

Challenges Faced by International Students in Turkey*

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ABSTRACT Nowadays, due to the high development and good quality of education in Turkey the number of international students from different countries is increasing from year to year, despite the different challenges of being in a foreign environment away from their home countries. The purpose of this paper was to investigate challenges faced by international students who study at Sakarya University in Turkey. A phenomenological model was used for this study. The data were collected using the qualitative research method. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the sample, which comprised thirty seven international students from different countries who study at Sakarya University. The response frequencies were analysed. The results show that many responses accepted to have challenges in communication, at the language center, accommodation, the environment, cultural issues, health, and social interaction activities, and that there should be an increased focus on minimizing all the challenges facing them with long and short-term strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey as a geopolitical, multicultural country is attracting the attention of an ever increasing number of international students. In Turkey, new international students who will not take their course in English as the language of instruction are required to attend a one year language preparation course at the Turkish language teaching center called "Türk Dili Öğretimi Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi" (TÖMER), which means Turkish Language Teaching, Application, and Research Center, before starting their classes at university. Since, the language of instruction at many Turkish universities is Turkish, particularly at public universities with some exceptions (Bilecen 2009). TÖMER is an official language center; it is recognized by the government for teaching Turkish language, culture and lifelong education to the foreigners (Turkiyeburslari 2015). During the language preparation course, students develop their lifelong learning skills such as learning Turkish language, history, ethnography, and culture, as well as formal and informal programmes and procedures. Students are given the opportunity to experience real life through study trips where they can explore the traditions, customs, and social life of Turkish people. The knowledge they gain during their language preparation course helps them share their experiences with the students at university and other people in their daily social life. Never-

theless, it provides them with more experience, but also to make them more aware of the challenges that they might be faced with in their daily lives. The Turkish language center prepares international students to be proficient in the Turkish language and culture.

Definitions of international students vary between countries. Some countries define international students according to their citizenship or visa status in the host country. Kritz (2015) international students are those who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship or permanent residence in order to participate in international educational exchanges as students, teachers, and researchers. However, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) figures understate the amount of study because they only include students who go abroad for a year or more of study (Rajkhowa 2014). There are many reasons that attract international students to study abroad such as economic, political, security, and academic even though they face different challenges during their studies. Challenges may refer to a confrontation or struggle with something as a test of one's abilities or one's due claim to something, that is, any difficulty that stands in the way of an opportunity for development. Despite the challenges they (international students) face, the number of students studying outside of their

country of origin is increasing worldwide (Nufic 2012: 75; OECD 2012; Rajkhowa 2014). Moreover, the growing number of international students who study at Turkish universities steadily increased from 5,378 students in 1983 to 16,656 in 2000, and in 2012 there were about 43,000 international students. The number of international students increased sharply in 2013, when the number of students who were already admitted to different Turkish universities was about 55,000 (Çetinsaya 2014: 151-153; Özoğlu et al. 2015). The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) aims to increase the number of international students in Turkey to approximately 100,000 students by the 2015/2016 academic year (ICEF-monitor 2012). These numbers include international students who study at different Turkish universities under Turkish government scholarships for international students, the ERASMUS exchange program and the Mevlana exchange program, as well as international students who come under private sponsorship. Additionally, according to the new statistical data issued by the CoHE in April 2015, the number of international students in Turkey increased and reached 72,178 in the academic year of 2014-2015. The number of students studying at Sakarya University has also increased year to year. In 2000 there was only one international student. Between 2004 and 2006 there were 89 students, and the number continued to rise to 546 between 2007 and 2009. These numbers reached 1747 between 2010 and 2012. As the statistics show, 2041 international students received admission and are pursuing their education at Sakarya University in the academic year of 2014/15 (Sakarya Üniversitesi Uluslararası Öğrenci 2014-2015). In general, in this number of international students studying at Turkish Universities, Azerbaijan appears to be the top country sending students to Turkey, followed by Turkmenistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Çetinsaya 2014; CoHE 2015).

