

## **Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study of Lived Experiences of International Students in Turkey**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Internationalization trends in higher education have become a significantly accentuated issue, and student mobility is considered one of the core components. This study focuses on investigating the lived experiences of international students at a state university in Turkey using a qualitative research method and phenomenological design. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews in order to reveal the participants' experiences and their overall insight into studying abroad. Ten international students from various countries participated in the current study. The findings provide a rich description of the lived experiences of international students and their perceptions of studying abroad. Results of the data analysis yielded two major themes entitled "Perceptions of being an international student: What does it mean? What have they experienced?" and "The assistance and challenges they have been through during their study."

**Keywords:** higher education, internationalization, international students, phenomenological study, studying abroad

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### **INTRODUCTION**

For several decades, the overall globalization process has been forcing higher education institutions to transform themselves to accommodate the needs of the new era. In this respect, the internationalization of higher education institutions has

become a significantly accentuated issue within the context of higher education literature (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Childress, 2009; Morosini et al., 2017). Internationalization of higher education, considered as a multidimensional term, is defined by Arum and Van de Water (1992) as several activities, programs, and services that include international studies, international educational exchange, and technical cooperation. A process-oriented definition, which focuses on a different aspect of the term, proposed by Knight (2008), refers to an integration process of an institution's teaching, research, and service functions into international and intercultural dimensions. There are several ways to support internationalization in higher education institutions, including facilitating activities such as studying abroad, encouraging cross-border student and staff mobility, adopting international curriculum, setting up new branch campuses, making international agreements, and building networks at the institutional level (Knight, 2004; Teichler, 2010).

Among these methods of internationalization, student mobility has a key role in this process because mobility programs offer opportunities to broaden one's horizons and increase one's cross-cultural skills (Marshall, 2014). Mobility programs facilitate the development of necessary skills and experiences that most international organizations expect (Di Pietro, 2014). These exchange programs provide participants opportunities of short- or long-term stay in different countries. However, these programs also bring some negativities, encountered in different fields, especially in economic, sociocultural, and administrative dimensions of education systems of countries (De Wit, 2011). People who attend mobility programs often feel marginalized, isolated, and lonely and face racial tensions (Knight, 2011). In addition, they often experience culture shock, which includes stressful experiences such as adapting in a new environment, seeking for accommodation, struggling with the language and the educational setting of host countries, and experiencing homesickness (Jones & Brown, 2007; Sigalas, 2010). In this regard, it is vital to identify the problem areas encountered in this process to eliminate the negative experiences in the internationalization of higher education and to develop future education policies (Knight, 2012).

### **Student Mobility in Turkey**

Turkey strongly supports student mobility among neighboring countries, resulting from bilateral agreements with Turkic republics such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus where the majority speaks a Turkic language and are a neighboring country. Turkey welcomes a great number of international students especially from countries such as Iraq and Syria where inner turmoil and civil war have been ongoing for almost a decade. According to the research done by the European Association for International Students and Study Portals (2017), Turkey offers the largest number of English medium undergraduate programs, with 545 across the country. Plus, Turkey is considered at the top in the list of countries with respect to affordability for international students (StudyEU, 2017).

Among all student exchange programs, European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, which is a part of Erasmus Plus (Erasmus+)

exchange program, is one of the most popular, successful, and common ways of student mobility all over the world (European Commission, 2015; Ferencz, 2011). Taking the importance of the program into consideration in terms of cross-border mobility activities, as the biggest and most efficient mobility program, Erasmus+ constitutes the largest dimension of the internationalization process of higher education institutions in Europe.

Erasmus+ is one of the popular methods of student mobility in Turkey. Much of the literature on student mobility in Turkey focuses on participants in the Erasmus+ program. The studies have found that students encountered several problems before and during the mobility such as the late arrival of documents from the host universities, the lack of sufficient foreign language competence (Yucelsin Tas, 2013), limited opportunities for accommodation and transportation, and other cultural and economic barriers (Çepni et al., 2018). Research has revealed that despite the various problems, mobility students have benefited much from Erasmus process by improving mostly their lingual and cultural skills (Aslan & Jacobs, 2014; Çepni et al., 2018). Local scholars have also placed a specific emphasis on instructional dimension of the process and evidenced that Turkish instructors are often challenged in improving writing and reading skills of mobility students.

