Article

International Students' Adaptation Process in a Turkish University

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ABSTRACT

International student mobility increases student diversity, fosters different perspectives, and contributes to human capital. Turkey has gradually increased international student numbers, making investigating their challenges and academic success factors essential. This study examines the adaptation processes of 62 language preparatory students at a state university in northwestern Turkey using an exploratory, qualitative approach, focusing on a holistic single case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed using a common software tool. The article addresses the adaptation process, structures and practices aiding adaptation, and reasons for choosing Turkey as a study destination. Findings show students choose Turkey for "cultural proximity," "social conditions," and "educational conditions." Adaptation factors are categorized into "cultural practices in daily life," "individual factors," and "institutional factors."

Universities are international institutions that educate and train students, promote pluralistic cultures, enhance state-society synergies, and support broad-based national development initiatives (Heyneman et al., 2007). Every year, thousands of students migrate from developing countries to pursue education. The Institute of International Education (IIE, 2024) reported that more than 1.1 million international students from more

than 200 countries enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions in the 2023–2024 academic year. These students have had to cope with a variety of culturally diverse stressors (Gao&Wesely, 2024).

International students study outside their country (Siczek, 2015; Xiong et al., 2024). This usually means that students go to another country to study at the tertiary level. In addition to generating revenue for the education sector, international students transfer knowledge between institutions and serve as cultural ambassadors between countries (Astley, 2024; Bokayev, 2024; Tran & Pham, 2016).

For the last 25 years, the "internationalization of higher education" has fluctuated with economic trends, global security, and technology and communication tools (Choudaha, 2017; Kashkan & Egorova 2015). University administrators in Turkey embraced the trend around 2010 (Bostrom, 2010), understanding that internationalization leads to increases in the quality of education, greater cultural understanding, economic impact, and human resources developed through scientific cooperation. This is important for individuals, institutions, and society at large.

There are potential economic and cultural benefits of having international students in higher education. The economic contributions of international students and their dependents are not limited to higher education institutions. They also make definitive economic contributions to the host country during their post-graduation employment. Furthermore, they provide cultural and strategic benefits (Siczek, 2015). However, some adjustment problems come with being an international student. Coping with difficulties may vary depending on the culture in which the student was raised (Altbach, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Even the most minor needs can be considered significant problem areas for international students. Pritchard and Skinner (2002), in their study of international students in the UK, found that international students need help in establishing meaningful social relationships and addressing problems with different food cultures and cultural expectations. These studies show that the host country's attitude towards students impacts adaptation. Prejudices against certain cultures negatively impact the adaptation process of international students, significantly contributing to issues like isolation and poor overall health (Zhang et. al. 2024). Additionally, these studies suggest that institutional orientation programs and intervention practices, such as creating buddy programs and explaining informal communication channels, will provide improvement (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Research shows several areas where international students sometimes struggle. The results of a study of international students studying at two universities in South Africa showed similar findings. The results show that many international students suffer from psychological distress and have difficulty with cross-cultural adjustment. Language barriers, lifestyle, and xenophobia were cited as prominent situations, among numerous other factors (Iwara et al., 2017). According to the study conducted by Mbous et

al. (2022) in the USA, residence difficulties and lifestyle changes were ranked among the top problems of students. As a result, residence challenges, particularly those related to lifestyle or cultural differences, occur in almost all countries and negatively impact students. Social cohesion is seen as a way to promote belonging while reducing marginalization and fragmentation (Engel et al., 2014). In a 2007 study of international students from 15 different countries in the United States, the problems faced by international students were not only problems of adaptation but also severe difficulties with the host country's rules, regulations, and procedures and a lack of support structures in place at host institutions. Some of these include difficulty renting a house and educational requirements that differ significantly from those in the host country (Lee & Rice, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Mobility to Turkey

International student mobility in Turkey began in the mid-20th century. During this time, Turkey established cooperation agreements with various countries, increasing the acceptance of international students (Ünal, 2019). However, with the Law on Foreign Students Studying in Turkey (Republic of Turkey, 1983) enacted in 1980, especially in 1983, this mobility trend continued to increase. Turkey has become a popular destination for international students. International students studying in Turkey increased from 50,000 in 2013 to 300,000 in 2023 (Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024).