As we know, studying in a foreign environment is not an easy task and is regarded as a challenge whereby international students in a new culture face, like culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to customs and values, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, differences in the educational system, and loss of their established social network (Rawjee 2012). It is known that international students are faced with several challenges, Singh et al. (2003) including racial discrimination, changes in their role and

status, weather and food differences, language, accommodation, separation from home, dietary restrictions, money, diminished social discrimination, and different educational systems. Le et al. (2016) the majority of international students have to deal with additional challenges such as language barriers and culture gaps. International students are at risk of developing mental health problems due to the loss of support systems and acculturation stress (Maclachlan and Justice 2009). The same problem is mentioned by Sam et al. (2015) mental health problems such as depression, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, and paranoid reactions are the greatest challenges faced by international students. The difficulties they face that contribute to this mental health risk include language difficulties, culture shock, difficulties in negotiating day-to-day social activities, racial and ethnic discrimination, and a lack of physical activity (Yoh et al. 2008; Wang 2009). This leads international student, on their return home, to find themselves feeling frustrated because of the vast differences between their overseas training and the reality of their home countries (Robinson 2009).

Many researchers have indicated that the challenges for international students may differ from region to region depending on the country where they are pursuing their education. Talebloo (2013: 3) researched international students in Malaysia and concluded that international students are faced with four common categories of problem, which are facilities (accommodation, transportation, food, and libraries), the social environment (culture, communication, and English difficulties), academic difficulties (the academic system, lectures and methodology, faculty supervisors), and the international office program (lack of entertaining activities). Rawjee (2012: 1) researched exchange students' communication challenges in South Africa and argued that on exchange programs students are faced with communication issues and culture shock. Furthermore, Chimuchowa (2013: 4-5) showed that African students in South Africa are faced with challenges related to crime, travel, medical insurance, acquiring a study permit, discrimination, distance from their family, work challenges, limited funds, accommodation, and limited access to other resources.

Lewis et al. (2013: 18-22) surveyed international students in Taiwan and concluded that they are faced with language, culture, transpor-

tation, weather, gender, and ethnic challenges. International students from the United States of America are faced with language problems, financial issues, cultural issues, feelings of social exclusion, homesickness, loss of social support, and even racism (Kioga 2015). The US News (2015) added that there are six common challenges facing international students in America, which are new assignments, new professors, new food, a new culture, new subjects, and new friends.

On the other hand, Sumra (2012) mentioned that international students studying in China had 19 common problems to face, including language and cultural barriers, health facilities, access to data for research, part-time jobs opportunities, food and living problems, offices reluctant to provide data for research, differences in the treatment of people in study and social environments, Chinese as a medium of instruction for international students, activities to reduce stress, the length of study periods, financial problems, academic competition, academic counseling problems, the assurance of Chinese warrantors for the self-paid students, international office services, environmental problems, facility problems, and admission and selection problems. The literature shows that many international students try their best to overcome the challenges facing them, but still some challenges occur and measures should be taken to deal with them.

Rationale and Aim of the Study

This study's rationale aims to investigate and provide in-depth information and guidance concerning the challenges for both current and future international students who wish to study at a Turkish university. The information will also help government and private agencies in providing positive and effective support against the challenges faced by international students while they are pursuing their studies in Turkey. However, many international students, including 37 volunteer students, can speak English. Nonetheless, the Turkish language structure matches neither English nor their native language. Due to its originality from the Altaic language, the vocabulary of the Turkish language contains many words from Arabic, Persian, and European languages. Though, the imported words mostly follow the basic grammar and vowel sounds of the native Turkish language. Therefore, the Turkish

language structure differs from various participants' languages such as Swahili, Somali, Khmer, Persian, Arabic, Georgian, and others. In addition, some international students indicated that they already knew the Turkish language and culture before coming to Turkey, such as those from Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. However, during their first year in particular, international students can face a lot of challenges. That is why this research could provide an opportunity to understand and solve problems easily for university administrators. Moreover, the findings of this paper will develop international students to scholastic learner these findings can also develop scholastic systems. In this study, the researchers came up with three sub-questions that guided us in investigating the challenges faced by international students in Turkey:

1. Are there any challenges faced by international students during their first year of study at Sakarya University ?
2. What are the challenges faced by international students in their daily life at Sakarya?
3. What measures should be taken to solve lifelong challenges in different cultures?

