

## Why do international students choose Turkish universities and what are the challenges they encounter?

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International student numbers in Turkish higher education have increased considerably in recent years. This study explores the reasons for selecting Turkey as a study abroad location as well as the challenges faced by international students. In this qualitative study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 62 international students at different Turkish foundation universities. After analysing data through content analysis, the results indicated that there are two main categories which influence the decision to study in Turkey: (i) negative factors at their home country and popular destinations push the students to new destinations; emotional, social, and political affiliation pull students to Turkey (ii) positive factors at Turkey (e.g., cost advantages, providing opportunities, strategic location) that pull students. The respondents reported the following as challenges to study in the host country: the language barrier, personal factors related to transitioning to life abroad, living in a big city, and difficulties with their educational institution and government. Ultimately, the results of this study provide a new perspective to the existing literature by providing insights from the international students choosing a university in a non-traditional destination that is outside the major receiving countries.

### Introduction

Although many studies have evaluated aspects of the internationalisation process, most of them have focused on higher education experiences in traditional destinations, i.e., English-speaking, developed countries, such as the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada (Huang, 2007; Kondakçı, van den Broeck & Yildirim, 2008). There are also some recent studies (e.g., Huang 2006; Li & Bray 2007) conducted in Asian countries on the topic of international students. In particular, China, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea have seen significant increases in international student admissions, a trend that is related to their economic growth. As most studies have focused on English-speaking or some Asian countries, in the present study, a Turkish case represents a non-traditional destination (Gianni 2017; Kondakçı, 2011).

Turkish higher education has expanded significantly with a marked increase in the number of universities, students, and also academic staff (Saraç, 2020). According to statistics from the Higher Education Council of Turkey (HEC, 2019a), in 1987, the number of students enrolled in higher education was 502,380; in 2003, there were 5,139,469 enrolled; while in 2019, this number reached 7,729,790. In 1987, the number of academic staff was 24,382; in 2015, this number had increased to 148,903, now it has reached 158,098. There were only 28 universities in the country in 1984, this number had increased to 76 by 2001. The number of universities reached 201 in 2019. There are two types of universities in Turkey, namely state and foundation universities (HEC, 2019b). In Turkey, private universities have to be run by a foundation as specified in higher education law. As these universities have a public legal personality, they are defined as *Foundation University* in the relevant

regulation. Currently, in the total of 203 universities, 74 are foundation universities and 129 are state universities. According to the statistics of HEC (2019a), while 7,134,674 of the students are in state universities, 595,116 are studying at foundation universities. State institutions of higher education are funded by the government, based on a detailed itemising of their expenditures. Foundation universities are funded by their foundations and tuition fees are identified by their authorised councils (HEC, 2019b). Whereas with state universities, there are no fees or fees as little as around US\$100-200, tuition fees at foundation universities can reach thousands (US\$5,000-20,000).

With a dramatic increase in the number of institutions of higher education in the last decade, higher education for international students has become more accessible in Turkey. Recent years have witnessed an increasing rate of inbound student mobility in Turkish universities, with the majority originating from the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, and African countries. In 2003, there were 14,690 international students, increasing to 48,183 in 2013, 108,076 in 2016, and 125,138 in 2019. Moreover, some recent studies (e.g. Wei, 2013; Wen & Hu, 2018) on international student mobility elaborated that Turkey can be accepted as a regional higher education hub. For example, Kondakçı, Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter (2017) revealed Turkey was accepted as central hub for Western and Central Asia, and constituted a community of its own. Barnett, Lee, Jiang and Park (2016) found Turkey was a regional hub for students from the Balkans, Middle East, Caucasia and Central Asia. Jon, Lee and Byun (2014) found Turkey was viewed as a regional hub for a niche market rather than a major global host. They found students who wanted to study abroad preferred Turkey because of similar cultural, political, and historical features, traveling convenience and lower cost. Kondakçı (2011) emphasised the importance of Turkish higher education for countries in close proximity like the Caucasus and the Balkans.

