international higher education literature. It is widely recognized as a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual characteristics, learning behaviors, and institutional contexts rather than academic ability alone. Across different higher education settings, studies consistently identify

communication skills, self-regulation, motivation, faculty support, and engagement in learning activities as key factors facilitating successful academic adjustment (Rienties et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2022; Mao, 2024).

Although these studies agree that academic adjustment is multidimensional, they differ in the factors they emphasize and in how they explain successful adaptation. Rienties et al. (2012) found that Western students reported higher levels of academic and social adjustment than their non-Western peers; however, differences in adjustment did not necessarily result in lower academic performance, suggesting that academic success cannot be explained solely by integration. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of communication skills and self-regulated learning, while also demonstrating that older students tended to adapt more successfully to academic environments. Complementing these findings, Mao (2024) argued that academic adjustment is a dynamic process that evolves over time through the interaction of bilingual competence, faculty support, intercultural learning opportunities, and students' experiences of inclusion or marginalization.

Taken together, these studies indicate that academic adjustment is best understood as a dynamic and context-dependent process emerging from the interaction of individual competencies, institutional support, and sociocultural environments.

Sociocultural adaptation is widely recognized as a multidimensional process influenced by language proficiency, intercultural communication, cultural adaptation strategies, and opportunities for meaningful interaction with members of the host society. Across different higher education contexts, research consistently identifies language barriers and limited social interaction with local students as major obstacles to successful adaptation (Khan, 2025; Lai et al., 2023; Xiao, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2026).

Although these studies agree on the central role of language and social interaction, they emphasize different mechanisms underlying sociocultural adaptation. Khan (2025) highlights language proficiency and communication skills as the primary factors reducing acculturative stress, whereas Lai et al. (2023) focus on students' acculturation strategies and demonstrate that sociocultural adaptation does not necessarily lead to positive psychological outcomes. Complementing these perspectives, Xiao (2024) argues that classroom participation should be interpreted within its cultural context, showing that Western expectations of active participation may unintentionally marginalize students from Confucian educational traditions. Similarly, Yu and Wright (2026) demonstrate that despite students' willingness to engage with local communities, language barriers and limited interaction with domestic students often reinforce social isolation and reliance on co-national peer networks.

Collectively, these findings indicate these studies suggest that sociocultural adaptation cannot be explained solely by students' individual efforts. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between language competence, cultural expectations, institutional environments, and opportunities for meaningful engagement with the host community.

Beyond individual competencies, research consistently emphasizes that institutional support and opportunities for social integration play a central role in international students' academic and sociocultural adjustment. Supportive relationships with faculty members, meaningful interactions with local students, and accessible university support services contribute substantially to students' sense of belonging, well-being, and overall educational experiences (Howe et al., 2023; Ivanova et al., 2025; Xue & Singh, 2025).

Although these studies highlight the importance of institutional support, they emphasize different dimensions of the adjustment process. Howe et al. (2023) focus primarily on academic success, demonstrating that faculty relationships, peer support, and academic skills are essential resources while identifying racism as a persistent structural barrier to integration. In contrast, Ivanova et al. (2025) examine students' experiences of loneliness, arguing that limited friendships with local students and insufficient participation in community activities weaken students' sense of belonging. Expanding this perspective to an Asian context, Xue and Singh (2025) emphasize that institutional support should also address cultural and religious diversity, showing that language assistance and culturally responsive services are essential for students studying in multicultural environments such as Malaysia.

Overall, the evidence suggests that institutional support extends beyond the provision of academic services. Effective support requires inclusive campus environments that foster meaningful interactions between international and domestic students, promote social participation, and provide culturally responsive services that address students' diverse academic, social, and psychological needs.

Psychological well-being is increasingly recognized as an integral component of international students' adaptation. Beyond academic and sociocultural adjustment, research suggests that students' overall educational experiences are shaped by their ability to cope with acculturative stress, maintain psychological well-being, and access supportive social and institutional resources. Across different cultural contexts, studies consistently identify language barriers, loneliness, homesickness, and culture shock as major challenges affecting students' psychological adjustment (Alasmari, 2023; Riaz et al., 2025; Fanari & Kim, 2025).