In addition to Erasmus+, Turkey offers additional student mobility opportunities. First of them is the Mevlana Exchange Program, which targets the exchange of higher education students and academics between the Turkish higher education institutions and higher education institutions of other countries. It's quite different from Erasmus+ and other exchange programs in the world because Mevlana includes not only some specific countries or regions but also almost all higher education institutions in the world (Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2019). Türkiye Scholarships, which is another method of student mobility in Turkey, aim to attract distinguished students from international countries by providing a full-time degree and short-term programs at outstanding Turkish universities. (Türkiye Scholarships, 2019). Moreover, with the regulation of 42457 dated July 16, 2014, the Turkish Council of Higher Education allows higher education institutions to make bilateral agreements with the international institutions in terms of student mobility (CHE, 2014).

The current study mainly focuses on examining the lived experiences of international students at a Turkish university that hosts one of the largest number of international students ( $N = 7,450$ ) using a qualitative research method and phenomenological design. The study is guided by two research questions: *How do international students perceive studying abroad in Turkey?* and *What do international students experience during their study?* The findings from the study will offer data for both decision and policy-makers in terms of detecting the potential challenges, understanding student perceptions of studying abroad, providing better conditions for international students, and facilitating their adaptation to social and academic life in Turkey.

## METHOD

This study was designed within the perspective of a phenomenological study based on qualitative research design. A phenomenological study identifies the meaning of the lived experience of individuals related to a particular phenomenon and then builds a compound description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It also pursues responses to research questions in a descriptive aspect through interviews or observation of those closest to the phenomenon (Davison, 2013). Correspondingly, the study focuses on the experiences of international students within the context of studying in a Turkish higher education institution based on their opinions about being a student in a foreign country, various experiences gained during their study and the contribution of those to their life, problems encountered both at school and in their social lives, possible solutions they have come up with for addressing issues, and in general, their insight on studying abroad.

### Study Group

We used criterion and maximum variation sampling techniques under the purposeful sampling method to identify potential participants (Creswell, 2013). As a criterion, only international students who had spent at least 6 months in a Turkish higher education institution located in the north of Turkey were included. We thought that including a variety of participants from different origins could lead us to deeper and comprehensive aspects of the phenomenon. Therefore, we contacted International Relations Office of the university to obtain the full list of international students, including some demographics such as age, gender, country, department and duration of the mobility. The list showed that majority of students were studying in School of Foreign Languages at the time of this study. Then, we contacted some of these students, with the help of second and third authors of the present study who were employed as instructors in School of Foreign Languages, asked them to participate in our interview voluntarily. We also payed attention to select the participants across various countries in accordance with the maximum variation sampling strategy. As can be seen in Table 1, 10 international students (four females and six males) from 10 different countries participated in the research.

**Table 1: Participants' Demographics**

Participant	Age	Gender	Country	Department	Duration of the mobility
P1	19	F	Kazakhstan	English Language & Literature	6 mo
P2	26	F	India	Business Administration	6 mo
P3	22	M	Chad	Mechanical Engineering	7 mo
P4	21	F	Malaysia	Theology	6 mo

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Participant	Age	Gender	Country	Department	Duration of the mobility
P5	21	M	Azerbaijan	International Relations	4 yr
P6	24	F	Turkmenistan	English Language & Literature	2 yr
P7	28	M	Pakistan	Physics	6 mo
P8	20	M	Lithuania	Automotive Engineering	6 mo
P9	23	M	Syria	Automotive Engineering	2 yr
P10	22	M	Somalia	Biomedical Engineering	6 mo

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### **Instrumentation**

We collected the research data through a semi-structured interview form with seven questions and several sub-questions mainly about participants' experiences and their overall insight into studying abroad. We asked sub-questions based on the answers of participants in order to reveal their insight and to have in-depth knowledge of the related phenomena (Glesne, 2012). The interview form was composed of two main parts. In the first part of the form, we asked demographic questions about the participants' age, gender, country, study period, and the departments they study in, while in the second part there were seven questions, such as "How do you feel yourself as an undergraduate in a foreign country?" and "What do you think you have learned as an undergraduate from the experiences you gained here?" In the first phase, the form was presented to English language experts, and through their feedback, we made revisions. In order to check its intelligibility, we also presented the form to three international students who did not participate in the study and made further revisions.