Both the increasing number of inbound students and the aforementioned studies are a reminder that, despite important developments in Turkey, there is insufficient research relating to inbound student mobility in Turkish higher education area. This study addresses the literature gap by examining the reasons why international students select their host country and the difficulties they face studying in that country, particularly in the case of Turkey, with its strategic position between Asia and Europe as well as its important position among Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by providing insights from international students choosing a university in a non-traditional destination that is outside the major receiving countries. Moreover, as the home countries of study participants are generally different from those highlighted in existing research, it will provide an interesting perspective.

## **Literature review**

### **Drivers and challenges of international students**

The reasons attracting international students to attend a university abroad can be academic, economic, and political. Most existing studies on the reasons for student mobility have used the push-pull model. In all these studies, there are two perspectives. In

the first perspective, which is more common, researchers (Altbach 1998; McMahon 1992) have surmised that the negative economic and social forces within home countries serve to “push” students abroad, whereas the positive features of host countries “pull” the students. In this context, in the study by McMahon (1992), the “push” model was called the “outbound” model, and the “pull” model was called the “inbound” model. A study by Chen and Barnett (2000) explained that the students move to economically developed countries to improve skills and abilities and, ultimately, to maximise economic returns based on their potential. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identified three stages in the student decision-making process: predisposition, search, and choice. According to their study, push factors, such as political conflicts, unsafe environments, or low living standards can play an important role in the first stage. Pull factors, such as geographical proximity, quality of education, high living standards, or reputation of the university are influential factors during the search and choice stages.

Another perspective, as argued by just a few researchers, has proposed that negative factors at a popular destination “push” students to another country, whereas developing positive factors in the home country “pull” the students to stay at home. For instance, Li and Bray (2007) mentioned that some evolving positive factors in a home country, such as the increasing number and quality of higher education institutions, may “pull” students to stay in their home country, while other factors, such as unwelcoming attitudes, may “push” students away from willingness to study in a foreign country (Kondakçı, 2011). Lee and Rice (2007) posited that discrimination against international students from particular countries after the 9/11 terrorist event in the USA can be shown as an example where the host country can serve to “push” the students. Seeing how these two perspectives work at English-medium institutions in non-Western/Anglophone countries will provide a new viewpoint for the internationalisation literature.

There are many studies about the difficulties faced by international students. In these, international students have generally emphasised three basic topics: language difficulties, cultural differences, and an unwelcoming attitude from the host country. For instance, in the study by Wu et al. (2015), international students in the USA identified social isolation, loneliness, and prejudice as negative features of study abroad experiences. In Heng’s (2017) study conducted among Chinese students in the USA, participants said that while overseas guests in China are usually welcomed with open arms, students entering the USA encountered different, unwelcoming practices.

Lin and Scherz (2014) defined two challenges facing Asian students in the USA, cultural and linguistic. English was a strong barrier for understanding lectures, especially when professors spoke too fast or used slang or idioms. American culture was different for international students, who perceived Americans as individualistic and distant in relationships. Similar points were raised by Sawir et al. (2008). According to their study, two thirds of the international students in Australia had experienced isolation and/or cultural loneliness, due to the lack of a preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. Students described feeling lost in a jungle, because of the profound unfamiliarity of the Australian culture and language.

Grey (2002) found that the language barriers and exclusion from groups of local students were the challenges experienced by international students in Australia. Lee and Rice (2007) also emphasised exclusion by local students in the USA. The students included in this study said that the students from Western and English-speaking countries faced minimal or no discrimination, compared to students from other regions. Consistent with that study, Lee (2010) revealed that the cultural and language differences create difficulties that are particularly noticeable to visitors from non-Western regions (Asia, Africa, Latin American, and the Middle East) who attend universities in the USA, the UK, Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

While there are many examples of international student experiences in English-speaking higher education, a limited number of studies has examined challenges facing international students in non-traditional destinations. One recent study by Kondakçı et al. (2008) was conducted in Belgium, finding that foreign students complained about the low English-language skills of academics and administrative staff. They also stated that students spoke with different accents, which made communication difficult. Another study by Lau and Lin (2017), at a Taiwanese university where Mandarin Chinese was spoken, resulted in similar comments. The local students were very anxious about making mistakes speaking English with their peers, especially among those international students who spoke English with a first-language accent. Besides the language difficulties, in both studies, support services such as peer support programs or help from advisors were seen as inadequate by international students.