Although these studies agree on the importance of psychological support, they offer different perspectives on how international students respond to adaptation-related challenges. Alasmari (2023) emphasizes the role of university facilities and institutional services in alleviating loneliness, homesickness, and culture shock among international students in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Riaz et al. (2025) demonstrate that strong social support networks and reduced acculturative stress contribute significantly to students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment. In contrast, Fanari and Kim (2025) move beyond a deficit-oriented perspective by conceptualizing adaptation as a process of communicative resilience, arguing that international students actively negotiate cultural barriers, challenge stereotypes, and strengthen their sense of identity through communication.

Taken as a whole, these studies indicate that psychological well-being should not be viewed merely as an outcome of successful adaptation but as an active component of the adaptation process itself. Effective institutional support, meaningful social relationships, and opportunities to develop resilience collectively contribute to international students' long-term academic success and overall well-being.

Beyond institutional factors, international students' adaptation is also shaped by macro-level contexts, including the host country's political environment, historical relationships, educational system, and national image. These broader contextual factors influence students' expectations, sense of belonging, and overall adaptation experiences (Erturk & Luu, 2022; Yerken & Luu, 2022).

Although both studies examine international students in Hungary, they highlight different dimensions of macro-level adaptation. Erturk and Luu (2022) demonstrate that historical ties, cultural proximity, and contemporary political relations facilitate Turkish students' adaptation, while also noting that historical stereotypes may create barriers to social integration. In contrast, Yerken & Luu (2022) focus on students from post-Soviet countries and argue that adaptation is shaped primarily by differences between educational systems and students' perceptions of Hungary as a transitional destination to Western Europe.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that international student adaptation extends beyond individual and institutional factors. Broader political, historical, and educational contexts shape how students perceive the host country, interact with local communities, and navigate their academic and sociocultural experiences.

Overall, the literature indicates that international students' educational experiences are shaped by the interaction of academic, sociocultural, psychological, institutional, and macro-level contextual factors rather than by any single dimension of adaptation. Although previous studies have examined these dimensions from different theoretical and geographical perspectives, they consistently demonstrate that successful adaptation depends on the combined influence of individual capabilities, supportive institutional environments, meaningful social relationships, and broader cultural and political contexts. This multidimensional perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining international students' educational experiences in the present study.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, a case study approach, recognized as one of the qualitative research designs, will be employed (Yeşilbaş Özenç, 2022, p.57; Subaşı & Okumuş, 2017, p.419). Case study is a qualitative research approach in which a situation or system is examined in detail with the help of multiple data sources collection tools (observations, interviews, audiovisuals, documents, reports), usually with data collected over a certain period of time (Creswell, 2007, p. 96). The aim is to provide an analysis of the context and processes that illuminate the situation or system under study (Hartley, 2004, p.323). Due to this characteristic, case studies are frequently used to enhance our understanding of individual, group, organizational, social, and political phenomena (Aytaçlı, 2012, p. 2).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of international students during their education at higher education institutions in Adana, Türkiye both within the institutions themselves and in the broader urban context. The research aims to address students' academic success and adaptation processes, social and cultural integration, the language barriers they face, and their access to university support services in a multidimensional way. In this respect, the challenges faced by students, the coping strategies they develop and their perceptions of the education system in Adana will be revealed.

Study Group

Although the sample size for qualitative research techniques cannot be determined exactly, Dworkin (2012) states that a sample size between 5 and 50 participants is sufficient based on the large number of studies he examined. Accordingly, 11 foreign undergraduate and graduate students at Adana Alpaslan Türkeş Science and Technology University and Çukurova University in Adana, Türkiye were included in the study. Table 1 shows information about the participants.

