

# Adaptation Challenges for International Students in Turkey

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## Abstract

The number of international students has increased greatly in the past few years. As part of the efforts to internationalize its higher education, Turkey is one of the top destinations for international students hosting over 100 thousand international students by 2018. Research shows that with the increasing number of international students come socio-cultural and academic adaptation challenges. This study employed a qualitative approach to understand the adaptation challenges international students face in Turkey. The research discusses findings from focus group discussions with participants from more than 20 countries on adaptation challenges. Results from the focus group discussions showed that international students face challenges in their everyday life, dormitory life, campus life, social life and academic life. The range of challenges includes socio-cultural challenges, language challenges and academic challenges. Notably, findings of this study highlighted that language barrier is at the center of all other challenges affecting socio-cultural adaptation and the students' academic life. The results were discussed under three categories: socio-cultural challenges, language barriers, and academic challenges.

## Keywords

International Students, Socio-Cultural Adaptation, Language Barrier, Academic Challenges

## 1. Introduction

International student mobility has expanded at a rapid rate since the turn of the twenty-first century. Countries and universities are doing their best to attract international students with scholarship opportunities, study incentives and better education infrastructure. In fact, the presence of international students in a

university is being considered as a key element in the internationalization of higher education (Latipov et al., 2017). On a global basis, the number of students pursuing higher education studies abroad has more than doubled since the year 2000 to approximately four million students in 2012 (OECD, 2013). By 2025 it is predicted that the number of international students pursuing degree outside their countries will exceed 7 million (Foresight for Development, 2002). United States of America receives the largest number of foreign students internationally (Nga, 2009).

International students choose to pursue their studies outside of their home countries for many reasons including but not limited to: discovering new environment, experimenting a different education system, experiencing a different way of life and society, for pursuing in advanced and quality higher institutions etc. (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Talib et al., 2014). Indeed, most of the international students choose to pursue their studies overseas because of the presumed better and quality education outside their home countries (Faleel et al., 2012).

Efforts of internationalizing Turkish universities dates back to the 1990s when the government of Turkey started a scholarship program called the Grand Student Project (Özoğlu et al., 2015). The program targeted international students in the Turkic and the former soviet countries. However, it was after 2010 when the number of international students increased dramatically. As of 2018 Turkey hosts over 100 thousand international students from 16,500 students in the year 2000 (Anadolu Agency, 2018). This dramatic increase is attributed to the government's special focus towards internationalization of higher education through different policies and arrangements (Özoğlu et al., 2015). Similarities in culture, history, religion, ethnic affinities and relatively cheaper cost of education are the main pull factors in international students' choice of Turkey for their higher education (Özoğlu et al., 2015).

The presence of international students has its own positive contribution for a country's higher education. For example, local students attending classes with international students exhibit a lot more interest in their studies (Calleja, 2000). Generally speaking, international students who go out to enrolling in a foreign country have a better academic history. They have to go through rigorous academic and language requirement tests to get acceptance in a foreign country's university. This better academic history in turn helps in improving the quality of education in host countries. In their study of foreign students enrolled in Russia, Baklashova and Kazakov found that the presence of international students in a classroom creates a sense of competition among the local Russian students and helps them achieve better (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). In this regard, international students play a key role in the betterment of higher education in host countries.

Moreover, international students are greater source of ethno cultural diversity; facilitating inter-country links thereby reducing intergroup hostilities and conflicts (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). According to Sam, international students can serve as "cultural carriers" facilitating cultural exchanges between different

groups (Sam, 2001). They bring in the cultural knowledge of their respective countries and thereby helping in creating a diverse community which in turn helps the local students and the community develops their understanding of different culture and increasing their intercultural communication.

Last but not least, the role of international students for the host country's economy is also another important role. International students invest in the country's education, help gain foreign exchange, and inspiring local businesses (Burslem, 2004 cited in Gu et al., 2010).