Alavi and Mansor (2011) in Malaysia also indicated that university management policies on internationalisation were lacking. More than half of the international students in their study mentioned “poor arrangement of campus activities” and “lack of advisors for international students” as problems. Considering the limitations of previous research into different destination experiences of international students, a Turkish case as reported here will be interesting and can broaden understandings of the difficulties faced in a host country, from the perspective of the students selecting a less common destination.

## **Method**

### **Design and data source**

This work uses a qualitative research method. Data collection started on 30.11.2018 with a meeting at the International Relations Office of Istanbul Bilgi University (IBU), for two reasons: the author is on staff at this university, and it is one of the top five foundation universities, having the largest number of international students. During the meeting, the aim of the study was communicated to the International Office team. To identify students for the research, the author described the following criteria: (i) the student should come from one of the countries which had more than 100% increase in their student population in the last five years (based on Higher Education Council of Turkey data, 2019; these countries and their student population growth rates are as follows: Syria 1060%, Germany 913%, Egypt 865%, Libya 638%, Yemen 480%, Jordan 424%, Somalia 262%, Iraq 227%, East Turkistan/China 202%, Bulgaria 198%, Palestine 170%, Afghanistan 150%, Pakistan

150%, Azerbaijan 148%, Morocco 145%, Uzbekistan 126%); (ii) first and second year undergraduate international students, who are closer to the process of selection and adjustment in their universities, preferred over older students; (iii) students not receiving a scholarship or a scholarship with less than 50% funding prioritised; and (iv) students who are willing towards participation and contributing preferred.

The International Office requested a two-week period for identifying the students. After two weeks, a second meeting was scheduled on 14.12.2018. The author was introduced to 27 volunteer students. The aims of the study were conveyed to these volunteers by the author. Thus, the first sample group was purposefully selected by the International Office team in accord with the abovementioned criteria. These 27 students agreed to participate in in-depth, face to face interviews with the author. All interviews were conducted in English as it is the language of instruction for IBU and the language in common among all participants in the study. Each of the 27 students was asked to refer other students compatible with the study criteria and those who study in other foundation universities where the language of instruction is English, as is the case of IBU. These 27 students suggested 35 of their friends who were studying in different English-speaking foundation universities; thus a snowball sampling method was employed in accessing the second group of participants to extend the sample. The author conducted the same interview with these 35 students. This sample size was accepted as appropriate because a saturation point was reached after the 62nd interviewee, when the researcher encountered similar interviews again and again, becoming confident that a category is saturated (Urquhart, 2013). The final sample size was 62 students (23 female and 39 male). The majority of participants (46 students, 74%) were from Middle Eastern countries; the remaining 16 students were from a number of other countries (Germany, Bulgaria, Russia, Azerbaijan). The number of international students in the study per country of origin and their universities are presented in Table 1.

### **Data collection tools and data analysis**

To explore international students' views, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Basic interview questions included: "Did you have any other choices if you hadn't decided to study in Turkey?"; "Why did you choose to study in Turkey?"; "Can you recall the decision-making process to study in Turkey?"; "What are the difficulties you faced in your daily and campus life?" Interview durations were about 40 minutes, audio recorded with respondents' consent. As Merriam (2002) pointed out, qualitative data analysis is actually content analysis for exploring concepts that could explain the data and how it relates to the participants. Therefore, interviews were subjected to content analysis as follows. The researcher listened to the interview recordings, followed by a verbatim transcription to become familiar with the data. Then, each transcript was coded. After the emerging codes were grouped together and common themes were identified, the results were written in a report.

