



## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' VIEWS REGARDING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN TURKEY

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**Abstract** Turkey as a developing country aims to increase internationalization of its higher education as it wants to form increased social, economic and cultural relations around the world. From this perspective, the recent increase in the number of international students in Turkish higher education system is of great significance. However, there is still a significant need for the improvement of internationalization in terms of quality and quantity. Accordingly, via a qualitative research design utilizing a semi-structured interview, this case study aims to investigate international university students' views about the higher education system and life in Turkey. The findings show that the participants are mostly content with the quality of education and living conditions in Turkey. The most common problem is racism although a significant percentage of the participants report that they like Turkish people. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the problems from the perspective of international students, and this can provide implications for attracting more qualified international students.

**Keywords:** Higher education, International students, Turkey, Internationalization



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current era has been identified with developments and changes in virtually all aspects of our lives. Therefore, it is essential to equip new generations according to the requirements and needs of this new era. Higher education has an essential role in achieving this goal. It is the tertiary level in education, and it is the stage at which students earn a bachelor's degree. Due to globalization and rapid changes in the world in the recent decades, higher education has also been affected, and there is a significant increase in international student mobility. Internationalization in education is the increase in the movement and exchange of knowledge, practices, students and lecturers (Pike, 2012). It is now a significant agenda found in institutional mission statements of many higher education institutions throughout the world, and it has also become a national goal (Knight, 2011). Turkey traditionally had a low percentage of international students. Although this has doubled in the recent years, and there is a huge increase in the sheer number of students, its ratio is still very low (i.e. around 2 percent). Hence, it may be argued that Turkey needs to focus on this issue more.

There are various reasons why international students prefer to study in a specific country. Accordingly, the views of international students in Turkey from the perspective of recent studies are worth mentioning. One main reason is the quality of education (Levent & Karaevli, 2013; Tekelioğlu et al., 2012). The prestige of the country in which students have the education is of utmost importance as well. Some countries such as the US or the UK have a high level of prestige around the globe, and thus students want to have education in these countries (Atar, Erdem & Koçyiğit, 2017). Similarity in culture and religion is another variable (Yardım, 2016). Some students prefer a country which shares a culture similar to theirs, and this was suggested by other studies as well (e.g. Levent & Karaevli, 2013). Tuition fees, cost of living, cultural relationships and visa issues were reported to be significant factors (Levent & Karaveli, 2013). In another study, the quality of education, scholarship opportunities and academic success were found to be the most important factors, while social facilities were not found as important (Tekelioğlu et al., 2012). Finally, Erdem and Polat (2019) found that the international students in Turkey developed a positive attitude towards being an international student in Turkish higher education. They reported some problems as well. Some of the students experienced problems with adaptation, economic issues and communication problems, though they are few in number. They also suggested that the students had more problems after 1 year.

Considering the literature review, it is seen that there are some studies in the Turkish context; however, these are few in number. Considering Turkey's pursuit of a more international higher education, it is significant to investigate international students' views as they are the main target of internationalization. Accordingly, it is suggested here that investigating international students' views can provide insights into the higher education system in Turkey with regard to internationalization. Hence, the following research question has been formed:

1) How do the international students view the higher education system and life in Turkey?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative and descriptive case study which aims to investigate the participants' views via a semi-structured interview. The participants were 15 international students that were learning Turkish to start their degrees at their university at the time of data collection in 2018-2019 academic year. The students were mainly from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. The data were collected via a semi-structured interview consisting of 6

questions. The questions were prepared via expert opinion, and the findings from the literature were considered to specify the significant issues in this topic. The questions were as follows:

1. What were your expectations before coming to Turkey?
2. Describe your experience as a student in Turkey.
3. Describe your experience as a student at your university.
4. What are the things you liked most during your studies? Why?
5. What are the negative experiences you have encountered while studying in Turkey?
6. What are your acquired attributes?

The interview questions were used to collect data at a state university in İstanbul, Turkey. The data were analyzed via Descriptive Analysis. The data were investigated according to the questions in the interview, and quotations from the data were provided to better demonstrate the findings.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results will be provided according to the questions in the interview one by one, and a discussion will follow after each analysis.

