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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trends for the Segregation Practices of International Students: A Review of Higher Education in Turkey

Tugba Hosgorur İlker Aysel

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose - This study aims to explain international student mobility within Turkish higher education in terms of the push-pull factors that affect students' choices to attend Turkey based on international students studying at a provincial university in Mugla, Turkey.

Materials/methods - The current study was implemented through a qualitative approach originated from the interpretivist paradigm. This qualitative study is a case study, with data collected through semi-structured interviews.

Results - The reasons pushing students to study abroad were observed as economic such as due to high unemployment rates in their country of origin; political issues such as a state of war; educational issues such as low quality education; or personal issues such as a wish to experience a different culture.

Conclusion - The reasons behind choosing Turkey for higher education were observed to be economic factors such as Turkey's low-cost living; political factors such as bureaucratic regulations being more accommodating for students recognised as refugees; educational factors. Such as superior quality higher education; and, geographical and cultural proximity.

Keywords – international students, segregation, higher education, push-pull factors, higher education policies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why do people move around? This fundamental question of human nature may have several answers. Is it because of their needs? For instance, why would an academic who writes (or tries to write) an essay get up from their desk? Could it be to refresh their coffee or to select a book from their bookshelf (aim-pull)? Or maybe they have a stiff neck or numb legs due to sitting in the same position for a prolonged period (discomfort-push). Of course, in such an inquiry, many different reasons may be applicable for this simple human action. However, if we consider this action process by limiting it to certain aspects, it is possible to draw certain sociological implications. If we consider international mobility, for instance: Why does a person go to another country? As for international mobility, which is today exemplified by concepts such as globalisation, universalisation, or internationalisation, this has become more 'liquid' and therefore requires that individuals' motivations for mobility be questioned from a multidimensional perspective. However, when you come across this query whilst going through customs upon entering a country, your reasons are usually categorised under two headings: Business or pleasure? The answer for many international students will probably be a mix of both business and pleasure. In addition to these standard alternatives, the concept of 'hope' may also appear as a response. Today, many young people leave their homeland for the purposes of completing their higher education elsewhere, having chosen to undertake their studies in a different country. The countries in which they may prefer to study is at the intersection point of what they were hoping for and what they were promised. The main problem addressed in the current study focuses upon this situation. The research conducted in the study aims to reveal which promises of Turkey intersects with which hopes of international students coming to Turkey.

Today, it has become commonplace to find students of various nationalities at each university campuses in Turkey. When this traffic in international student mobility is articulated with educational approaches that consider human as capital, the social, cultural, academic, and economic outputs provided by international students drives countries and universities towards engaging in a global competition to increase their international student numbers (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Today, the number of students involved in higher education international exchange programmes has reached a significant level. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017, 2018), the number of international students in member countries increased to 3.5 million in 2016 from a mere 800,000 in the 1970s. It is apparent that such a boost in figures is gratifying for the countries attended by the students. However, focusing solely upon increasing numbers without providing suitable conditions to satisfy the students' needs may not only make it difficult to obtain the expected academic outputs, but that students may fail to meet their own higher education expectations.

At this point, it is important to emphasise the relativity of the concept of expectation within the international mobility process. If we examine the expectations (or the need to satisfy their desires) of individuals who change their country for any purpose from the perspective set out by Bauman (2000); the increasing fluidity of the mobility of different social classes, which are articulated with many different expectations, leads to a process of disengagement or polarisation on both a local and global scale. For instance, the differences in expectations of international students who prefer Turkey for their higher education from

those who prefer continental European or North American universities has increasingly led to the segregation of student profiles.

The works of Becker (1952) and Rosenthal, and Jacobson (1968) set good examples for how the relativity of expectations in the education process reproduces social classes and social differentiation. The relativity of expectations in the education process also creates homogenisation in different neighbourhoods and in different schools. It is also possible to read the results of these studies carried out at the micro level together with the internationalisation process of education. Especially, the international student profile in Turkey may seem like it includes students from many different countries, but is actually homogenous in terms of a sociological point of view. This phenomenon of homogenisation is related to the reproduction of social classes through education that Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) revealed. Just as the positioning of individuals in the social space operate depending on their economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, the international orientation of students results in a similar segregation. However, it is possible to say that the primary motivation for students to study abroad is to gain access to a higher quality of education.