The first year abroad represents a critical period in the adaptation process of international students (Gu et al., 2010; Nguyen & Larson, 2017). Students may experience difficulties adapting to a new culture and environment during this period. As An & Chiang (2015) emphasized, the first year is a period in which significant changes occur in important adaptation indicators such as emotional stability. The initial "honeymoon" phase of students' educational experiences is quickly overtaken by academic demands, complicating the adaptation process (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008).

International students in Turkey receive education through programs such as YÖS, TCS (students from Turkic Republics, Turkic, and Related Communities), Islamic Development Bank (bilateral agreements, YÖK), Socrates/Erasmus Program (mutually agreed students) (Çelik, 2008; Kılıçlar et al., 2012). Students from many countries of the world come to Turkey for education within the scope of programs such as TÜBİTAK, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), YÖK, Ministry of National Education, intergovernmental agreements, Turkish National Agency, and the Mevlana Program. There are programs and support not only at the undergraduate level but also at the graduate level.

The countries that send the most students to Turkey are Indonesia, Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Greece, Bulgaria, Somalia and China (Şahin & Demirtaş, 2014).

Reasons Why International Students Choose Turkey

According to a study conducted by Radmard (2017), international students choose Turkey based on various factors such as quality of education, cultural proximity and economic opportunities. On the other hand, Turkey attracts attention with its scholarship opportunities for higher education. Research conducted by Snoubar (2017) reveals that scholarship opportunities are the main reason why students choose Turkey. In addition, Turkey's cultural diversity and historical richness facilitate the adaptation of international students, offering a significant advantage in students' educational journeys (Kocabıyık et al., 2019).

From an economic perspective, the cost of living and education in Turkey influences students' choices by offering a more affordable option, especially when compared to countries such as the United States and Switzerland (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015).

Turkey, besides being a Muslim country, has a developed culture of cooperation. This allows Muslim students, especially those from African and Asian countries to fulfill their religious rituals and contributes positively to the adaptation processes of students from other countries (Nguyen & Larson, 2017). According to the study by Topal and Tauscher (2020), students studying in Turkey often come from Islamic cultural backgrounds, reflecting the traditions of their home countries. Generally, these students do not face significant difficulties in performing their religious rituals. They tend to choose culturally closer countries to their own to continue practicing their religious rituals.

Social support networks are essential for international students when choosing a study destination. Support (social support) means the perception that the person is loved, cared for, valued and part of a social network of mutual help and obligations, and this increases the student's sense of belonging (Shu et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Demirbağ et al. (2022), social networks are critical to relieving loneliness among international students in Turkey. According to the study conducted by Şimşek (2022), students continue to maintain their traditions such as food and clothing through social networks, and they can also remain in solidarity in performing their religious rituals.

Factors Affecting the Adaptation Process of International Students in Turkey

The literature has examined the challenges faced by students coming to Turkey from various countries, particularly the Central Asian Turkic Republics. For example, Çelik (2008) found that the adaptation problems

experienced by students lead to stress, which in turn affects their academic performance. Kılıçlar et al. (2012) emphasized that inadequate proficiency in Turkish and financial challenges contribute to a decline in educational attainment. Language skills are among the most important factors that negatively affect academic success and make adapting to society and culture difficult.

In countries that teach English, students' English language proficiency can affect their academic performance, adaptation level, and ability to be socially involved in society and contribute positively to the adaptation process (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Students who know the language will be more likely to participate in social activities. They can also comprehend the information conveyed in the lessons more easily. However, language skills require a process. According to the study by Trenkic and Warmington (2018), language proficiency may not lead to success in academic results before a certain threshold is reached. This threshold does not correspond to the minimum language entry requirements. This points to a systematic disadvantage many international students face when pursuing their studies.