Table 1: Sample of the study

Countries	Student numbers and their universities
Afghanistan	1 (IBU); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.); 1 (Bahçeşehir U.)
Azerbaijan	1 (IBU); 2 (Özyeğin U.); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.); 1 (Beykent U.)
Bulgarian	1 (IBU); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.)
Egypt	2 (IBU); 1 (Altınbaş U.); 1 (Beykent U.); 1 (Istanbul Şehir U.)
Germany	3 (IBU); 1 (Bahçeşehir U.); 1 (Istanbul Okan U.)
Iran	1 (IBU); 2 (Koç U.)
Iraq	2 (IBU); 1 (Altınbaş U.); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.)
Russia	1 (IBU); 2 (Bahçeşehir U.); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.)
Jordan	2 (IBU); 1 (Özyeğin U.)
Yemen	2 (IBU); 1 (Istanbul Okan U.)
Libya	1 (IBU); 2 (Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim U.)
Pakistan	3 (IBU); 2 (Istanbul Ticaret U.); 2 (Yeditepe U.); 1 (Istanbul Şehir U.)
Palestine	2 (IBU); 2 (Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim U.); 1 (Istanbul Aydın U.)
Morocco	1 (IBU); 1 (Istanbul Okan U.)
Syria	4 (IBU); 2 (Istanbul Aydın U.); 1 (Yeditepe U.)
Total	62 students from 12 different foundation universities

## Findings

### Reasons for selecting a Turkish university: Negative factors

*Negative factors in their home country and popular destinations push the students to new destinations; emotional, social, and political affiliation pull students to Turkey*

While 3 of the 62 students said that they did not have another option to study abroad, 59 said that they did have an alternative option, such as the UK (12 students), China (7 students), Germany (7 students), the USA (5 students), France (6 students), Canada (7 students), Australia (4 students), Qatar (4 students), Dubai (4 students), and Switzerland (3 students). Two of the three students who stated having no other options were from Syria, and the other was from Yemen. They stated that they had escaped from war and took refuge in Turkey. They said that they did not even think about looking for another option under the given adverse conditions, that they were incredibly happy to be here and alive, and that they were grateful to Turkey. Remarks from the Yemeni student were noteworthy as they represented the perspectives of these students:

S1 (Yemen): Actually, Turkey opened her country for about five million refugees from different countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, and Yemen that had a very harsh war with ISIS and governments. I appreciate Turkey because they open the door for all refugees and they didn't close it like Western countries. For this reason, even if I had the opportunity to go to a Western country, I preferred to study in Turkey.

When 43 of the 46 participants from the Middle East who stated that they had chosen Turkey, although they had other options, were talking about the reasons why they chose Turkey, they mentioned their poor and negative conditions, like the three students who said they had no other options. However, they stated that Turkey's positive and inclusive

policies toward Muslim countries, especially in recent years, had an influence on their decision to choose Turkey. It was worth noting that the Middle Eastern students this research interviewed compared Western countries and Turkey, though often doing so from an emotional approach rather than by considering education. A student from Pakistan stated:

S2 (Pakistan): My previous choice was Germany, which is a developed and beautiful country. But being Muslim can be dangerous in this country [Germany]. You can be attacked, made a joke of, or even mocked just because you are Muslim. Why study in a place where you are not provided with security for being who you are?

An Egyptian student shared similar opinion:

S3 (Egypt): After the coup, the Egyptian government killed several people from the Muslim Brotherhood. Our government says that the Muslim Brotherhood are terrorists but they are not. I had another choice - America, but I didn't prefer it. Because, I think the USA is responsible for all the conflicts in my country and I know that the Western world faces a racism problem especially against Muslims. Therefore, I am here. Turkey is a Muslim country and I feel more safe and happy here.

Another student from Palestine shared:

S4 (Palestine): There is racism against Muslims in the Western world. It [Turkey] is a developed and modern country owned by Muslims. So, it is better to give our money to Turks rather than give our money to the Western countries whose main purpose is to destroy Islam and use the money to kill the people.

A student from Libya spoke about negative factors in Western countries:

S5 (Libya): There is obviously a racist attitude toward Muslims in the Western world. This factor is very important to Muslim students nowadays if they consider moving to countries in the West for education. It was actually one of the reasons I myself chose Turkey rather than a country in the West for higher education, as I personally know people who were physically assaulted in Australia, the USA, and the UK for being Muslims. They still face racism in their daily lives. However, Turkey is welcoming and not racist. It gives a feeling of peace and security to the students coming to Turkey.