Table 1
Information about the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality	Duration of stay in Adana/ Türkiye	Education level
P1	F	21	Syria	3 years	Undergraduate
P2	F	21	Syria	9 years	Undergraduate
P3	F	31	Iran	3 years	PhD
P4	M	24	Egypt	4 years	Undergraduate
P5	M	35	Iran	2,5 years	Graduate
P6	F	25	Syria	3 years	Graduate
P7	F	21	Yemen	3 years	Undergraduate
P8	M	37	Iran	3 years	PhD
P9	F	30	Mauritania	2 years	Graduate
P10	M	27	Somali	2 years	Graduate
P11	M	36	Iran	2,5 years	PhD

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, a widely used data collection method in qualitative research that enables participants to express their experiences and perspectives in depth. The interview guide was developed based on previous studies examining the educational experiences of international students (Yıldıran et al., 2016; Usta et al., 2017). It consisted of 25 open-ended questions covering participants' academic experiences, sociocultural adaptation, language-related challenges, and access to institutional support services.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of the information they provided, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. Face-to-face interviews were preferred to facilitate in-depth discussion and to allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions when clarification was needed.

Data Analysis

In this study, the views of international students regarding their experiences both within their universities and in the city of Adana during their higher education were examined using the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is to define the themes of the research, to say something about a subject and to use these themes to interpret the available data (Çarıkcı et al., 2024, p.127). Main themes and sub-themes were created from the raw data obtained from the participants. The participants' responses to the questionnaire were interpreted through the determined themes. Finally, the participants' statements were directly included, and the comments were supported with quotations.

RESULTS

The findings obtained from the interviews with foreign students are presented thematically in line with the purpose of the study. Accordingly, the experiences of foreign students during their education in higher education institutions in Adana were analyzed under the headings of academic adjustment, social adaptation, cultural adaptation, language proficiency and problems, support access and evaluation, general evaluation and future perspective.

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Academic Adjustment	Difference in education systems
	Academic adaptation
	Academic achievement
	Communication with instructors
	Academic advising
Social Adaptation	The process of building a social network
	Relationships with Turkish students
	Sense of belonging to the campus
Cultural Adaptation	Difficulties / surprises in Turkish culture
	Cultural differences in daily life
	Opportunity to maintain one’s own culture

Language Proficiency and Problems	Improvement in Turkish language proficiency
	Language difficulties in classes and social communication
	Adequacy of Turkish preparatory education
Support Access and Evaluation	Awareness of the support services offered by the university
	Relations with the international student office
	Unmet service needs
General Evaluation and Future Perspective	Intention to pursue further education in Türkiye
	Additional opinions regarding the overall experience

1. Academic Adjustment

The findings were grouped under five sub-themes: differences in education systems, academic adaptation, academic achievement, communication with instructors, and academic advising.

1.1. Difference in Education Systems

Most of the participants stated that there are some significant differences between university education in Türkiye and the education systems in their countries of origin. It was noted that the education system in Türkiye is more practice-oriented and project-based, whereas in the participants' home countries, the system is predominantly theoretical and operates with more limited resources.

"Here is more emphasis on project-based learning and teamwork, whereas my previous studies were slightly more theory-focused" (P5).

"While both countries have a well-structured education system, Mauritania tends to focus mainly on theoretical learning with fewer resources available, whereas Türkiye provides more opportunities for research and has more advanced facilities" (P9).

It was stated that the system in Türkiye is more flexible and based on final exams, whereas in some other countries, year-long collective assessment and process-oriented assessment methods are at the center.

"In Türkiye the system is more final exam centered while my previous educational experience was more focusing on the collective effort throughout the year. Both have their up and downsides" (P4).

1.2. Academic Adaptation

The majority of the participants reported that they did not experience any serious difficulties in adapting to the courses. However, some participants initially experienced some adaptation problems, especially in terms of language barriers, different academic backgrounds and getting used to the new education system.