Studies on international students in Turkey and their difficulties parallel the results of the above studies. International students' challenges in Turkey include academic failure, longing for family, economic difficulties, language, accommodation, adaptation to culture, loneliness, etc. Inadequate support services offered by the university to students exacerbate these challenges (Kocabıyık et al., 2019, Sungur et al., 2016). Nowadays, the significant change in exchange rates leads to a decrease in the financial problems experienced by students coming to Turkey. Economic problems may vary according to economic fluctuations. As for the language problem, many universities in the US require a language proficiency certificate. However, this is not true in Turkey. As a result, regardless of the problems experienced by the students, language challenges lead to a decrease in the level of academic success and an increase in adaptation problems. Moreover, it causes some of them to drop out of education (Çöllü & Öztürk, 2009). For example, according to the data from the Student Dean's Office of the Turkish State University where the study was conducted, 9016 international students enrolled. There are currently 3680 international students. The University has an international student profile from Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt, Germany, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Palestine, Bulgaria, and many other countries. On average, international students comprise around 6-7% of all students (the state University, Dean of Students data-2022). These statistics reflect other universities in Turkey as well. It has been observed that since 2015, 1571 students have withdrawn their enrolment at the university where this study was conducted for various reasons, and 82 of them have withdrawn their enrolment due to failure. Failure can often result from a combination of many problem areas

related to adaptation. This study basically focuses on what these problems might be.

While Turkey has been sending students to foreign countries for years, especially in recent years, thousands of international students have been coming to study at Turkish universities. In 2019, two out of 100 university students in Turkey were international students. This rate is 19 percent in the UK, 10 percent in Germany and 4 percent in Greece. The number of international students in Turkey is increasing every year. The results of studies conducted on foreign university students in Turkey show that the academic achievement of international students is generally very low. Evidently, the challenges students face play a key role in their adaptation process, and many of these challenges are commonly shared. The primary category of issues affecting students is economic, including school fees, meal cards, food, transportation, and lodging concerns. A 2014 study conducted on international students at a state university in Turkey found the main reason for the low academic achievement of international students was language problems (Şahin & Demirtaş, 2014). Çiftçi and Öktem (2024) found very similar results in a study of international students studying in Turkey. Although respondents reported that in many ways, administrative challenges were more difficult in their home countries, they also reported challenges at their host institution with long paperwork processes and cost of paperwork, administrative problems due to language challenges, and frequent rule changes at the host institution. Language problems bring many problems with them, including problems based on socialization and problems of adaptation to the university and the city.

The main research question of this study is "What are the problems faced by foreign university students at the Turkish host university, and how can these problems be overcome?" To answer the main research question, the respondents in this study were asked about why they chose Turkey as an international study destination and what factors have helped and hindered their adaptation processes?

METHOD

Model

This research was designed as qualitative because it is more suitable for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in their context. Participants were asked to use their concepts for research problems. The research design is a holistic single case study (Yin, 2003). The single case design is used in studies on an event, a person or an institution. This study was conducted at a single institution. It reflects the university where the research was conducted the period and conditions in which the study was conducted (Morgan & Morgan, 2012). Using this design, the participants were asked to suggest the difficulties experienced by international students

in higher education during the adaptation process, the tools that help them, and the factors contributing to the adaptation process.

Participants

This research covers the experiences of international students at a public university in Turkey. The reason for choosing Turkish preparatory group students is that these students' experiences in Turkey are new. A total of 62 students, 36 men and 26 women (17 students from Indonesia, 8 from Kazakhstan, 6 from Saudi Arabia, 5 from Sudan, 3 from Jordan, 3 from Iraq, 2 from Syria, 2 from Palestine, 2 from Albania, 1 each from Russia and Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Serbia, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Lesotho, Kyrgyzstan, Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan) were interviewed. The interviews were student-directed, and snowball sampling methods were used. In addition to demographic information, some information such as income level and parental education level was also asked from the participants. The education level of the participants' parents is quite good. This suggests that their emphasis on providing their children with a quality education abroad reflects their own strong educational background and highlights the importance they place on education. Respondents also reported good income levels. The answers were categorized within the framework of the research questions.

Reliability

Methodological triangulation (literature review, observation, interview) was used during data collection, providing the potential to balance the weak points in the research process and increase the accuracy of the data. The triangulation technique is used to prepare field reports during and after the interview session with the participants. These reports can provide additional information about the context in which the interview was conducted. The non-verbal behaviors of the participants, such as their reactions, gestures, etc., are reported during the interview. Thus, potential clues are collected. The aim here is not only to collect comprehensive data about the phenomenon under study, but also to verify the data and identify inconsistencies in the clusters (themes and coding) (Donkoh & Mesah, 2023). The focus was on allowing the literature findings, statistical data, and students' experiences in the study during the adaptation process to emerge from their own statements. In order to ensure credibility (validity), consistency (reliability) (Kumar, 2011), and transferability (generalizability) (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006) within the scope of qualitative research, consensus was first reached among experts. To increase the reliability of this research, the interview form was prepared by obtaining the opinions of four experts and conducting pilot interviews. Finally, the case study design presented the data in a theoretical and descriptive structure.