Additionally, students may want to receive their higher education in other countries in order to study in fields which are not available in their home country, and thereby improving their chances to find employment and build a career in today's increasingly globalised job market, as well as to learn foreign languages, and to gain an understanding of different cultures (Cairns, 2014; Li & Bray, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017; Stroud, 2010). Whatever the triggers for international students to leave their country of origin, it essentially involves achieving an elevated status through education. On the other hand, students are aware that certain costs are involved in order to obtain the results they expect from gaining a university education in another country, and select their destination carefully in order to minimise the negative effect of both tangible and intangible costs.

There are several factors that determine international students' study country and university preferences such as the opportunities and procedures involved in securing the necessary residence and study permits, accommodation options, accessibility, the quality and cost of healthcare services (e.g., health insurance, conditions), as well as security and geographical proximity are among the 'environmental' criteria that shape students' decision-making (Bodycott, 2009; Shanka et al., 2005; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Additionally, a potential study-country's cultural characteristics such as its traditions, customs, dominant religions, and language constitute the criteria for prospective international students with regards to the 'social conditions' they would face. Moreover, variables such as the international prestige of the educational institution, the medium of instruction, the educational opportunities on offer, and the tuition fees levied are included among the criteria related to the 'universities' preferred by prospective international students (Cubillo et al., 2006; Shanka et al., 2005; Shuai & Lang, 2017). Students evaluate all of these criteria according to their personal goals, aspirations, needs, and also their available means in order to reach a decision. In the current study, the aforementioned criteria was implemented as a framework for the analysis of international student flow in Turkish higher education. Paragraph: use this for the first paragraph in a section, or to continue after an extract.

International students in Turkey: overview

The number of international students preferring Turkey for their higher education has significantly increased by approximately 320%, up from 48,183 in the 2013-2014 academic year to 154,505 in 2018-2019 (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Turkish Council of Higher Education], n.d.). While current indicators point towards a positive trend, it is not possible to say there is a systematic approach towards higher education institutions based on any established policy framework. However, it may be argued that the most important international student initiative to date is the 'Great Student Project' which commenced in 1992 (Kavak & Baskan, 2001).

It is striking that the target audience of the Great Student Project was the youth in Turkic countries. Ending the inward-oriented tendencies prevalent in higher education during the 1980s, the Great Student Project was both a diplomatic and an academic initiative (Vural Yılmaz, 2016). It may be argued that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the foremost factor shaping the international student policies of the era, with several newly-independent Turkic republics established and Turkey's interest related to higher education oriented towards these countries in line with Turkish foreign policy. The project commenced with five countries in 1992 and later became more extensive, but was later debated due to unfulfilled quotas and graduation rates languishing at around 30%. Meanwhile, both state and governmental student grants were restructured as 'Turkey Grants' in 2012, but which are open to students from all countries (Vural Yılmaz, 2016), and the Council of Higher Education's centralised 'Examination for Foreign Students' was abolished as from 2010-2011, and student admission criteria left largely with the universities. Finally, the Council of Higher Education removed a rule which limited international student enrolment to 50% of overall student quota, with certain exceptions for medical and dentistry programmes (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Turkish Council of Higher Education], 2019).

The results of practices aimed at increasing international student numbers in Turkish higher education may also be evaluated by examining student profiles. Students from the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkan region who preferred Turkey for their higher education totalled approximately 60,000 in the 2017-2018 academic year (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Turkish Council of Higher Education], n.d.). With students from the Turkic republics included, almost 90% of international students in Turkey are from relatively similar cultural backgrounds. Evaluating this with respect to the 'push-pull' factors described in relation to international students' choices (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) leads to a seminal discussion. While it may be conceded that an opportunity for higher quality education is the basic reason attracting students to study abroad, it is clear that several factors affect students' choices. Cultural or religious affinity is among the most important factor, with financial factors being another. It is therefore unsurprising that Turkey is able to entice students from the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans, and the Turkic republics.

It would be remiss to assume that international student number increases of the past 5 years, in parallel with Turkey's growing popularity in certain regions, would continue at the same pace, since such a projection lacks any systematic approach. Moreover, although contributing both academically and economically, such increases do not equate to multifaceted long-term potential benefits to the country being fully utilised. For instance, there are no incentive policies in place for the employment of graduates, particularly for those who could significantly contribute to Turkey's labour force. Until 2016, international PhD students were obliged to leave Turkey within 15 days of their graduation. However, with

a protocol established between the Turkey's Council of Higher Education and the Ministry of the Interior's Directorate General of Migration Management, international students who received their Doctoral degree in Turkey were granted temporary residency (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Turkish Council of Higher Education], 2017). Nevertheless, Turkey's realisation of the desired higher education outputs of its international students depends primarily on meeting their needs throughout their study period.