“Since I come from a different academic background and the education system in Türkiye is a bit different from what I was used to, it took me some time to adapt. For example, the teaching style and working with university websites” (P3).
“At first, I had difficulty understanding my major because it was different from my bachelor’s degree. However, I gradually understood the program, and the professors were very supportive and helped me a lot” (P9).
“Although most of the lectures where in English, I needed Turkish to communicate freely with other students. The difficulty was the language” (P7).

1.3. Academic Achievement

When asked about their grade point averages, the majority of the participants stated that their GPA was above 3.00 on a 4.00 scale.
“My GPA is currently around 4.00 out of 4.00” (P5).
“3.69 out of 4.00” (P10).

1.4. Communication with Instructors

Participants generally reported positive communication with academic staff throughout their studies. Most indicated that instructors were approachable, responsive, and willing to provide assistance when needed. Positive interactions with instructors were perceived as facilitating students' learning experiences and helping them address academic challenges.
“I don't regularly communicate with staff, but when I do the staff are generally responsive” (P1).
“They are very helpful and available most of the time” (P4.)
“My communication with academic staff has been positive; they have been approachable and willing to help when needed” (P5).

1.5. Academic Advising

Participants reported varying experiences with academic advising services. While some indicated that they rarely consulted their academic advisors or did not find these services particularly helpful, most participants described receiving guidance on course selection, academic procedures, and research-related issues. Graduate students also emphasized the importance of supervision during their thesis studies. Overall, participants perceived academic advising and supervisory support as beneficial for navigating their academic responsibilities.
“I haven’t relied on my academic advisor, so I haven’t directly benefited from the advisory services” (P2).
“Yes, I have consulted my academic advisor, especially for selecting courses and discussing research directions” (P5).
“Yes, I have definitely benefited from the support of my academic advisor. My supervisor provided me with valuable guidance and formal advice throughout my studies” (P9).

2. Social Adaptation

The findings are divided into three sub-themes: The process of building a social network, relationships with Turkish students and sense of belonging to the campus.

2.1. The Process of Building a Social Network

Most of the participants stated that the process of acquiring a social environment in Türkiye required time, primarily due to the language barrier and cultural differences. After they started to speak and understand Turkish, they stated that their social circles expanded.

“Honestly, it was difficult for me to build a social circle at first, mainly because of language and cultural differences” (P3).

“At first, I had difficulty building a social circle because I didn't know Turkish. However, once I improved my Turkish language skills, it became much easier for me to form friendships and communicate well with others” (P9).

2.2. Relationships with Turkish Students

Most of the participants stated that establishing relationships with Turkish students was a difficult and slow process in the beginning. However, over time and as their Turkish communication skills improved, they stated that they were able to establish social relationships with Turkish students.

“It was a very slow process. It took a while for the people around me to open up to the possibility of becoming friends with foreigners but after that initial period a very strong bond of friendship was born” (P1).

“My relationships with Turkish students developed gradually; they have been friendly and supportive, especially after I learned some Turkish” (P5).

“It started with English then I started using some Turkish. After that, we were helping each other in lessons and going to visit different places in Adana and even visiting other cities” (P7).

2.3. Sense of Belonging to The Campus

Participants' level of social integration on campus varied. Some stated that it was still difficult to be in large groups, but in general they felt integrated. Some initially felt isolated, especially due to their limited Turkish language skills, but over time began to build social bonds through group work, class discussions and activities. Some participants rated social integration as limited and academic integration as stronger.

“Not as much as I would have liked. I am fully integrated socially at my faculty, but unfortunately, I didn't get to socialize enough outside of my faculty” (P1).

“It took some time to adjust, especially as an international student with limited Turkish skills. In the beginning, I felt a bit isolated, but over time, through group work, classroom discussions, and occasional events, I started to connect with other students” (P3).

“Moderately integrated, mainly academically” (P10).

3. Cultural Adaptation

The findings are divided into three sub-themes: Difficulties / surprises in Turkish culture, cultural differences in daily life and opportunity to maintain one’s own culture.

