

From Paper to Practice: Heed the Voice of Students!

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ABSTRACT This paper identified problems of Turkish university students studying abroad (Erasmus Program) and suggested solutions. Participants were 10 students who had studied abroad, currently at universities in Istanbul. Qualitative research included paper-pencil, open-ended questions, and face-to-face interviews. Interview data were collected as voice recordings during the 2016 academic year and evaluated for categories. Participants' categorized views of challenges as academic, economic, political, and socio-cultural. Most critical problems were bureaucratic barriers, socio-cultural differences, foreign language proficiency, course selection, and accreditation. Program benefits included self-development, language improvement, cultural awareness, and feelings of being a global citizen, language improvement, and advancement of curriculum. Finally, some suggestions for reducing problems were offered. Overall, there is no doubt internationalization will play an increasing role in Turkey's integration to the world.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, International Student Mobility (ISM) has been a significant strategy implemented toward internationalization, in which it plays a key role. In many countries, ISM emerges as a crucial human resource and assists extensively in global competition and in academic, economic, socio-cultural, and political development. Additionally, Streitwieser (2012:1) stresses the importance of understanding global student mobility's impact on "social and economic systems at a variety of levels, from the local and national to the regional and global" (Dassin et al. 2014:74). Therefore, this research's purpose was to identify problems Turkish students studying abroad experienced and to present suggestions for solving them.

When we consider historical determinants that have efficiently spread ISM, we consider especially the internationalization procedures of the Erasmus Programs, the Bologna Process, and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In this sense, ISM, a dimension of internationalization, can be identified as the heart of EHEA. The source of the variety that is key for the EU relates to mobility. Variety contributes to students academically, culturally, and socially, it provides students qualifications as European citizens, and it provides job opportunities in international employment. Participants, too, in mobility contribute to universities' internationalization by improving their cooperation, networks, research, and educational quality (ESIB 2007). Moreover, the Erasmus Program has essentially triggered internationalization of education, but the Bologna Process has also highlighted the internationalization of higher education in Europe (Teichler 2012). In 1999, by initiating the Bologna Process, the EHEA was founded. In 2012, the Mobility 2020 strategy was embraced, including a mobility target that by 2020, "at least twenty percent of those graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training period abroad" (Wulz and Rainer 2015:45).

Now, the Erasmus Program for the budgeting period 2014-2020 is called Erasmus+ (European Commission 2011). Especially by introduction of Erasmus-Mundus programs, efforts to raise European higher education's quality have increased. In this context, international students' contributions to Turkey have gained importance. Particularly, the growing importance of

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Turkey's strategic location makes internationalization and ISM a current, important issue. As an important vehicle for short-term ISM in Turkey, the Erasmus Program gained great momentum from 2005 to 2013, because of the increasing number of students going to Europe through the program, and particularly significant is the tremendous increase from 2012 to 2013 (Cetin-saya 2014: 159-161).

On the other hand, our "flattened world" (Friedman 2005) has brought new opportunities, new challenges, and also new dangers. Therefore, universities should provide ISM to handle problems of globalization (Guruz 2011). Nevertheless, in ISM, economic, political, academic, and socio-cultural factors are effective, emerging in many countries as a crucial human resource and assisting extensively in academic, socio-cultural, political, and economic development as well as in global competition. Furthermore, results of the September 11 attack and the 2008 financial crisis have affected ISM methods with the change of the global knowledge economy in developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Choudaha and de Wit 2014: 19-34). For the last few years, the greatest number of mobile students has been from Asia, especially from China. Following China, India and South Korea hold places as international student resources (Henze 2014: 188). Australia, Korea, New Zealand, and Russia are developing international proactive marketers, but other countries, such as Malaysia, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Cyprus, and Turkey, actively try to attract world institutions and international students (OECD 2012: 468).