From examining studies conducted in Turkey regarding international students, it can be seen that students' access to both basic on-campus and off-campus needs is limited. Specifically, problems relating to services such as the provision of accommodation and healthcare, which are crucial basic life requirements, have become a chronic issue for international students, especially for those from low incomes (Nkoko, 2018; Ozkan & Acar Guvendir, 2015; Snoubar, 2015; Yardimcioglu et al., 2017). Another striking finding is that students from the Turkic republics are still prevalent in samples or study groups of international student studies whose higher education was fully completed in Turkey. For instance, Kiroglu et al.'s (2010) study aimed at exhibiting problems experienced by international students in Turkey through a wider perspective by providing diversity in terms of countries, yet 14 of the 15 students hailed from the Turkic republics. The current study aimed to analyse the flow of international students in Turkish higher education from a wider perspective by examining diversity on the basis of their origin country. The factors that led the students to study abroad were categorised as push factors, whilst the reasons for them choosing Turkey were categorised as pull factors.

2. METHODOLOGY

Scope and method of the study

The current study was implemented through a qualitative approach originated from the interpretivist paradigm. The study aims at understanding and analysing the state of being 'an international student in Turkey'; reaching beyond numerical parameters via a research pattern based on Weber's concept of 'verstehen' (Tucker, 1965). As Coulon (1995) emphasised, individuals construct their position in societal life by means of attributing meanings to objects, people, and symbols. Focusing on how such a construction process materialises for international students studying in Turkey and how they position themselves in their academic life as international students in Turkey, the current study was designed based on seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What are the factors leading students to study abroad?
2. Why do international students choose Turkey for their studies?

Type of study

The current research was designed as a case study. The main reason behind utilising a case study approach was to afford a research design suited to the in-depth description and analysis of a problematic case within certain limitations. Gillham (2000) indicated that the case focused upon in such studies may sometimes be a single individual or a small social group, and sometimes different cases which relate to the same research topic may be analysed as a multiple case study. The current study considers 'being an international student in Muğla/Turkey', which examines their choice to study in Turkey through several

aspects. Significant care was taken whilst determining the study group in order to adopt an approach that reflects a suitable breadth of multidimensionality.

Study group

The study was conducted at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University (MSKU), which was established in 1992 as a provincial-level higher education institution located in southwestern Turkey. The region is well-renowned for its nature and touristic appeal, with Muğla's geographical position and natural beauty considered an important factor that attracts international students towards selecting MSKU for their studies. It could be said that in 2018, as the year in which the current study was conducted, MSKU's international student profile was analogous to the overall international student profile in Turkey, as previously discussed. Of the 1,128 international students studying at MSKU during 2018, 58.95% originated from Asia, 25.09% from Africa, and 16% from Europe. In addition, MSKU's international student profile included two students from the United States, one from Australia (Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, 2019). The study group for this study was selected from this student population in line with the aforementioned considerations about international student profile in Turkey. The study group formed in the current study was as detailed in Table 1 through adopting this approach.

Table 1. Study group

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age (years)</i>	<i>Educational Status</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Time Spent in Turkey</i>	
G1	Ghana	M	26	Master's	Educational Management	1	5 yrs	
G2	Madagascar	M	25	Undergraduate	Tourism	4	6 yrs	
G3	Mali	M	22	Undergraduate	International Relations & Politics	1	3 yrs	
G4	Ethiopia	M	26	Master's	Civil Engineering	1	4 yrs	
G5	Azerbaijan	F	26	Undergraduate	Guidance & Psychological Counselling	2	2 yrs	
G6	Syria	M	22	Undergraduate	Business Administration	2	3 yrs	
G7	Germany	F	20	Undergraduate	English Teaching	Language	2	10 yrs (child) + 2 yrs
G8	Tunisia	F	23	Undergraduate	Labour Economics & Industrial Relations	4	5 yrs	
G9	Ghana	F	26	Undergraduate	English Teaching	Language	Prep. school	7 mths
G10	Nigeria	M	28	Doctoral	Geological Engineering	Thesis level	10 yrs	
G11	Sudan	F	21	Undergraduate	Science Teaching	3	4 yrs	
G12	Ghana	M	25	Undergraduate	Biology	4	5 yrs	
G13	Niger	M	24	Undergraduate	Mathematics	3	4 yrs	
G14	Nigeria	M	26	Undergraduate	Economics	1	3 yrs	
G15	Guinea	M	20	Undergraduate	Economics	Prep. school	8 mths	
G16	Syria	F	20	Undergraduate	English Literature	1	10 mths	
G17	Yemen	M	19	Undergraduate	English Literature	1	8 mths	

