

**International student's challenges and adjustment in Turkish universities, a case study
based on Ankara.**

Asst.Prof.Dr.Thseen Nazir
Ibn Haldun University
Istanbul, Turkey

Presented Paper titled **International student's challenges and adjustment in Turkish universities, a case study based on Ankara** in 4th International Social Science Congress, Nevsehir, Turkey from 22nd Nov to 24th Nov 2018.

Abstract

International student's enrolment in higher education in the Turkey has expanded considerably in the last decades with the help of Turkey Bursları Scholarship Program. The relevance of this work is determined by the real problems of foreign students' adaptation to the educational environment of Turkish Universities. Every year more and more foreign students come to Turkey to get higher education, and every foreign student goes through an objective process of adaptation to University life. In this study, international students' experiences were examined in academic and socio-cultural settings. Through qualitative interviews, the findings revealed that international students deal with academic challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment. Specifically, academic challenges included communication with professors, classmates, and staff. Consequently, they have to deal with social isolation when engaging in different group activities. Culturally, they need to confront the different ways of thinking and doing in the Turkey. In order to overcome these challenges, students have adopted some reasonable resources that mainly are derived from the universities and outside universities to overcome these challenges. Thus, as demonstrated in this study, having a better understanding of these students' academic challenges, university faculty and staff can recognize students' needs and effectively offer supportive campus resources and services. The university needs to be prepared to meet students not only academically but also socially and culturally. This study also

suggests that some preparations need to be made by the university that will embrace international students upon their arrival.

Key Words: - International Students, Academic challenges, Issues, adjustment

Introduction

The recent demand for internationalization and globalization of our world, cross-borders the student mobility around the world has increased fundamentally. The inflow of international students in Turkey has increased significantly. According to the recent data from the most famous scholarship of Turkey i.e. Turkey Bursları Scholarship the total number of applications which they received during 2018-2019 session was 130000 and after the selection the number of foreign student under this scholarship will rise to 17000. According to the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) data, 17,000 students from 160 countries are studying in Turkey as part of Turkey's full scholarship program.

International students study at thousands of colleges and universities in all across Turkey. They contribute to the diversity and internationalization of their classrooms, campuses, and communities. For example, these students add different perspectives in the classroom and enhance the mutual understanding and appreciation of the differences found around the world. Therefore, it is critical to embrace international students in Turkish universities campuses because of their contributions that have positively influenced the student population on so many different levels. These levels that are influenced include academic prestige, cultural exchange etc.

To begin with, among different students, international students are extremely crucial to Turkish higher education for both academic prestige and financial benefits. For example many international students are high ranked in their home countries; however, they have to also meet

requirements in academic and language aspects. Namely, these students bring new divergent ways of thinking and catalyze academic competition.

Secondly, international students constitute an increasingly relevant and important source of diversity on college campuses. They enrich the cultural diversity of campuses with their home culture and ethnic experiences. In addition, international students help the faculty and students to develop their cultural sensitivities and skills in working with people from different backgrounds. International students can provide opportunities for Turkish faculty, students, and Turkish society to experience different languages, cultures, and traditions. Hammer et al. (2003) discovered that “as one’s experience of cultural difference become more complex and sophisticated, one’s potential competence in intercultural relationship increases”. Moreover, as an individual is exposed to diverse cultures, he or she has multiple opportunities to compare and construct a more diverse worldview. However, many international students face challenges as they pursue higher education outside of their home countries (Hull, 1978, Ozturgut, 2009). They face obstacles, such as different food, unfamiliar living circumstances, financial problems, balancing work, studying schedules, learning styles, or any difficulties related to language, culture, and personal barriers. A series of transitional difficulties can be from daily life to cultural adaption (Constantine et al 2009, Yoon, 2004). If Turkish colleges are going to embrace international students on their campuses, these issues should be addressed and accommodated. The current study is, therefore, situated based on the Ankara hosting international students in higher education for the past few years.

