

# Outcomes of Being an International Student in Turkey

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## Abstract

Universities in many Western countries host a substantial number of international students. Turkey is one of these countries. International students bring a range of benefits to the host country, and in return, the students gain higher education. However, studying abroad may present many challenges for the international students. The present paper provides the challenges international students face in Turkish universities. Personal narratives and interpretations of their own lives can help to understand the growing body of knowledge of the problems of international students. With narrative individual lives receive a representation that can be communicated. Thus, this study is a case study with narratives of two international students studying at a university in Turkey. This study showed that while international students sometimes get support from their peers and instructors, they often face difficulties in their classes, social lives, and economics.

## Keywords

International Student, Narrative, Challenge, Host Country

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## 1. Introduction

As old as learning itself is the history of traveling overseas for pleasure or instruction (Sandhu, 1994). The desire to pursue higher education overseas has grown during the past few years. As per the OECD study (2008), the number of students who traveled overseas for training was roughly 600,000 in 1975, but it has climbed five times to reach 3 million in 2006. Over 3.3 million foreign students were enrolled in postsecondary education in 2008 (OECD, 2010). This figure increased to 5.8 million globally in 2021, while the number of foreign tertiary students in OECD countries was 4.3 million, and the number of tertiary students in partner or accession countries was 1.5 million (OECD, 2023).

Similar to other countries, the number of international students in Turkish universities is increasing. Of course, Turkey also seeks to have more international students. In a hearing of YOK (2022) (Yuksekk Ogretim Kurulu-The Council of Higher Education), The director of YOK stated that “when we compare the numbers of international students enrolled in Turkish universities between 2000 and 2020, the rise of the number of international students in Turkey is higher than the USA and the United Kingdom” (2022). The rate of increase of the numbers of international students went up to decuple in Turkey.

First and foremost, foreign students are vital to any nation’s higher education system in terms of both financial benefit and academic prestige. Second, a growing source of ethno-cultural diversity is the global student population. Their ethnic expertise and native culture enhance cultural diversity. In addition to providing developed countries’ universities with much-needed financial support, international students also add richness to these nations through their varied backgrounds and viewpoints, which raises national understanding and appreciation of other cultures (Bevis, 2002). International students also aid in the development of the faculty’s and students’ cultural awareness and interpersonal skills when interacting with individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, by paying for their living expenses and tuition, international students contribute significantly to the global economy and relations. Furthermore, international students contribute to the intellectual capital of their host nation and increase the size of the labor force by bringing a wide range of knowledge and skills from different academic fields.

Turkish government scholarship program Grand Student Project was launched in the 1990s, marking the beginning of efforts to internationalize Turkish universities (Özođlu et al., 2015). The program was designed with international students in the former Soviet and Turkic nations in mind. There were about 18,000 international students registered in 2000. Nonetheless, there was a sharp rise in the number of foreign students after 2010. Compared to 16,500 students in 2000, Turkey now hosts over 100,000 foreign students (Yuzbasioglu, 2018). By 2022, there will be 300,000 foreign students studying in Turkey, representing 198 nations (YOK). The government’s unique focus on the internationalization of higher education through various policies and arrangements is credited with this sharp increase. Turkey is the top choice for international students seeking higher education because of its similarities in history, culture, religion, ethnic affinities, and somewhat lower cost of living (Özođlu et al., 2015).

However, as they pursue further education outside of their native nations, many foreign students encounter difficulties. They must overcome challenges like adjusting to new diets, strange housing arrangements, money issues, and striking a balance between job and school. They must adjust to the academic calendar, different learning styles, and potential challenges arising from linguistic, cultural, and individual obstacles. During the period of transition from ordinary settings to cultural adaption, a student may face several challenges. These concerns need

to be thought through and taken into account if the university plans to accept overseas students (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016).

Language competency was found to be the most prevalent issue among international students' concerns in research done in several other nations, including the United States (Yang, 2006; Mori, 2000). According to participants, they had a range of issues with lecturers and their education (Kesten, Kiroğlu, & Elma, 2010).

Additionally, these students must deal with a unique set of issues related to adjusting to their new community, some of which can be major obstacles to their successful academic studies or successful integration. Therefore, a detailed grasp of the issues these kids confront ought to result in more effective strategies for addressing them or demonstrating to the students how to make the necessary adjustments.