That is, contrasting with exclusionist attitudes in some popular international higher education destinations, the supportive attitudes in Turkish society are viewed as effective, particularly in responses by students from the Middle East. Negative attitudes toward Muslims in these countries, specifically in recent years, have led students to seek a new destination. When students search for a new destination, the influence of parents and family was frequently voiced as an important factor. Considering supportive policies developed by Turkey, the common religious and socio-cultural similarities for these countries, and parents' encouraging manner, the trust in Turkey are not surprising. Since most of the students in this study are from Eastern cultures, where the family concept is at the forefront, this has also led to this factor in the foreground of their answers. Moreover, the use of the words "motivation, insistence, and trust" by participants in their

discourse was remarkable. Some illustrative quotations show the influence of family:

S6 (Pakistan): I did have other opportunities in Australia, Germany, and Canada. Specially, I want to study in Canada. However, my family motivated me and insisted that I should go to Turkey. Finally, I am here and happy studying here.

S7 (Syria): My father is a businessman; he wanted me to receive a quality education. Due to the conflicts in my country, both he and I wanted me to study at a university abroad. He appreciated Turkey's recent policies in the Middle East and believed that Turkey is the place where I can be happy and receive a quality education.

S8 (Egypt): The idea of studying abroad was completely mine, but the country options were completely up to my parents. The idea of a female living alone abroad is not really that common in Egypt. My dad goes to Germany, Hungary, and Turkey a lot for work reasons, and finally, he prefers and trusts to Turkey. I always hate saying this but when I was in Germany, even though it was amazing, and I loved it, I did not feel comfortable at all being a "hijabi." On the other hand, from the first day I came to Turkey, I felt that I fit in much better, and that was not because of the hijab thing, but rather the fact that it was just like Egypt, but a lot better.

Many of the students stated that they feel comfortable and happy in Turkey thanks to the similarities between life in Turkey and their lives in their own countries; therefore, they recommended receiving an education in Turkey to their friends. This leads to an increase in the population of students from their home country. As stated by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), feeling "the presence of a population" from their own country in a different country seemed to positively affect the students' decision. That is, whereas Turkey provides the opportunity to experience university life in a different country and to recognise another culture, it is also seen as a location that decreases the feeling of being foreign. This idea can be clearly shown in the following expressions:

S9 (Libya): I recognised that there are many students from my country. I really did not expect this much but it was very good for me. By the way, I hope next year my best friend will come to our university to study business.

S10 (Iraq): My friends are studying in Turkey. They encourage me for studying here, they told me it's a great country to discover new things and gain new experiences.

A total of 43 Middle Eastern students were asked the following: "Well, the reasons you mentioned are mostly emotional. Have you ever considered your decision based on more concrete data such as the quality of education or the facilities offered?" The analysis of their responses revealed the following themes. When the responses from the 16 students who came from regions outside the Middle East and who stated as having other options were analysed, it was observed that their responses were related to the factors below rather than the aforementioned factors.

**Reasons for selecting a Turkish university: Positive factors***Positive factors that pull students: a. Cost advantages and providing opportunities*

The participants attached importance to the criterion that their university is an international university and the educational language is English. So, the presence of the international universities, which have English as their educational language, with relatively low fees was seen as an influential factor in the students' preferences. An Afghani student elucidated:

S11 (Afghanistan): I chose Turkey because it was the most financially viable for my family. I was going between a few universities but picked Bilgi at the end, because it is an international university, had an impressive academic faculty and a solid psychology program with a perfect campus facilities.

The interviews revealed that the cost advantage for Turkey is an important factor affecting students' decisions. A Moroccan student shared:

S12 (Morocco): To live here is not so expensive, especially compared with Europe, such as London. There are many social activities in Istanbul, they are not expensive. I was in London this summer for a language school. The life there is really expensive.

