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## EXPLORING INTERNATIONALIZATION IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Globalization has led to a growing interest in pursuing higher education abroad, with increasing numbers of students seeking university education outside their home countries. This trend has prompted countries to adopt an international dimension in education, including Turkish higher education, which is focusing on new practices to attract more international students in the face of global competition. The mobility of students who pursue university education outside their home countries is a key factor driving these changes. This research aims to contribute to the internationalization of Turkish higher education by examining the reasons for international students choosing Turkey, their expectations, and their opinions on the quality of Turkish higher education. In line with this purpose, the experiences, expectations, challenges, and issues faced by international students at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University have been comparatively examined and proposed solutions. In this study, which uses qualitative research methods and snowball sampling from purposive sampling methods, 12 international students at Ankara University and 11 international students at Kırşehir Ahi Evran University participated. The data were analyzed using MAXQDA Qualitative Analysis Software with the content analysis method. As a result of the study, six themes have been identified regarding the problems encountered by international students and the solutions proposed for these problems, including "Reason for Choosing Turkey," "Reason for Choosing the University," "Reason for Choosing the Department," "Problems Experienced," and "Gains of Studying Abroad."

**Keywords:** Higher education, international students, quality in higher education, preference for studying abroad in higher education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education aims to integrate international, intercultural, and global elements into its performance and practices in a way that promotes respect for cultural diversity and different traditions. Internationalization is the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global elements into universities' purpose, functions, and activities. The rationale for internationalization has varied over time and by country, and they are not mutually exclusive when considered from this perspective. Indeed, the university's organisational structure also provides indicators about the reasons for internationalization. According to Knight (2006), understanding the reasons for internationalization in higher education requires understanding the framework of values in which the internationalization policies of the higher education institution are scrutinized. The phenomenon of internationalization, which changes with globalization, rapidly increases the preference for universities abroad in higher education. Nowadays, the influence of technology and communication tools developed with globalization has brought new pursuits to higher education by providing quick access to information. Internationalization in higher education is defined as educational activities in different countries outside of their own for students and academics worldwide and as the entirety of other educational activities in an international context. In this sense, international education is the continuation of a student's education in a country other than their own. Internationalization, student mobility, and program collaborations directly affect countries' higher education policies. This situation has also affected Turkish Higher Education at the same level, forcing it to change and adapt to internationalization policies. The accreditation of the curricula of Turkish universities with the Bologna process, the opportunity for education in a foreign language, academic quality, the affordability of tuition fees, the low cost of living, and the high level of security in Turkey positively affect the preferences of international students in higher education. Recently, there has been a significant upward trend in international student mobility. The mobility of students who pursue their education in countries other than their own and gain an international dimension leads Turkish Higher Education to implement new practices to attract international students in the global competitive environment.

### **Internationalization in Higher Education**

Global trends have made the international dimension of universities more functional in the context of academic, sociocultural, economic, and political reasons. These reasons have created significant internationalisation awareness in higher education systems (Selvitopu & Aydın, 2018). When the higher education literature is generally examined, internationalization is mostly used in the sense of international collaborations, mobility, and exchange programs and transnational policies and programs that support them (Van Der Wende, 1997). Internationalization refers to the specific policies and programs carried out by higher education institutions and their academic units to support student and faculty exchanges, encourage joint research abroad, and prepare intercountry joint curricula (Altbach, 2007). Internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating the learning, teaching, research, or service functions of a higher education institution with an international component. Internationalization of higher education institutions aims to create service areas where they can

carry out their activities with an intercultural or global perspective (Knight, 1994). Activities such as student and faculty mobility, developing and ensuring the unity of educational programs, establishing collaborations in research activities, developing staff professional skills, and improving quality are evaluated within the scope of internationalization (Van Der Wende, 2010). Another perspective by Knight & de Wit (1995) states that internationalization provides a different approach to academic studies and requires an international approach to foster critical thinking about global relationships.

Distribution of international students in Turkey by universities:

**Table 1.** Distribution of Students by Nationality and Field at Kirşehir Ahi Evran and Ankara University Over the Last 5 Years

Year	Kirşehir Ahi Evran University							Ankara University						
	International Student Numbers	Active	Discontinued on of Enrollment	Graduated	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree	International Student	Active	Discontinued on of Enrollment	Graduated	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
2022	1.106	973	133		64	971	71	370	348	22		10	218	142
2021	775	745	30			733	42	1.074	748	314	12	77	784	213
2020	790	604	117	69		606	184	1.500	859	579	62	127	997	376
2019	587	434	144	9		561	26	1.050	587	370	93	100	781	169
2018	507	260	190	57		462	45	850	401	283	166	81	646	123
Total	3.765	3.016	614	135	64	3.333	368	4.844	2.943	1.568	333	395	3.426	1.023

Table 1 shows the number of international students studying at Kirşehir Ahi Evran University and Ankara University between 2018 and 2022. Accordingly, a total of 3,765 international students studied at Kirşehir Ahi Evran University, with 1,106 in 2022, 775 in 2021, 790 in 2020, 587 in 2019, and 507 in 2018. At Ankara University, a total of 4,844 international students studied, with 370 in 2022, 1,074 in 2021, 1,500 in 2020, 1,050 in 2019, and 850 in 2018. Between 2018 and 2022, 614 students from Kirşehir Ahi Evran University terminated their affiliations, and 135 graduated, while 1,568 students from Ankara University terminated their affiliations, and 333 graduated. According to 2019 data, the ratio of international students to the total university students in the country where they are studying was 48.6% in Luxembourg, 28.4% in Australia, and 20.8% in New Zealand, while it remained below the OECD average at 2% in Turkey (OECD, 2020). In Turkey, according to the number of international students by universities in 2019-2020, Anadolu University ranked first, Karabük University ranked second, and Istanbul University ranked third (YÖK, 2021).