Although it could be argued that international students' stay is mutually beneficial because they bring a variety of assets to their host country and in return receive higher education, several factors affect their acculturation, which is defined as the process of change that results from the contact of two or more cultures (Berry, 2005). Still, international students face several challenges. Language, financial, social, psychological, health, recreational, and academic difficulties are common concerns for international students (Andrade, 2006; Lui, 2009). Hus (2003) lists several difficulties that international students encounter, such as prejudice, language hurdles, homesickness, relationships, and self-esteem.

Proficiency in the English language is crucial for academic classes since it allows students to express their knowledge with ease in research papers, classroom settings, and essay tests. Conversely, low English proficiency among international students has a detrimental effect on their psychological health, and these students could not be qualified for teaching assistantships at colleges or other institutions (Lin & Yi, 1997). There is a favorable correlation between adjusting to this new culture and academic issues. According to Lin and Yi (1997), students who struggle with academic subjects like understanding lecturers or teaching methods find it difficult to adapt to new situations. International students who have strong social connections have less psychological stress and have an easier time adjusting to their new social surroundings (Lui, 2009). Furthermore, the absence of a social support network among overseas students can have a detrimental impact on students' psychological health, including feelings of loneliness and sadness.

International students might not even be able to participate fully in class if they don't have English language proficiency. Many Asian students reported serious difficulties in understanding lectures, taking notes, responding to questions, and writing essays in research conducted by Heikenheimo and Shute (1986). Therefore, the most significant issue that foreign students encounter in their new country is academic failure, which also contributes to other social issues.

Studies have shown that foreign students from various countries who came to Turkey for university education had issues with language proficiency, academic performance, housing, orientation, and economic standing, among other things

(Ercan, 2001; Garabayev, 2000). Language issues are becoming more common among these issues (Allaberdiyev, 2007). Naturally, linguistic issues might lead to some academic issues (Tutar, 2002). According to Titrek et al. (2016), while studying in Turkey, foreign students have challenges with accommodations, health care, and cultural matters (17).

## 2. Method

The story research design was one of the qualitative research approaches used in this study. In the model of research narrative researchers explore people's experiences with a topic through personal stories (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012: p. 275). The investigator compiles the given tales. Through narrative research, stories are developed into experiences, and during the research analysis phase, the study's objectives evaluate these experiences from a variety of perspectives (Creswell, 2007). The participant's experiences during this process are examined by the researcher. These experiences fall into two groups, according to Saban and Ersoy (2016): societal and individual. While social experiences are derived from the participant's contacts with other people, individual experiences are derived from the participant's experiences alone.

Narrative research has the potential to reify the internal "self", idealize individual action, and present itself as offering an "authentic" voice—that is, an unfiltered subjective reality (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). It is dangerous to over-personalize the narrative. Narrative techniques are inappropriate for studies involving large numbers of anonymous and faceless participants. Consequently, the investigator intends to incorporate the accounts of four acquaintances into her investigation. Stories do not reflect the past; they distort it. Imagination and strategic goals impact storytellers' decisions about how to link events and make them meaningful for others (Riessman, 2005).

The research endeavored to examine the social experiences of the participants regarding the subject matter. These experiences were analyzed using the Riessman method. The following are the steps in Riessman's (2005) analysis procedure:

- 1) The account provided by the research participant (story).
- 2) The researcher's interpretation of this tale (narrative of narrative).
- 3) The story is experienced by the reader or rebuilt in their reality (narrative of the narrative of narrative).

The narrative study that follows includes each of these stages. The narrative is analyzed in terms of place, time, and interaction.

### 2.1. Study Group

In the study, an Iranian and a Syrian female student studying at a university in the western part of Turkey in the spring semester of the 2022-2023 academic year were interviewed. Narrative research is a research model that examines the life experiences of a single person or a very small number of people in great detail (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, detailed life experiences were tried to be revealed by

interviewing two people in the interview. The interview was conducted voluntarily. The participating students who came to Turkey in 2019. They were freshman at the College of Education.