Moreover, the combination of quality of education provided, social facilities offered, and fee required by universities influenced their decisions. One student from Iran stated:

S13 (Iran): I chose to study in Turkey because the city has high standards for education, and I decided to study especially in Koç, because it has an international and perfect campus with multicultural people. Especially when I compare the rate of education quality and fee, really, I am so happy being here.

Travel cost is a significant consideration for a student studying abroad, and thus Turkey is at an advantage, considering its proximity to the participants' countries. All these cost issues merge with the offering of "relatively easy acceptance process" and "scholarship opportunities" by Turkish universities, which emerged as an important theme. The following excerpts provide examples of student views:

S14 (Azerbaijan): I did have other choices, such as China, London and Sweden, but in my opinion, Turkey was the better option in terms of accessibility and opportunities. Turkey is clearly cheaper than Europe countries and also I have a good scholarship opportunity. Also, I wanted to go out of Azerbaijan and see new places.

S15 (Russia): I wanted an international experience. I received a scholarship offer from Bahçeşehir University, and I jumped at it after my applications for Canada were mishandled.

*Positive factors that pull students: b. Positive aspects of Turkey as a country and its people*

The aforementioned emotional-social-political affinity seems to have influenced students' decisions by merging with the positive features of Turkey, such as Turkey's unique

strategic location between Asia and Europe, the close geographical distance to their own countries, the rich history, natural beauty, and hospitable human characteristics. A student from Azerbaijan stated:

S16 (Azerbaijan): Actually, I chose to study in Turkey because I like the city, people, culture, and also, it is near my country. Also, my father encourages me to study in Istanbul. I had the opportunity to study in London, but I chose Istanbul because it is near my home country.

Also, some of the noteworthy comments were about identifying Turkey as a safe region and seeing it as a heaven by the participants. For example, a Syrian student said:

S17 (Syria): Turkey is beautiful and safe place to live and also Turkey is a European country. Life is so comfortable. Turkish people are respectful and lovely. Turkey and Istanbul seem like heaven for me.

Some other interpretations are depicted below:

S18 (Bulgaria): Istanbul as one of the biggest cities in the world, full of opportunities and life. It is not only the reputation of the university that made me choose Turkey, it is the city, the people and culture as well. My family was also very supportive which made the whole process for me easier.

S19 (Jordan): Turkey was my first choice. It is an exciting city, because it is surrounded by the Bosphorus Strait and the Sea of Marmara. Turkish people are known for their warmth and hospitality. Accessibility to Europe was also an important issue in my decision.

Furthermore, in interviews conducted with German students, the author recognised that two of the five German participants in the study had Turkish parents and the other three had Turkish fathers. In fact, this greatly explains the increasing number of students coming from Germany as a Western country. Analysing their responses, the answers about staying away from Turkey for years, developing a yearning for their country, and their “willingness to gain a better knowledge of their origins” attracted attention as important factors in their decisions. For example, a German student elucidated:

S20 (Germany): I am a citizen of Germany. My father came to Germany in 1965 and married my German mom. But they divorced and my mother raised me and, as she is German, I cannot speak fluent Turkish. In summer, I generally was with my dad and his family in Turkey. I like my country but not as much as Turkey. However, I don't know much about Turkey. Therefore, I wanted to be in Turkey for my higher education. I wonder about my other country and its culture. Here, now, I live with my grandmother, who is Turkish. At first, I was a little hesitant and afraid about getting used to Turkey but now I have a lot of friends and also a girlfriend. Maybe we will marry and stay here.

Also, their “positive views on Turkey and its future” were notable. Another student's expression can be shown as an example of this idea:

S21 (Germany): I came from Germany but I am not German. I don't want to be a second-class citizen anymore; I want to live in Turkey for the rest of my life. I believe that Turkey will be more powerful in the world because it embraces citizens from across the world.