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age (years)</i>	<i>Educational Status</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Time Spent in Turkey</i>
G18	Guinea	M	24	Undergraduate	English Literature	1	2.5 yrs

During the formation of the study group (see Table 1), special efforts were made in order to achieve a profile that would reflect the diversity of international students studying at MSKU as the study was specifically focused on exhibiting various aspects of choosing to be an 'international student'. Feedback from pre-interviews conducted during the initial research stage and from suggestions made by various reference groups were utilised during the study group formation process. In other words, the data collection process directly influenced the study group's formation process.

Data collection

It is crucial to mention the researchers' position in outlining the data collection process. Both researchers are academics at MSKU and are in frequent contact with international students (and therefore any issues that they may experience) through their lecturing and other university-based activities. In qualitative case studies, the researchers are considered the primary data collection and analysis tool (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Accordingly, it may be said that the data collection process commenced from the initial point that the researchers decided upon conducting such a study. The data collection strategy employed was determined based on conclusions drawn from pre-interviews conducted with international students who were immediately accessible to the researchers.

During the current study, data were collected via interviews conducted according to a 'semi-structured interview form' that was based on the related literature and from daily life observations at the university. Both researchers attended each interview, which were held in either of their respective offices based at the campus. The participating students were informed about the scope of the study prior to their interview, and their consent to participate taken before being interviewed. Interview appointments were agreed in advance with those students who agreed to participate, and they were requested to attend an interview on a specified date at a certain time.

All of the interviews conducted within the scope of the current study were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. During the interviews, the researchers each took observational notes independently. In the evaluation period that followed each interview, the researchers' compared their observational notes and added them to the dataset. Considering that communication using the Turkish language may be problematic for some of the international students, the participants were offered the option for their interview to be conducted in Turkish or English. Overall, 13 out of the 18 interviews were conducted in Turkish, whilst five were conducted in English.

Data analysis

Analysis of the collected data was performed based on the interview transcriptions and the observational notes, with thematic analysis based on a content analysis perspective. The analysis was performed on the basis of themes (and subthemes) as derived from the interview data, and was determined by building the problematic case according to the main focal points of the interviews. As previously mentioned, the case study themes were designed to cover various aspects of choosing to be an international student in Turkey;

hence, an inductive analysis was performed through conducting a cross-case analysis under each theme.

Validity and reliability

It is clear that statements on validity and reliability testing of qualitative studies differ significantly from those of quantitative studies based on statistical data. In relation to the validity and reliability of the current study, the researchers primarily worked on the interview form and eventually finalised it on the basis of pre-interviews conducted before the main application of the study, and through consulting expert opinion. The raw interview transcripts were cross-analysed by the two researchers in order to avoid any data loss. During the data analysis, the themes and the quotations included under each of these themes were also subjected to cross-analysis. As a result of this approach, whether or not a quotation belonged to a certain theme was discussed by the researchers, and the data analysis was performed accordingly.

Limitations

While problematic fields presented in the current study were found to overlap with other studies in the literature that were conducted across various regions worldwide, it is important to emphasise that for certain aspects the current study was limited to data pertinent to the Muğla province of Turkey. This may be due to Muğla province being more familiar to non-residents compared to most other regions of Turkey due to its popularity for domestic as well as international tourism. Accordingly, it may be argued that the study's results may be limited to Muğla province, or just with other areas sharing similar characteristics.

Another limitation of the current study relates to the nature of certain problems underlined in the study. There is a risk that certain problems that are currently experienced by international students could change should laws related to students' working permits, healthcare coverage, and insurance be superseded by new legislation. To this end, it is important to note that the current study is limited to the conditions as of 2018.

3. FINDINGS

The study's findings have been arranged in order to promote the discussion of international studentship over two basic dimensions, as based on the research questions of the current study. First, the reasons behind an individual student's wish to study abroad are discussed. Then the primary factors for their selecting Turkey are discussed as a second dimension.