3.1. Difficulties / Surprises in Turkish Culture

While most of the participants stated that there were similarities between their own culture and Turkish culture and therefore, they did not experience difficulties, some participants stated that they saw differences in gender roles and were surprised.

“Thanks to the cultural similarities between my country and Türkiye, the adaptation process hasn’t been very challenging” (P5).

“Some aspects of Turkish culture challenged me, such as differences in formality and gender roles. However, shared values helped me adapt and feel comfortable” (P9).

3.2. Cultural Differences in Daily Life

The cultural differences observed by the participants in daily life are generally limited. Some participants stated that they did not feel any significant difference and that it was easy to adapt to Türkiye. Prominent differences include distance in social interactions, language barrier, greeting styles, mealtimes, differences in holidays and ceremonies, and differences in perceptions of body language. In addition, the normalization of long working hours and differences in traditional celebrations were other noteworthy details.

“Not really. I didn’t experience any major cultural differences that affected my daily life. Most things were easy to adapt to, and I felt comfortable overall” (P3).

“I noticed differences in daily routines, social greetings, and mealtimes compared to my own culture” (P5).

“The type of food and holiday people have here. The long working hours are something that people don't complain about” (P11).

3.3. Opportunity to Maintain One’s Own Culture

All participants stated that they were able to preserve their cultural identity and maintain their cultural practices during their stay in Türkiye. Participants stated that they were able to keep their culture alive in various ways, such as preparing traditional foods, celebrating religious and cultural holidays, communicating in their own language and coming together with their communities.

“Yes, I believe I’ve been able to maintain my own culture while living here. Even though I’ve adapted to some aspects of Turkish culture, I still keep my own traditions, values, and daily habits. For example, I cook Iranian food at home, celebrate my cultural holidays, and stay connected to my language and community through social media and video calls with family and friends. Living in a multicultural environment actually made me appreciate my own culture more, while also respecting the local one” (P3).

4. Language Proficiency and Problems

The findings are categorized into three sub-themes: improvement in Turkish language proficiency, language difficulties in classes and social communication, and the adequacy of Turkish preparatory education.

4.1. Improvement in Turkish Language Proficiency

All participants reported a significant improvement in their Turkish language skills after they started studying in Türkiye. The intensive use of Turkish in academic and social settings played an important role in increasing their linguistic competence. In particular, the interactions in the courses, the communication requirements encountered in daily life and the relations with the local people supported language development by providing the opportunity to use Turkish actively.

“My level of Turkish has improved since I arrived, although I’m still not fluent” (P3).

“My Turkish has improved since I arrived, especially in daily life” (P10).

4.2. Language Difficulties in Classes and Social Communication

The majority of the participants stated that they experienced various language-related difficulties in the beginning of their education in Türkiye. Limited Turkish proficiency, especially in terms of following classes and communicating with friends, posed a significant obstacle at the beginning of the process. While some participants stated that they did not have any serious academic problems due to the widespread use

of English in the university environment, they expressed that they had difficulties in communicating with the social environment, especially due to the fact that class groups and announcements were in Turkish. It was emphasized by the participants that language problems decreased over time and their ability to speak Turkish improved.

“At the beginning, I had some language problems in following lessons and communicating, but now it’s much better” (P5).

“There were two courses fully in Turkish in my first year, that was a problem for a student who does not know Turkish. Some problems in communicating with friends for example the class group and all announcements are written in Turkish” (P7).

“No, I did not face any problems in my studies because the courses were taught in English. However, I sometimes face some difficulties communicating with Turkish friends due to language barriers” (P9).

4.3. Adequacy of Turkish Preparatory Education

Most of the participants stated that they did not participate in Turkish preparatory education when they came to Türkiye. Participants enrolled in the Turkish preparatory program stated that the education provided was insufficient and unproductive. These participants stated that the content and practices that would ensure language proficiency, especially at the academic level, were insufficient.