**Table 2.** Number and Ratio of International Students by Year

Academic Year	Female	Ratio (%)	Male	Ratio (%)	Total	The ratio of International Students to Total Students	Total Number of Students
2021-2022	123.122	% 63,02	72.256	% 36,98	195.378	% 2,57	7.616.360
2020-2021	111.299	% 64,28	61.852	% 35,72	173.151	% 2,28	7.595.918
2019-2020	93.600	% 64,81	50.817	% 35,19	144.417	% 1,97	7.320.449
2018-2019	80.400	% 64,93	43.418	% 35,07	123.818	% 1,74	7.134.674
2017-2018	67.068	% 65,50	35.329	% 34,50	102.397	% 1,47	6.963.903

Table 2 presents the number of international students studying in Turkey between 2017 and 2022, their distribution by gender, and their ratio to the total number of students studying in Turkey. According to this, while 102,397 international students were enrolled in the 2017-2018 academic year, this number reached 195,378 (2.57%) in the 2021-2022 academic year. The proportion of female international students ranged between 65.50% and 63.02%, while the proportion of male international students ranged between 34.50% and 36.98%.

Internationalization in higher education includes worldwide educational activities involving students and academics from different countries studying outside their home countries. International student mobility, which is the continuation of a student's education in a country other than their own, is the most important reflection of internationalization (YÖK, 2017). OECD (2018) predicts that the number of international students will reach 8 million by 2025. This situation has also accelerated internationalization movements in higher education in Turkey (Mete and Özgenel, 2021).

Examining the reasons why international students choose Turkey, their expectations, and their views on the quality of higher education will contribute to Turkey's achievement of its goals for international students in the context of internationalization. The purpose of this research is to comparatively present the choices of international students in Turkey, their expectations from higher education, and the effects on Turkish higher education in the context of students studying at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University. The results of this research will contribute to the internationalization of the Turkish higher education system and the strategies and practices of universities operating in Turkey to attract international students. In this regard, the following questions have been addressed to reveal the reasons why international students choose Turkey and their expectations and the effects on Turkish higher education:

1. Reasons for choosing Turkey,
2. Reasons for choosing the university and department,
3. Expectations from Turkey and higher education,
4. What are the problems and difficulties experienced by international students?

## **METHOD**

In this study, a qualitative research method was used. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in its assumptions regarding the nature of reality (ontological), what and how the researcher knows (epistemological), the role of values in the research process (axiological), and the methods used in the research process (methodological) (Creswell, 2017). This study determined the reasons why international students chose Turkey, their universities, and departments, as well as the problems and gains they experienced. In the social sciences, the primary data source for a qualitative researcher is the human subject, and the researcher does not acquire data from a pre-existing whole but rather reconstructs the data with the interviewee (Kümbetoğlu, 2015). In this context, the internationalization dimension at Turkish universities will be addressed, utilizing the experiences of international students studying at Turkish universities.

In this study, phenomenology was chosen as the qualitative research design. Phenomenology studies examine an individual's interpretation of their experiences closely (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler, 2006). While all qualitative research is engaged in such a process to some extent, phenomenology focuses on the essence of human experiences and is the most unbiased way of understanding what experiences mean for participants, mainly relying on interviews (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009, 2006). In this context, the phenomenological design was preferred because it addresses international students' experiences when choosing a country, university, and department, the gains their choices provide to their lives, and the problems they face.

**Study Group**

The study group of this research consists of international students studying at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University in the 2022-2023 academic year. The study group was determined using the criterion sampling method, one of the purposive sampling types. In qualitative research, the purposive selection of the sample is based more on the research objective than methodological requirements, and the purposive sampling technique allows the researcher to select suitable participants (Creswell, 2017; Marvasti, 2004; Patton, 2002). The study group consists of 3rd or 4th-year international students studying at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University in the 2022-2023 academic year. When determining the study group, similarity in the context of the research area at both universities was considered. Table 3 presents data related to the code, gender, age, nationality, monthly income, field of the faculty where they study, and accommodation of the study group members.

**Table 3.** Research Study Group

	Code	Gender	Age	Class Level	Nationality	Accommodation	Monthly Income	Field
1	AUS1	Female	25	4	Turkmenistan	Home	1.850TL	Education
2	AUE1	Female	23	4	Turkmenistan	Home	1.000 TL	Education
3	AUS2	Female	22	4	Turkmenistan	Home	2.800 TL	Education
4	AUM1	Male	25	4	Iraq	Dormitory	2.500 TL	Science and Engineering
5	AUM2	Female	21	3	Ukraine	Dormitory	2.000 TL	Science and Engineering
6	AUM3	Female	22	4	Australia	Home	7.000 TL	Science and Engineering
7	AUM4	Male	26	4	Syria	With Family	4.000 TL	Science and Engineering
8	AUS2	Male	21	3	Egypt	Home	5.000 TL	Health
9	AUS3	Female	23	3	Iran	Home	10.000 TL	Health
10	AUS4	Female	22	3	Iran	With Family	5.500 TL	Health
11	AUS5	Male	22	3	Iraq	Home	9.250 TL	Health
12	AUS6	Female	24	3	Iran	Home	5.000 TL	Health
13	AEUE1	Female	25	4	Turkmenistan	Home	4.000 TL	Education
14	AEUE2	Female	19	3	Kazakhstan	Home	10.000 TL	Education
15	AEUS1	Female	23	4	Turkmenistan	Home	6.500 TL	Education
16	AEUS2	Female	24	3	Turkmenistan	Home	1.850 TL	Health
17	AEUS2	Male	22	4	Turkmenistan	Home	5.000 TL	Health
18	AEUS3	Male	22	4	Turkmenistan	Home	5.000 TL	Health
19	AEUM1	Female	20	3	Sudan	Home	1.500 TL	Science and Engineering
20	AEUM2	Female	21	3	Morocco	Home	3.500 TL	Science and Engineering
21	AEUM3	Female	23	3	Iraq	Home	2.500 TL	Science and Engineering
22	AEUM4	Female	21	3	Sudan	Home	4.500 TL	Science and Engineering
23	AEUM5	Male	21	3	Iraq	Dormitory	25.000 TL	Science and Engineering

The research study group consists of 3rd or 4th-year international students enrolled in the 2022-2023 academic year at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University. Upon examining Table 3, it can be seen that the study group is composed of 16 female and 5 male international students, with 12 from Ankara University and 11 from Ahi Evran University: 9 from Science and Engineering, 8 from Health, and 6 from Education fields. The nationalities of the international students participating in the research are predominantly from Turkmenistan, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Morocco, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Egypt, and Australia, respectively. According to Table 1, it can be observed that the majority of students prefer to live at home and their income ranges from 1.000 TL to 25.000 TL.