### **Data Collection**

The main purpose of a phenomenological interview is to identify the meaning of a phenomenon that several individuals share (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Through a comprehensive dialogue with the participants, we aimed to elicit their accounts and their own sense of reality (Koch, 1995). Based on Creswell's (2013) ethical principles in qualitative research, first, we applied to the Institutional Review Board with an explanatory note about the purpose of the study and participants needed for the research to get an approval. After we received permission to start our study, we recruited participants. Prior to their participation, we informed them about the purpose of the research, and they signed a consent form before the interview process. The interviews, conducted in a confidential and quiet room, with refreshments, took place between November and December 2018. Gray (2004) outlined that planning of the environment is an important consideration toward establishing rapport and gaining the respondent's confidence in the first few seconds of an interview. Each of

the interviews took approximately 30–45 min and were recorded and transcribed after getting permission from each participant.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the transcribed data for themes using a content analysis technique. In the first phase of the analysis process, we sent the transcribed interview data to the participant for review in order to ensure the credibility of the study. We then analyzed all transcriptions according to Creswell's (2013) qualitative data analysis steps: coding the data, classifying themes, organizing codes and themes, and defining and interpreting findings. First, we read the data through several times to grasp a general sense of information. Next, we categorized and labeled each piece of data with a term. We then identified common aspects from each term to render into a major theme and classified the main themes. Finally, we analyzed all data separately using codes regarding the themes to turn them into a manageable data set.

### **Credibility, Transferability, and Confirmability**

We used prolonged engagement and member checking to assure credibility in the study. In order to ensure the transferability, we used thick description, criterion, and maximum variation sampling methods in the study. Additionally, we sent the research data with a code list to a professor who studies higher education and has experience in qualitative research. The professor examined the research data in terms of inquiry audit regarding reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Urquhart (2013) highlighted, we went back to data to make certain that saturation was based on the widest possible range of data until no new codes occurred in the data. In the context of confirmability, the intercoder reliability value was calculated as .90 by using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula [ $\text{Agreement on data} / (\text{Agreement on data} + \text{Disagreement on data}) \times 100$ ]. Finally, we provided findings with direct quotations from participants coded as P1–P10. Based on these reviews, we found the research data as a whole to be consistent and reliable.

## **RESULTS**

The findings provide a rich description of the lived experiences of international students regarding their perceptions of studying abroad. Results of the data analysis yielded two major themes entitled "Perceptions of being an international student: What does it mean? What have they experienced?" and "The assistance and challenges they have been through during their study." Several factors affecting both major themes emerged under each.

### **Perceptions of Being an International Student: What Does It Mean? What Have They Experienced?**

In the narrations of the participants, we saw various types of associations between their understanding of being an international student and their personal life

experiences. These associations revealed the traces of their perceptions of living in a different country and the factors affecting their perceptions. Therefore, the first theme emerged from the data is participants' common perceptions of being an international student in a different country and their experiences. The first theme led us to consider several factors that had some direct effects on their lived experiences, such as their host country's culture and people, cross-cultural simulation, cultural adaptability, cultural awareness, self-dependence, self-approbation, career opportunities, and the importance of friendship. All these factors multidimensionally shaped students' perceptions and experiences.

Among all the other factors, striking narrations on the host country's culture and people were the outstanding ones. Participants spoke extensively about how they perceived the host country's culture and people. This perception was mostly related to the hospitality of the host country. Hospitality created a positive perception of the host country's culture and people.

From the first day in Turkey, I met only sympathetic and kind people who helped us. People are very kind and always very helpful and hospitable.  
—P7

I found that Turkish people are more than friendly and helpful towards foreigners, which helped a lot during my time here. —P2

Some participants went beyond having a general positive perception of the host country's culture and people by expressing more elaborate feelings about how they thought of the host country.

People here are very friendly, and they treat us as brothers and sisters and that is my true feeling. —P9

I feel like I'm in my own country. —P4

The culture here is so great and people are very respectful. I don't feel like a foreigner here. I am a Black person from Africa, but people here are mostly White, they don't make us feel uncomfortable, they love us, and I even feel advantageous because of my skin color here. —P4

We observed that cross-cultural simulation was another emerging factor explicitly highlighted by some participants, especially those from Turkic and Islamic countries. They pointed out that they came across a lot of similarities between their home country and the host country's culture.