METHODOLOGY

This paper was conducted using a qualitative research method. A phenomenological method was also used. The qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews (face-to-face interviews conducted with a well-structured questionnaire) with sample of thirty seven participants. Convenience sampling was chosen on the basis of their availability and willingness to respond (Gravette and Forzano 2015: 147). Semi-structured interviews were considered effective in the study of a heterogeneous group (Hollaway and Wheeler 2013: 140). The heterogeneous sample comprised males and females across a broad range of ages with different fields and from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. One-dimensional questions were avoided (Donnelly 2005). During the interview the participants were not guided in their answers, but were directed to answer questions without deviation. The content analysis of the semi-interviews was transferred to frequencies by identifying the common problems and aspects. The data were gathered by different researchers by assigning "agreement" or "disagreement" separately so as to com-

pare and determine the level of the reliability of the study. In this way the reliability of the study was estimated with the (number of agreements / total number of agreements + disagreements) x 100 formula (Mile and Huberman 1994: 64). Therefore, after making a comparison between the coders, the level of reliability of the study was 37/38 x 100 percent, and the average of the inter-rater reliability was determined to be 97 percent.

Participants

The participants were international students who study at Sakarya University in Turkey. This study was based on gender, so that both males and females were involved (heterogeneous sampling). The convenience sampling contained students from different countries; Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Ethiopia, Georgia, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Mauritania, Slovenia, Somalia, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. A questionnaire was applied to international students in their first year of language preparation (2015) as well as continuing students. 40 participants were expected to participate in this research, but only 37 international students voluntarily participated. The data were collected and analyzed by using frequency analysis.

23 participants were male and 14 were female; 1, 23, 8, 4, and 1 participants were 17, 18-22, 23-27, 28-32, and 32-37 years old, respectively. Regarding their marital status, 35 were single and 2 were married; 19 had undergraduate degrees, 17 had master's degrees, and 1 had a PhD degree. Concerning religion, 30 were Muslim, 5 Christian, 1 Buddhist, and 1 Pagan. The data were collected as the interviews were conducted with the international students, and the findings were discussed in order to get a clear picture about the situation and challenges faced by international students in Turkey.

FINDINGS

Nearly all the participants answered positively, that is, they face challenges in their studies in Turkey. Moreover, the participants indicated that there should be an increased focus on minimizing all the challenges they face with long and short-term strategies. The international students felt so welcome in Turkey that, according to interviews, when they were asked if they would return home due to the challenges facing them

or stay in Turkey, 31 students agreed to stay and were well-satisfied with their standard of living, despite the challenges.

Considering the number of challenges facing international students, in the Turkish language center 14 students indicated that speaking was one of the main problems for them, followed by grammar, reading, listening, and writing. As a Thai student commented "*It is too hard for me to speak because we don't have some letters in Turkish like Ö, Ü, and S and every time I speak, I have to be careful because some of the words come out of my throat different from my native language.*" A Cambodian student said that "*since I came to Turkey I've been trying my level best but the pronunciation is a little bit difficult for me during speaking.*"

Regarding their teachers' behavior and their response toward helping them in learning, 28 students accepted that the teachers were trying their best to respond when they needed help. A student from Cameroon said "*Generally, they answer my questions well and give me good advice to learn the language.*" An Uzbeki student commented "*Actually the teachers are very helpful and more cooperative in helping us understand this Turkish language.*" One student from Uganda added that "*They always want to help us. They are always friendly, and I think they are doing a perfect job.*" A Jordanian student said "*They are just awesome! I was a student for all of them and I love them all.*"

Regarding the challenges in their daily lives, many of them accepted that they faced challenges in cultural similarity, communication, social interaction, accommodation, security, and health.

In terms of cultural similarity, many international students showed that, compared to their home countries, most of them are Muslims and there are few challenges in the culture. 18 students indicated that food seemed to be the greatest challenge facing them, followed by greetings, wearings, holidays, and religious activities.

A Kenyan student stated that "*I am not familiar with Turkish food, every day I try to drink Ayran (a Turkish drink) but I cannot finish it, I used to drink something like Ayran but it is salty, not like ours.*" A Mauritanian student said "*Our food is more delicious than the Turkish one, I used to cook myself and eat with spices like ginger, but since I came to Turkey I have not even smelt ginger.*" A Ethiopian student commented that "*Even though some Turkish food resembles our home cooking like beans and rice, still I am not familiar with it, I am used to eating*

food with cooked coconut milk.” In accommodation, 31 dormitory students were satisfied with their living conditions in the place where they were staying. A Bosnian student said “*I did not have any problems in the dormitory, every day they cleaned the room. I’ve never seen this kind of sweeping, they clean even if there is no dust, they just clean it! The condition of the room is wonderful; we used door cards like in five-star hotels.*” Six of them (females) indicated that they often faced challenges in their dormitory. An Afghan student commented “*The food, the condition of the rooms and facilities are the worst.*” A Jordanian student said that “*It is so crowded, I hate being in a six-person room.*”