International students cannot escape the cultural shock and change they experience during their studies in the Turkey. Hence, these changes can be attributed to the acculturation process. These changes occur across physical, biological, cultural, social relationship, and

psychological (behavior and mental health status) domains (Berry et al 1987). Berry (2006) has proposed a transactional model of stress and coping in which he surmises that psychological health and adjustment are influenced by an individual's acculturation experience, the appraisal of acculturative stressors, and the coping skills used. The acculturation process can be positive, improving one's life chances and mental health in the majority/dominant culture, or it can be negative. The negative part of the acculturation process can occur due to the inherently challenging nature of change and adaptation to new cultural and social expectations (Berry et al 1987). Similarly, the success of a sojourn or a temporary stay in a new culture is often conceived, in the psychological literature, in terms of "adjustment." It can occur in two aspects, namely, psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Ward, 1993). Psychological adjustment is defined as relating to the mental health and overall well-being of migrant (Ward,1993), whereas sociocultural adjustment is defined as relating to the behavioral and cognitive factors that are associated with effective performance during cross-cultural transition (Sam, 2006).

Literature review

For most international students, entering Turkish universities can be an overwhelming life and cultural transition. Many studies (Nazir,T. 2018) explored the challenges and hurdles experienced by international students attending institutions of higher education in the Turkey. These difficulties include, but are not limited to, language difficulties, difficulties adjusting to the academic culture, misunderstanding, and complications in communication with faculty and peers; stress, anxiety, feeling of isolation, social experiences, culture shock, lack of appropriate accommodation, isolation and loneliness, and any adaption in their daily life.

In many aspects, international students perceive the isolation and loneliness when they are studying in the Turkey. In a recent study conducted among 900 international students in

Australia, (Russell et al., 2010) found that 41% of international students experience substantial levels of stress. This stress could be from homesickness, cultural shock, or perceived discrimination. A recent study conducted in Turkey (Nazir.T., 2018) showed that 94% of the students had problems in adjusting to living in the Turkey. Yi et al. (2003) conducted a study in a major university in Texas on the utilization of counseling services by international students. The data collected over six years of the study indicated that many international students, when having difficulties or psychological concerns, lean on family and friends. Unfortunately, not all students have the support they need and many people were not empathetic for hosting international students.

Next, many challenges also occur in the academic setting. Language is considered one of the greatest academic issues hindering smooth adjustment for international students (Galloway, 2005). The following studies highlighted international students' challenges in their academic learning. Probertson et al (2000) surveyed staff's experiences with international students. The findings indicated that the staff was not empathetic due to the students' language proficiency. They criticized international students for not taking responsibility for their academic advancement. Liu (2011) used her own experiences as an example to discuss her struggles as an international student in Canada. Liu expressed that her lack of English proficiency became a barrier for successful participation in host community. She could not understand what her instructors and classmates were talking about in her graduate-level classes. She even had difficulty solving everyday problems, such as taking the correct buses, grocery shopping, or asking for help. Besides the isolation from classmates, many international students also faced the challenges from professors. For example, Terui (2011) examined six international students'

struggles in interacting with native speakers using ethnographic methods. Findings from this study showed that international students had to pretend to understand the conversational contents exchanged with native English speakers due to their limited language proficiency. At times, a low English proficiency level would result in a negative impression from a professor because the professor perceived that the international student was not well-prepared for class. Similarly, another study also demonstrated a problem between a professor and their international students because of language proficiency. Beoku-Bettors (2004) observed African female scientists who were graduate students in Western universities. The finding demonstrated that professors regularly questioned international students' ability to complete course assignments, encouraged international students to take remedial classes, and readily criticized international students' accents. The result of this type of treatment on behalf of the university professor prompted international students to feel that they did not have support when needed at school, and they perceived these responses from the professor as prejudicial attitudes toward them. These studies show that international students lack support in their academic learning. Racism and stereotypes still exist for international students, and this is an important finding to consider that universities should consider when hosting international students.

On the contrary, Severiens and Wolff (2008) found that students who feel at home, who are well-connected to fellow-students and professors and who take part in extracurricular activities are more likely to be retained in school and successfully graduate from the university. Namely, support from family and society has a positive influence on the study-success of students.