#### **Data Collection Tool and Data Collection**

The research used a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers. The first part of the form consists of demographic questions related to the participating international students, while the second part includes questions aimed at determining their opinions on their higher education preferences and expectations in Turkey, problems and challenges faced during their university education. Allowing another expert to review the research for validity and ensuring expert confirmation also positively contributes to its validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Sandelowski, 1986). In this context, the semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers was presented to 5 field experts, 2 measurement and evaluation experts, and 2 language experts. Following expert opinions, the expression of 2 questions was changed, and one interview question was added. The developed semi-structured interview form is presented below.

1. What are your reasons for choosing Turkey for your university education?
2. What are your reasons for choosing the university and department you are studying in?
3. To what extent has the country/university/department you are studying in met your expectations?
4. What problems and challenges have you encountered during your university education?
5. Compare your home country with Turkey regarding the opportunities offered in higher education (transportation, accommodation, food, health, etc.)?
6. What are the opportunities provided by your university to ensure your language proficiency?
  - a. Your Turkish/language proficiency:
    - i. Reading.
    - ii. Understanding.
    - iii. Writing.
    - iv. Speaking. At what level?
  - b. What is the effect of your Turkish language proficiency on your academic success?
7. Can you talk about the impact of studying in Turkey on:
  - a. Your academic success,
  - b. Your employability,
  - c. Your social skills?

8. Would you recommend Turkey to international students who want to come to Turkey? If you had the opportunity, which country/countries would you prefer outside of Turkey? Why? Can you explain?

In the implementation phase of the final version of the data collection tool, help was obtained from the external relations offices of both universities to reach the students. International students were informed about the research's purpose, content, and importance, and a consent form was signed. Before starting the research, the questions on the semi-structured interview form were shown to the students. Interviews were conducted online or in an environment the student prefers to allow them to express themselves comfortably and feel at ease.

In this article, the journal writing rules, publication, principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. The authors are responsible for any violations that may arise regarding the article. Ethics committee approval of the article was obtained by Ankara University Ethics Committee with the decision dated 01.03.2023 and numbered 85434274-050.04.04-845378

### **Data Analysis**

The preferences and expectations of international students studying at Ankara University and Kırşehir Ahi Evran University regarding higher education in Turkey, as well as their potential contributions to Turkish higher education, were analyzed using content analysis of their opinions. Content analysis techniques aim to facilitate understanding and interpretation of discourse while eliminating subjective factors. They introduce objective reading principles against interpretations easily and automatically made based on the reader's knowledge, intuition, attitudes, values, and reference environments (Bilgin, 2014). The content analysis of the research was conducted using the MAXQDA program. Although Huberman and Miles (1994) state that counting codes makes researchers feel comfortable, they note that these numbers are not shown in qualitative research articles. This is because counting is close to quantitative research, and it implies that all codes should be given importance and coded paragraphs show contradictory expressions (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995). No frequency counts were given in coding in this research because each international student's statement was thought to affect the research's significance and the qualitative data analysis approach of Huberman and Miles (1994) and Asmussen and Creswell (1995) was adopted.

The analysis of data generates patterns, categories, and themes in a "bottom-up" manner by organizing the data inductively into more abstract information units. This inductive process involves researchers working back and forth between themes and databases until a comprehensive set of themes is created. It also entails interactive collaboration with participants to shape the emerging themes or abstractions. Researchers use deductive thinking skills as they continually check the themes they create against the data. The deductive and inductive process means that complex reasoning skills are employed throughout the qualitative research process (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This research presents codes and the themes that form these codes in a hierarchical tree diagram. In the hierarchical tree diagram, the most abstract

information is in the top boxes, and less abstract themes are in the bottom, showing different abstraction levels (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Reliability and Validity of the Research**

At the same time, while collecting data, validity is the degree to which the researcher resolves the problem under investigation as impartially as possible. Internal validity has been ensured by obtaining confirmations, such as "Is this what you meant?" during interviews with students, as interviews were conducted in languages other than their native languages. The realistic perception of the research findings by the study's participants contributes to increasing internal validity (Morse, 2016; Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2016). External validity, on the other hand, is the principle of repeatability, in which cases resemble each other at similar times and similar events are universal enough to yield similar results at different times (Baltaci, 2019; Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In this research, external validity has been ensured by the study universe consisting of two universities and the similarity of experiences of international students selected from similar fields in two different universities.

In qualitative research, reliability is achieved through time invariance (continuity), agreement among independent researchers (scorer consistency), and ensuring internal consistency (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). The research must be reported transparently to ensure external reliability, and participants and other data sources must be clearly specified (Connelly, 2016). To ensure external reliability in this research, after the transcribed interviews, they were sent to the students to check their conversations.

The direct inclusion of the findings in the research report with a descriptive systematic (Baltaci, 2017) has been provided to increase internal reliability. At the same time, for internal reliability, including multiple researchers in the same research, developing the research perspective, and receiving analysis support from other researchers and experts in data analysis or providing scoring consistency with different coders have been ensured (Baltaci, 2020; Creswell, 2017; Kvale, 1994; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Neuman & Robson, 2014; Silverman, 2016).

### **FINDINGS**

According to the findings of the research, the theme of "internationalization of higher education" and 5 sub-themes, including "reasons for international students to choose Turkey, reasons for choosing the university, reasons for choosing the faculty, problems they face, and gains of international students," have been identified.

