

Exploring the Lived Social and Academic Experiences of Foreign-Born Students: A Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the experiences of foreign-born students (FBSs) studying at a Turkish public university. The study attempted to provide useful findings for student services, faculty, policy makers, and other stakeholders to effectively address the needs, interests, and aspirations of FBSs, thereby helping them better adapt to school and community life in Turkey. The researcher collected the data in the winter of 2019 by utilizing an open-ended interview protocol with a snowball sampling of seven FBSs. Three themes emerged from the students' spoken words: first days' experience, balancing period through social experiences, and the lived academic experiences. Findings from this study suggest that FBSs have lived many positive and negative social and academic experiences. For most, negative experiences were transformed into positive ones with various facilitators that brought FBSs personal growth and better adaptation.

Keywords: academic experiences, foreign-born students, phenomenology, social experiences, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Within internationalization studies, the mobility of students has been one of the most popular benefits for higher education institutions in developed and developing economies (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2018), the number of foreign students enrolled in higher

education has exploded since 2000. The number was just around 800,000 in 1975; it rose from 2 million in 1999 to 5 million in 2016, and this trend will probably continue to rise. This dramatic increase in the number of international students worldwide has received growing attention, and as the number is rising steadily, many higher education institutions have started to compete in a global academic marketplace (OECD, 2018).

Statistics from OECD and UNESCO show that developed countries such as the United States, England, Australia, and Canada share more than half of foreign students, and new competitors such as China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan are becoming host countries for international students (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). With emerging economies (Vercueil, 2016), Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey may also be seen as new and dynamic competitors in the international education market.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current research on foreign-born students (FBSs) in higher education is predominantly composed of American, English, and Australian studies because those countries have the highest number of FBSs in their universities (Luijten-Lub et al., 2005). In recent years, some Asian studies also have been conducted because the flow of FBSs is changing steadily around the world, especially in favor of the far-East countries such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan. FBS literature has mostly focused on the challenges and difficulties FBSs encounter in the acculturation, adaptation, adjustment, and communication processes. Transitions, academic and social stressors, language barriers, discrimination, and prejudicial treatment are among the issues most frequently studied by the researchers of international education. The first year of university is a significant transition even for native students, and cross-cultural transition is more difficult for foreign students because it brings additional stressors (Brodin, 2010; Ding, 2016; Freeman & Li, 2019; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In a study conducted in the United States on the transition process of FBSs, Ang and Liamputtong (2008) found that most international students find the transition difficult because they have to deal with the disparities between the culture in their respective countries of origin and with the host country. Another study on cross-cultural transitions revealed learning to navigate the host culture, finding a sense of belonging, and enjoying out-of-school activities was helpful for a smoother transition (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

Socially related stressors, such as a sense of conflict, cultural loneliness, and isolation, are main disadvantages in the process for adaptation and change. Studies on the experiences of FBSs have found that being afraid to communicate with native students, feeling insecure about intercultural competences, not having close friendships, or lacking meaningful interactions with locals are socially related stressors that bring cultural loneliness and isolation (Andrade, 2006; Benyamin, 2018; Freeman & Li, 2019; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2014). Besides socially related stressors, academically related ones, such as lack of good interaction with faculty, financial instability, and unfamiliarity with academic culture, are also mentioned by FBSs in a variety of studies (Exposito, 2015; Glass et al., 2015; Soremi, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2018). In their study, Rienties and Tempelaar (2013) focused

on the role of cultural dimensions of international students and found that non-Western groups of international students score substantially lower on academic integration, while Westerners integrate fairly well. They suggested facilitating academic adjustment for international students, especially for non-Western students. Many studies have also dealt with the language barriers of FBSs and have emphasized that the lack of host language proficiency negatively impacts academic performance and brings undesirable results for adaptation (Foley, 2010; Myrna, 2016; Sawir, 2005; Schleicher, 2015). Another critical issue studied in the FBS literature is discrimination or prejudicial treatment (Dimandja, 2017; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Discrimination and prejudicial treatment may be cultural, racial, religious, or gender-based. For instance, Lee and Rice (2007) studied international students' perceptions of discrimination and found that many were confronted with discrimination on entering the United States in terms of cultural identity and gender. Another study conducted by Dimandja (2017) also found that Muslim FBSs perceive obvious discrimination and prejudicial treatment due to their expression of their Muslim identity. In accordance with this brief review, it is clear that FBS literature has mostly focused on the acculturation, adaptation, adjustment, and communication issues encountered by FBSs in the whole process.