“Yes, it was sufficient for daily life, but not fully sufficient for academic life” (P6).

“To be honest it’s not sufficient for me” (P8).

5. Support Access and Evaluation

The findings were categorized into three sub-themes: awareness of the support services offered by the university, relations with the international student office, and unmet service needs.

5.1. Awareness of The Support Services Offered by The University

The participants' awareness of the support services offered by the university (such as accommodation, scholarships, counseling, etc.) varied. While some participants stated that they were aware of these services and benefited from them from time to time, a significant number of them stated that they did not have sufficient information about such services.

“Yes, I’m aware of some of the support services offered by the university. However, I think more promotion or clear information about these services would be helpful, especially for new or international students” (P3).

“Honestly, I don’t know about scholarships, and as long as I know the university has only boy’s dormitory. Except that I have notices the counseling part as I used to get help when facing specific problem like forgetting password” (P7).

5.2. Relations with The International Student Office

Participants' relations with the international student office were generally evaluated as positive. Participants who had frequent contact with the office stated that the office staff were helpful, caring and supportive, especially in matters related to the registration process, residence permit procedures and courses. Some participants stated that they had limited or no contact with the office and therefore did not develop a deep relationship.

“Very positive they were responsive” (P2).

“My relationship with the international student office was generally positive. They were helpful, especially during the registration process and when I had questions about residence permits or course-related issues” (P3).

“It wasn't very deep. I went to them once or twice that's all” (P4).

“I haven’t had any engagement with the international student office so far” (P5).

5.3. Unmet Service Needs

As reported by the opinions of the participants, although the support services at the university are generally adequate, deficiencies were observed in some areas. In particular, it was stated that there is sometimes a lack of information about the necessary paperwork procedures for international students, and that more guidance is needed as this process differs from that of local students.

“Sometimes they lack some information about the paperwork system of the international students, which may differ from that of local students” (P2).

Some participants stated that a more interactive and student-oriented structure of the international student office would be beneficial. It was also mentioned that Turkish language support and cultural adaptation programs are inadequate or offered with insufficient frequency. In addition, given the economic conditions, it was emphasized that the available scholarships are insufficient to cover living expenses.

“Some services, like Turkish language support and cultural orientation, could be improved or offered more frequently” (P5).

“The funds is not fitted to the live expenses especially with considering the inflation rate in Türkiye” (P8).

6. General Evaluation and Future Perspective

The findings were categorized into two sub-themes: the intention to pursue further education in Türkiye and additional opinions regarding the overall experience.

6.1. Intention to Pursue Further Education in Türkiye

Most of the participants stated that they would prefer to study in Türkiye again. However, some stated that they would prefer another country if there was an option that offered better academic or career opportunities.

“Yes, I would choose to study in Türkiye again. Despite some challenges, my experience here has been very rewarding. I’ve grown personally and academically, and I’ve had the chance to learn about a rich and diverse culture. The people are warm and welcoming, and the educational opportunities are good” (P3).

“Honestly, if a better opportunity arose elsewhere, I would consider that a priority instead of Türkiye” (P5).

6.2. Additional Opinions Regarding The Overall Experience

The participants' overall assessment is that studying in Türkiye offers an enriching experience both academically and culturally. It was emphasized that the multicultural environment offered by Türkiye contributed to the students' self-development by interacting with different cultures.

“It is a very good experience to integrate oneself with such people and culture” (P1).

“Türkiye provides a rich academic environment and cultural growth. With its openness and support, international students have great opportunities to succeed” (P9).

However, some participants stated that there were insufficient programs and activities to promote social interaction among international students, and that universities should provide greater support in this area. Additionally, a lack of information about Turkish business culture and challenges in finding part-time jobs were also noted.

“I think it would be great if the university offered more programs or events to help students get to know each other better” (P3).