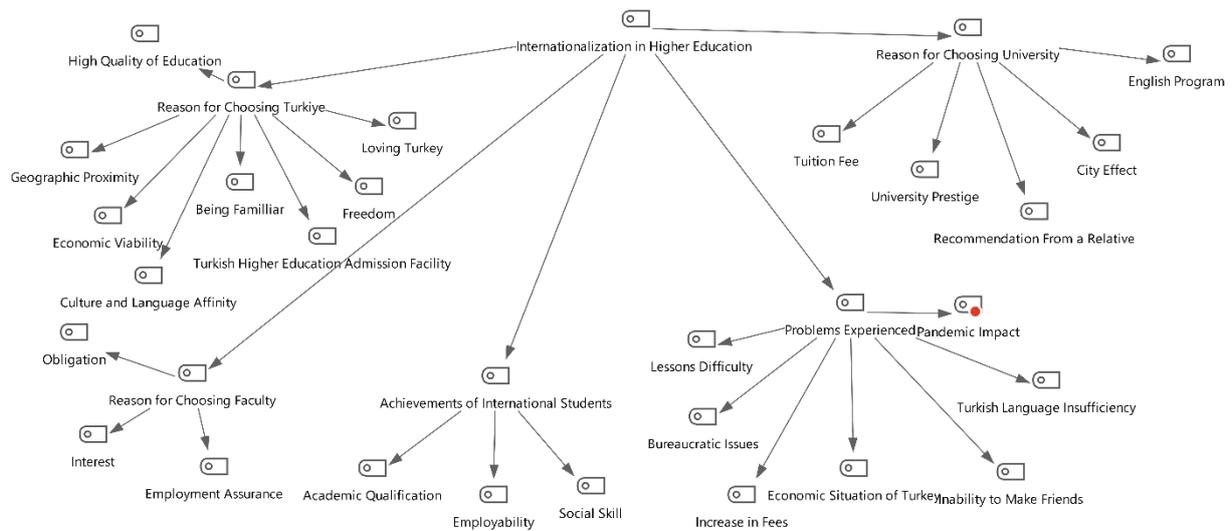


Figure 1. The theme of internationalization of higher education, sub-themes, and codes.

**Reasons for International Students to Choose Turkey**

The sub-theme of reasons for choosing Turkey consists of codes such as "loving Turkey, easy acceptance to Turkish universities, geographical proximity, cultural, linguistic and religious proximity, economic suitability, high quality of education, freedom, and being acquainted." Codes related to the sub-theme of reasons for international students to choose Turkey are shown in Figure 2.

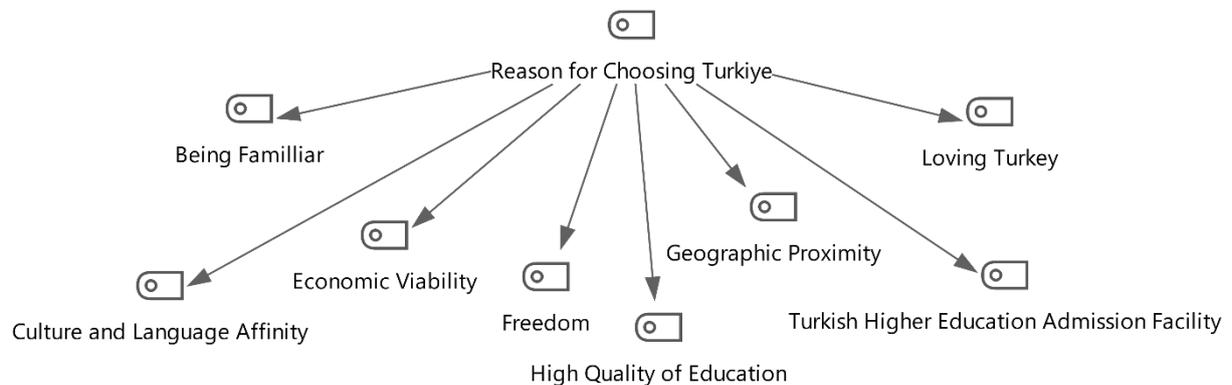


Figure 2. Reasons for International Students to Choose Turkey

**Freedom**

According to international students, one of the reasons for choosing Turkey is the presence of a free environment. Some participants opinions related to the freedom code are as follows: "There is freedom in universities in Turkey. It's not like Iran. In Iran, girls cannot talk to boys, and we cannot wear makeup. There was a festival here recently. I sent photos to my friends. They couldn't believe it! My mental state is very good here (AUS5)." "I think universities here are more liberal (AUE3)."

"My situation is a bit different. I came to Turkey because I couldn't live the way I wanted in Iran. This doesn't mean that Turkey is better. I came to Turkey because I had no choice. I chose Turkey because its lifestyle suits me. I came here entirely to live a freer life (AEUS3)." Notably, international students who find Turkey's education and social environment free are mostly of Iranian nationality.

#### ***Economic Viability***

Some of the statements by international students indicating that economic suitability is among the reasons for choosing Turkey for university education are: "It was economically more difficult because the currency of other countries is in euros or dollars (AUS3)." "Studying at a university in Turkey is very cheap, almost free (AEUE3)." "Also, economically, it is cheaper here. I chose this university and city because of financial reasons and because my family lives here, and it is cheap (AEUM5)." Choosing Turkey for its economic suitability can be interpreted as international students prioritizing their economic situation.

#### ***Geographical Proximity***

According to international students, one of the reasons for choosing Turkey is the geographical proximity of their home country to Turkey. Some participant opinions related to the geographical proximity code are: International students have chosen Turkey because of its geographical proximity to their own countries. "It is close to Iran and easier to come here (AUS1)." "Turkey is close to Iran (AUS2)."

#### ***High Quality of Education***

According to international students, one of the reasons for choosing Turkey is the high quality of education offered in Turkey. Some participants' opinions related to the high quality of the education code are: "There were many Turkey graduates in my environment, and they were far ahead of others. When I went to an English course, I definitely saw the difference in being a graduate of Turkey (AUE3)." "I chose to study at a university here because the education level is higher (AEUM1)." "The reason I chose here is the academic opportunities available. I researched Turkey (AUS1)." Students seem to have obtained their judgment on the high quality of education in Turkish universities from the education information of graduates and academic opportunities at universities.