In the last decade with the increasing numbers of FBSs in Turkey, researchers have started to deal with acculturation and communication issues by focusing on the challenges, needs, integration activities, and satisfaction levels of FBSs in Turkish higher education system (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Karadağ & Yücel, 2018; Özoğlu et al., 2012; Titrek et al., 2016; Yükselir, 2018). Those studies especially focused on describing integrational challenges, pull factors in deciding to study in Turkey, and academic performance of those students. More research is needed to understand the social and academic dimensions of being FBSs in Turkey by focusing on their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes comprehensively since the enrollment number is increasing steadily. Acculturation, adaptation, and adjustment issues of FBSs should also immediately be investigated. This study, by focusing on the lived social and academic experiences of students in a Turkish public university, aims at exploring and providing a better understanding of those FBSs' daily life experiences.

An Overview of FBSs in Turkey

In this study, the term “foreign-born student” refers to students who were born in a different country and came to Turkey for studying at an institution of higher education. These students can also be Turkish citizens who were born abroad and come back to Turkey for university education. Turkey, as a developing country, has been paying attention to internationalization of its higher education system for 40 years, and many developments, especially in the last decade, are noteworthy. In 1981, an “FBS Placement Exam” was put into practice by the Turkish Higher Education Council (THEC). Increasing the number of foreign students became a strategy after the 1990s for mostly sociocultural rationales such as developing intercultural understanding and cultural sensitivity. Studies also have shown that those rationales are still dominant in recruiting foreign students in Turkey (Gök & Gümüş, 2017;

Selvitopu & Aydın, 2018). At that time, Turkey established a special scholarship program called “The Great Student Project” for youth from newly established Turkic countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to strengthen its relationship with them after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kavak & Baskan, 2001). The process was then halted and the number of foreign students increased very slowly. The last decade can be called an awakening decade for Turkish higher education to take part again in the internationalization process. Some policy documents and reports were prepared, workshops and conferences on internationalization were also held, and the awareness about the process has risen recently (Çetinsaya, 2014; Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu [DEİK], 2012, 2014; Kadioğlu, & Özer, 2015; Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2013; Kırmızıdağ et al., 2012; THEC, 2015). For instance, the THEC published a strategic plan in 2015 that mostly focused on internationalization, and the Ministry of Development also started a project in 2014 that aims to make Turkey a center of attraction for FBSs. Some regulations were also made to facilitate the functions of higher education institutions such as abolishing the central foreign student placement exam, preparing strategic plans for internationalization, and establishing international relations offices and Turkey scholarship programs. As an expected result of those efforts, some visible transformations have taken place in Turkish higher education institutions. For example, the number of FBSs has risen from 15,000 in 1995 to 125,000 in 2018, and most of that increase has taken place between the years 2009 and 2018 (THEC, 2018). Figure 1 represents the numbers of FBSs enrolled in universities in Turkey.

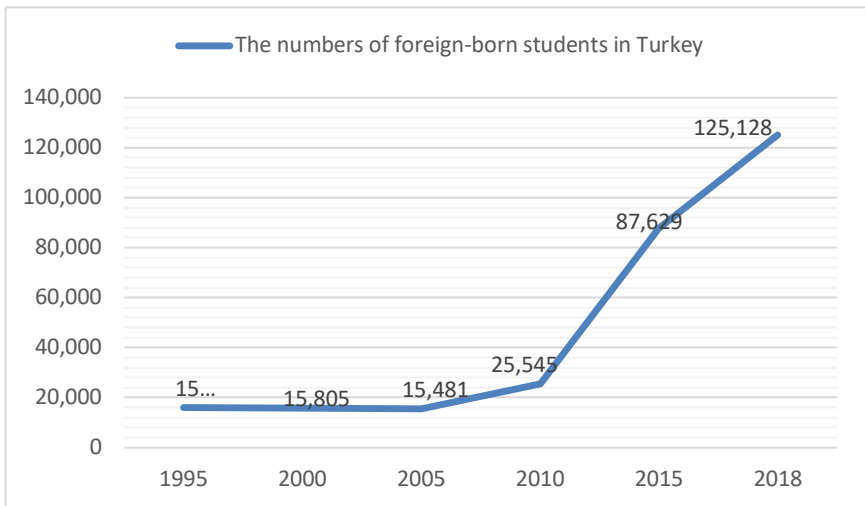


Figure 1: Numbers of FBSs Enrolled in Universities in Turkey

Note. Data were derived from the website of the THEC (2018) and Presidency of Measurement, Selection and Placement Center (2018)

As seen in the Figure 1, the population of FBSs in Turkish universities has grown substantially during the last decade. That dramatic increase depended not only on

many facilitating regulations but also on the political instability and war conditions within neighbor countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. For example, while the number of Syrian students was just 1,500 in 2011, it rose to about 15,000 in 2018 because of the political instability and war continuing in Syria since 2011 (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017). Figure 2 represents the data including the country of origin of FBSs studying in Turkey.