The above literature had discussed different examples from different populations, and these studies demonstrated the international students' acculturative stress. The acculturative

stress refers to a variety of negative outcomes for international students. For example, the literature has noted that the challenges experienced by international students often trigger feelings of uneasiness, insecurity, depression, anxiety, and loss (Constantine.,2004, Wei., 2004) or academic pressures, language difficulties, feelings of inferiority, difficulties in adjusting to new food or cultural values, lack of support, perceived discrimination, and homesickness (e.g., Sandhu.,1994, Yeh., 2003). Although challenges and coping strategies were discussed intensively in the literature, more studies are needed to examine these challenges, however, in different contexts

Research Design

Qualitative case study approach was adopted because the purpose of this study was to understand in depth the issue of academic adaptation faced by international students studying in Ankara City. Case study is the most appropriate qualitative research method for the present study because it “concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts” (Stake, 2005)

Participants

Twenty participants were identified randomly as international students who were studying in undergraduate, graduate and doctorate programs in the different universities of Ankara. Among twenty participants 10 was male and 10 was female students. Using convenience sampling, representativeness was limited in this study; however, in order to generate more representativeness some demographic variables were controlled. For example, participants were selected from different continents such as Asia, Africa and Europe.

Having a similar background helped researchers to establish the relationship with our participants. The participants were typically more open with us so that allowed for a greater depth of data to be gathered. We met our participants at whatever place was convenient for them such as university campus, dormitories or in their apartments. They all were selected based on these criteria. (1) They enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate or doctorate program in a university in Turkey under Turkey Bursları Scholarship (2) The length of residence was less than two years in Turkey. The length of residence may also influence the adjustment difficulties, so this study focused on students who newly arrived in this country. (3) Students had experiences taking language classes.

Data Collection

Interview sessions were held according to convince of participants such as at the university campus, apartments or dormitories. Each interview lasted 70 minutes and Interviews were audio taped and all participants was comfortable with recording and they all was assured it will be used for research purpose only and their identities will not be released anywhere. The interview questions are related to international students' experiences since they came to study in Turkey. We adopted the semi structured interview in this study; thus, each participant replied to the same research questions, and we can explore more information based on their responses. The rationale of using this approach is to understand the respondent's point of view rather than make generalizations about behavior. The value of this type of interview allowed for opportunities to explore areas I had not previously considered (Reinharz.,1992). Interviews were conducted mainly in English. Interviews were transcribed immediately afterwards. Researcher's reflection and notes were also prepared to compare with interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Informed by many qualitative studies, data analysis was primarily inductive while guided by the literature. Individual interviews were transcribed and reviewed. The data were coded through a process of open coding, and emerging themes were analyzed both individually and across interviews for further analysis. These categories in order of coded transcripts were (1) struggles and difficulties encountered by participants in different settings (academic, social, and cultural); (2) strategies adopted to resolve these difficulties; and (3) recommendations for universities. Under each category, each theme is discussed, followed by potential strategies used and recommended by the participants.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that international students encountered different challenges in Turkey. They have to deal with the people, society, universities, psychological status, and behavioral changes in order to adapt to the new environment. Findings will be categories from academic, language and cultural aspects within the context of universities. Under academic struggle, there were four themes related to their difficulties in academic learning.

Academic Barrier

Participants spent a significant proportion of the time discussing study related issues during interviews. All participants, regardless of cultural origins, claimed that their professors were nice, professional, and approachable. However, they noted difficulties in communicating with their professors due to language barriers, cultural differences, and different expectations from professors.

- **Theme 1 (Interaction with Professors).** The interaction and communication difficulties happened in the classroom. This happened to students both from collectivism and individualism cultures. For example, most of the participants felt that they are not able to communicate with the professors because of the language barrier and they are not able to compete with the students who are native speakers of Turkish. Many times there pronunciations seem awkward and they feel if they ask anything and other students will laugh. The fear of saying something wrong make them silent in their class as well as they are not able to communicate with their professors. This problem is faced mostly by graduation students who have huge number of classmates in their classes.
- **Theme 2 (Isolation from Classmates).** Isolation occurs when fitting in and making friends occurs. International students in this study have encountered different isolation in class and their social life. These students usually take a more passive role in the beginning, but they eventually discover different strategies to involve in the social events or in the classroom discussion. Many participants feel isolation and they are unable to make friends because of the cultural as well as language barriers.
- **Theme 3 (Language Barrier).** Language is a greatest hindrance in participant's academic adjustment. Many participants indicated that Turkish language is a challenge for them although they have studied Turkish for one year in their language preparatory courses. The language difficulties are from different accents, rate of speech, and pronunciation. For many participants, they have to spend extra time improving their Turkish but speaking to them in day to day life in Turkish is different than the academic Turkish language. In one recent study conducted in Ankara and found that 87% foreign students had problems in adjusting with Turkish Language T. Nazir., 2018).