#### **1. What were your expectations before coming to Turkey?**

The analysis of the participants' responses suggested that the most common reason, mentioned by 8 participants, was the quality of education in Turkey. More than half of the students said that they expected a good education system, and some of them said that they expected the quality of education in Turkey to be better than the one in their own country. For instance, S3 says: "I wanted to have a quality education and earn the valuable diploma because the diplomas in my own country are not very valuable." The second most common expectation (3 participants) was having education in Turkey, and then returning back to their country to work or to serve their nation. To exemplify, S14 says: "Having higher education in Turkey and then, I will work for my nation/people." 2 participants expected to have a tolerant society, and 2 of them thought that the city (i.e. İstanbul) and the country (i.e. Turkey) were developed. Touristic attractions, learning Turkish and having new experience were mentioned by only 1 participant.

These results suggested that more than half of the participants expected to have a qualified education in Turkey. This is in line with the other studies in the literature (Levent & Karaevli, 2013; Tekelioğlu et al., 2012). They thought that education in Turkey was good especially in comparison to their own countries. The analysis also showed that most of the students want to have a qualified, improve themselves, and then turn back to their home country to possibly serve it with their acquired knowledge and skills.

#### **2. Describe your experience as a student in Turkey.**

The students' responses indicated that more than half of the students (8 participants) were happy with their life in Turkey. Around half of the students were also happy with the quality of education and some of them underlined their content with the lecturers/instructors. 5 participants said that they liked the people in Turkey, and 3 of them were happy with the discounts and opportunities offered for students. Other much less common themes were learning a new language and culture, good weather conditions, food and the system in Turkey.

There were also some negative experiences, but they were quite rare. Crowds, bureaucracy and racism were mentioned twice in the interviews. Homesickness and language related problems were reported only once. To exemplify the common findings, P3 says: “I have learnt some Turkish. I learnt some places in Istanbul. Living here is very beautiful and people are very sincere. My lessons are fine...”

The analysis of the findings with regard to this question showed that the participants were in general happy with their experience as a student in Turkey. They seemed to like the living conditions and the quality of education the most. This is in line with Levent and Karaevli's (2013) and Tekelioğlu et al.'s (2012) suggestions which argued that quality of education was significant for international students. Erdem and Polat (2019) found that new international students in Turkey usually reported very few problems. However, Erdem and Polat (2019) also argued that students might report more problems after 1 year. In this sense, considering the fact that this was the 1st year of the participants in this study, the findings supported Erdem and Polat's (2019) findings. Overall, the problems were very few in number, and some problems (e.g. crowded environment) can be specifically due to effect of İstanbul as an overpopulated city, rather than a general issue in Turkey.

### **3. Describe your experience as a student in your university.**

The students' answers showed that the participants were mostly happy with the quality of education as a student in Turkey. 9 participants suggested that they were content with their education, and 3 of them reported that they liked the facilities the university offered. 2 of them said that they liked their friends, and 1 participant stated that the university had good security. To exemplify their views on the quality of education, P1 says: “Education in Turkey is very good, because there are qualified lecturers. Also, there is a library which helps students do research.” There were also some negative experiences, but they were not very common. To exemplify, 2 participants complained about the facilities offered by the university. The following issues were reported once as well: lack of extra-curricular activities, lack of flexibility and experience in the university, the department's Turkish-only policy and difficulty in learning Turkish.

When the results for this question were checked, it can be seen that around two-thirds of the participants were content with the university in terms of the quality of education. There were some conflicting findings as well; however, they were not very common. For instance, 3 participants reported that there were good facilities while 2 of them complained about lack of facilities. This may be due to the differences in students' expectations (e.g. a library versus food hall). These findings were in line with Tekelioğlu et al. (2012) in that the quality of education was seen as a significant factor again. Also, the findings overlapped with Tekelioğlu et al. (2012) in terms of facilities. In both studies, social facilities were reported a few times; however, they were not very significant for the participants in general.