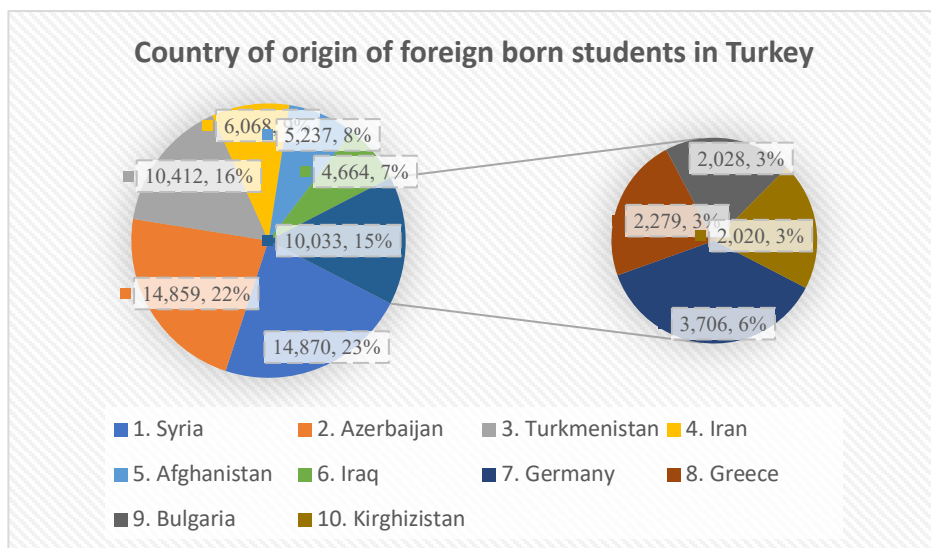


Figure 2: Country of Origin of FBSs in Turkey in 2018

Note. Data were derived from THEC website (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>)

As seen in Figure 2, sending countries are mostly neighboring or close countries that have cultural, social, or traditional ties with Turkey. Syrian students constitute the highest number because of the reasons explained above. Other countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan have strong cultural ties with Turkey, and those numbers may also be explained by “The Great Student Project” first conducted in 1992. Germany, Greece, and Bulgaria also have relations with Turkey. For example, in Germany the Turkish population has increased nearly 3 million (Kırmızı, 2016), since the worker migration that took place in the 1960s, and their children may prefer to study in Turkey as FBSs. The number of FBSs who come from 10 sending countries represents 51.5% of the total FBS body in Turkey. In sum, official statistics show that Turkish universities have been successful in increasing the number of FBSs as many policy documents overemphasized the quantity as the main target of the internationalization process (DEİK, 2015; THEC, 2018). However, social and academic experiences of those students, the quality of teaching and learning, and student qualification issues still remain. Therefore, this study is an attempt to address the lived experiences of FBSs to better understand them and provide useful findings

for student services, faculty, policy makers, and other stakeholders to effectively address the needs, interests, and aspirations of FBSs studying in Turkey.

METHOD

This study adopts a phenomenological perspective to understand the internal meaning of being an FBS in Turkey. A phenomenological perspective gives participants a chance to present the shared meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2002), by telling their stories freely and explaining their lived experiences deeply (Moustakas, 1994). The history of phenomenology started with Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician. In his extensive writings, Husserl emphasized many points of philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. “Researchers search for the essential or central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of FBSs in a Turkish public university, a phenomenological design is the most appropriate method because it allows researcher to describe the lived experiences of participants in depth through the interview analysis.

Participants

Seven participants, three males and four females, were selected with a snowball sampling method. The researcher first contacted a staff member working in the Student Affairs Office and gave her information about the study. Then, the staff member invited one FBS to the office and introduced her to me. The first volunteer participant was Emina (pseudonym). Following Patton (2002), I asked the first person a question like “Can you recommend someone to talk about that issue?” Then, with her and other participants’ help, the sample grew to seven participants who signed a consent form before the interview took place. All participants are from the same public university located in the southwest of central Anatolia of Turkey. The city where the university is located is a small one with a population of 162,000. The university, founded in 2007, as of 2019 had 14,322 students, and 95 of them were FBSs who come from 14 different countries such as Azerbaijan, Syria, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan. Fifty-seven of the FBSs are from Syria, and this number shows us that Syrian students dominate the whole FBS body. Table 1 presents some demographic information about the participants.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Majoring field	Country of origin	Time in Turkey
Emina	F	22	Pre-primary teaching	Syria	1 yr
Issam	F	19	Food engineering	Palestine	2 yr
Midaf	M	20	Counselling	Kazakhstan	3 yr
Fariha	F	18	Mathematics	Afghanistan	4 yr