- **Theme 4 (Pressure of YTB).** Most of the participants felt pressure from the Scholarship office as they have to abide the rules and regulations and they have to fulfill all the criteria's otherwise their scholarship will be cut. These expectations included the learning outcome of Turkish language proficiency within a year; the completion of studies within a given time.

Social Barrier

- **Theme 5 (Communication Patterns).** International students face difficulties not only in the classroom but also in their social life. For example, when international students joined different social events, they stated they had to deal with different communication patterns. Participants also stated that the communication patterns are very different, so they have to deal with some awkwardness in the social interaction.

Adjustment Strategies

Studying abroad is not without its challenges, and there is evidence that international students experience a range of adjustment issues that can impact their study and overall experience. While universities often provide support services for international students, the personal stories of international students, identifying challenges, and strategies to overcome them can be helpful to other international students. The following themes have provided evidences that the institution has played an important role to support international students' adjustment.

- **Theme 6 (Dormitory and Campus Activities).** In order to overcome these challenges, participants took an active role to explore the new society and culture. For example, few

participants started to look for native Turkish speaking roommate in order to improve their Turkish proficiency. One of participants joined different students' organization. Through the socialization, she would like to share her cultures to other students at campus, and she would like to immerse herself to interact with other Turkish-speaking speakers. Namely, participants take active roles to engage in different campus activities in order to broaden their social networking.

- **Theme 7 (Language Support).** Though most international students did show proficiency in written and comprehension Turkish when they were admitted to Turkish universities, they faced a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting. In addition, it is also helpful to hold an orientation for international students. The Turkish educational system is very different compared to many students' background, so the orientation would help international students' readiness in living and studying in the Turkey.

This section presents the findings and provides further interpretations of them. Findings indicated that international students faced different challenges, and they utilized different strategies to adjust themselves. For a university that hosts international students, the following sections will discuss implications drawn from this study.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for institutions of higher education in the Turkey and YTB on how to assist international students in becoming successful were generated. Firstly, Turkish language program for students must be oriented towards academic language. Language barriers could affect students' academic learning, participation in different events, and cultural understanding. Universities can host workshops where international students

become familiar with the use of colloquial Turkish, commonly used slang words, and the social and cultural mores of the Turkish society in order to communicate effectively both in academic and in nonacademic settings.

Secondly, for Turkish students and faculty, they should be aware of the value of embracing international students and appreciating the diversity from each other. For example, Universities could host orientation programs for learning from international students. Faculty should consider the equal access and learning opportunities for all students. Turkish students also need to develop intercultural competence to interact with international students such as providing training for staff, who will work with international students.

Thirdly, tutoring and counseling are expected because international students need guidance to succeed in their academic learning, and their psychological stress should be supported. Fourthly, universities should offer international students a special orientation about Turkish culture and overall academic culture. Such efforts might include seminars by professionals, international students telling of their own experiences in Turkey, and organizations where friendship ties can be developed with local people.

Conclusion

Using qualitative research methods, this research explored international students' academic, social, and cultural adaptation. To maintain the generalization, this study includes international students from different countries. The findings indicated that international students often face a series of transitional difficulties when they come to study in Turkey at universities. On the other hand, these challenges also motivate international students to develop strategies to solve problems. When they become autonomous learners, they develop new learning strategies to

deal with difficulties. The adjustment and adaption takes time and effort, and it needs a lot of support from different aspects. The YTB and university is usually the first place where resources can be provided; thus the university needs to focus on the challenges faced by international students and provide more adequate support for them.