Data Collection

Before data collection, approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the university where the research was conducted. After obtaining permission from the Ethics Committee, interviews were conducted between February 2023 and May 2023. Some participants were provided with interpreters during the interviews. Multiple data sources were used in this study. We collected demographic data, asked respondents to write a response to an open-ended question, and conducted a semi-structured interview. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed by the researchers, and stored on a password-protected computer to ensure the security of the data collected.

Data Analysis

This study used a descriptive method based on a phenomenological approach to interviews and a general survey model. Research data were obtained through a qualitative research approach. Thus, the factors related to an existing situation were examined, and how the participants were affected by these factors was investigated. The data analysis consisted of defining the phenomenon, organizing the data collection tool, collecting the data, coding and classifying the interviews, formatting the data, and reflecting them in the report (Creswell, 2020; Moustakas, 1994).

An inductive strategy was used to create new codes and themes in the analysis process with the open coding method the MAXQDA (2018) program. They allow the guidance of the text in coding aimed at revealing the unique situation of the students in the adaptation process.

Here, what it means to be an international student, the main difficulties, and coping methods were examined. The study provides not only textual description but also "revealing the perceptions and experiences" of the participants by focusing on their experiences and perspectives in a structural sense (Creswell, 2020).

RESULTS

All of the participants are preparatory students, and most of them are from Muslim Asian countries. The purpose of selecting language preparatory class students is that their development and experiences regarding adaptation processes are still new. The findings can be categorized under two themes.
- Reason for receiving education in Turkey
- Factors Related to the Adaptation Process

Reason for Receiving Education in Turkey

According to the responses received from the participants, the reasons for choosing Turkey for education were consistent with the literature. Accordingly, three themes emerged: "Cultural proximity," "social conditions," and "educational conditions."

Cultural Proximity

Religion is an important determinant of cultural similarities and is sometimes expressed through eating habits. One respondent shared, "My family preferred me to come here because it is easy to find halal food here." Participant: 15 (Indonesia, F, 21, 6 months). Accordingly, finding halal food and historical proximity can be seen as reasons for choosing Turkey. Despite the differences in daily practices, feeling close to Turkey is also reflected as "I wanted to learn Turkish because I liked Turkey from TV series." Participant: 36 (Saudi Arabia, M, 18, 6 months).

Social Conditions

Social conditions include social networks in Turkey, the characteristics of the city they come from, and the security situation. On the other hand, siblings, relatives, or acquaintances are also very important when choosing a university.

> The biggest factor for me to choose this place is that I have many relatives and friends in Turkey. (Participant: 13, Kazakhstan, F, 18, 6 months).

> I came to Turkey for education because Turkey is very beautiful, and I want to learn about the history of Turkey. I also chose the University because the city is neither crowded nor calm. (Participant: 12, Indonesia, F, 19, 12 months).

Social networks can be a determining factor in choosing Turkey, especially if there is someone they trust and can communicate with.

Educational Conditions

For international students, the quality of education is a decisive element in their decision to choose a university. Educational processes are also related to campus facilities and the educational approach of the country/city. One participant expresses their thinking and choosing Turkey as a good alternative for education as follows.

There are many reasons why I want to study in Turkey. 1. Education in Turkey is much cheaper and better than in Indonesia. 2. It is easier to get into a good university in Turkey. In Indonesia, the exam to get into a good university is quite difficult. 3. The education and health system in Turkey is better than in Indonesia, so I like it a lot. 4. Turkey has four seasons. (Participant: 48, Ethiopia, F, 18, 6 months).
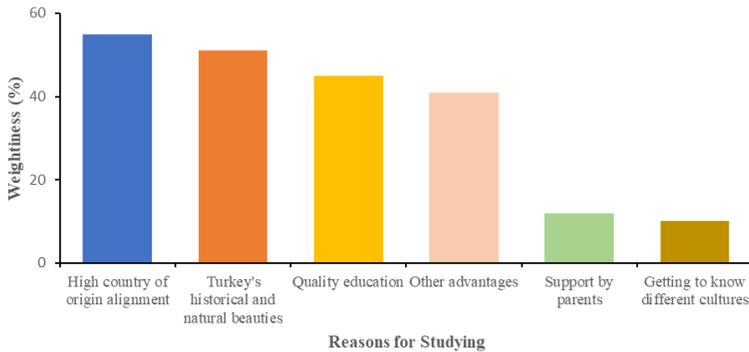