Besides that, no matter how studying abroad presents students various opportunities, it also exposes them to different kinds of challenges - academic, economic, political, or socio-cultural. In the literature, some studies have emphasized studying abroad and the Erasmus Program (Yeh and Inose 2003; Knight 2007; Sahin 2007; Demir and Demir 2009; McLachlan and Justice 2009; Sherry et al. 2010; Bakioglu and Certel 2010; Bostrom 2010; Mutlu 2011; Crose 2011; Smith and Khawaja 2011; Koskey 2013; Stilianos et al. 2013; Egron-Polak et al. 2015; Hudzik 2015; Beer-kens et al. 2016; Titrek et al. 2016; Martinez and Colaner 2017).

First, in academic reflections, students face various challenges of finding a new job, access to health services and social services related to

some governments, and other, increasing dangers in higher education internationalization (Hudzik 2015: 48). One major factor in internationalization is language. Especially, English sovereignty holds a prominent place in globalization and internationalization policies (Svensson and Wihlborg 2010). Additionally, language obstacles have been examined as one of the most important problems (Cui et al. 2017). ISM is also an opportunity for students in higher education to gain a variety of experiences in the following: innovative teaching and research; obtaining international and national citizenship rights; new ideas and information production; access to studies; vocational development; new programs and courses (Bostrom 2010); communication networks; cultural awareness; standards and improvement of academic quality; new intercultural skills and international understanding; increased mutual understanding (Knight 2014: 55-56); language acquisition, knowledge and curriculum enhanced by international content (Altbach and Knight 2007); and different educational systems (Stilianos et al. 2013).

Second, in economic reflections, the importance of the economic dimension in higher education internationalization cannot be ignored. Lack of funds is a major obstacle. Students' need for financial support takes first place: cost of living and the cost of education itself. Policies concerning fees for visas and other documents may affect international initiatives (Koskey 2013: 13-15). Furthermore, according to Choudaha (2017: 5), "2006-2013 was shaped by global financial recession which triggered financial motivations among some institutions in traditional top destinations to aggressively expand international student enrolment."

Third, in political reflections, higher education internationalization is a key factor in governments' "soft diplomacy" objectives (Hudzik 2015: 48). Security problems in host countries are a crucial issue for individual international students and might affect ISM in international higher education (Hudzik 2015: 48). Fourth, in socio-cultural reflections, discussions about impacts on local knowledge and cultural diversity of cross-border education always provoke strong mindsets and stances. Some believe that through modern knowledge and communication technologies, persons, ideas, and cultures that go beyond national borders enrich cultures and support integration. In other words, they have

acquired a positive point of view about internationalization in higher education. ISM also provides opportunities for higher education students to gain such experiences as visiting other countries, participating in cultural exchanges, gaining self-confidence, becoming aware of cultural differences, communicating interculturally, evaluating events from a broadened view, and understanding occupations at an intercultural level (Bostrom 2010). On the other hand, international students may encounter various problems: racism, social isolation, alienation, feelings of loneliness, lack of social assistance, problems based on lack of language proficiency, cultural obstacles, homesickness (Yeh and Inose 2003; McLachlan and Justice 2009; Sherry et al. 2010; Smith and Khawaja 2011), and difficulties in social adaptation (Martinez and Colaner 2017). For example, recently, one of the most common problems that Turkish students have faced abroad has been “Islam phobia.” Thus, students might become isolated socio-culturally because of their religious beliefs, values, and lifestyles. They might be exposed to racist interactions. In fact, several previous empirical studies indicate that international students might even experience identity conflicts.

To sum up, from time to time, international students might experience culture shock because of their inability to adapt to the host culture’s point of view, but they might also be included in the process of acculturation. One problem is the inability to adapt to the host country’s socio-cultural life, and this problem might arise especially if the student lacks language proficiency (Yeh and Inose 2003).

So far, this paper has revealed both challenges and opportunities for international students, in this case, Turkish higher education students going abroad to study internationally (under the Erasmus program).

Objectives

Fundamentally, considering students’ challenges and opportunities in international study, this paper sought answers for the following two research questions:

1. What are student mobility challenges in internationalization for students of Turkish higher education institutions?
2. What are student mobility opportunities in internationalization for students of Turkish higher education institutions?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To answer the research questions, this study used the qualitative methods of open-ended questions and face-to-face interviews with 10 voluntary participants, who had studied abroad via the Erasmus Program, and were currently studying at public and foundation universities in Istanbul. Participants were selected by convenience sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods (Merriam 1998). Qualitative data from interviews were collected as voice recordings during the 2016 academic year.