Regarding health challenges most of the international students adjusted to the conditions of a new environment, where 27 students did not face any health challenges since they had come to Turkey. An Indonesian student said that “*Until now I have not faced any health challenges, I regulate myself with food and living with sports activities.*” However, nine students had faced health problems, most of which were flu due to the cold weather in the winter. A Tanzanian student commented “*Back pain and flu have been my problems since I came here, I am not used to sitting for a long time in a room and the weather since I came has been cold everywhere, in my country the lowest temperature is 27 degrees, it is hot every day.*” A Jordanian student said that “*I’ve put on so much weight, I eat four times for free, not like in my home country. I have a facial skin problem which I have never had before and till now I have not been able to cure it. I come from Arabia, where it is hot nearly all the time.*”

In terms of security challenges, 29 students had not faced any challenges. A Guinean student said “*No security problems in Turkey for foreigners and everything is alright. One day I was surprised when I met the police; I was scared because I had forgotten my permit in the dormitory, but when the police saw me they realized that I was a student, so instead he asked if I liked Turkey or not, and after that he gave me some chewing gum to chew! I was surprised at this welcome for foreigners.*” A few of them had encountered problems with the migration office (resident permit), which took some of the foreigners a long time to get, and some of them had a mis-communication with the migration officer, especially when they went back to their home country. An Ethiopian student commented “*They cancelled my permit without any reason and after a long follow up with the help of*

my friends I needed to get a new student visa to return to Turkey, I was frustrated and asked myself why they had done it? But in the end it was due to misleading information between the University and the migration department.” An Albanian student said “*At Sakarya migration office a problem occurred, which led to my being late opening my bank account and having my living allowance on time.*”

Regarding communication challenges, especially when arriving in Turkey for the first time, 23 students did not have any problems at the airport, in the transport to Sakarya, or in Sakarya due to the well-arranged and organized welcome desk for new international students set up by the Turkish Scholarship officers. Some Chinese students stated that “*It was not difficult because there was a welcome desk at the airport prepared by the scholarship team that welcomed us at the airport and took us up to our dormitory.*” Some Slovenian, Macedonian, Jordan, and Azerbaijani students said “*I knew Turkish before I came so I did not have any communication problems.*” But there are a few students who faced these challenges like some Somali students, who said “*I was shocked when I saw no one spoke the English language, so even for small problems I had to show what I meant by using body language. This happened when I wanted to go to the toilet and the word “tuvalet” (the Turkish word for toilet) I did not know yet, thank God they understood what I needed.*”

Language and cultural similarities played a large part and seemed to be a common challenge faced by international students at Sakarya University. About 23 percent (37 frequency) of the international students experienced language speaking problems or a language barrier and 31.6 percent problems related to non-cultural similarity (51 frequency) (see Table 1).

Table 1: The rate of the challenges (problems) faced by international students in Turkey

<i>A problem experienced</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>	<i>f</i>
Cultural similarity (food, religion, holiday)	31.6	51
Language speaking	23.0	37
Health and accommodation facilities	16.8	27
Teachers’ attitudes in helping students	15.0	24
Security	13.6	22
Total	100	161

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the challenges faced by international students who are doing their studies at Sakarya University in Turkey. It is known that challenges, if not eradicated or minimized, can affect the learning processes. This can lead to failure, frustration, and some of them even decided to return home. A recent study by Buliæ (2015: 1) indicated that some international students in Turkey are facing difficulties, which sometimes results in their leaving everything and going back home. From the findings, this study shows that these challenges are still occurring and that long and short-term strategies should be applied to overcome these challenges. These challenges teach students new perspectives and also develop their lifelong learning skills.

The most important lifelong skill is learning Turkish, formal and slang; learning the language is a common challenge faced by international students at Sakarya University. Özoglu et al. (2015) reported that international students' language proficiency is their most challenging during their academic life in Turkey. Traditionally, in educational institutions including universities the language of instruction is predominantly Turkish. The language difficulties pose a communication barrier for many international students, as a result fails to cope with the new teaching and learning system in the hosted university. Thus, lack of extra-curricular activities that based on language practice lead to failure in both communication skills and academic basis. It is known that extra-curricular activities enable students to develop better communication skills and critical and independent thinking right from the start, and this in turn improves their integration with local students and makes the whole transition process easier (Cathcart et al. 2005: 29-39). In Turkey, cultural compatibility for foreigners is different to some extent, where many foreigners are not familiar with the new cultural environment. A large number of international students experience culture shock and homesickness. But fortunately, the teachers are very friendly and helpful toward the students, whereby to some extent the teachers' behavior helped them (students) to reduce their stress and fear. Mukminin (2012) international students experience culture shock through differences in language, communication style, food, and lifestyle. Moreover, many international students live in state dormi-