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Majoring field	Country of origin	Time in Turkey
Ali	M	19	Pre-primary teaching	Syria	3 yr
Youseff	M	20	Religious studies	Syria	2 yr
Oknabat	F	21	Electronic engineering	Turkmenistan	8 mo

Participants in this study were mostly in their first year of their bachelor's program, and one Syrian participant was in her second year of study. As the university is a public one situated in a small city in the east of Turkey, all students were recruited to the college with their high school diploma without any exam.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semistructured interviews, which are the major source of data in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). The interview questions were prepared within the context of reviewed FBS literature and were composed of three main questions with 16 probes. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and sometimes a little Arabic since one Syrian student still did not have enough language proficiency to speak Turkish. Each interview lasted from 30–55 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. After the transcription of the interviews, participants were invited to check and confirm their expressions on the issues interviewed via email to enhance research trustworthiness. One participant clarified some of her statements to avoid from misunderstanding.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis are interrelated processes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), so it is critical to make coherent arrangements. I applied an inductive content analysis approach, which moves from the specific to the general by emerging themes or categories from the data (Patton, 2002). Technically, I followed six steps to analyze and interpret the data as Smith et al. (2009) suggested. After the verification and confirmation of transcripts, I read all of them while listening to the audio recording in the first step. I put data into NVivo 8, (QSR International Inc., United States) to create initial codes and make patterns visible with free and tree modes. In Step 2, I highlighted important parts of the text and examined them to find connections and patterns by assigning to the codes in the third step. By doing so, the package program allowed me to organize codes and themes by seeking connections across them in the fourth step. At this stage, I invited a colleague to check codes and themes generated in the analysis. After member checking, I typed the list of themes and formed categories, which were clustered around themes, corresponding to the literature review and the research purpose. Then, I chose quotations that demonstrated the themes based on participants' lived experiences to help readers understand the whole context. Finally, I identified key themes in the whole data and explored connections between emergent findings and existing literature.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, credibility, transferability, and consistency of data and findings are important issues to establish strong trustworthiness of the outcomes of study (Krippendorff, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). In this study, some measures were taken to increase the trustworthiness with peer debriefing, respondent validation, and participant feedback (Creswell, 1998), as well as bracketing (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). In terms of peer debriefing, a colleague, who is an expert in higher education management field, observed all the steps and gave feedback on the progress of the study. Respondent validation is an effective way of preventing misinterpretations on the participants' phrases (Maxwell, 2005). To provide validation, I invited participants to check and confirm their expressions on the issues via email after the transcription of the interviews. I followed the same process after the themes emerged; thus the participants had the chance to ensure an accurate presentation of their social and academic experiences by agreeing on the findings. Bracketing is also critical to understand a phenomenon in its own context; it helps the researcher be more aware of their biased perspectives that may influence the research findings (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Here, I, with my past experiences with FBSs and foreign-born faculty, collaborated throughout the research process with an expert of higher education management who studies internationalization, higher education policies, and acculturation of FBSs, and this helped me avoid potential biases and personal judgments, and to be more open to the voices of participants as much as possible. Also, I chose the best quotations reflecting the lived experiences of participants without breaking them into smaller parts to help readers understand the whole context.

RESULTS

Three themes were identified from the data regarding the participants' lived experiences through the process: (a) the first days' experience, (b) the balancing period through social experiences, and (c) the lived academic experiences. These themes reflect what participants lived socially and academically through their first or second year of study at that city and university. Table 2 presents the main and subthemes of the data.

Table 2: Data Themes and Subthemes.

Main themes	Subthemes
The first days' experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Full of surprise.• It was hard times.
Balancing period through social experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language "was" a barrier.• He is Syrian!• We have many similarities!• Friendships are great here.
The lived academic experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We sometimes got ignored.• I do hesitate!

Main themes	Subthemes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Familiarization with academic culture

The First Days' Experience

The first theme that became evident from the data was “The first days’ experience” of FBSs recruited at the university. Participants mostly emphasized their first days’ experience as surprising and sometimes hard to bear. It was surprising because they mostly stated that they were unaware of the process and did not know how things worked in this country.

Full of Surprise

Fariha, from Afghanistan, described her experience as surprising:

When I came here, I never think about going to university because my father always said it is not easy to be accepted by a university here. After a while, I learnt from a neighbor that it may be possible if I apply with my high school diploma. I told my father but he did not believe at first. Then, one day with my persistence, he brought me here [university] and I asked an official and learnt that it is possible and also easy. I really got surprised and my life has changed suddenly.