In this research, some semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted (Kus 2003; Yildirim and Simsek 2005). For the study’s internal validity, the relevant literature was examined and then questions were developed. Prepared questions were presented to two experts and their opinions were obtained. A pilot interview was conducted with volunteer students to test interview questions, which were then rearranged according to the experts’ opinions, and with the feedback from pilot interviewees, questions were finalized.

Interviews for the main study were implemented at the participant’s university and lasted from 15 to 20 minutes. Interviewees were told that they could answer the questions freely. After interviews were transcribed, data were analyzed by the thematic analysis method to elicit common themes (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Thematic analysis separated data into two headings: challenges and opportunities. Afterward, student views on internationalization’s challenges were grouped into four categories: academic, economic, political, and socio-cultural. The “Reliability = Agreement / Agreement (Agreement + Disagreement) x 110” formula was used to determine the research’s reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994).

To reflect participants’ views accurately, interviews were maintained intact through transcription, and then transcriptions were sent to interviewees to ensure their accuracy (Creswell 2014). Volunteers were selected according to their participation in the Erasmus Program. They had gone to various countries: Poland, Germany, Brussels, Holland, Austria, France, and the Czech Republic. At the time of the study, participants were aged from 22 to 26 and enrolled in social sciences departments. Instead of names, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10 were used.

FINDINGS

Participants were asked about both challenges and opportunities of Turkish students going abroad under the Erasmus Program. Results are summarized below under the two headings of challenges, with four categories, and opportunities.

Challenges

In this study's results, students' responses about internationalization's challenges were grouped into four categories: (1) academic, (2) economic, (3) political, and (4) socio-cultural.

Academic Challenges

Participants named the following academic challenges: course content, difficult lessons, lack of selective courses, fear of failure, unequal university standards, lack of communication with host academic staff, inadequate foreign language of academic staff, different examination, and evaluation styles, lack of foreign language, and crowded classrooms. Some participants expressed their academic challenges as follows:

- (P3): *I had problems about the course contents.*
- (P1): *The courses were very hard. I did not remember that I studied like this before. I thought that I would not pass the exams.*
- (P5): *The classrooms were very crowded. Naturally this situation affected my attendance for the lectures.*
- (P2): *My English was not good. I had a problem.*
- (P9): *College choice is very important. There should be a standard. It should be suitable to my division. Similar colleges should be matched with each other.*
- (P10): *Lecturers were not qualified enough. They were not good at English. The lecturers were like moderators. The lecturers were so dull. They were not sincere. Their communication was poor.*
- (P7): *There were no tasks of the courses. We made a presentation in a course. There were final examinations but not midterm examinations. I think it was nonsense. It would be better if there were midterm exams.*

Economic Challenges

Participants agreed on the insufficiency of study grants and took some money abroad with them. Moreover, they expressed financial challenges they encountered during the process of visa extension:

- (P4): *When it was compared with the conditions in Turkey, economic circumstances affected my life quality. I just spent in order to supply my needs. Although I took some money with me, the grant was not enough.*
- (P3): *Sometimes; the late transfer of the money put me into trouble.*

Political Challenges

Participants reported that they encountered some bureaucratic challenges during the Erasmus Program's application process:

- (P2): *The visa process was too long. Collecting documents was a tiring process.*
- (P10): *Application form, formal transcript, copies of passport, health insurance, visa process, etc. I was about to give up.*
- (P3): *The country that I applied for asked for the documents in its own language, so I had to make them translated. I think some countries complicate the student mobility. Especially during the process of collecting bureaucratic documents, we witnessed to this complication.*
- (P1): *The most important point was security problem for me. In the beginning, I was so nervous because there were crime events in my neighborhood continuously. I was so regretful that I rented that room.*

Socio-cultural Challenges

Participants listed socio-cultural challenges as follows: adaptation problems, racism, social isolation, homesickness and feelings of loneliness, problems based on lack of language proficiency, cultural obstacles, and various expectations.