## **2.2. Data Collection Process**

One technique for gathering data was the semi-structured interview approach. Among the several interview techniques, the semi-structured approach was employed. Although this approach makes the researcher's analysis easier, it gives the interviewee more room to express himself (Büyüköztürk, et al., 2012: p. 154). Apart from the pre-planned questions in this technique, one may include additional questions that arise based on the interview flow (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

Field texts, or the recorded interviews with the student participants, are the main sources of data used in this research project. Interactions and informal talks between the teacher and students in the classroom served as the basis for these interviews, which were then followed with interim field texts. These interim field texts were then utilized to facilitate negotiations between the researcher and study participants, aiding in both interview direction and interpretation. According to Cladinin and Connelly (2000: p. 111), the goal of these interviews was to make sure that the "participants' intentions are the uppermost". By letting the participants narrate their own stories in their unique ways, this was achieved (Anderson & Jack, 1991). The interview procedure took place in a cozy coffee shop, and the participant's familiarity with the researcher helped to foster this form of an autobiographical narrative of their experiences. This study conducted two interviews on different days by recording the interviews with the participants. A Syrian student was interviewed on one day and an Iranian student was interviewed on another day. Interviews lasted for 45 minutes. Additionally, the researcher's observations are also used as a data collection tool. Since the researcher is a professor at the university and was one of these students' instructors, the researcher's observation of in-class communications with Turkish and other international students was also added to the study.

These encounters have also been documented to create temporary field texts. The researcher's initial experiences as a teacher in a classroom full of international students inspired the research puzzle. Throughout the interview process, these experiences—which were recorded in notebooks and as reconstructed memories—served as temporary field texts. The interview questions and inquiries were based on these intermediate field texts. Additionally, thorough field notes were taken while conducting the interviews. As the researcher, these thorough field notes made it easier for me to record important events from the interview process. In further interviews during the interpretive process, these "constructed representations of experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: p. 106), or additional interim field texts, were used so the participants could negotiate and validate the meaning.

## **2.3. Analysis of Data**

Data analysis in the narrative study seeks to illuminate experience meanings. This

is why an attempt is being made to comprehend the data and establish its veracity (Liamputtong, 2009). The content analysis method was applied as a result. This method's primary objective is to provide the reader with a condensed and interpreted version of the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). At the beginning of the data analysis, students' interviews which were audiotaped were transcribed into a Word document. Later, these transcriptions were translated into English since the interviews were in Turkish. Lastly, transcribed and translated data were grouped, and categorized. In the end, themes that emerged from the data were determined. Following the analysis, two themes emerged: unacceptance from faculty and financial and social problems. Direct quotes from the opinions of the participating students are included in the conclusions on these themes; these quotations have been evaluated in light of the participant students' remarks.

According to Connelly and Clandinin, it is a challenging but crucial process to transition from field texts to research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: p. 129). It was challenging to step back from these sessions after the participant interviews and concentrate solely on the field texts to write the final narrative report. The shift in connections is not that the tight ties with participants have ceased, but rather that they are now more focused on repeating tales through research texts rather than living experiences with participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: p. 129). That being stated, on May 14, 2011, the researcher gave the participants one last chance to review the narrative accounts to make sure that member-checking resulted in a negotiation of the text.

It is important to read field texts carefully and again while keeping in mind the idea of commonplaces. At this stage, in their field texts, narrative inquirers start to "narratively code" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: p. 131). As the researcher tried to connect the narrative and experiential events that were revealed in the field texts, this approach raised numerous problems about meaning and social relevance. For them to be true to themselves, it is hoped that the narrative account would address the nuances of experiences for overseas students. To prevent the participant's voice from being drowned out, the researcher must be aware of their voice and signature throughout this process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: pp. 146-149).

## 2.4. Ethical Considerations

The participants in this study come from a different cultural background than the majority of Turkish people. To ensure that the participants' genuine identities in the research materials were hidden and confidentiality was maintained, pseudonyms, Aisha for an Iranian student and Emel for a Syrian student, were used. In addition, some material from field texts that would have revealed the participants' true identities was removed to protect their anonymity further. To guarantee that the participants were aware of the procedures and their rights throughout the research, an informed consent form was also utilized. All things considered, every effort was made to guarantee that everyone associated with the study—that is, the

participants—had positive experiences. To encourage member checking and negotiation of field texts, the researcher and participants engaged in an interpretive process. The genuine voices and concerns of the participants were respected in the spirit of this interpretive process. The research attempted to respect the subject and his rights by using an informed permission form and operating under the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Both the participant and the researcher expect to gain from their study interaction reciprocally by using this as an ethical platform.

### **2.5. Significance of the Study**

The researcher noted that some international students stood out from the rest in the Turkish-majority classrooms at a Turkish university, which led to the start of the research puzzle. The researcher started to question whether “I, as their teacher, or the institution and its curriculum were meeting their needs” as she started to ponder why these pupils stood out so strongly. The researcher then proceeded to pose the following queries: What are the experiences of international students attending Turkish universities? And how do their narratives influence how they interpret their experiences in this particular setting?