With the increasing number of international students come adaptation challenges and difficulties. Adapting to a foreign culture takes place at different levels including social, psychological, academic, and environment. Being able to adapt successfully to a new culture is key for international students' success both in their social and academic lives. Nevertheless, adapting to a new culture and way of life has never been easy. Many researchers tried to understand the adaptation challenges of international students. For example Titrek et al., found that international students face problems related to communication, accommodation, health and cultural issues in their stay in Turkey (Titrek et al., 2016). However their research was confined to a single university in a smaller city.

Moreover, international higher degree research students may also encounter problems in adapting to the social and cultural way of life (Sovic, 2008). Ozcetin conducted a research on the problems faced by international students in higher education in Turkey (Ozçetin, 2013). According to the findings of the study Turkish language difficulty, dormitory life and the cultural difference problems were among the most important challenges faced by international students studying in Turkey.

In another study conducted by Özoğlu, culture difference was one of the leading factors affecting social adjustment of international students studying in Turkey (Özoğlu et al., 2015).

In light of these challenges of international students in Turkey, in this study, we focus on the experiences of the international student's challenges living in Turkey. We tried to understand their socio-cultural adaption challenges, language challenges and academic challenges. We believe that the experiences of one of us, as researchers, contribute to understand and interpret the experiences of the international students. That is why we preferred qualitative research, and conducted FG discussions.

## 2. The Concept of Adaptation Challenges

The concept of adaptation varies according to scholars from different disciplines. According to Zhou et al., adaptation is a continuous process of adjusting and handling stress at different levels (Zhou et al., 2008). For Lewthwaite on the other hand, adaptation involves striving for a balance between a person and environment (Lewthwaite, 1996). According to him, people react to a new condition in one of four different ways: changing the environment, changing oneself, doing nothing, or avoiding it.

There are different theoretical models in the socio cultural adaptation literature. Dominant among them is Lysgaard's culture shock model, which using the U-shape curve classified the process of adaptation into four different stages (Lewthwaite, 1996). The first stage is what Lysgaard called "the honeymoon stage" and takes place during the first few months and is characterized by excitements of the new environment. In the second stage "the culture shock stage" the sojourner faces problems and strives to solve them. The third stage is "the adjustment" stage when the person starts to learn and adapt to the new culture. In the final stage "the mastery stage" the person accepts and adapts to the new culture.

Another theoretical model important in the understanding of adaptation challenges emphasizing on the intercultural contact of international students is the functional model of friendship networks of Bochner (Zhou et al., 2008). According to Bochner international students tend to belong to three different groups and each group plays unique adaptation importance. The first one is via communication with those remaining in their home country international students maintain their home culture and networks. The second is through their interactions with nationals of the host country they learn socio cultural skills that can help them adapt and succeed in their academic lives. The third group is the networks and friendships foreign students make with other foreign students, which according to Bochner is important as it gives mutual support.

The process of socio-cultural adaptation is influenced by several factors including but not limited to: strength of personality, prior knowledge of host culture, duration of stay in the host country, nature of interaction with host community, previous experience living abroad (Zhou et al., 2008).

### 3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Focus group discussion was used as main method to generate data. Focus group discussion is appropriate as it enables respondents to share a detailed account of their experiences, developing and adding on each other's experiences. Moreover, focus groups are being highly recommended as a good method for researches in cultural variations and differences (Smithson, 2008). Initially an in depth interview was used to identify discussion questions for a focus group discussion guide. Using the data from the interviews as input a semi-structured focus group guide using a sample template from Hennink's book "Focus Group Discussions" was prepared and used in all groups as a guide for the discussions (Hennink, 2014). Before participant recruitment and the actual data generation the research was reviewed and approved by Hacettepe University Ethics Committee.