Being an international student

Which factors play a role when an individual decides to study abroad? It may be argued that the case of international students studying in Turkey fits in accordance with the basic assumptions of push-pull factors as cited in the international literature. However, the relativity of the push-pull factors to the Turkish context need to be considered. From which countries would students be more likely to be pulled towards selecting Turkey for their higher education, or which students are pushed towards the selection of Turkey?

Relativity of educational quality

The reason why most (17 out of 18) students interviewed during the study (the exception being G7) chose Turkey for their education was the belief that they would receive education under better conditions comparative to their country of origin. However, it is important to clarify in comparison to which countries the 'quality education' in Turkey was considered to be of a higher quality. As previously mentioned, the international student profile exhibits homogeneity which manifests itself on the axis of Africa, the Middle East, as well as the Turkic republics.

In my country, those who study abroad can find jobs quickly after graduation... Not just Turkey, other countries too... Education in Turkey is better than in Mali... [G3]

Education in Guinea isn't that good for universities. [G15]

I like in here [Turkey]. Of course we could say that the education in Germany is better actually. Here [Turkey], the system is mostly based on memorising things, but there [Germany] it is mostly based on learning critical thinking. There were other alternatives for me, but as I lived in Turkey in my childhood, I had always been missing here. [G7]

G7 was the only student from Western Europe and the student's reason for choosing Turkey was not based on any superiority of educational quality, but an emotional tie that the student had towards the culture and the geography. The international human development index rating of countries responding to Turkey's promise of quality education renders the relativity of quality-based choices even more apparent. Turkey constitutes a stepping stone for students from countries which face considerable infrastructural problems when compared to Western Europe or North America. Whilst Turkey may also experience certain issues related to higher education, and even problems similar to those in prospective students' countries of origin, Turkey may still appeal to those from certain countries.

The reason I left Nigeria is that the population is too high in my country and the number of university places is insufficient for everyone... Turkey is somewhat different, because there are many universities in Turkey. But, there are only a few universities in Nigeria. Private universities are very expensive. For these reasons I chose to study abroad. [G14]

We choose here [Turkey] because engineering and teaching education is very good in Turkey... and engineers [trained in Turkey] find jobs very easily, and earn much more... [G4]

At first I didn't want, to go to another country I mean. My father persuaded me, because unemployment is very high in Tunisia... He told me, "There is little chance to find a job if you study here... You will go to Turkey, it's not a very beautiful country, but it's better than Tunisia still; you'll learn a new language, and you'll improve your chances a little bit more"... [G8]

For example, in examining the motives of G4, G8, and G14 to study abroad, it can be seen that the factors pushing them relate to structural issues within the higher education establishment in their respective country of origin such as limited capacity of universities and high level tuition fees associated with quality education. In addition, as emphasised by

both G4 and G8 (and also several other participants), the relatively higher chances of realising a profession with better working conditions following graduation can push students towards studying in Turkey. It should be emphasised here that the conditions referred to that ‘pushed’ students to preferring Turkey over their own country of origin could also be said to be present in Turkey. The participants were also found to be aware of this ‘relative’ quality differential.

Back then, the Nigerian government was granting scholarships and we used to think that education here [Turkey] was better than ours. [G10]

When your government provided scholarships, were Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada, etc. included in the same grant pool? [Interviewer]

They weren’t, else I would surely have chosen them... Egypt and Turkey were available though, and I preferred Turkey. [G10]

It may be argued that for students attempting to escape from the relatively poor state of education in their country of origin, Turkey is positioned as a country that could at least be a viable option, even though it may not have been their first choice.

Relative safety

The instrumentalisation of the ‘education’ component with a pragmatist/opportunist approach in international education mobility may be addressed in juxtaposition with Turkey’s geographical location. Situated between the Middle East, which is seemingly in a perpetual state of war, and Europe (and possibly North America) that also offer several opportunities, Turkey is severely affected by the ongoing civil war in neighbouring Syria with respect to its international student profile.