In Turkey, high school students in their last grade take a central exam conducted all over the country and they choose universities according to their exam results. Fariha was aware of this exam and she was desperate since she thought she would not pass that exam because the exam is in Turkish. But the process went in favor of her and she was accepted as a student in the university with her high school diploma. It was surprising for her since it happened so much more easily than she expected. Another male participant from Syria, Youseff, dealt with a similar experience.

When I escaped from my country because of the war you know, I, with my family, do not know what to do. It was completely a disaster for us. I was attending high school there in 2015. I came here and I lost all my hopes about education. Thanks to Turkish government that three years after I came here, I applied to this university and accepted. It was unbelievable for me and my family. ... Believe me, it was my dream to continue my education.

Youseff was very happy during the interview and he always talked about his future plans as he was very motivated and focused on his education. The political instability and war conditions forced many Syrian people to seek asylum and nearly 4 million people took shelter in Turkey as a result of that condition (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017).

It Was Hard Times

The first days' experience may sometimes be hard to bear for FBSs because of the shock they face. Oknabat, a female participant from Turkmenistan, is still living isolated in the university.

My mother has worked in Istanbul for 5 years and I came to Turkey 8 months ago. My parents are divorced and my father still lives in Turkmenistan and I miss him. In the first days I was so afraid of everything because I had a bad experience. I stayed at a dormitory but it was not a state dormitory so when I learnt that I wanted to leave. Then I had a big problem with the owner of the dormitory. He threatened to call the police. I was so frightened and cried a lot..... After that, I started to live on my own and I did not want to join any group or friend. Now, when my lessons finish, I came back my dormitory and I only take care of my bird. I even do not go to city center.

Oknabat had a negative experience in the first days and she is still under the influence of it. Midaf, from Kazakhstan, had a different and funny experience as he stated.

When the first days of school come, I went university to join class. I am a student in counseling department but I attended different wrong classes for four days. Nobody told me where to go and I attended wrong classes for four days. It was really funny now I laugh a lot with my friends. ... In fact, the university has prepared an orientation program for all students in the first week but I did not hear and after four days, I could find my class in the second week.

Balancing Period Through Social Experiences

Social experiences may be positive or negative. Within this theme, social experiences were divided into two subcategories as negative and positive ones. Negative experiences dealt by the participants categorized into two subthemes, language barriers and discrimination.

Language "Was" a Barrier

Most participants shared language issues as a negative experience they face and a big barrier that prevents them from adapting to college life. Emina, who is from Syria and has still poor Turkish, described her experience as restrictive.

I have been here for one year and when I came, I even did not know one word in Turkish. I could not communicate with anyone apart from my family. After a while, I think I must attend Turkish classes which were given by Turkish government for all foreigners. There, I could learn a little Turkish and now I am in college but still I am lack of proficiency. So, I can't talk with my friends as long as I want. You are just like a deaf or blind without language.

Providing Turkish language classes for foreigners is an important policy that has been on the acculturation agenda since 2013 after the start of the Syrian war (Büyükkiz & Çangal, 2016). For instance, foreigners who want to attend a university in Turkey can do so after gaining a certificate of attendance to a Turkish language class. This is critical because without language acquisition, people are almost deaf or blind as Emina stated. Another Syrian participant, Youseff, also dealt with the same negative experience.

I and my family had many difficulties for not having language proficiency. We were very happy to come here but we were unaware of everything. We even can't say "Hello" to anybody. Again many thanks to Turkish government, they provide Turkish language classes and I, with my father, can speak Turkish now after a six month course..... My mom and two sisters did not attend those classes. My sisters are little and my mom does not need for now since she has got Syrian neighbors.

Youseff dealt with the same issue as Emina but a detail is noteworthy is that he thinks it is not necessary for his mom and sisters to attend Turkish classes. This view is problematic since it is essential for all foreigners to learn the language of hosting country in the adaptation process (European Commission, 2019). Within this subtheme, just two participants from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan did not experience any communication problems since they have language proximity and also had chance to learn Turkish before coming to Turkey. The other participants dealt with the same issue as Emina and Youseff using similar statements and they overcame that problem by attending Turkish language classes. Apart from lacking language proficiency, one participant shared his prejudicial treatment experience that he faced in his high school class.

He Is Syrian

Ali shared his experience as follows;

After we came here, I started to go a high school in the eleventh grade. There I sometimes face prejudicial treatment. For instance, one day during the lesson, I heard some murmurs as "He is Syrian. They are everywhere now." something like that. I was so sorry but I could not tell anybody and this happened many times until I graduated. ... Now in college, I have not faced any treatment like that. I think Turkish students became familiar with Syrian students as we have been here for a long time.