#### 3.1. Participant Selection

A total of 31 international students from more than 20 different countries<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Algeria, Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Bulgaria, China, Columbia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Iraq, Kenya, Kirgizstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Somaliland, South Sudan, Syria, Uganda, Yemen, Zimbabwe.

enrolled in 7 different state and public universities in Ankara took part in this study. The study adopted purposive sampling where “information rich” participants with specific characteristics relevant to the research subject were selected. The characteristics that are considered for participant recruitment are being international student in Turkey and ability to make discussion in English. We tried to include both male and female, senior and junior international students since we think their experiences and perceptions will differ. The strategies for purposive recruitment of participants were using contacts through Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities and international students’ offices in universities.

Initially, we planned to conduct five focus group discussions with each group having 6 to 8 participants. Therefore, sampling and discussions were set to go on until the researchers reach a saturation point where no new information is obtained from further data. This being the case it was found worthwhile to over recruit participants to avoid any possible attrition and to have enough reserves for possible new groups.

### **3.2. Data Generation**

A total of 5 focus groups were conducted with group size ranging from five to seven. All the focus groups were moderated by one of the authors with another researcher as an assistant. A focus group guide was used as a reminder for the researcher to make sure all the important questions were covered. All of the focus groups were audio tape recorded. Generally, the discussions started with small talks between the participants, between the participants and the researchers. This small talk was necessary for creating a friendly environment among the participants. The actual discussions started with a welcome speech introducing of the discussion by the researcher, followed by all participants introducing themselves. After the opening introduction the following issues were covered in the discussions: adaptation challenges for international students in Turkey, socio-cultural adaptation challenges, language adaptation challenges, and academic related challenges. No payments or incentives of any form were given for the participants, they took part in the research for free. For all the discussions the researcher provided refreshments. The discussions lasted between 70 and 142 minutes.

Participants were given an informed consent both in the recruitment phase and right before the actual discussions. They all gave their informed consent to participate voluntarily. An additional consent was also taken for the discussions to be audio recorded. In return the researchers assured the confidentiality of the research and for participants to remain anonymous throughout the research process.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

Data analysis was started by verbatim transcription of the audio recorded group

discussions. The raw data (transcriptions and discussion notes) then were organized and reviewed by the researchers to check mistakes or missing information. Data was coded manually. Transcribed data was coded using sentence by sentence coding. Code list was prepared and codes were organized under categories. After coding and organization of the data, extracts from the focus group transcripts and discussion notes were used to discuss the adaptation challenges under main themes.

## 4. Results

Results from the focus group discussions showed that international students face various adaptation challenges in Turkey. The challenges range from socio-cultural differences to academic barriers; from weather to language barriers. The results are discussed under three categories: 1) socio-cultural barriers; 2) Language barriers; and 3) Academic barriers.

### 4.1. Socio-Cultural Adaptation Challenges

Coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds international students face a variety of challenges when adapting to Turkish culture. International students from Eastern Europe, Northern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Far East, and Latin America took part in the research making the focus group participants diverse in terms of socio-cultural backgrounds. Participants had to deal with a new way of life i.e. culture: from dressing to cuisine; from religion to language; from norms and values to beliefs etc. When talking about socio-cultural barriers the respondents mentioned about cultural differences between Turkey and their home countries. The major socio-cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students are:

**Norm and value differences** (differences in norms or values between international students' home countries and Turkey). Examples of differences in norms and values are discussed below.

Participants reported that talking and laughing in group in public spaces were considered rude in Turkish culture, and people reacted in unfavorable way to international students laughing and talking loudly especially in a language other than Turkish.

*TY: ... and also when we are with other Africans in the bus or in the Subway usually we laugh harder in our conversations we talk and we laugh. I have observed that the Turkish people don't like it when we are having such kind of times, when we are talking and laughing together (TY, female participant from Uganda).*

**Asking questions:** Most of the participants mentioned that they had difficulty adapting to Turks' culture of asking questions to strangers about everything in a first time meeting. Participants reported that even though most of the questions were asked out of curiosity it made them feel uncomfortable opening up in such detail to strangers.