These inquiries sparked a series of casual discussions between the researcher and international students at the university about their experiences both there and in Turkey more broadly. The researcher was astounded and fascinated by their responses. The study also found that the participants’ life experiences and their time in Turkey are dynamic and multifaceted. The requirements, aspirations, learning preferences, and other characteristics of international students may differ significantly from those of the majority Turkish population. Examples of such differences include cultural expectations and perspectives on education. The researcher soon found that not only was there a dearth of studies being done globally on the experiences of international university students, but such research did not exist in Turkey. Furthermore, there was a dearth of narrative research being conducted on this subject, and a comprehensive search revealed that virtually none of it was taking place in Turkey. Considering these factors made the importance of this topic’s research even more clear.

## **3. Results**

The results are presented in two major themes: unacceptance from faculty and financial and social problems. As a data collection tool, semi-structured interviews were used in the study. Some general questions were asked of the participants. These questions were as follows:

- 1) Experiences you lived in the university environment;
- 2) Problems you encountered in your courses;
- 3) People or supports facilitating problems you encountered;
- 4) Any discrimination incident you experienced.

Answers of participants to these questions and the field texts of the researcher

will be presented in this section.

### 3.1. Unacceptance from Faculty and Turkish Peers

Both of the participants stated that professors don't try to understand international students' situations, don't try to help them in their courses, and some of them even discriminate against them. Thus, along with other adaptation problems, international students are facing with unacceptance of faculty. For example, Emel said that

“One day, in one of my courses, the instructor asked me where I am from. I said, ‘I am from Syria.’ He also asked what I was doing there. I told him that I came to study. He started to say ‘You should go back to your country, we don't want you here, especially since we don't want Syrian people in our country’. I was very sad and annoyed. I cannot forget that day and what the instructor said to me”.

Field texts of the researcher support this sentence of Emel. In one of her courses, she was chatting with international students at the end of the class, they all said that they were having trouble understanding what the instructors teaching since they were talking too fast. They asked one of their instructors to give them their PowerPoints and notes so that they could study. But the instructor refused it. Aisha's statement about talking fast also supports Emel's ideas. Aisha said, “One day I asked the instructor to *taşl* slowly so that she could not understand, but the instructor didn't pay attention to what she said and continued to talk as always.” Aisha also stated that some of the professors are fascists. She said that one of the professors was behaving international students differently than Turkish students and that the professor was racist. She said, “I came here eagerly and full of ambitions of learning; however, some racist professors made me very sad and went cold on.”

Aisha also gave another example of faculty being unacceptable to international students. She stated that one day she was at an exam and the duration of the exam was 40 minutes. However, the instructor took her paper for 30 minutes. When she said this was not fair, and that she had an additional 10 minutes. The instructor threatened and reprimanded her. She also added that after that her grade for that course went down. Additionally, the researcher wanted to give extra time for international students in her exams since they cannot read as fast as Turkish students but the department refused it. International students not only have problems understanding the courses but also catch up with the time for the exams. Of course, it shouldn't be ignored that some professors are racist and single out international students.

Regarding peers, international students mostly aren't welcomed by Turkish students. Syrian student Emel said, “There was a course which was very difficult for me and my Turkish friends didn't help me.” Aisha also stated that “mostly Turkish students don't want to be friends with us and they look at us as strangers”. Along with the participants' sayings, the researcher as a teacher also witnessed that international students were mostly left alone by their Turkish friends. One day,

while the researcher was teaching the course, the subject was ethnocentrism. Most of the Turkish students stated that they don't want international students in their classes uncaringly even if there were international students in the class. Also, the researcher always observes that international students sit together away from Turkish students in the classroom.

One day the researcher called some of the Turkish students and asked them why they were not talking or hangsgng out with international students. They answered that "even though we entered the university entrance exam they didn't take it and just came to university. This is not fair. We don't want them in here". We can see from this statement that they are not welcoming international students.

### **3.2. Financial and Social Problems**

International students come to Turkey to get a university education and they aim to be successful academically. However, when you enter a new country you also have to deal with social and economic issues. Thus, international students also face problems socially and economically.