As the Syrian population has increased dramatically after the start of the war, Turkish people have started to encounter Syrian refugees in the streets, hospitals, schools, and everywhere in their daily life. Here, Ali gave an example of a lived negative experience that some Syrians possibly faced in the early stages of relocation. But as time has passed and the Syrians have integrated into Turkish society, those negative experiences tend to lower day by day.

Positive social experiences or activities may be helpful for FBSs to adapt to the new environment. To understand the balancing period of FBSs better, I analyzed the

negative experiences before the positive ones. Positive experiences also divided into two subthemes as cultural proximity and great friendships.

We Have Many Similarities

Midaf, who is from Kazakhstan and has many relatives in Turkey, shared his experiences by dealing with cultural and religious proximity.

I did not have much challenge because I have my aunts, uncles, and cousins living in Turkey for a long time. I have been to Turkey before many times and I know the culture. It is very similar with our culture. People here are just more modern than us. Their dressing and eating habits are very similar. We are Muslims as the people in Turkey. These were great advantages for me to easily adapt Turkish life.

With his statements, Midaf tried to show the similarities and the facilitator effects of those similarities on adaptation process. Through the data analysis, the similarities were frequently emphasized by the participants as a pull factor also. Fariha dealt with the role of cultural proximity in the balancing period.

I feel relaxed everywhere in the city, university, and in my class. Because the Turkish culture is very similar with ours. In Afghanistan, girls are more restricted to join community life but here everybody, girl or boy, can do whatever they want. ... In my class (college), I have a group of four girlfriends and we do everything together. They behave me like a Turkish student. ... I do not talk with boys because my mother especially warns me not to talk with boys and I already do not like to talk with them.

Fariha is happy to be in Turkey and she became used to community and college life with the advantage of cultural proximity. But her explanation about boys shows that her traditional culture is still dominant in her daily life practices. Oknabat dealt with ethnic and language proximity advantage as facilitating experience:

I am Turkmen and we come from the same race with Turkish people. Although we were exposed to Russian culture for many years, we did not break our ties with Turkey. For instance, my parents and grandfather always told me something in my childhood about Turkey. They also motivated me to learn Turkish better and now I can speak Turkish and understand most of it.

According to the voices of most participants, cultural, ethnic, and religious proximities play key roles for providing positive social experiences. Those experiences may explain why FBSs choose to study in Turkey. In addition to positive social experiences, participants also mention close friendships that they experienced through the process.

Friendships Are Great Here

Having close friendships in the hosting country is one of the most desirable experience for FBSs. Issam, who faced isolation in the first days of her arrival, now thinks that Turkish people are really great.

Turkish people are great really. They are very helpful, sincere, and hospitable. When I started my college education, I could not talk with anybody, but two girls in my class came near me and talked with me. Those girls, their names are Ayşe and Buse, asked me if I need help or something else. It was a great facilitator and motivation for me. I was really anxious because you know it is very difficult to involve in a class that you do not know anybody.

Most participants also experienced Turkish people's helpfulness and hospitality, and they emphasized that those characteristics were great facilitators for meaningful interactions with local students and set healthy relationships with them. The third theme emerged from the data is the lived academic experiences which play a critical role in adaptation.

The Lived Academic Experiences

Within this theme, academic experiences were divided into two categories as negative and positive ones. Negative experiences categorized into two subthemes, lack of good interaction with faculty and being unaware of campus services.

We Sometimes Got Ignored

Some participants mentioned the feeling of being ignored in the early days and months of college since they lacked language proficiency as they stated. Ali shared his experience as being ignored in the class.

When the lessons started, the lecturer came to class and gave his lesson then leave. I just looked at the board or follow the slides but understood nothing because I could not interact with the lecturer. I even could not ask any question. The faculty members do not see me. My first exam results were terrible.

Another participant, Emina, also dealt with faculty ignoring her:

I do not know whose fault is it but in the beginning of the lessons I really did not understand anything about the lessons. My friends tried hard to tell me the lessons again after the course or before the Visa exams. My majoring area is also difficult to understand in my native language and I was trying to understand it with my poor Turkish. I wrote nothing in three of the exams and I failed.

Interaction in and out of class between faculty and students is critical for an effective learning and teaching activity (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Here, the voices of

participants may be interpreted as having poor interaction with faculty, which brought the feeling being ignored for FBSs. In another perspective, the faculty may hesitate to communicate with FBSs because they do not know FBSs' native languages. Youseff mentioned an interesting point by comparing the attitude of high school teachers and faculty members in Turkey.