*LC: I have noticed that people really like asking questions here, and to be honest some of the questions are very funny and kind of weird (chuckles). Initially such questions were very weird and very difficult to understand since I was wondering if it was just for me or for everyone else. At first I would be going around and answering their questions, sometimes I was laughing alone. And gradually when I start making foreign friends I realized that it is for all foreigners. Some questions were funny and silly (laughing) while others were very detailed questions which I don't want to share with someone I met for the first time (LC, male participant from Columbia).*

**Smoking culture:** One of the things participants unanimously agreed to is the smoking culture in Turkey where people smoke almost everywhere and every time. Smoking pattern is one of the biggest culture shocks experienced by international students in Turkey. The following are some of the extracts of participants reacting to the smoking pattern in Turkey.

*And then about another huge difference for me probably the smoking I would say. Because in my country ummm of course there are people who do smoke but they do it in secret should I say, you don't see them smoking everywhere you go like in the bus stop waiting in the line smoking. Because personally I have been affected so much by this, I do not smoke but I become a second hand smoker since I came here. I don't know the damage that is creating for my system which I don't appreciate quite frankly (YS, female participant from Nigeria).*

**Differences in food and cuisine** is another adaptation challenge for international students in Turkey. Many international students have difficulties getting used to Turkish food. They said that they were forced to rely on fast foods until they get used to the Turkish meals. Participants noted that food different from their respective home countries made adaptation difficult especially in the first few months.

*Talking about the socio-cultural adaptation challenges I can't go without talking about the food. The food I used to eat back home and the food in Turkey is completely different and it was really hard for me to adjust. Oh my God it is amazing, it is tasteless. So it was very difficult for me to adjust and in my first few months or I can say my first one year I remember I was having those junk foods that of the fast foods on a regular basis (HR, female participant from Malaysia).*

**Dormitory culture:** Female international students in particular discussed about the differences in dormitory culture i.e. way of behaving and living in a dormitory different from their home countries e.g. sleeping time, use of the light etc. Participants reported incidents of misunderstandings in dormitory. For example, one participant (a Masters student) who completed her undergraduate studies back in her home country compared the dormitory culture and commented on the differences in the sleeping patterns (see the excerpt below).

*NW: related with the sleeping pattern in Ethiopian universities or dormitories there is a different dormitory culture. After sometime in the evening we turn off*

*the light and everyone goes to sleep. If anyone wants to study she should go to the library. And in the morning the person who wake up early should complete her preparation and makeup and stuff without making any noise. That is the dormitory culture in Ethiopia for example. But here in Turkey all these kind of things are non-existent. Someone can turn on and off the light anytime she wants and they spray perfume while you are asleep ... (NW, a female participant from Ethiopia).*

**Clothing difference.** One participant from Somaliland commented on clothing differences and his experience. He said that a particular clothing common in his culture was considered as homo sexual in Turkey.

*MK: and another thing in our culture there is some cloth which is famous in even in Ethiopia (looking at ID) we call it Mawis. You can wear it in outside or even in your house, but in here you can't go outside wearing it because people think another thing (laughing) they think of you as homosexual or something like that (MK, male participant from Somaliland).*

**Nonverbal cues:** differences in nonverbal cues differences between Turkish culture and international students' home culture is also another challenge. Participants recalled funny incidents because of the differences in nonverbal cues and gestures.