### **Difficulties faced by international students**

In this section, difficulties in social and campus lives faced by international students are examined. Based on the interview answers, four types of difficulties were identified *in their social life*. Language was seen as a barrier in daily life, especially when shopping, ordering food, and commuting. Students mentioned that Turkish people often do not know English, and if they know the language, they do not like to speak it. The second theme related to the personal factors and students emphasised two issues: the difficulties of adapting to a new culture even when there are some similarities to their home culture and difficulties of living without their parents. The third theme was living in a big city, where three issues were identified: crowding, traffic problems, and difficulties with renting. Lastly, students mentioned the problems with the government. They raised two disputes: the lack of an information desk for international students and the process involved in acquiring residence permits and health insurance. The following quotations describe the social life challenges:

S22 (Russia): When I first came here, I had problems speaking in Turkish in my daily life. Because I was always used to speaking English at home. When you are going out, you have to talk with people. It feels like a completely different language.

S23 (Iran): Actually, people here are so nice and helpful, but of course language is really a problem. Most of the people in the streets can't talk English, so at first it was hard, but I am learning Turkish now, so I hope it will be easier in the future.

S24 (Pakistan): The biggest problem is language of course, and the second one is, for example, in Pakistan I travel by my car but here I had to use buses for transportation and I am not used to traveling like that. Also, the foods are very different.

Besides social challenges, international students also faced difficulties in campus life. Eleven students (18%) stated that they had not faced any challenges in the university. However, 51 students (82%) mentioned problems living on campus. These difficulties can be categorised under two main themes. One concerns the language barrier. Students dealt with three specific issues. Participants said that sometimes Turkish is spoken in class, which creates an academic problem. The second issue was university management. There is an inadequate number of staff members to support international students. The third issue involved local students who did not want to speak English in class and used Turkish in group projects. The following quotations describe the language challenges:

S25 (Libya): It was hard to communicate with Turkish students as they used to be far away from international students and stay close as a group among themselves. They didn't put much effort to respond to me when I talked to them.

S26 (Jordan): It is very difficult to make friends when everybody around you is speaking a different language. Also, most of the people I met in Turkey don't make even the slightest efforts with international students, they just prefer to speak Turkish with their own friends.

S27 (Morocco): I'm unable to communicate in Turkish with some of my teachers and in one of my core courses, which is supposed to be English, the teacher speaks in Turkish. For foreigners and international students there should be courses in English.

Difficulties relating to the university policy for international students were mentioned as a second challenge on campus. There are three issues under this theme. First, it is the lack of activities and clubs for international students. Although the university is international, some of the courses are in Turkish, and there are problems with registration, because the classes fill up too quickly and advisors are difficult to contact.

S28 (Bulgaria): I think that an international university could improve its policies against international students. None of the staff in dormitories for example can speak English which makes it impossible for international students to deal handle registration processes and other arising issues. I would like to mention that there are no common activities providing social interaction between international and national students.

S29 (Afghanistan): I feel like the clubs are not very inclusive and some are falsely advertised. I wish that the international centre was given more opportunity to create events for international students to get together.

## Conclusion

Internationalisation of higher education is developed in two geopolitical regions in the world. One is Western higher education (English-speaking regions and developed countries in Europe). The other is the Asia-Pacific region that has emerged since the 2000s (Huang, 2007; Kondakçı et al., 2008; Jiani, 2017). There has been a 160% increase in number of students studying in Turkey over the last five years (2013-2019) and a 752% increase in the last 15 years (2003-2019). This study was initiated from a consideration of the remarkable increase in the number of international students in Turkey as a different region, other than these two major higher education areas. The first part of this study explored the reasons for the increase in international students choosing Turkish universities.

In our study, most respondents from the Middle East mentioned war, low living standards, safety in their country, poor economic conditions, and political conflicts as reasons for wanting to study abroad. In turn, they also emphasised Turkey's positive qualities, such as the proximity to their country, the geographical proximity of Turkey to Europe, and inclusive, positive, and collaborative policies of the Turkish government toward Middle Eastern students and refugees. The combination of the negative factors about their home countries (push factors) and the positive factors associated with Turkey (pull factors) have led to the increasing numbers of students choosing to study in Turkey.