I attended high school one year here. There my teachers were very helpful and always ask me how am I. This may be strange but their positive interest was annoying me sometimes because I always felt myself as "other". Now in college, faculty members behave equally to us in class and I am really happier here. Because I feel myself same as other students.

Youseff dealt with an issue that many FBSs face in Turkey. Turkish people are generally helpful, hospitable, or generous to foreigners, but sometimes it may be exaggerated. Youseff remarked that the exaggerated concern caused him to feel as "other."

The second subtheme includes the experiences of ineffective utilization of student services in campus such as library, catering, and accommodation. From the voices of many participants, it is understood that they are still unaware of many services or they hesitate to use them.

I Do Hesitate

Oknabat told her experience about library usage and she emphasized her hesitation as,

I do not use library very much. Because I am afraid of forgetting to bring back the books on time. If I need a book, I go to library and read it there. It takes my time but I do not want to borrow books.

Another participant Emina dealt with a similar experience she faced.

My family lives in another city in Turkey. When I admitted to this university, I was unaware of the dormitory. I rent a flat, but last month I learned that I can stay in the dormitory if I apply. I did not know this. But next year I will apply for the dormitory.

Youseff shared his experience as;

I like sports and when I came here I sometimes go to student sports service in the university. I paid full fee for the sports services for 5 months. But the fee was lower for students. I did not know that and I paid much for five months. I have just been aware of that recently.

As the participants mentioned, they had some negative experiences because they were unaware of student services in campus and they could not use those services effectively.

Familiarization With Academic Culture

Within this second theme of academic experiences, participants shared their positive academic experiences that helped them adapt to academic culture. Midaf was so surprised at faculty members' attitudes toward him:

In Kazakhstan, teachers have strict rules and they are the boss of class as we call them. They are inflexible and when a student make mistake, they generally angry with him/her and give punishments. Here, I attend both high school and university and I see that teachers are really tolerant. This made me relaxed in class.

Fariha also mentioned a similar experience and the support of her classmates:

Teachers and headmasters in Afghanistan are always very angry. We were very afraid of them because every mistake we do bring us various punishments. For example, once you read a sentence wrong or make a little noise, you surely expose verbal or physical abuse by teachers. In the first days here, I was very very afraid of teachers because I was thinking that they are the same teachers as in my country. When my teacher smiled at me here, I was really shocked. Then with the support of my friends, I am getting accustomed to the class culture. I always asked them what and how to do. They are really helpful.

Some participants also dealt with the changing learning environment that they were not used to. Issam, from Palestine, shared her experience regarding student participation in class:

In my country, students in class are not allowed much to say something about the subject. Teacher gives his/her lesson and you calmly listen to. No participation ... No noise. Here students are encouraged to participate in class and I still can't participate because of my former experiences. I always worry that if I say something wrong, the teacher will be angry with me.

Youseff has also described his engagement process of academic culture in the hosting country.

Here, with some help of my friends and faculty members I learned how to struggle with academic issues and I think I am better than 7 months ago. What do my teachers expect from me academically? And how can I participate better or engage classroom activities? In the exams, academics help me better understand the exam questions which I do not understand well by making explanations, my friends also help me where to focus in the courses. I am really improving myself and feel better.

From the voices of participants, it is clear that their positive experiences were mainly based on academic support provided by their peers, faculty members, and administrative staff.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study lead to many explorations of the lived social and academic experiences of FBSs studying at a Turkish public university. Before the discussion of the findings, an emphasis should be made that FBSs generally take on the challenge of crossing cultures for many reasons such as better learning opportunities, expanding world views through new cultures, and creating a better future for themselves, their family, or their country (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011). However, this is not the case for most of the participants of this study, especially Syrians, because they were obliged to come to Turkey to escape from political instability and war in their country. The Syrian student population is getting higher day by day because they are given a chance to attend Turkish schools to better adapt to social life in Turkey (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017). Findings of this study can be categorized into four main themes: (a) negative and (b) positive social experiences, and (c) negative and (d) positive academic experiences. In this study, negative social experiences included loneliness, isolation, language barriers, and prejudicial judgment. That finding is mostly consistent with FBS literature, which commonly identifies cultural loneliness, isolation, lack of meaningful interactions with locals, discrimination, and prejudicial judgment as negative experiences (Andrade, 2006; Benyamin, 2018; Freeman & Li, 2019; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2014). Few participants experienced isolation and loneliness not because of the bad attitudes of native students, but because of their feeling of homesickness or their choice. Language was a barrier mostly for Syrian and Afghan participants since their mother language is not close to Turkish and they could not integrate well in the early stages. In their study, Wright and Schartner (2013) found that FBSs are reluctant to participate in interaction opportunities with local students because they lack language proficiency. Culture shock is also cited as a negative experience in the literature (Sutherland, 2011), but the participants of this study never dealt with it. This may be explained by the cultural proximity with Turkey.