- (P8): *I had some trouble because of cultural differences. It took 1 to 2 months to adapting the environment. I can say that it was a culture shock in fact. The habits and our point of view were different. I always would like to talk to the Turks.*

- (P6): *I could not spend much time with the others because of my belief, because they were attending to the parties. I had to prefer studying on my own. I felt depressed because of my domestic life style.*
- (P3): *The biggest problem was their prejudice against Turks, they were racists, and they had stranger phobia. There was a high level of prejudgment against Turks.”*
- (P7): *I felt the disadvantages of speaking different languages and coming from different cultures. I missed my family so much.*
- (P5): *The courses I lived difficulties in adapting Turkey after I turned back. The university was not satisfactory for me. It was a big frustration in academic sense.*

Opportunities

Besides challenges, this study examined students' views on internationalization's opportunities through student mobility. All students identified lingual and personal development as the program's most effective gains. Other opportunities were cultural awareness, the feeling of being a global citizen, foreign language development, and enrichment of curriculum.

- (P2): *Student mobility is so useful. To bring together the different cultures is very crucial.*
- (P10): *Materials, articles, and videos were very interactive.*
- (P1): *My ideas were changes. My vision developed and prospered. The most important point was that my life changed. I acquired intercultural knowledge. I cooperated with the people of different cultures and countries.*
(P1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10): *I improved my foreign language.*
- (P9): *I met with international people from different cultures. I linked professional connections.*
- (P2): *It provided me cultural awareness. It was a nice experience for me to meet with different cultures and try to understand them.*
- (P8): *Being a global citizen is the ability of feeling the sorrow of other countries. For instance, it is increasing the communication and intercultural interac-*

tion and student mobility, and intercultural information share.

DISCUSSION

This paper examines the extent to which student interviews about challenges and opportunities can explain Erasmus participation, and, compared with findings of previous studies, these results can be summarized in two categories: challenges and opportunities.

Challenges

Academic Implications

Participants listed academic challenges as follows: The first refers to “foreign language.” These findings are similar to those of Camiciotoli (2010), that is, the challenge and risk in mobility was defined as the difficulty of following classes in a foreign language. This finding is supported by the study of Knight and Madden (2010). Yigit et al. (2009) revealed that most Turkish students who went abroad for the first time felt themselves incompetent in the foreign language they had learned in Turkey. This paper's findings reinforce previous studies findings about students' language difficulty abroad. The second challenge refers to “accreditation-challenges about course content.” As is commonly known, credits at one university are not necessarily equally reflected at other universities (Koskey 2013:12). Reichert and Tauch (2004) stated that students frequently encountered accreditation problems when returning from study abroad. It was found, for various reasons that many Erasmus students in the academic year 1998-99 could not register for the classes they wanted. Additionally, this study observed that achievements generally acquired abroad were regarded as “artificial approval”: Students were told courses would be approved, but then could not avoid taking the same courses in their home institutions (Teichler 2004). Moreover, most students took very few lessons (Teichler 2004). The researchers' findings correspond to those in the study of Unal and Ozdemir (2013), for instance, accreditation problems and difficulty in following course content because of language. The third challenge refers to “lack of communication with the host academic staff and lack of foreign language proficiency of academic staff.” This

finding is also supported by studies of Egron-Polak and Hudson (2010) and Teichler (2012). According to Godwin (2009) many international students and academic staff come predominantly from lecture-based academic environments, where relations between instructors and students are very formal, with very little interaction. Students perceive instructors as authority figures and do not ask questions. This description corresponds to the researchers' study findings. Participants listed the following academic challenges: difficult lessons, fear of failure, unequal university standards, different evaluation and examination styles, and crowded classrooms.

Economic Implications

Participants agreed on study grants' insufficiency and took some money abroad with them. This finding is supported by studies of Bracht et al. (2006) and Yagci et al. (2007).

Similarly, according to Wulz and Rainer (2015:53) "A main challenge for mobile students is related to financial efforts. Tuition fees, living and study expenses, travel and high income differences between European countries are the main barriers for ISM."