I can’t study in Syria because of the situation there, and education here [in Turkey] is better than in our own country... I considered countries such as Egypt and Jordan, but as I said, studying in Turkey is better compared to Arab countries. My brother went to Cyprus after having studying for 1 year in Syria, and said that there was a great difference. A friend of mine who is my age has studied in Syria and all he says is stuff like “Oh my god, I’m not happy to be here”... [G16]

It is clear that G16’s main reason for preferring Turkey over Syria is the state of war in Syria. On the other hand, the fact that other countries that might be chosen were also located in the Middle East and the student considered Turkey as an alternative to these countries indicates that Turkey presents a good option for students who do not want to stay in the Middle East. However, when the alternatives are Turkey and Western Europe, the students’ reasons for choosing Turkey exhibits an association with which there was a relative tendency to settle for.

I left Syria before the war, for Egypt. Education in Syria is very bad... so I left (for abroad) because of the war... I didn’t want to go to Germany because of the state of affairs... as you have to live in a camp for 1 year there... [G6]

The Syrian refugee crisis is a widely discussed issue in Turkey. A focal point of discussion is the difference in ‘quality’ between refugees admitted to Europe and those who live in Turkey. The fact emphasised by G6 (obligation to stay in a refugee camp in Germany) indicates that the reason for choosing Turkey –even though the student also points out the

higher quality of education in Turkey compared to the Middle East– was being a refugee in Turkey is rather easy for Syrian students.

A First stop in escaping from the Middle East

Accordingly, it may be argued that Turkey is like a station waiting area or like a motel for international students, particularly those of Middle Eastern origin, on their way to or wanting to eventually settle in the West.

After graduation in Turkey, America, I'm thinking about doing my Master's there... [G3]

I actually wanted to go to Europe... But it wasn't easy. I had to come to Turkey, for the embassy, then I returned to Cyprus and after a month again, I had problems with extending my visa. Turkey was the closest place to Cyprus. So, I moved to Turkey, I planned moving on to Europe, but I was stopped on the way... [G14]

My reason for choosing Turkey was that, when compared to countries such as England and America, you can access quality with less expenditure here. Good education, good health services, but cheap... That's why we choose Turkey. [G18]

It may be argued that Turkey's position as a first stop particularly for students 'pushed' away from the Middle East has turned the country into a 'Casablanca' for students who have the luxury to achieve educational mobility in the face of war and other similar issues. In the movie *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), Europeans who ran (or managed to run) away from the Nazi occupation would travel to Casablanca, even though their intended final destination was America, and generally awaited safe passage to America at 'Rick's Café'. Considering international student mobility in Turkey in this respect, it may be said that Turkey has been evolving into a modern-day 'Casablanca' for students who are able to escape the troubles of the Middle East, with Turkish universities functioning as today's 'Rick's Café'. However, it should be strongly emphasised that however students are pushed and/or pulled in terms of seeking quality education, not all students are able to enjoy the opportunity for international mobility.

Benefits of innate advantages: Parental advice and social circle

Students worldwide may often dream of experiencing life in other countries. While such dreams might be considered mere exotic fantasy for students based in North America and Western Europe, for their peers living in the Middle East and Africa, this can actually equate to the prospects of a better education and a better life as a means of liberation from their environment. However, students' access to quality living conditions via education is not solely dependent on their individual characteristics. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) underlined, economic, cultural, and social capital are also determinative factors for one's international mobility. Such determining characteristics might occasionally manifest via an enforcing figure such as a parent.

I actually didn't want [to study in Turkey], I planned studying there... Since my father is a professor, now a Dean, at the Faculty of Medicine... [He said] If I went abroad for studying, you can too. [G2]

G2 is a student who went abroad for higher education due to pressure from his father, despite having not personally considered it. Stating his economic, social, and cultural

capital in a single sentence, the father's words exhibit how advantageous students with such capital can be with regard to their international mobility potential for educational purposes. The reasons for tendency of international students towards selecting Turkey may therefore be interpreted in terms of their social reference groups.

We always hear about Turkey. When I was little, my older brother was a doctor here, my older sister's here... My brother came here, then everyone started coming here. [G4]

University education isn't that good in Guinea; I'm not gonna lie about that. That's why my father chose here... He chose Turkey because he works with Turks... [G15]

I had friends here, they encouraged me. They said, "Turkey's good, their education system is good, so come here and try". And so I wanted to give it a go... [G9]

As the participants indicated, one's social circle –both family and friends– can play an influential role during the process of deciding whether or not to study abroad. Chen and Zimitat (2006) indicated in their study that students' seeking advice from their social environment is a fundamental source of information when considering studying abroad. Such information may be related to the country in question, the university they are interested in attending, or its location. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also determined that prior students' experiences of a social environment where they had studied, or had interacted with a particular country and/or university were among variables that influenced students' choices. Countries and universities which acknowledged this started attaching great importance to fulfilling students' expectations and producing graduates satisfied with their education by attempting to fulfil any service promised to students prior to their attendance (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). At this point, it may be argued that having familiar faces in a country renders the country itself more familiar even though the prospective student may have never been there. Nevertheless, there are other factors that may make prospective international students feel that some countries are closer to themselves while choosing their host country.