Since my religion is almost the same as the one here, I haven't faced any kind of issues related to religion, so I haven't felt any pressure. —P6

Turkey is like a native country for me, like holidays, religion and I feel at home. —P1

I could see there is almost nothing different between my country and Turkey in terms of many things. —P5

Hence, it is possible to say that these similarities between their own culture and the host country's had a positive impact on their easy adaptation to a new culture. In this sense, these similarities directly affected their perception of being an international student.

In the narrations of participants, cultural adaptability was also a strikingly mentioned factor directly affecting what international students experienced during their stay.

It is exciting to study in a foreign country but at the same time, you need to learn about how things work, the local people, safety etc. Learned how to adapt to a place where you have nil understanding of the local language, so I know I could improve my adaptability skills to a new environment. —P2

Adapting to a new culture was surprisingly not an issue for most of the participants. Several ones mentioned a desire to experience new things and how they enjoyed being able to experience cultural differences and adapting themselves to new surroundings and so forth.

I feel thrilled, I think meeting new people, trying to make new friends who can help me in life and learning about a new culture, they are amazing experiences. —P4

I love cultural differences, so I don't mind some small ones. Learning new things about a new culture is so amusing and interesting for me. —P8

Another factor influencing the perceptions and experiences of international students was the cultural awareness they gained. The data showed that some participants experienced various types of cultural awareness on different levels during their time in the host country.

I learned the differences of their culture from my own, and even a bit of their language—we showed each other our traditional foods and wore our traditional clothes, shared stories about weddings and celebrations in our countries, so it was an amazing experience and more than what I had hoped for. —P4

For me, it's learning something new in a different way and different languages. A good chance to communicate with other people and see new places. —P3

Some participants stated that they became aware of differences and learned from their experiences. Additionally, some mentioned that they were amazed to discover new, inspiring, and surprising things both from Turkish and other international students coming from different parts of the world. It is possible to say that cultural awareness plays a big part in shaping international students' perceptions of both host and other nations.

Every day I see, try, and learn something new for me not only from my Turkish friends but also the others from different countries all over the world. It makes me so enthusiastic about the world and cultures. —P4

Furthermore, a few of the participants also spoke explicitly about how they valued understanding different cultural values with an emphasis on the cultural diversity within the host country. They were pleased to have an experience of multicultural learning environment broadening their horizons.

I met many nationalities and learned various interesting traditions and customs of different nationalities. It broadens my mind. —P1

I learned a lot and how to be tolerant to other people from different countries. I also learned to be more respectful. —P10

In the narrations of participants, self-dependence emerged as another important factor. Almost all participants mentioned the desire to be an autonomous individual who could achieve things solitarily in a different country.

I learned to be more self-dependent to solve my problems on my own. The experiences I gained here made me more confident and fearless and taught me some basic survival skills in a foreign country. —P2

Now I am much more confident to deal with everything in a foreign country and I know how to survive. I feel stronger now. —P6

I trust myself as an independent person to overcome so many problems in a foreign country. —P9

Likewise, self-approration became another factor when several participants talked about their feelings of achievement and how they were content with what they achieved. Personal satisfaction is an important element shaping student's perceptions of mobility programs. The idea of being considered successful might be a factor underneath the self-approration. Most participants mentioned that they were satisfied and proud of being selected for the mobility program and having a chance to study abroad.

Being a student in a foreign country feels good, especially when you are one of the few students selected from your home university. I always wanted to study abroad; this is a golden opportunity for me as a student. Making my parents proud by performing well here at the University. —P2

Proud of myself to achieve such a thing, to have such an opportunity to study here. —P9

Studying abroad is a great experience and I feel very lucky and excited to have this kind of chance after all that hard work. —P7

Career opportunity also emerged as an extensively emphasized factor. Studying abroad was perceived as a career opportunity and a chance to improve their living standards by almost all participants. Their perception was mostly related to having better facilities and infrastructure.

When I compare Turkey to Azerbaijan in terms of economy, education facilities, and technology they have, I can clearly say that Turkey is more

developed in every term than my country so studying here means a more prestigious diploma and better job opportunities for me. —P5

It is a good experience to write down on my CV. —P8

I hope studying abroad will create more chance to find new job opportunities. This is a unique experience to add on my CV maybe some people will choose me just because I have this extra on my CV. —P2

The importance of friendship also emerged as an effective factor in the lived experiences of international students. Participants perceived strong friendship ties as a supportive and motivating factor that made them feel cheerful, protected, and comfortable.