Figure 1: Reasons for studying in Turkey

The participant students generally described the behaviour of Turks as warm, sincere, and helpful. Participants have positive statements about the trainers at the university.

When I was at university in my home country, my teachers were usually very formal; here they are more relaxed and mingle with the students more. (Participant: 47, Indonesia, F, 23, 5 months).

The quality of education and the attitude of the academic staff played a decisive role in the reasons why students chose Turkey.

Factors Related to the Integration Process

As seen in Figure 2, there are eight main areas that affect the adaptation process of international students. These areas are grouped under three main categories. These categories are "cultural distance factors," "individual factors," and "institutional factors.”
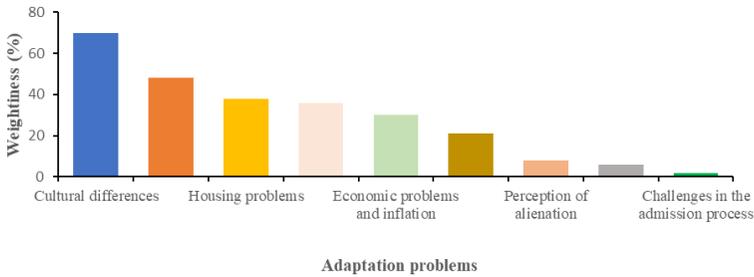
Figure 2: Problems with the adaptation process

Cultural Distance Factors

One of the reasons why international students prefer Turkey is stated as cultural closeness, however, the emphasis here is mostly on similarity of belief. Halal food and ease of living religious beliefs are decisive here. However, many cultural differences were stated in daily life, and it was said that this situation caused adaptation problems. Cultural differences include eating habits, language barriers, prejudices, family structure, etc. which may negatively affect the participants. Despite this situation, students meet their own cultural practices (especially food) with their own individual efforts. They continue their country-specific cultural practices through student groups.

Students' stress problems are significant. Some of the statements received from the participants in this direction are as follows.

> There are very strange foods from Turkish culture. Also, Turks wear shoes when they should wear slippers. (Participant 51, Indonesia, F, 19, 6 months).

> At first, it was difficult to eat Turkish food, but after a month, I got used to it, now it's fine. (Participant: 46, Russia, F, 19, 5 months).

Eating habits are one of the problem areas faced by international students in almost all studies. If there are markets where they can shop for foods from their home country, they overcome this problem much faster. It is seen that these differences come to the fore not only in terms of eating but also in different cultural norms. The statements given by the participants are as follows.

> There is a lot of cigarette consumption in Turkey in; my country, there is not so much cigarette consumption. This

situation seems very different to me. (Participant 38, Ethiopia, M, 20, 6 months).

The most critical teachings and symbols related to their traditions such as flags, language, traditional dances, music, jewelry, and cooking specific to their own tastes are the practices they can continue without any problems. On the other hand, since the participants are generally from Asian countries, they emphasize that they do not have many problems with traditional teachings in Turkey. Although there are slight differences in eating and drinking, they do not have much trouble getting used to Turkish food. Also, many students stated that they cook their own local food. *"I can continue my traditions; for example, I cook Palestinian food.*" Participant: 22 (Palestinian, F, 24, 5 months). In addition,

> I usually communicate with people from my own country. For example, it is better for me to speak my native language with my friends. (Participant: 52, Kazakhstan, M, 18, 7 months).

Another respondent stated that they communicate with their own communities.

> I try to continue my tradition. I celebrated my country's holiday here. We wore our traditional clothes in the show we attended. (Participant: 20, Mongolia, F, 19, 6 months).

In this way, they emphasized that they keep their traditional values alive.