Moreover, students needed to research a new location for their higher education because of the push factors in popular countries. Due to the increasing nationalistic and exclusionist immigration policies in many Western countries, students seem to have turned toward countries that embrace rather than exclude them. As Li and Bray (2007) stated, some negative factors such as unwelcoming attitudes, may push students away from willingness to study in a foreign country. For example, America's new inward management with its negative approach to Islamic countries and Europe's views about refugees can be viewed as the push factors driven by the host countries. Lee and Rice (2007) contended these negative experiences produce resentment and anger toward the USA and other Western countries that override the positive effects of study in these regions. In this context, data obtained through this study indicates that Middle Eastern students and their families are less willing to study in Europe and the USA due to these push factors. Therefore, this situation supports the emergence of new hubs (such as Turkey) in higher education. That is, the students deciding to search for a different destination, influenced by push factors in a desired-popular destination, may choose a different destination, influenced by pull factors in the new destination. It appears that the students in our study did not turn to popular countries that have been at the forefront for some time. Also, they did not give up their idea to study abroad because of high living expenses in such countries or because of racist discourses on the rise, especially in recent years. Instead, they turned to destinations that are developing, where they could establish a bond, like in Turkey.

The second part of the paper examined the difficulties that international students encounter in the host country. While our study presents somewhat similar results to those provided by past studies, it also presents some different outcomes, especially in three main topics. The first is language. Language was identified as a problem in almost all studies discussed here, but there are two different perspectives on this issue. English was seen an obstacle to study in English-speaking countries; the students mentioned difficulties in communication with native English-speaking peers and staff. The second perspective was presented by international students who study in a country where the native language was not English, even if the educational language (common language of the campus) was English. This group of students, like in our study, complained about the inability or unwillingness of local students and sometimes staff to speak English. Therefore, they mentioned difficulties facing a third, new language, even though English should be a common language. The second is that international students who study in Western higher education area have generally reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, the respondents in our study did not discuss loneliness, distant behaviour, or prejudices. On the contrary, the respondents in our study emphasised the welcoming host country students and people.

The third differing point centred on government and university management support for the internationalisation process. While, the studies conducted in traditional study abroad destinations (e.g., Lee, 2010; Heng, 2017; Wu et al., 2015) showed that international students' satisfaction with the support from government and university management is generally high (probably because of a long experience of receiving foreign students), our study, that of Kondakçı et al. (2008), and other studies run in non-traditional study abroad

destinations found that international students identified this issue as a challenge. Institutional services were seen as inadequate, such as peer support programs or help from advisors. For example, similar with our results, studies such as Bozbay, Baghirov, Zhang, Rasli and Karakasoglu (2020) and Titrek et al. (2016) mentioned the need for organised multicultural activities, university orientation programs, and information offices to offer better services to help international students adapt to the host country.

### **Recommendations**

In the past Turkey was generally viewed as a major sending country; however, both the increasing number of inbound students and the aforementioned studies indicate that it can be now accepted as a receiving country from nearby geographical areas. Although the students participating in our study seemed to be pleased with their decision to live in Turkey and did not feel any negative feelings, such as isolation or loneliness, the study results show that institutions in Turkey are obliged to address educational deficiencies and meet student expectations. Despite the promise of being an international, English-speaking university, the managers and staff of the universities need to consider why language is stated as the most important challenge faced by international students. Actually, these findings imply that the Turkish higher education system needs to focus more on educational quality, because respondents mainly mentioned emotional, social, and political affinity and the cost-benefit, instead of educational quality or reputation of universities as the important factors contributing to their decision.

As a country that aims to become an international, English-speaking, higher education hub, this new higher education area needs to prioritise more systematic structures on both the government and university levels. If Turkey can have a conscious policy, the conflicts in near regions and negative attitudes in some developed countries toward Muslim people can be turned into an opportunity for providing a permanent place in the area of international higher education. In this sense, introducing better policies in higher education might help Turkey to become an educational centre for students from neighbouring countries, especially the Middle East. As studies focused on international student experiences in non-traditional destinations are necessary and valuable for understanding the changes and different demands in higher education around the world, the results of this research will contribute to well-managed internationalisation process around the world.

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