Turkish friends and other international students I learned that meeting new people and socializing with friends open new doors for your life and you don't feel alone or stranger in a different country. —P4

Some participants specifically stated that the support they received from their friends was paramount importance for them. In addition to that, a few perceived friendships as a usual part of social life and they also enjoyed the experience.

My friends support me when I have any kind of problem, so all these factors make me feel free, happy and special. —P9

By the way, if I face any problems or if I need any help, I know I have friends and lecturers are ready to solve them, so I feel relaxed and safe. —P10

### **The Assistance and Challenges They Have Been Through During Their Study**

The second theme that emerged from the data is the assistance and challenges participants had during their time in the host country. There were five factors clustered under this theme including language barriers and language learning challenges, emotional challenges, financial challenges, formal procedural challenges and assistance, and educational assistance.

Because language is one of the main components for communication and social interaction, language barriers was explicitly pointed out as the biggest challenge for most of the participants. Some participants expressed their frustration both for limited social interaction and not being able to understand some academic courses conducted in the host country's language.

I was a bit worried initially because I do not speak the language at all. As mentioned, the biggest challenge is communication, we keep having trouble understanding instructions and lectures in class. —P4

The only problem here is the language problem not many people can speak English that's why I sometimes find it difficult to communicate with some people. —P1

Language is the main problem here. It would have been better if I had more interaction with the local students, but the problem is almost no one speaks English so, there is a limited interaction. —P2

Similarly, for several participants, along with the language barrier issue, another challenge was learning the host country's language. Some of the participants did not find the efficiency of language courses and academics satisfactory as they mentioned the courses weren't beneficial even for the basic level of language learning.

My teachers do not know any basic knowledge of English and they try to teach us Turkish but it's impossible to teach a new language without using English especially for beginners. —P7

Also, some of the teachers teaching Turkish cannot even speak English, so they are teaching us Turkish using Turkish, which we don't understand. It is eventually not really helpful. I do not hope that the lessons will make me fluent, but at least capable of making daily conversation. Therefore, I think it would be better if the Turkish lessons have a clear syllabus on what should be taught every week—to avoid repetition, and the teachers are those who can at least speak basic English. —P4

In the narrations of participants, emotional challenges didn't emerge as one of the major challenges, but a subtle one. Only a few of them spoke about their feelings of being alone in a different country that turned into difficulty especially at the initial part of their experience of living away from their usual social environment.

In the beginning, I was missing my hometown and my friends because I haven't lived in a foreign country before but sometimes, I feel homesick and lonely. —P6

But I have a sense of loss because I am far away from my family and relatives. —P9

In other words, the intersection between language barriers and feeling alone in a different surrounding is evident. It is possible to say that international students' emotional challenges appear especially at the initial stage of their adaptation. This crucial period might become an unbearable situation that may result in quitting the mobility program.

When I came here, it was the first time to be away from my family and country. So, at first, I felt a bit homesick even thought about going back. —P5

In the first days in Turkey, I was so stressful and depressed because I couldn't communicate successfully. I couldn't understand the people or express myself clearly. —P8

Among all the factors affecting the second theme of the study, financial challenges became visible when participants, particularly from developing countries

or countries with less national income than the host country, pointed out the difficulties they went through to pay for their own expenses.

The biggest problem that I experienced is financial issues because when I compare the expenses for utilities and rent, I find it very difficult to live here because prices are so high, and I have a very limited budget to live on. —P6

Here you can only find buses, taxis, and minibuses to travel in the city and the fees for transportation should be cheaper. Hospitals are good but medical expenses are higher here. To buy medicine you must pay a great amount of money. —P2

In fact, I want to start with the financial problems I have. When I first came here, I didn't have a lot of money because of the never-ending war in my country make most people very poor. My family sent me here to study, but I know they don't have enough money to support me here, so I must work to earn enough, I think it is more important than my academic life. —P9

Interestingly, for several participants, on the other hand, financial issues were not even a problem. The ones from European countries or those with sufficient scholarships stated that they received enough money to cover all their expenses including social activities and travel fees. Thus, they indicated that they had no financial challenges and even expressed their satisfaction with the scholarship funded by the mobility program. Accordingly, the absence of any financial challenges placed the students from the developed countries in a position separate from the developing ones. Because most of the European countries have better economic conditions, students from those countries might consider mobility programs as a way to experience new things without even thinking about financial issues.