Relatively familiarity: Historical, geographical and cultural sympathy

Educational lessons that introduce students to other countries (e.g., history, geography, etc.) are inclusive elements of any country's curriculum. However, the content of such introductory subjects is seldom limited to mere facts and figures (e.g., total area, population, etc.). When introduced, countries are materialised through their history such as their past hostilities and wars, their commercial affairs and other similar matters. Accordingly, it may be argued that Turkey occupies a significant place in the history and geography courses for countries in the general region of the Middle East.

Turkey is one of the countries we prefer... Turkey is very tolerant according to what we learned about the Ottoman history... [G1]

Well, in our secondary schools we already learned about other countries in geography. We know about countries and their capitals a little. And then there was also the Ottoman Empire... The Ottoman Empire expanded a lot, even to Africa... [G3]

Particularly in those lands that were ruled by the Ottoman Empire there is significant overlap with the countries in question. Therefore, it is not unsurprising that international

students from the Middle East and Africa mention having started to learn about Turkey from an early age. However, factors influencing the critical decision process of selecting a country for international study mobility are not limited to school-gained knowledge.

Another thing, Turkey is culturally more familiar to us... My uncle used to travel to Turkey... I also searched about it on the Internet. [G6]

I also conducted my own search about Turkey and its education system using the Internet, and then realised that I might choose to come here... [G9]

The education system in my country is not as strong as the one here [Turkey]. So we searched for scholarship opportunities on the Internet. [G18]

During the study, almost all of the interviewees indicated having performed Internet searches about Turkey. It has also been seen in other studies that the leading source of information referred to by international students, particularly recently, is online media. For instance, in a study conducted by Phang (2013), it was concluded that most students browse university websites for information on the academic and physical campus environment, the education programmes on offer, and then interact with universities via e-mail. Their choices are thereby significantly influenced by the extent of the knowledge obtained, as well as the quality of communication established. Reddy (2014) also indicated that students gather information via established social media groups, or they conduct research using Internet search engines as well as attending educational fairs and exhibitions in their country of origin.

The common characteristic of most international students in Turkey is that they are from Muslim-majority countries, which can also be termed 'Islamic geography'. Accordingly, religious and cultural familiarity is deemed to be an important pull factor among students from the Middle East, Africa, and the Turkic Republics.

I've been loving Turkey since long before... in my childhood; it's a bit of our childhood. Because of our language, religion, culture, origin... [G5]

There is little difference between Nigerian culture and the culture here in Turkey, but in general, it's actually good as there are no big differences. Why, because with respect to our religion, this "respect" thing is also present here as it is at home... I mean, Turkish people, that same hospitality exists... [G10]

The two cultures are very similar. Most people are Muslim, so the cultures are similar... [G17]

The reasons behind international students studying in Turkey hailing from a certain geographical region may be understood better when considered in combination with the recent political transformations to affect Turkey and the impact on its education policies. It may be argued that the transformation taking place in Turkey, which has had a relatively turbulent political history, and particularly since the 1980s, has considerably impacted international student mobility among other areas. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that the conservatism tendency articulated with neoliberalism as a consequence of the 1980 coup d'état would later reflect on education policies. As previously mentioned, the target of the Great Student Project was limited to certain regions. On the other hand, various Turkish schools in the Middle East and Africa as well as several foundations and religious

communities providing support such as scholarships, and particularly to poorer students, have played a crucial role in the efforts to develop international student mobility on the basis of religion and cultural background. One significant community was structured around educational activities during this period and was particularly active in Muslim-majority countries in addition to Turkey. However, it has since been accused of involvement in acts of terrorism by the current Turkish government, and in being behind the unsuccessful coup attempt of 2016. Today, Turkey is still recovering from this troubled time. Obviously, these events affected those students who came to Turkey prior to 2016 via this organisation.