Limitations

The findings of the present study should be carefully interpreted because this study focused on a particular group of international students at a specific institution. Thus, generalizability of the findings beyond this group of international students is limited. Due to the time and word limit, this study did not further report other variables, such as motivation, cultural background, personality, and attitude, toward living and studying in Turkey. Future studies should consider looking at other variables closely for these groups.

References

Beoku-Bettors.(2004). “African women pursuing graduate studies in the sciences: racism, gender bias, and the Third World marginality,” *NWSA Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 116–135.

Berry, J. W., Kim, U. Minde, T. and Mok, D. (1987). “Comparative Studies of acculturative stress (Canada),” *International Migration Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 491–511.

Berry, J. W. (2006). “Acculturative stress,” in *Handbook of Multicultural Perspective on Stress and Coping*, P. T. P. Wong and L. C. J. Wong, Eds., pp. 287–298, Springer, New York, NY, USA.

Constantine, S., Okazaki, and Utsey,S.O.(2004).“Self-concealment, social self-efficacy, acculturative stress, and depression in African, Asian, and Latin American international college students,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 74, no. 3, pp. 230–241.

Constantine, M. G., Kindaichi, M., Okazaki, S., Gainor, K. A. and Baden, A. L. (2005) “A qualitative investigation of the cultural adjustment experiences of Asian international college women,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 162–175.

Galloway and Jenkins, (2005). “The adjustment problems faced by international students in the United States: a comparison of international students and administrative perceptions at two private, religiously affiliated universities,” *NASPA Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 175–187.

Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., and Wiseman, (2003) “The intercultural development inventory: a measure of intercultural sensitivity,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 27, pp. 421–443.

Hull, W. F., (1978). *Foreign Students in the United States of America: Coping Behavior within the Education Environment*, Praeger, New York, NY, USA.

Liu, (2011).“An international graduate student's ESL learning experience beyond the classroom,” *TESL Canada Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 77–92.

Nazir,T. (2017). “Adaptation challenges of International students, who come to study in Turkey under Turkey Bursları scholarship International Social Science Congress Istanbul”, International Students Social Sciences Congress Proceedings – i, *ilmi etüdler derneği*, isbn: 978-605-68401-4-2 (1.c), *Page 523-526*.

Probertson, Line.M, Jones, S.and S. Thomas, (2000) “International students, learning environments and perceptions: a case study using the Delphi technique,” *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 89–102.

Reinharz,(1992). *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, USA.

Russell, J., Rosenthal, D. and Thomson, G. (2010). “The international student experience: three styles of adaptation,” *Higher Education*, vol. 60, no. 2, pp. 235–249.

Sam. D. P.,Vedder, and Ward. C., (2006). “Psychological and sociocultural adjustment,” in *Immigrant Youth in Cultural Transition: Acculturation, Identity, and Adjustment Across National Contexts*, J. W. Berry, Phinney, and Sam, Eds., pp. 117–142, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, USA.

Sandhu and Asrabadi,(1994) “Development of an acculturative stress scale for international students: preliminary findings,” *Psychological Reports*, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 435–448,.

Severiens and Wolff, R.(2008).“A comparison of ethnic minority and majority students: social and academic integration, and quality of learning,” *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 253–266.

Stake,(2005).“Qualitative case study,” in Handbook of Qualitative Research, N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, Eds., pp. 443–466, Sage.

Terui,S.(2011).“Second language learners' coping strategy in conversations with native speakers,” *Journal of International Students*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 168–183.

Yi, Lin, and Kishimoto. (2003), “Utilization of counseling services by international students,” *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, vol. 30, pp. 333–346.

Yoon. E., and Portman, T. A. A. (2004) “Critical issues of literature on counseling international students,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 33–44.

Ward. C. and Kennedy. A., (1993) “Where's the culture in cross-cultural transition? Comparative studies of sojourner adjustment,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 221–249.

Wei, P. P. Heppner, M. J. Mallen, T.-Y. Ku, K. Y.-H. Liao, and T.-F. Wu,(2007). “Acculturative stress, perfectionism, years in the United States, and depression among Chinese international students,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 385–394.