“I think as an international student who is not very aware of the Turkish work culture. I would like more support and guidance in how I can start looking for jobs, especially part-time jobs while studying to support myself, something which I didn't find very possible in Türkiye sadly” (P4).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that international students' educational experiences in Türkiye are shaped by the interaction of academic, sociocultural, linguistic, and institutional factors. Although participants generally evaluated their educational experiences positively, they also reported challenges related to language proficiency, social integration, and access to support services, particularly during the early stages of their studies. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that international students' adaptation is a multidimensional process influenced by both individual and contextual factors (Rienties et al., 2012; Khan, 2025; Howe et al., 2023).

In terms of academic adjustment, the findings indicate that students gradually adapted to the Turkish higher education system despite experiencing initial challenges. Similar to the findings of Rienties et al. (2012), Zhu et al. (2022), and Mao (2024), academic adjustment was influenced not only by students' individual abilities but also by communication with instructors, academic guidance, and institutional support. The ability of most participants to maintain satisfactory academic performance despite initial adjustment difficulties further suggests that supportive learning environments play an important role in facilitating academic success.

Consistent with previous studies (Khan, 2025; Lai et al., 2023; Xiao, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2026), language proficiency emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting students' academic and sociocultural adaptation. Participants reported that limited Turkish proficiency created difficulties in understanding lectures, communicating with instructors, and interacting with local students, particularly during the early stages of their education. These findings reinforce the importance of providing continuous language support as part of internationalization policies rather than viewing language learning solely as students' individual responsibility.

The findings also highlight the importance of institutional support in facilitating international students' educational experiences. Similar to the studies of Howe et al. (2023), Ivanova et al. (2025), and Xue and Singh (2025), participants generally perceived academic advisors, instructors, and international student offices as valuable sources of support. Nevertheless, some participants indicated that communication with these services could be improved, suggesting that institutional support should be more visible, continuous, and responsive to students' changing needs.

Finally, the findings suggest that international students' educational experiences are shaped not only by university-level practices but also by broader contextual factors. Consistent with the studies of Erturk and Luu (2022) and Yerken and Luu (2022), which emphasize the influence of macro-level societal, geographical, and economic conditions on adaptation, participants in the present study viewed Türkiye's cultural diversity and educational opportunities positively while identifying increasing living costs as an important challenge. Overall, these findings reinforce the view that international student adaptation is a multidimensional process requiring coordinated academic, linguistic, social, and institutional support. By examining these dimensions simultaneously within a single qualitative case study, this research contributes to the literature by providing a more holistic understanding of international students' educational experiences in the Turkish higher education context.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the educational experiences of international students studying at higher education institutions in Adana, Türkiye, through a qualitative case study approach. By exploring students' academic adjustment, sociocultural adaptation, language-related challenges, institutional support experiences, and broader educational perceptions, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping international students' educational experiences in the Turkish higher education context.

The findings indicate that although participants generally evaluated their educational experiences in Türkiye positively, language barriers remained the most significant challenge affecting both academic

participation and social integration. Participants also emphasized the importance of accessible institutional support, effective communication with university staff, and opportunities for interaction with local students. Overall, the findings demonstrate that successful adaptation depends on the combined influence of academic, linguistic, social, and institutional factors rather than on any single dimension.

This study contributes to the international student literature by providing qualitative evidence from the Turkish higher education context and by examining multiple dimensions of international students' educational experiences within a single analytical framework. The findings suggest that universities should continue to strengthen language support, orientation activities, academic advising, and initiatives that encourage meaningful interaction between international and domestic students.

The findings should, however, be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study was conducted with a relatively small group of international students from two public universities in Adana, and therefore the results cannot be generalized to all international students in Türkiye. In addition, the findings are based on participants' self-reported experiences within a qualitative case study design. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples from different regions of Türkiye and employ comparative or longitudinal research designs to provide a broader understanding of international students' educational experiences over time.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Publication Ethics Board of Adana Alparslan Türkeş Science and Technology University (Decision No. 06/5). Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were anonymized before analysis.

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