#### ***Turkish Higher Education Admission Facility***

International students have mentioned that one of the reasons for choosing Turkey is the easier admission process to universities in Turkey compared to other countries. Some participants' opinions are as follows: "Actually, I came from Saudi Arabia. I am Egyptian. My passport doesn't allow me to go to Europe. This is an important feature. Turkey, Germany, and Poland were options. Turkey was the easiest way to go (AUS2).", "I came to Turkey because it accepted me. And Turkey was good too (AEUM2)." The ease of admission for international students to Turkish universities can be interpreted as the need to review the admission requirements and that it may reduce the sustainability of education quality for international students at Turkish universities.

**Recommendations from Acquaintances**

According to international students, one of the reasons for choosing Turkey is advice from acquaintances who have previously studied or are currently studying in Turkey. Some participant opinions related to the recommendation code are: "My brother came here to study, and he guided me (AUE2).", "My elder brothers studied here, so my family sent me here (AEUE2).", "My sister was here too. I had acquaintances (AUS1)." The advice of acquaintances who have previously studied and lived in Turkey has significantly influenced the choices of international students.

**Loving Turkey**

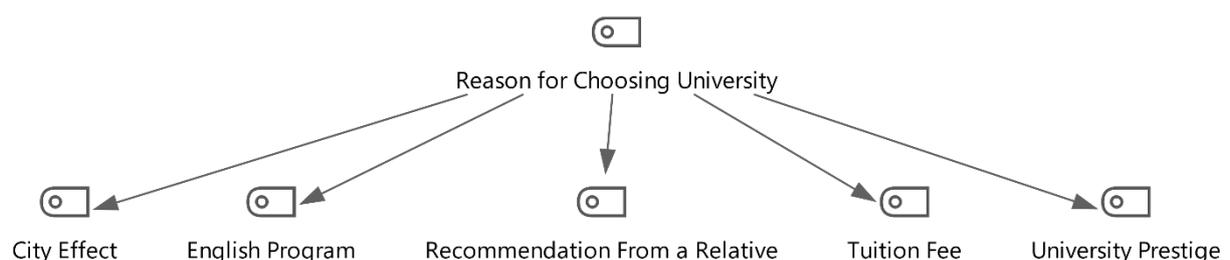
International students have mentioned that loving Turkey has been influential in their university preferences. Some participants opinions related to loving Turkey are: "I would study in Turkey, regardless of the department. I would even go to a small city (AUE1).", "If I had the opportunity, I wouldn't prefer another country. I love Turkey, and I admire it (AEUE3).", "I studied in Alanya, Turkey, for the last two years of high school. My family came for a vacation and loved it. I had to stay with them since I was under 18. My family returned, and during that time, I had a social life, so I chose to study here (AUM4)."

**Cultural and Linguistic Proximity**

International students have expressed that the country's linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities have been influential when choosing Turkey, and these similarities make their lives easier: "There are no other problems in Turkey, in my opinion. Being a Muslim makes it easier for me; it makes life much easier. Turks treat me well because I am a Muslim (AEUM3).", "I chose this place because it is very close to us in terms of language (AUE2).", "You probably had a thought about the proximity of Turkish culture to Kazakh culture, so you chose here (AEUE3)."

**Reasons for International Students to Choose the University**

International students have stated the reasons for choosing the university: "tuition fees, recommendations from relatives, university prestige, English programs, and the influence of the city." Figure 3 shows the codes related to the sub-theme of why international students choose the university.



**Figure 3.** Reasons for International Students to Choose the University

#### ***Tuition Fees***

It has been determined that tuition fees influence international students' university preferences. Some participants' opinions related to the tuition fee code are: "Ahi Evran University's fee is more reasonable (AEUE3)." "It was more affordable in terms of fees (AEUS2)." The way international students choose their university based on tuition fees shows similarity with the economic affordability code in their reasons for choosing Turkey.

#### ***Recommendation from a Relatives***

Just as international students consider the recommendations of their relatives when choosing a country, they also listen to their relatives' advice when choosing a university. "I didn't choose it, a teacher I had in Sudan chose Kırşehir Ahi Evran University. He chose the Mechanical Engineering department because there is a lot of work in this field in Africa, especially in Sudan. It's a good department with a future profession (AEUM3)." "My physics teacher in Alanya high school recommended Ankara University to me. I do not regret choosing Ankara University's department at all. I think I made the right choice regarding education and social life (AUM4)."

#### ***English Program***

International students have stated that they chose Ankara University because it has an English program: "I chose this place because Ankara University is the only veterinary faculty offering English education (AUS2)." "I chose Ankara University because it was the only English department (AUS1)."

#### ***University Prestige***

International students have stated that university prestige is influential when choosing a university: "Ankara University is a well-established and large university. It ranks 5th among state universities. Physics Engineering in English was interesting to me (AUM1)." "I am proud to say that I chose Ankara University. It gives me great pride to be at the place where the republic was founded (AUE2)." It is observed that there are especially international students studying at Ankara University.

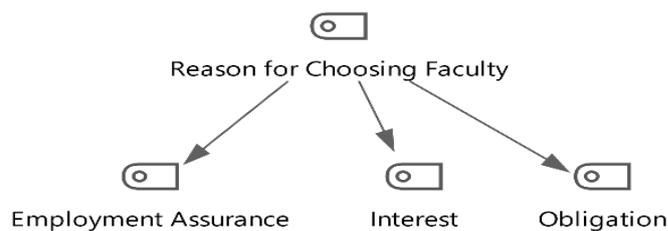
#### ***City Effect***

It is seen that the city where the university is located impacts international students' university preferences: "I thought the education would be better in Ankara since it is the capital (AUE3)." "They had me choose a few universities, and I chose Kırşehir among them. Because I think the city is small and the best for education. I chose it. There are few places to go; I think it's perfect for students. The living conditions here are cheap (AEUE2)." International students who prefer Ankara University consider the possibility of more social and cultural events

in the metropolitan city. In contrast, international students who prefer Ahi Evran University think maintaining life is economical due to Kırşehir being a small city.