The scholarship is enough, so I don't have any financial problems even I save some money to travel around Turkey. —P8

Actually, I don't have any problems. Turkish scholarship is enough for me. Meals provided at the school cafeteria are not expensive for us. —P10

The scholarship is more than enough, and it covers all my expenses here for now I have not faced any financial problems yet. —P7

Formal procedural challenges and the need for assistance was another factor stated by several participants. Along with the assistance they received from the formal authorities including the mobility program officials, they also mentioned the institutional support provided by the host university.

The people in Erasmus office are very helpful. They organize almost everything; I can easily get information about anything. They even arrange my dorm and help me with some of the official documents. —P8

The people who are responsible from international students are very helpful. —P6

I believe people are doing their best to astonish and satisfy foreign students. They work hard to make everything convenient for us. —P4

It was clear from the narrations some were content with the assistance they received starting from the initial stages of their study. This assistance seemed to be important for their adaptation to their new schools.

Everything is managed by the administration, and us foreign students do not have to manage everything by ourselves. I found that the administration in Rectory is incredibly efficient and fast, and none of our questions or enquiries go unanswered. —P4

However, only one participant found it difficult to cope with some formal procedural documentation work and expressed the difficulty as a challenge causing some boredom and annoyance.

It takes up a lot of process and exhausting work, namely filling forms, applying for residency permits, adding subjects into our learning protocols, taking up classes and examinations etc. —P7

Educational assistance and available resources emerged as another distinctive factor, as participants spoke extensively about the satisfactory support they received from the academic staff and how they appreciated the educational system the host institution provided.

Our teachers here are all helpful people and school is very modern, it has the latest technology, tools. It provides free internet connection and there is a huge library to study. —P3

The facilities are very good. Technology you use here like smart boards and projectors are better than we have in my country. Infrastructure is much better here. —P2

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study offers a further exploration of the lived experiences of international students regarding their perceptions of studying abroad, particularly those of students studying abroad in Turkey. Although there is a considerable amount of research on international students and internationalization of higher education institutions, not many researchers have examined the basic reasons that constitute students' perceptions toward living in a foreign land as an international student and the experiences they have during their study.

The findings of the study revealed views that the host country's culture and people play a crucial role in enabling students to integrate both socially and culturally into their new surroundings. No matter what their gender, religion, cultural backgrounds, or ethnic origins, most of the participants explicitly stated that they had positive perceptions toward the host culture and people. Previous research (particularly on international students in the United States) has pointed out that more interaction with host country nationals led to better cultural adjustment and a better

social experience (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Considering the research and this study's findings, a welcoming culture and the hospitality of the host country's people affect the way international students adapt into a new social surrounding, despite any previous opinions of the host country. Intensive interaction with the host culture and people takes on a significant and facilitating role in this adaptation process rather than a challenging one (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). A related outcome of this conclusion is that the cultural diversity, friendship, and interaction with nationals on host campuses provides a positive, supportive, and motivating environment for students to blend easily in social and cultural surroundings, which helps them develop better interaction and communication skills. Historical, sociocultural, religious, and linguistic bonds and similarities that international students, especially from Turkic and Islamic countries, find within the host culture play an efficacious role in this process. Within the related literature, there is much evidence about the facilitator role of the interaction patterns in this sociocultural adaptation process (Coles & Swami, 2012). Additionally, international diversity and friendship on host campuses function as a pivotal element providing international students with better intercultural communication skills and appreciation of diverse cultural differences (Williams, 2005; Yang, 2016). The integration level increases as international students experience resemblance in terms of co-national relationships (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Ward & Searle, 1991). Within the related literature, there is much evidence about the facilitator role of the interaction patterns mentioned above in this sociocultural adaptation process (Coles & Swami, 2012). Additionally, international diversity and friendship on host campuses function as a pivotal element providing international students with better intercultural communication skills and appreciation of diverse cultural differences (Williams, 2005; Yang, 2016). In addition, through mobility programs, international students utilize an opportunity not only to enhance cross-cultural skills but also to broaden their horizons with regard to gaining more cultural awareness (Marshall, 2014). Furthermore, previous research has also revealed that appreciating cultural differences helps international students improve cross-cultural interactions (Rockstuhl et al., 2010).