Iranian student Aisha stated "The tuition that I have to pay was very important and when I asked how much I will pay they told me that I will pay 2500 Turkish liras tuition for a year. However, I just learned that my tuition increased and became 9000 Turkish liras for a year. This will be very hard for me. It is not impossible but I will have trouble paying it. On the other hand, many international students had to leave since they would not be able to pay the tuition. This is not fair". When we look at Aisha's statement, it is clear that international students are having economic problems in Turkish universities.

Emel, the Syrian student, mentioned a social problem she had. She said "One day I went to the cafeteria. I tried to get my lunch but I couldn't. I asked a man why I could not get my lunch. He checked and said that I made the wrong reservation. Nobody helped us or did orientation about campus life". International students should get an orientation program before they start their education at the university.

### **3.3. Supports**

The participants mostly mentioned problems they encountered in their narratives. One of the questions asked them about people or events that facilitated problems they encountered. They just mentioned about two things. After telling them about the wrong lunch reservation she made, Aisha said that "that man who said she made the wrong reservation, bought her a lunch even if she didn't want to accept. The man said that he didn't want her to be hungry". Aisha was very grateful to him. Emel, another participant, also said in her interview that "there were some professors like you (stating the researcher) who want to help us on our courses. Sometimes they gave us their notes, PowerPoints, or gave us additional assignments to increase our grades". She was also very grateful to those professors.

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They feel comfortable when there are people who try to help them.

#### 4. Conclusion

The increased mobility of students brings with it adaption issues that require evaluation and investigation. Globally, there has been an increase in cross-border student mobility as a result of the contemporary push for internationalization and globalization. They add to the public and scholarly spheres' diversity and globalization. For instance, these students improve understanding amongst peers and foster an appreciation of the diversity present in the world by bringing diverse viewpoints to bear on classroom issues. Because of their numerous and varied contributions to the student body, Turkish universities must admit overseas students. These levels include financial income, cultural interchange, and academic prominence. International students do, however, encounter numerous issues in their host nations.

To try to figure out the challenges international students face in Turkish universities by narratives of two international students, the study found that international students are facing some problems. These can be grouped under two themes; unacceptance from faculty and financial and social problems.

When examining literature, language challenge is the most severe of all other challenges making socio-cultural and academic adaptation very hard. Gu et al. (2010), in their study of foreign students in the UK, found that adapting to a new academic environment seemed to last longer and continued throughout their stay with challenges and loads such as completing assignments and improving their academic writing. This is consistent with the results of this study. The participants of this study mostly mentioned how they could not understand the courses, and their professors and Turkish peers weren't helping them.

Unfavorable attitudes and unacceptance towards international students among some professors and Turkish students is also another problem as mentioned above. An awareness creation on intercultural communication and international students' mobility should be made for Turkish students and staff working in universities (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020). In terms of support from faculty, Goodwin and Nacht (1983) reported that some hostility prevailed towards international students—"wet noodles soaking up anything you pour over them", and "bazaar merchants haggling over grades" etc. (10). They concluded that there were three reasons for the antipathy towards international students: first, "fear of the unknown"; second an "unwillingness of faculty to commit the extra time needed to teach foreign students effectively or even to take seriously their pedagogical problems" and thirdly, "passivity in the classroom, unwillingness to accept objective grading, even slowness to laugh at faculty jokes" (10). Similar to these studies, this study also showed that professors of these students aren't willing to spend extra time or effort for international students. When these students asked them to slow down or give them their notes, they didn't accept.

Another finding of the study showed that Turkish students aren't willing to be

friends with international students. Most of the time, international students were sitting together and away from Turkish students. Similar to this finding, Bunz (1997) argued that the lack of interaction between American and international students has roots in the American tendency toward ethnocentrism, the habitual disposition to judge people from other cultures by standards and practices of one's own cultural or ethnic group. Likewise, Turkish people tend to ethnocentrism which can be concluded from this study. Both professors and peers stated that they don't want international students in Turkey, especially Syrian students. The tendency of ethnocentrism will cause international students anxiety and fear which will affect their academic and social lives in Turkey. Mori (2000) explored the reasons causing anxiety for international students and explained that student-teacher relationships, academic credits, grading scales, class attendance, class discussions, and types and frequency of quizzes, examinations, presentations, and assignments may well present problems.

In addition to the problems they face, international students are grateful for the support they get. As mentioned above, they sometimes get support from professors and staff working at the university which eases their problems a little bit. The research leads one to the conclusion that there are several interpretations and explanations for the problems encountered by overseas students. Furthermore, researchers and other professionals interacting with these foreign students still face the task of overcoming these obstacles.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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