### Reasons for Choosing a Faculty

The sub-theme of international students' preferences for their departments includes the codes "obligation, employment assurance, and interest." The reasons for international students choosing their department are presented in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Reasons for International Students Choosing a faculty

#### **Employment Assurance**

International students have stated that the availability of departments with high job prospects after graduation significantly affects their faculty preferences. Some of the participant's views on the job security code are as follows: "I chose the Electrical and Electronic Engineering department because it seems to have more job opportunities. I generally think the job prospects are better everywhere (AUM1)." "I chose this department to work, earn a salary, and make money. No matter where it is, I can do this job. My ideal is to study here and go to other countries. I can work anywhere. I chose this because I can easily go to other countries after studying nursing in Turkey (AUS3)." It appears that international students prefer departments with high employability in an international context.

#### **Interest**

It has been determined that international students choose the department they are interested in. Participants expressed their views on the interest code as follows: "I have loved animals since childhood. Other universities outside Ankara also accepted me. I could have chosen many places, engineering also came up. I entered the Foreign National Student Exam and could have won 20 departments, but I chose this one (AUS1)." "I saw many disabled children around me, and many people were studying teaching in my environment. That's why I chose it (AUE3)." "I chose it because it was my childhood dream profession. I had an interest in this department before (AUE2)."

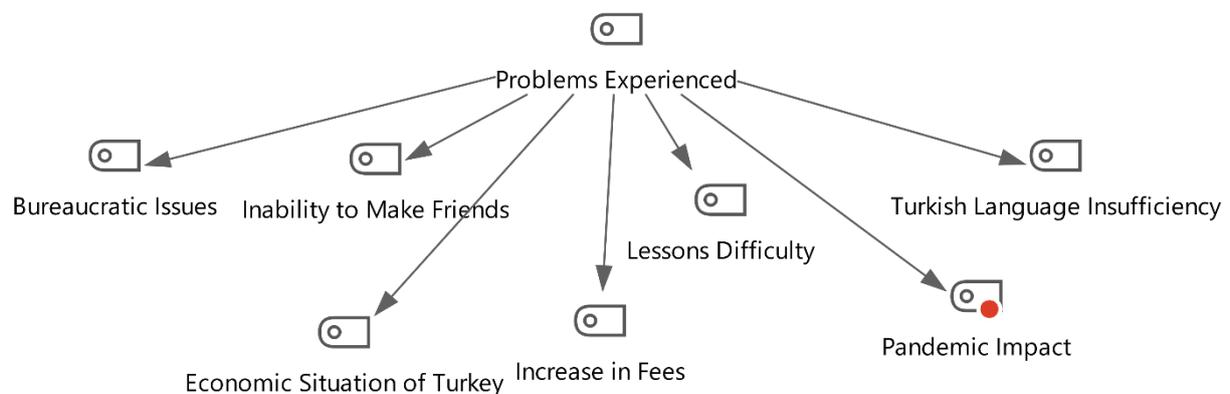
#### **Obligation**

According to the responses of international students, some chose their current department due to a requirement arising from their performance in the foreign student exam. A few participants shared their perspectives on the

necessity factor, with one stating, 'I actually wanted to study physical rehabilitation (PDR), but I had to choose this department. Initially, it was out of necessity, but I grew to like it later on (AEUS2).' Another student expressed, 'I intended to pursue medicine or dentistry, but I was unable to after taking the Ankara University exam. So, I opted for a program that is more closely related to medicine (AUS5).

**Problems Faced by International Students**

The sub-theme of problems international students face consists of codes such as "insufficient social opportunities, increased tuition fees, inadequate academic education, inability to make friends, bureaucratic issues, the impact of the pandemic, mandatory courses, Turkey's economic situation, and Turkish language insufficiency." Figure 5 shows the problems encountered by international students.



**Figure 5.** Problems Faced by International Students

**Increased Fees**

International students have mentioned the increase in tuition fees as one of the problems they face. Some participants' opinions related to the increased tuition fee code are as follows: "In Iran, we pay a very small amount for university, but here we pay a much larger amount (AUS3)." "There is a significant difference between the tuition fees when we first enrolled and the current fees, which puts a strain on us (AUM2)."

"The tuition fee was 15,000 when I first came to the university. At the beginning of this term, there was an increase, and it went up to 22,000, and we only found out about this during course selection. All international students face this problem. I want the contribution fees to be equal until I graduate (AUM1)."

**Bureaucratic Issues**

International students have expressed that they encounter bureaucratic problems in the necessary processes for their education. Bureaucratic issues: "People dealing with international students don't help us; they don't accept that we are not proficient in Turkish (AUE2)." "People at the rectorate dealing with foreign students don't help us; they don't accept that we are not proficient in Turkish, and they are not polite to us even though it's their job (AUM5)."

### ***Inability to Make Friends***

International students generally stated that they cannot make friends in Turkey; even if they do, they cannot establish friendships with Turks. Some of the participants' opinions related to the inability to make friends code are as follows: "I still face the question, 'Why don't you study in your own country?' a lot. I couldn't find any Turkish friends (AUE2)." "When I entered the university, I didn't know anyone. I did everything by myself. I have no friends. That's why it was very challenging at first because I didn't know anything (AEUM4)." International students also mentioned that not being able to attend school physically due to the pandemic contributed to their inability to make friends: "I struggled a lot due to the pandemic; I couldn't adapt, and now the school is ending, but I still haven't adapted (AUE2)." "We experienced the pandemic period; if it weren't for online classes, I could have gotten along better with my friends face-to-face (AEUS1)."