tories. In different countries and regions people live in the same room. Overcrowding in their rooms is one of the problems, especially for female student dormitories. The residences were built by the government essentially to accommodate both international and local students. Some students showed that they had experience of challenges with the health and accommodation facilities.

According to the constantly increasing number of students, the accommodation issue has become a challenge, especially when compared to the size and number of the rooms. Furthermore, international students, when faced with a health problem, go to a state hospital, a pharmacy, or a private hospital for treatment. As recommended by immigration rules and regulations, this is not a big problem for them as every international student has his or her health insurance from either a Turkish government scholarship, or the Erasmus or Mavlana exchange program. However, flu, back pain, and skin diseases were common problems for some students due to the new weather conditions, especially during the summer and winter seasons. Marginson et al. (2010: 193) argued that a small number of international students had physical health problems triggered by the change of climate and showed different examples of some students who had moved from humid climates in south Asia to the dry heat of Melbourne undergoing treatment for skin problems.

Based on the findings, a few of them (participants) showed that they had faced security problems, although many participants indicated that Turkey is one of the best places for international students to study. Many of them lived peacefully and the police helped them when they had any security problems. In Sakarya some of the students had resident permit problems, which meant not receiving them on time, and some had their resident permits cancelled due to misleading information between the migration office and the university in the international student department. Gabaldon et al. (2005: 69) explained that the resident permit problem faced by international students results in many more problems, including delays in starting their classes, and the amount of time wasted in getting it. As the participants' responses indicated, communication is a major challenge for international students who wish to study in Turkey. Even though those who came on a Turkish scholarship experienced

a good welcome service which took them from the airport to their university and to their residential area (hostels), and although they were accompanied by a Turkish scholarship team who met them at the airport, this did not lead them to experience communication problems for the first time on their arrival in Turkey despite a few of them experiencing a language barrier.

Additionally, the lack somewhere to pray became a challenge for international students who are not Muslim, since the majority of the population in Turkey is Muslim. Turkey has long been, and remains, a deeply religious society. Specifically, the practice of Islam is widespread (Titrek and Cobern 2010: 2). Traditionally, the citizens of Turkey are predominantly Muslim and about 98 percent of the population belongs to the Muslim religion. The rich and complex culture of Turkish society pertains to its ethnic structure (TDHS 2013: 29). In some cities finding a place for prayer such as a church is very difficult, which is the same situation faced by non-Muslim international students who are studying at Sakarya University.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that there are some challenges experienced by international students while pursuing their education at Sakarya University in Turkey. Among the main challenges are communication, the language center, accommodation, the environment, cultural, health, and other social interaction challenges, separation from families, friends and romantic partners, fear of failure, academic transfer, and academic challenges. Security was seen as the most successful issue out of the students' challenges, while culture seemed to be the most challenging aspect for international students in Sakarya. Moreover, the challenges may differ from one student to another, or from one nation to another. But the Turkish people and academicians are very helpful and one can develop lifelong skills easily and manage to adopt a new culture there.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviewees offered various recommendations, suggestions, and contributions that will help decrease the challenges faced by them such as: Introduction of extracurricular activities; or-

ganized multicultural activities to entertain the students; the teachers' methodology should be improved; academic language based on the faculty's lexis should be introduced; the number of students and room sizes should be considered to avoid overcrowding; the host university's orientation program should be introduced; international students should have prior information about Turkey, for example, the weather, food, people, and culture of the place (Turkey); full preparation in physical and psychological aspects; the teachers should be alert and sensitive to the needs of international students due to cultural differences; and the introduction of an international student advisory service board in the university. In addition, the university has to open an area for prayer for all religions in order to give the opportunity to others to participate in worship according to their religious beliefs.

LIMITATIONS

This research was carried out at Sakarya University in western Turkey. However, in Turkey nowadays lots of different universities accept international students from different cultures. Thus, this type of research should be conducted at other universities in Turkey in order to discern the overall situation.

NOTE

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