### **4. What are the things you liked most during your studies? Why?**

With regard to this question, the analysis of students' responses suggested that around half of the participants liked the quality of education the most, and they frequently mentioned that they liked the instructors/lecturers as well. P3's response exemplifies the findings here: “Turkey and its education system. Turkey is a developed country. Technology is also developed. So, studying here is very easy and fine.” The other responses were few in number: 3 participants mentioned that they liked the infrastructure in Turkey and the university. The following were mentioned twice: the students, the people and that the instructors/lecturers can speak English. Turkish food, the Turkish language and weather was mentioned by one participant. Yardım (2016) suggested that culture and religion are significant factors for

international students; however, this was not observed much in this study. Some students indirectly mentioned that they liked life in Turkey, and they were happy with the people in terms of factors such as hospitality; however, these were few in number. To sum up the findings on what they liked the most in Turkey during their studies, the most frequent response was the education. The students seemed to be happy with the quality of education, and the fact that they mentioned education frequently suggested that they saw the quality of education as the priority in comparison to other factors such as facilities, living conditions and attractions.

### **5. What are the negative experiences you have encountered while studying in Turkey?**

As for students' negative experiences, it was found that 8 of them reported no (significant) problems. The most common problem was racism with 4 counts. Problems in the system of the university (e.g. students' affairs office) were mentioned 3 times. The following were mentioned twice: rude people, bureaucracy and not being able to speak Turkish sufficiently. Some of them complained about bureaucracy and strikingly mentioned that they had to register even for their sim cards. The findings demonstrated that around half of the students did not experience a significant problem; however, considering the mentioning of racism and rude people, it was seen that around one-third of the students had problems with the people in their city. To exemplify this situation, P11 says: "Most people here do not like foreigners, and it is really not good. They can be so rude with us." This showed that there was a significant problem. On the other hand, around one-third of the participants reported that they liked people in Turkey (see question 2). Then, there seems to be a contradiction. Mass Syrian immigration may be a possible explanation. Due to the influx of Syrian refugee in the recent years, it is probable that people have increased rate of racism towards foreigners. These people may have thought that the students were also Syrians and this may explain why they had a negative attitude towards them. Still, no matter what the actual reason was, the findings in the study showed that there was a problem of racism from the perspective of some international students although some others though the opposite.

All in all, the international students did not report many problems while studying in Turkey, and this is in line with some other studies in the literature (e.g. Erdem & Polat, 2019). Erdem and Polat (2019) reported that international students usually had few negative perceptions towards higher education in Turkey, which was the case in this current study as well. On the other hand, Erdem and Polat (2019) also reported that the international students started to experience more problems after 1 year. However, this is not comparable to the current study as all the participants in this study were in their 1st year in Turkey.

### **6. What are your acquired attributes?**

For this question 3 students suggested that extracurricular gains were significant. Being able to speak Turkish was mentioned twice, and meeting international people was mentioned by one student. To exemplify the responses, P2 says: "I attend Islamic calligraphy club." Similarly, P12 says: "I had other opportunities to explore new places in Turkey." Despite these responses, the analysis here suggested that most of the students did not mention a response here. This may be because it was their 1<sup>st</sup> year and as a result, they did not have enough time to acquire attributes and skills other than the ones about academic education. They seemed to like the extracurricular activities provided by the university or the ones in İstanbul in general. However, the others did not acquire any skills and attributes other than pedagogical learning.



#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This case study set out to investigate international university students' views about the higher education system and life in Turkey via a qualitative research design utilizing a semi-structured interview. The participants were 15 international students at a state university in İstanbul, Turkey. The findings showed that in general the participants had already expected a qualified education before coming to Turkey. Their responses considering education in Turkey showed that they were happy with the quality of education and living conditions in Turkey. This meant that the conditions in Turkey satisfied the needs of most of the participants, and they had chosen Turkey before coming as they believed that it offered a qualified education. As the analysis showed, and in line with the literature, most of the participants did not report significant problems. The most common problem was racism in this study. Interestingly, the number of the participants saying that they liked the people in Turkey and the ones complaining about racism was almost the same. All in all, it may be argued that this study contributed to the literature by a qualitative and in-depth analysis of a group of international students. Considering the scope of this study as a case study at a single university, it may be a good idea to study students from multiple cities to have more generalizable results.



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