### ***Turkish Language Insufficiency***

International students have identified their lack of proficiency in the Turkish language as one of the main problems they face. Some participants' opinions related to the Turkish language proficiency insufficiency code are as follows: "At first, like every other international student, I struggled with the language. I knew some Turkish, but it was street language. I struggled academically. This difficulty continued into the following years, and I extended my studies (AEUS1)." "I struggled a lot with the language. While my classmates were taking notes in class, I was taking notes of the words and researching their meanings at home (AUE1)." International students have stated that they can speak Turkish but have trouble understanding the Turkish spoken by professors in class, i.e., academic Turkish. Many interviewees mentioned attending Turkish and Foreign Languages Application and Research Center (TÖMER) courses or achieving a C1 level score on the Turkish language proficiency exam. Despite this, they expressed difficulties in understanding questions on exams, as follows:

"We received Turkish language education at TÖMER. It was remote, so we didn't meet any Turks. We didn't talk to anyone; my friends and I spoke Arabic, so we didn't learn. We couldn't find Turks. There was only the teacher for an hour or two a day, but we couldn't talk because there were many of us in the class. Nobody talked in the crowded class. The TÖMER teacher taught Turkish by speaking Turkish. We only spoke Turkish with the teacher. For me, there are international languages like English and French. The teacher only spoke Turkish. If it had been face-to-face, we would have understood him better, but we weren't. He spoke, but we didn't understand. We started watching movies. So, we started memorizing words, listening to music, and learned that way. We learned through our own efforts" (AEUM2).

The participant (AUM4) expressed difficulty in comprehending exam questions, often unsure if they understand the question correctly. They also mentioned that while they know the answer to a question, they are unsure if it is correct, leading to potential misunderstandings. Furthermore, the participant reported making translation errors, resulting in a lower score. These challenges have led to failed courses and a lack of understanding of the subject matter. The participant noted that they can solve questions effectively when translated into English, but as they are studying in a Turkish department, they are unable to request translations.

### ***Academic Education Insufficiency***

International students have stated that the academic education they receive is insufficient. Some participant opinions related to the academic education insufficiency code are as follows:

“Turkey didn't meet my expectations. This university is not bad, but the engineering faculty didn't meet my expectations. I was expecting better academic education. The university met my expectations to a moderate level. The facilities provided by the university are mostly good, but there's a problem with engineering education. It hasn't fully met my expectations yet (AUEM1).”

“In terms of education, the university didn't meet my expectations. It would have been great if the education provided had been more practical and related to the department, with industry-focused applications. I work at a software company in New York. When I started working, I noticed a difference. In fact, I had to learn everything from scratch (AUM3).”

### ***Difficulty of Courses:***

International students have reported facing challenges in their departmental courses. For instance, one participant (AEUS1) highlighted the difficulty in understanding the course content, particularly in the physiotherapy department, which they found more challenging than other departments. Another student (AUS3) mentioned struggling to understand certain courses, which required them to memorize the material in order to pass. The student also shared that they faced difficulties when studying at home "The participant (AEUM3) reported facing difficulties keeping up with the course content due to the pace at which teachers cover the subjects. As local students have already covered these subjects in high school, international students who have not may find it challenging to keep up. The participant mentioned that since their exam was YÖS, they did not focus much on these subjects. As a result, they struggle academically, particularly in Physics, as there are topics that they did not cover in high school. Overall, the Physics course was reported as the most challenging by the participant."

### ***Economic Situation of Turkey***

International students have stated that the recent fluctuations in Turkey's economic situation have adversely affected them financially. Some expressions related to the economic situation of Turkey code are as follows: “I used to live more comfortably in Turkey, but I started to struggle economically. It became the same as Egypt and Arabia. I used to live more comfortably (AUS1).” “We inevitably face many financial difficulties. Everyone is struggling a lot. The economic conditions of the last year, in particular, have been very challenging for me. It's still not too expensive compared to Europe. For example, the normal minibus fare is 4.5 lira, 4 lira for students. They could offer it for 2.5 Turkish Lira to students. Nobody cares (AEUS3).”

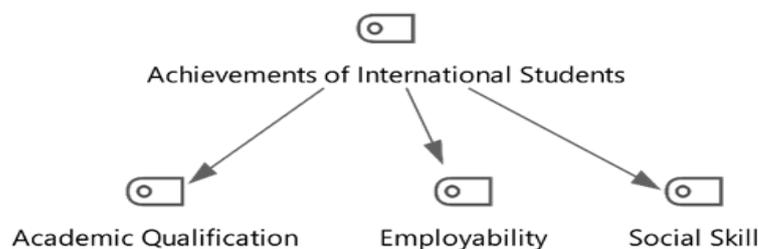
### ***Insufficiency of Social Facilities***

International students have expressed that the social and cultural facilities provided by universities are insufficient with the following opinions: “It's okay, but it's at a moderate level. To be honest; we are getting bored

as the city is small and there are not many activities. In the university, there is only a cafeteria and a library. It could have been better. The environment is too small, there are no activities. It would be nice to have social events and trips (AEUM2).” “In terms of social life, activities like dance and theater are quite good, but it’s much better on this campus. There are very few activities at the Gölbaşı campus (AUM4).”

### **Gains of International Students**

The sub-theme of gains for international students studying abroad is "social skills, employability, and academic competence". Figure 6 shows the sub-theme of gains for international students and their codes.



**Figure 6.** Gains of Studying Abroad According to the Views of International Students

### **Social Skills**

International students have expressed that studying abroad has contributed to developing their social skills, allowing them to comfortably express themselves in various social environments and overcome their problems independently. Some of their comments are as follows: “I am the president of a community called fizget. It has greatly affected my socialization. I entered new environments (AUM1).” “I can communicate with international students here. I got to know different cultures. Living here alone has given me a lot of freedom, and I can make decisions by myself (AUE3).”

“Studying in an international country gives students a different perspective or vision. It is very important in this regard. This will be an extra point. The child is learning the language as well. And I will learn the situation in that sector. I used to be more introverted. I behaved more comfortably here since nobody knows me. Generally, it gradually changed. I started to be more social and more active. I started trying new activities and new things. The fear of going to another foreign place has also decreased (AUM3).”

“It’s a new experience; we met new people. Different people, different cities, different languages, different lives. Everything is different, even the food, oooh. Everything is different, and it’s a good experience for me. I mean, I introduced Neşet Ertaş to my friends. Then I listened (AEUM2).”