Individual Factors

The most important individual factor is the expectations of those who come to Turkey. According to the interview data, the participants said that they had certain expectations before coming to Turkey and made their choices according to these expectations. While most of the participants stated that they met these expectations, a few participants stated that they encountered situations that were not as they expected. These situations include real estate agents, housing, economic ("I thought everything would be cheap in Turkey, but it is not that cheap." Participant: 52 (Kazakhstan, M, 18, 7 months)), inflation and language ("I expected Turkish to be an easy language, but it is not." Participant: 56 (Indonesia, M, 21, 6 months)) problems.

> This place is much different than I expected. I expected a more friendly environment. People are usually very tense, and I feel like a foreigner (maybe because I studied at

TÖMER[1] because there are only foreigners). (Participant: 37, Albania, F, 22, 6 months).

(I would say the main differences with my country are music, food and language. (Participant: 62, Sudan, M, 22, 6 months).

As can be understood from the above statements, the expectations of international students before coming to Turkey differ in some respects. Generally, in the age of technology, it is possible to access information at almost any time. For this reason, even though most participants encountered a process as they expected, a few had different experiences from what they expected.

Homesickness and missing family members are among the problems experienced by the participant students. However, many students said that they did not have much difficulty adjusting to Turkey. This rate is higher among students from Muslim countries. The emphasis on cultural similarities in countries such as Indonesia, Arabia, Kazakhstan, Syria, and Palestine mainly affect this situation. On the other hand, one participant of Albanian and Russian origin has a very different perspective on the adaptation phase and processes. They explain this situation with the following statements.

There are many Muslim holidays here. However, there are no New Year celebrations. It was difficult to prepare documents after admission to the university, it is hard to do without knowing Turkish. I asked for help, and I was not rejected. There was no problem with security, but my friend warned me that they might steal our phone late on the street. (Participant: 46, Russia, F, 19, 5 months).

I had a very hard time. It was very difficult because being alone and in another country is a big change, and it takes time to get used to it. It's been six months, and I still have not gotten used to it completely. (Participant: 37, Albania, F, 22, 6 months).

In general, international students feel safe. However, some students stated that they were afraid of earthquakes, mainly due to the implementation of the study two months after the February 6, 2023, earthquake.

Yes, I thought about dropping out of school. I thought about dropping out because I live in an earthquake zone. (Participant: 31, Jordan, F, 20, 6 months).

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[1] Turkish Language Teaching Application and Research Center, Unit that provides Turkish language preparation to international students.

In line with the responses received from the students, the earthquake issue hurts students' perceptions of safety.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors define both the processes related to the functioning of the university and the elements related to the procedures of the city in which the university is located. When looking at the university dimension, it was seen that exams were defined as an important source of stress. Exams administered in a language other than their mother tongue caused stress for students. This situation is especially traumatic for preparatory students. The fact that they do not consider themselves fully competent in listening, speaking, and writing a new language leads students to fear.

> I feel stress and fear during exams; sometimes I do not feel well, and I lose my appetite and cannot eat. (Participant: 34, Saudi Arabia, M, 20, 15 months).

One of the factors affecting adaptation to the city where the university is located is transportation difficulties. Transportation is an essential factor in the adaptation process. Students generally reside on or near the campus. However, a few students expressed difficulties finding and paying for transportation.

> Transportation is very expensive for me here. (Participant: 26, Iran, F, 22, 9 months).

> I have problems with transportation because the minibuses are full, and sometimes I have to walk. (Participant: 31, Jordan, F, 20, 6 months).

University activities and support are included among other institutional factors. Here, the university faculty, events, cultural activities, and programs can be considered as the most obvious supporters. Support from fellow students, positive attitudes, and behaviours towards international students in the city, student communities, and the support of having a relative here stand out. One of the first problems that students who are or will be studying in a foreign country face is the course registration problem. Concerns about registration and correct registration demoralize students and wear them out psychologically in the first days. Students overcome some of these challenges by relying on their social networks. This is especially true for students from Asian countries. This quote from a Saudi Arabian student illustrates the importance of social networks.

My cousin helped me when I first came to Turkey. When I first came to city, students from the university helped me by contacting me through WhatsApp groups. (Participant: 34, Saudi Arabia, M, 20, 15 months).

The level of socialization and with whom they socialize is essential in the integration process. During the socialization process, it was observed that the participants preferred to stay in contact with people from their own countries and maintain cultural practices.