Political Implications

Participants had encountered some bureaucratic challenges during the Erasmus Program's application process. According to Koskey (2013) and Hudzik (2015), security problems might affect cross-border student flows, and these findings correspond to the researchers' study's findings.

Socio-cultural Implications

Participants encountered some socio-cultural challenges during the Erasmus program's application process. This study's findings on participants' socio-cultural problems show similarities with previous studies conducted by Yeh and Inose (2003), McLachlan and Justice (2009), Sherry et al. (2010), and Smith and Khawaja (2011). Moreover, the study's findings on participants' adaptation-problem experiences show similarities with previous studies, as supported by Stoyhoff (1997) and Rivža (2007). According to Stoyhoff (1997) psycho-social adaptation of international students is accepted as significant because of its relation with academic perfor-

mance. Many studies about international students, similarly, showed significant correlation between social interaction with host students and the adaptation process of international students (Opper et al. 1990; Chapdelaine and Alexitch 2004). Besides that, this finding is supported by the study of Beerkens et al. (2016), showing some barriers, such as home ties, alternative expectations, and foreign language skills. Once individuals began to live in another country, in another language, and in another culture, they might experience culture shock. In addition, this situation may sometimes arise from lack of a desire to integrate (Otten 2003: 21). Hanassab (2006) reached similar findings in his study with international students from different countries attending California University. In his study, some students identified some host instructors as "racists"; they claimed that they were not given as much speech time as host students, and sometimes they were even ignored in classes. Also, current findings support Bennett's (1998) studies that prejudices may emerge as problems for individuals during intercultural communication. In sum, their expressions are similar to the researchers' participants' expressions.

Opportunities

This study found that self-development and language improvement were the program's two greatest benefits. The most important opportunities to grasp were cultural awareness, the feeling of being a global citizen, language improvement, and advancement of curriculum, among others. This study's findings on participants' improving foreign language show similarities with previous studies conducted by Opper et al. (1990), Teichler and Janson (2007), Yagci et al. (2007), Demir and Demir (2009) and Ekti (2013). Additionally, similar to Sahin's study (2007), the researchers' research findings show that students experienced enriching cultural interactions and increased self-confidence.

Overall, students said that the Erasmus Program was a good opportunity to acquire international experience. Moreover, the researchers' findings resemble results reported by Maiworm and Teichler (1995) with regard to cultural awareness. In addition to this, Kitsantas and Meyers (2001) drew attention to the increased level of students' international cultural awareness at the program's end.

CONCLUSION

This paper reported the extent to which student interviews on challenges and opportunities of studying abroad can explain Erasmus participation. In comparison to findings of previous studies, the researchers can summarize this study's findings according to themes within challenges and opportunities.

At any rate, no doubt student internationalization will play an increasing role in Turkey's integration to the world. These findings seem to reflect the difficulty of being an Erasmus student in a foreign country. At the same time, and just as importantly, learning a new language and adapting to a different culture is not easy, and new problems are inevitable.

In internationalization, international students' need for academic, economic, political, and socio-cultural support takes first place, involving emphasis on teaching in English, developing instructors' academic skills, intercultural communication and learning, updating curriculums and programs in terms of international needs, preserving accreditation and quality standards, increasing activities of international offices to facilitate international students' adaptation to social life, providing support for psychosociological problems, minimizing bureaucratic obstacles, and organizing social activities to facilitate intercultural integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, there is no doubt internationalization will play an increasing role in Turkey's integration to the world. As a reflection of lack of policies and strategies that can be applied to all international students, there is no a superstructure that will ensure the coordination among the institutions that would determine the internationalization standards in Turkey. For the reason, education policy makers should produce strategies to reduce problems. Internationalization and especially, student mobility strategies in particular should be studied comprehensively. International students should be encouraged to socialize and also language learning and financial should be supported.

Finally, future study is recommended to include the discussion of academic, political, socio cultural and economic status in depth.

NOTE

This study is derived from the Ph.D. thesis of Gulshah Tasci entitled 'Internationalization of Higher Education: The case of Turkey (1994-2014)' and this study was presented as an oral presentation at X. ECSBS - Sarajevo - May 19-22, 2016.

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