As all of the participants came from neighboring or culturally and ethnically close countries, they emphasized the role of those proximities as helping them relax, accommodate to any cultural practice easily, and feel in secure as in their home country. Based on their voices, it can be inferred that any proximities play a facilitating role in the sociocultural adaptation process of FBSs as many study findings support (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Gareis, 2012; Hofstede et al., 2010; Montgomery, 2010; Soremi, 2017). Gareis (2012) conducted a comparison study of international students' relationships in the United States and found that culturally close students from Northern and Central Europe tend to be happier with their relationships than other students from China and East Asia who have no cultural proximity with their U.S. peers.

As the FBSs accepted to universities brought their former characteristics and experience with them, study findings support the idea that they face some difficulties in a new academic culture (Exposito, 2015; Glass et al., 2015; Soremi, 2017). This is an expected result because every individual has different backgrounds. In this study some participants dealt with being ignored, hesitating to participate, and being unaware of campus student services. When those negative academic experiences are

analyzed in detail, many of them are the result of a lack of language proficiency. Many studies have found that a lack of host language proficiency negatively impacts the adaptation process (Foley, 2010; Myrna, 2016; Sawir, 2005; Schleicher, 2015). Language proficiency is critical to develop social networks in and off campus and engage with the host campus society through regular interactions with faculty and peers (Ejiofo, 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Sutherland, 2011). FBSs may have disadvantages in the early stages of admission, but if the college provides information about the services during the admission, they can minimize the negative effects of those experiences. Additionally, those experiences showed us that neither domestic students nor the previous FBSs could help their newcomer foreign-born friends and provide a desirable social support for their integration. Even though domestic and previous FBSs could not help them, Knox et al. (2013) emphasized in their study that social support of domestic or other FBSs for newcomer FBSs is still important and helps students adapt to life in a different country.

As for the positive academic experiences, participants mostly made comparisons between the Turkish college system and their home country. Most of them emphasized that contrary to Turkish colleges, the academic culture in their home country is dominantly based on strict rules in favor of teachers, principals, or the system itself and students have no rights. Based on some participants' voices, positive attitudes of faculty members and administrative staff, good interaction with classmates, and a positive learning environment are important for familiarizing with academic culture. Many studies also have found that social and academic support affect academic performance (Ramburuth & Tani, 2009; Trice & Yoo, 2007), academic integration, and adjustment (Nieto & Zoller Booth, 2010; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Rienties et al., 2012) positively. In this study, participants mostly tended to become accustomed to the academic culture with the help of their peers, faculty members, and administrative staff who provided them a positive academic environment with meaningful interactions through the process.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal the lived social and academic experiences of FBSs studying at a Turkish public university in depth. Generally, the study identifies social and academic experiences of FBSs as negative and positive. Negative social and academic experiences are loneliness, isolation, language barriers, prejudicial judgment, feeling ignored, hesitation, and unawareness of campus student services. On the other hand, positive social and academic experiences include cultural, religious, and ethnic similarities, hospitality, positive attitudes of faculty members and administrative staff, good interaction with classmates, and positive learning environments. When all of these experiences are considered, it can be inferred that the hospitality of the hosting country, Turkish language courses, supportive and encouraging multicultural teaching and learning environment, and cultural, religious, and ethnic proximity play critical roles in transforming negative social and academic experiences to positive ones for FBSs.

Implications

The study findings illustrate that FBSs live diverse experiences socially and academically in Turkey. Participants' narratives indicate a need for more research on the lived experiences of FBSs studying in Turkey. In a college community, FBSs will always be a minority group and may potentially be underrepresented. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and hear their voices through more research focusing on their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes comprehensively. By analyzing negative experiences stated by some participants, some implications may be presented for student services, faculty, policy makers, and other stakeholders to effectively address the needs, interests, and aspirations of FBSs. First of all, campuses should be FBS-friendly by providing more social and cultural activities for them, improving language or communication qualifications of its administrative staff, using a second or third language in announcements, and providing FBSs physiological support. As language is a key supporter for good interaction with all stakeholders to provide a positive academic environment, it is necessary to provide qualified language courses for FBSs to learn Turkish. People's attitude toward FBSs is also critical, and it may be useful to make some social activities in the city to enhance their awareness of FBSs. Policymakers may also enhance that awareness by using a variety of media tools. All of these implications should be considered as a way of transforming negative lived experiences to positive ones.

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