### **Employability**

International students believe that studying abroad will positively contribute to their employment prospects. Some of their views on this issue are: “When I return to my country, I think I am ahead of those studying there. I can find a job more easily (AUE3).” “I think I will find a job more easily in Iran (AUS5).” “Studying in a country

where you are not a citizen gives you an extra point. Both in terms of knowing another language and experience. This brings you an extra experience (AUM3)."

### **Academic Qualification**

International students have expressed the academic contributions of studying abroad as follows: "I see myself superior to those studying at a university in Turkmenistan (AUE1)." "When I went to clinics in Iran during the summer, I saw that the education was very good (AUS5)." "Science is valued more here. For example, while teachers show 2-3 different methods there, teachers here show 4-5 methods. I have a good relationship with the teachers, and they treat us well (AEUE1)."

### **CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION**

This study examined the views of participating international students regarding the theme of 'internationalization in higher education.' The analysis of these views was conducted according to relevant sub-themes within this theme. Participating international students have stated their reasons for choosing Turkey as the presence of a free environment, economic affordability, geographical proximity, high quality of education, ease of acceptance to Turkish universities, recommendations from acquaintances, love for Turkey, and cultural and linguistic closeness. It is observed that international students who prefer Turkey mostly come from countries with a common language, history, and cultural ties (Çetinsaya, 2014). Kondakçı (2010) also highlighted Turkey's geopolitical position as an important factor in determining the role of internationalization in higher education in Turkey. Çetinsaya (2014) stated that the removal of the "Foreign National Student" exam in 2010 has been effective in increasing the number of foreign national students studying in Turkey and that this increase will continue in the future. In his study, Özçetin (2013) concluded that many foreign national students studying in Turkey preferred Turkey themselves, that the quality of education met their expectations, and that they did not face many problems during their academic lives. Musaoğlu (2016) pointed out that one of the reasons for international students to choose Turkey is the availability of quality educational opportunities.

The participating international students determined that the tuition fees and prestige of the university they will study at, recommendations from relatives, English teaching language at the university, and the city where the university is located influence their university preferences. In 2017, the universities that secured a place in the global top 10 university rankings were "METU, Istanbul University, Hacettepe University, Ankara University, and Gazi University" (URAP, 2017). International students coming to our country generally prefer cities and universities in our socio-economically developed regions. At the city level, international students who prefer state universities mostly choose Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. These three major cities, with their population density, offered opportunities, and economic structure, host the most international students in our country (DEİK, 2013).

It has been concluded that factors such as job security related to the profession they want to pursue in the future, their interests, and their obligations were influential in the participating international students' choice of faculty

to study. In foreign students' faculty preferences, the availability of professions that will enable them to earn more in the future is influential (Şahin and Demirtaş, 2014). Enterieva and Sezgin (2018) concluded in their research that students coming to Turkey for higher education chose Turkey to acquire a good profession.

Participating international students have stated the problems they encountered in their educational lives in Turkey: an increase in tuition fees, bureaucratic issues, inability to make friends, insufficient Turkish language skills, inadequate academic education, difficulty of courses, and Turkey's economic situation and inadequacy of social facilities. Factors affecting international students' country choice can include the desire for quality education, tuition fees, relations between countries, foreign languages, universities' success, and bureaucratic processes (Levent and Karaevli, 2013). One of the most significant problems faced by foreign students is economic inadequacy. This situation is not limited to Turkey, as foreign students in other countries face similar problems (Kiroğlu, Kesten, and Elma, 2010). Studies on foreign students have revealed that they experience loneliness, maladjustment, shyness, culture shock, and psychological problems (Tomich, McWhirter & King, 2000). Mete and Özgenel (2021) showed in their studies on foreign students that making friends is an important factor in terms of social adjustment. According to Ercan's (2012) research, students face economic problems because they come from low and middle-income families. International students' economic problems negatively affect their socialization, causing adjustment problems and decreasing academic success (Osmanlı, 2018).

One of the significant dimensions in of student mobility during the internationalization process is collaborations with other countries and joint diploma programs (Çetinsaya, 2014). Participating international students have stated their gains as the development of social skills, easy employability, and acquisition of academic competence. Schultz (2008) stated that students living on campus are more successful in social relationships and adapt more easily to their environment. In their research, Mete and Özgenel (2021) concluded that some international students studying in Turkey would easily find jobs in their countries, while others would struggle to find jobs.

According to the results of this research conducted with international students, the prominent reasons for international students studying in Turkey to choose our country are the quality of the education offered, the affordability of economic opportunities, cultural and linguistic unity, the proximity of Turkey to their countries, easy employability after graduation, and the provision of English education. The difficulties international students encounter during their educational experiences include tuition fees, inability to socialize, insufficient Turkish language skills,

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are several ways to improve the experience of international students studying in Turkey. First, promotional activities can be developed to expand the reach of Turkey to accept students from a wider range of countries. Second, offering job opportunities to international students while they study can help them with their finances and provide valuable work experience. Third, increasing scholarship opportunities for foreign students can help

address their economic difficulties, meet their expectations, and create promotional ambassadors after graduation. Fourth, improving external relations offices at universities can help resolve bureaucratic issues that international students may encounter. Workflow solutions can be developed to address potential problems, and expert academic and administrative staff can be assigned. Fifth, including cultural elements from international students' home countries on campuses, and offering meals from their cultures in dining halls can help facilitate their adaptation to Turkish life. Finally, increasing inter-country collaborations can help international students secure employment opportunities after graduation.

#### **ETHICAL TEXT**

This study, which was carried out considering the scanning model, has a cross-sectional feature. The ethical procedure of the study was supported by Ankara University Ethics Committee with the decision dated 01.03.2023 and numbered 85434274-050.04.04-845378

"In this article, the journal writing rules, publication principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. The responsibility belongs to the author (s) for any violations that may arise regarding the article. "

#### **AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION RATE:**

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest. The contribution rate of the researchers in this study is as follows: 1. Author (33%), 2. Author (34%), and 3. Author (33%)

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