Actually I wanted to continue (studying) in Sudan, now we'll get into politics a bit. Now I... since I studied with them, they suggested that I went to study in Turkey, and I accepted, and that's how I came here. Else, I would not even think about studying abroad... They suggested only Turkey... They talked about Turkey as if it's heaven. Well Turkey is really like heaven, but the way they treated us was like a dog, and they told us many lies... [G11]

I came here on a scholarship, with the community, maybe my parents would not have let me come through another institution, but they are, I mean, religious conservative, so that's why we trusted them... [G8]

It is apparent that G8 and G11's main motivation for studying abroad was religious based. The fact that religion is a decisive factor for families and/or students while choosing a host country for their higher education is understandable. However, what is crucial here is that a religious-oriented organisation reportedly took a direct part in the process and that the students' time in Turkey was placed under the supervision of an organisation other than state organs. The risk is clear, with students' expenses being covered throughout their education by an organisation other than the state, indebting the students to them and therefore potentially leading them to pursue actions to the benefit of the community to which they belonged instead of their own or the public interest. It is clear that several countries attempted to attract students by means of NGO's international activities (e.g., publicity, scholarships, etc.). However, the blurring of lines, particularly execution of basic processes in the field of education by private organisations, where states are expected to maintain responsibility, can be to the detriment of both the country in question and the students. As mentioned, Turkey has had recent experience of such issues, both as a country and on an individual level as in the case of G8 and G11.

Students' evaluations and making the right choice based on the information gathered is critical to meeting the expectations of their higher education. Studying abroad involves additional challenges for students when compared to studying in their country of origin. Most face unfamiliar cultures, institutional rules, and learning environments, and a language they cannot speak or fully comprehend (Sawir et al., 2008; Sherry et al., 2010). As a result, they have to face an adaptation process in sociocultural, environmental, and psychological terms (Chen, 1999; Zhou et al., 2011). Due to the challenges or difficulties they may face during their adaptation period, they will inevitably be confronted with emotional crises due to feelings of anxiety, conflict, depression, loneliness, isolation, and abandonment (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Chen, 1999; Sawir et al., 2008; Sherry et al., 2010). Besides, the anxiety of potentially not being able to reach their educational goals due to the difficulties of the adaptation may itself become a source of stress (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006). Therefore, in addition to offering international students a high quality of education, universities are also

responsible for the provision of a physically, socially, and psychologically suitable environment in which to live and to study (Bektaş, 2008). Fulfilling such responsibilities effectively requires continual meticulous needs analysis of the international student.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This section presents a discussion of the study's results according to the research questions and in accordance with the related literature, with suggestions also offered by the researchers. The first theme of the study relates to the basic motives pushing the participants away from their country of origin to study abroad. According to the findings, the basic reasons pushing the students to study abroad were observed as economic such as high unemployment rates in their country of origin or being obliged to work in low-paying jobs; political issues such as a state of war or civil unrest; educational issues such as limited student capacity within their home country's higher education system, and low quality education. In addition, some students may opt to study abroad due to personal reasons such as to learn new languages, being immersed into a new culture, or obtaining a new perspective from a different system of education. On the other hand the reasons behind choosing Turkey, specifically, for higher education are economic factors such as Turkey's lower-costs when compared to alternatives, e.g., Europe and the United States; political factors such as bureaucratic regulations being more accommodating for students recognised as refugees such as those from Syria; educational factors such as superior quality higher education; and, cultural factors based on the belief that students, particularly those from geographically proximate countries, will feel more comfortable with regards to their religion, daily practices, etc., and will be less likely to feel discriminated against. It was also observed that the informational resources employed by prospective international students while making a host nation choice in favour of Turkey were mostly advice given by individuals as part of social networks who had direct experience of Turkey, or research about Turkey conducted online by the prospective students themselves.

When the countries preferred by international students are examined, it is seen that students generally prefer English-speaking countries for their higher education. However, in a recently study by Wen and Hu (2019), it was underlined that the nature of international student flow has evolved from global mobility to more regional mobility, with some countries having significantly sent students to other countries in the past (e.g., China, Turkey, Mexico, etc.) now beginning themselves to be seen as 'educational hubs' due to their efforts to attract international students. Therefore, the results of the current study may provide a direction to the segregation practices of international student flow in higher education. On the other hand, in order to be able to understand the reasons and the possible results of this change, further integrative studies are needed in these new hubs regarding this subject.

Declarations

Author Contributions The authors contributed equally to the current research with literature review, data collection and data analysis. All authors have read and approved the published final version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and also with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Availability Statement The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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