Living and studying in a different country means that international students must manage almost everything by themselves. Sometimes this experience could be distressing but most of the time encouraging. From the first day on, they must arrange their financial budgets and cope with some frivolous challenges, which may be their first time handling such things. In relation to this fact, the study findings indicated that international students not only notice the value of being a self-dependent individual but also foster their confidence and discover their hidden abilities to survive in a different surrounding. During this period, they also draw lessons from their experiences and increase in maturity. Therefore, it could be considered as a unique experience giving them the opportunity to find their potential regarding self-approbation and limits, to reinforce their confidence in a foreign land. The current study findings on this certain issue of self-dependence and self-approbation reverberate with some research in the related literature. Some previous research has stated that studying abroad could be considered as a self-development and self-

realization process through which students experience a variety of new things and discover their potential (Wu et al., 2015).

As globalization forces corporations toward enlarging international competition, the need for more cross-culturally skilled workforce rises. Thus, studying abroad provides favorable conditions to acquire those necessary skills (Kehm, 2005). Findings of the current study regarding career development also reflected that most of the participants considered studying abroad as a key to more prestigious and well-paid jobs that could lead to a better future. These findings support research stating that mobility programs could equip students with essential skills desired by international corporations (Di Pietro, 2014). Hence, it could be concluded that studying abroad serves as a supplier of the competent workforce both for host and international organizations.

As international students seek for higher education in a foreign land, they encounter many obstacles ranging from social, cultural, financial, and emotional issues to language difficulties (Jones & Brown, 2007; Sigalas, 2010). While their transitional phase can be quite challenging, it might also be a motivator as they use assistance provided by host institutions and utilize their own strategies to overcome these challenges. The findings of the current study revealed that language barriers, along with limited interaction both socially and academically, were the biggest challenges participants faced. They explicitly stated difficulties in communicating with host nationals and their professors due to language barriers that resulted in low academic performance and limited, stressful interactions with both. As they indicated, the language competency problem mostly stemmed from their professors who, lacking English language competency, tended to conduct classes in their native tongue. This forced students to learn not only survival level of the host language but also academic level language. The current study findings resonate with previous research outcomes regarding language barriers leading to limited interaction and stress for international students (Camiciottoli, 2010; Riggio, 2010). Host institutions should provide international students both with more linguistically competent professors and better educational assistance for language issues so that students can integrate and interact better in their academic and social life.

The current study findings also illustrated that some international students encountered emotional challenges including feeling lonely, homesick, and isolated. They experienced these challenges especially at the initial stages of their arrival. Thus, not only were they struggling to adapt to the host country, but also to adjusting emotionally. The study findings are consistent with previous research that a new environment outside of their home country could cause some emotional stressors (Knight, 2011; Sawir et al., 2007). Namely, it is critical to assist international students at the early stages of their arrival and to eliminate language obstacles causing emotional stress and weak academic performance. In this study's findings, financial challenges didn't emerge as a major indicator that directly affected most of the participants. Many of them expressed that the scholarships funded by the mobility programs were enough to cover all their general living and academic expenses. In this regard, if enough funding is provided, financial issues would not have a negative impact on their integration nor on their emotional adjustment process.

Apart from the challenges, educational and institutional assistance that international students received during their study had a significant impact on satisfaction level through positive experiences of international students. Thus, appropriate services, including academic mentoring, the infrastructure of facilities, financial aid, and social activities for international students, are essential to help students have positive experiences and achieve their academic goals. In this regard, the findings show similarity with previous research emphasizing the significance of both educational and institutional support to contribute to the satisfaction of international students (Carr et al., 1999; Lee & Wesche, 2000). That is to say, host institutions should be fulfilling places where resources and support are adequate for international students' needs. To sum up, the findings of the study form integrity with the related literature regarding the internationalization of higher education institutions and support the necessity of understanding the experiences and perceptions of international students and how these play a critical role in their adaptation process to living and studying in another country.

Since this study only centered on a certain group of international students at a specific higher education institution, the findings should be carefully interpreted. Therefore, making a generalization of the findings beyond the group of international students is limited. Future studies should consider exploring international students' experiences in-depth by looking at other variables of the phenomena.

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