For example, at least 2-3 times a month, Bangladeshis here get together and cook and eat traditional food together. We also celebrate National Holidays together. I have not had any serious problems so far. Still, I go to Bangladeshis here when we need something. I also have a lot of fun thanks to the activities organized by Yedirenk (student community). (Participant: 30, Bangladesh, M, 20, 6 months).

Students were asked what they thought the university should do to facilitate the socialization and adaptation processes. This theme was divided into two categories. It is seen that different topics were mentioned around on-campus activities and off-campus activities. In this regard, students mentioned the importance of using Turkish more actively, and the benefits of organizing trips, sporting and artistic activities, and various courses. Most respondents participate in these communities and state that they have a strong social environment. For this reason, the university has allowed international students to form communities with peers from their own culture. Students from almost all countries have student societies. Through these communities, activities specific to their countries are organized, and cultural characteristics of their countries are introduced.

In addition to the activities sponsored by the university, students create their own opportunities to socialize.

Many people at TÖMER are my friends. We go out a lot together; we go to each other's houses and generally have fun. (Participant: 34, Saudi Arabia, M, 20, 15 months).

On the other hand, there are student societies related to their own culture and artistic, scientific, or sports fields that align with the students' interests.

"We are informed about student societies when we arrive. Each country has its community. Our international community is called Yedirenk, but students from every country can join. Activities such as picnics, rector visits, and

municipality visits are carried out through the community." Participant 60 (Indonesia, F, 23, 9 months).

Thanks to these societies, students gain new experiences and have the chance to mingle with their peers. The following statement was used by the participants in this regard.

DISCUSSION

International student mobility is one of the most critical issues that should be evaluated and analyzed in all its aspects. The national and international significance of this process is social, economic, political, and human capital. Therefore, the healthy functioning of the integration process of international students is vital.

The findings of this study parallel to the literature on international students' adjustment and adaptation (Pritchard and Skinner, 2002; Lee &Rice, 2007; Iwara et al. 2017; Engel et al. 2014; An & Chiang, 2015). It was observed that international students, especially in the first year, had difficulties in daily practices (eating habits, socialization), and experienced challenges in speaking the language. Students tried to overcome the difficulties they experienced in socialization through student unions and informal communication channels.

When we analyze the study results, similarity in beliefs has been defined as cultural similarity as the reason for choosing a country. However, differences in daily practices have also been expressed as the reason for adaptation difficulties. Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country and has significant cultural differences from other Muslim countries. Especially in elements of daily life (food culture, clothing, values), these differences can lead to adaptation difficulties for international students.

On the other hand, students' reasons for choosing the city and country also positively impact the adaptation process. The students stated family guidance, having an acquaintance or relative in the country, qualified education and instructors, and preferable climatic conditions as positive factors. These factors were cited as determinants of the preference for Turkey, the city in particular, and the positive realization of the adaptation process. In addition, student clubs, university activities, and the support of friends and fellow students also positively affect the adaptation process.

In addition to these, individual needs also reveal the need to diversify and increase international student activities. Especially in the first year, establishing healthy communication can be more difficult due to the language barrier. In this process, psychological needs often come to the fore. For this reason, it is essential to fully understand what is conveyed in the lessons, to communicate effectively with the lecturers, and to increase individual entrepreneurship and confidence.

Another noteworthy point in this study is that students tend to engage in campus-based communities from their own culture, relying on these networks to manage and pursue their own work. In contrast, previous studies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Lértora et al., 2017), found that while universities provided consultancies and support centres, students showed relatively low demand for these resources.

LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations. First, the study only covers the experiences of international students at one university. Therefore, the study cannot be generalized. It is also limited to the opinions of only the interviewed students. In addition, it is worth noting that it is limited to the period in which the research was conducted. Based on this, a next step is to interview students at various universities in Turkey.

Many students from different cultures were selected. The student community belonging to a single culture could be expanded and examined to shed light on future studies. The students' experiences during the adaptation process are very fresh. Homesickness is prevalent in all of them, and many of them have the desire to return to their homeland as soon as their education process is over. However, we do not have enough information about whether the students will experience the same emotional response in the following years. More research is needed to obtain this information.

Acknowledgment

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