*I had problems with certain actions that we do back home that apparently here means something bad. Like I really had a problem with this thing (clapping with one hand folded). For us it means a lot. So I literally like umm, you know as I told you it's an innocent gesture for me when I do it okay. But then again I found it the hard way inside a minibus. At that moment everyone was like shocked. And I did it again and then everyone was like Allah Allah (laughing) (FR, female participant from Kenya).*

The adaptation challenges faced by international students due to socio cultural differences are in line with findings of other researchers. (Lewthwaite, 1996) for example noted that cultural differences between sojourners and host community can cause pressure on the students. In their study of socio-cultural adaptation challenges in Malaysia (Gu et al., 2010) found that international students face what they call "acculturative tensions" because of cross-cultural differences. Similarly, (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010) noted that the need to adapt to a new culture, way of life, food etc. can cause stress on international students. The more disparity between host and international students' culture; the more difficult the adaptation process (Li and Kaye, 1998 as cited in Özoğlu et al., 2015). Being able to successfully adapt to the new culture can on the other hand contribute for the overall success of international students; both academically and socially (Gu et al., 2010).

While the aforementioned challenges indicate that international students encounter a variety of socio-cultural adaptation challenges, as time passes the challenges seemed to decrease. A similar conclusion was reached by (Gu et al., 2010) where they observed most of international students in their study adapt and develop with time.

## 4.2. Language Barriers

Language barrier is the most severe challenge faced by international students in Turkey. This is supported by findings of prior researchers (Mori, 2000). International students face challenges starting from their first day in Turkey. Language barrier made adaptation to Turkey very difficult. The first thing about language barrier to which the respondents unanimously agreed to was the fact that Turkish people generally do not speak other languages other than Turkish (i.e. English, Arabic and so on). Language barrier hinders foreign students from forming friendship and social network with their Turkish counter parts. In their study of international students in USA (Hayes & Lin, 1994) observed similar trend where language barrier hindering foreign students from interacting with their American peer. The following excerpt is example:

*TH: I think the main problem is language as they said. The fact that the Turks do not speak other languages other than Turkish made it hard for foreigners in general and international students in particular. Because if you cannot speak the language, you will obviously miss a lot of things. Maybe we can say it will be hard for you to have social life in the first place, and moreover you will struggle to adapt. So, as for my knowledge and experience language is the most challenging part, and I believe if I knew the language before coming here my life and adaptation to Turkish culture would have been much easier (TH, male participant from Algeria).*

Most of the participants mentioned about the challenge they faced in the airport in their first day in Turkey. Many participants reported incidents like missing flight, unable to find their flight gate and losing their cargo in the airport mainly because of the language barrier.

*ID: okay when I first came at the airport I lost my flight and I had to pay an extra \$100. You know what because of the transfer from Istanbul to Ankara I was waiting just in the line with someone to get my documents authenticated. Passport control or something. I go around and then when I reach at the gate the plane had already taken off. So when I ask them nobody knows. I just walked around for about 2 hours. Nobody speaks English and finally I have to pay \$100 (ID, male participant from Ethiopia).*

**Miscommunications and misunderstandings:** most of the international students come to Turkey without prior knowledge of Turkish language and in Turkey most people don't speak English. Because of this miscommunications and misunderstandings between the locals and international students occur on their way to get the right information in everyday life, airport, shopping and university etc. many participants reported incidents of getting lost, going to a wrong direction, challenges in shopping, restaurant and so on. Example extracts are reproduced below.

*KN: actually almost all of us have a story to share about language. When we first came we get lost with my friend, we didn't know that we can come to Sih-hiye using the Subway. We came walking and it took me and my friend it took*

us 2 hours. From Sihhiye to Kizlay, we were getting lost just looking for the bus that takes us back to our dormitory in Cubuk. We just wasted 2 hours it was because of the language (KN, male participant from South Sudan).

...

NM: me for example I don't eat salad. But I didn't know how to say I don't like salad so I was eating doner with salad for like long time until I learned how to say it. (Laughing) just because I didn't know how to say don't put salad in my doner (Laughing) (NM, male participant from Zimbabwe).

**Speech handicap:** (international students feel frustrations because of their inability to explain their feelings in their everyday life, dormitory life, hospitals, schools and so on). This was especially true for female international students. Participants of the focus group discussions regardless of their racial and cultural backgrounds reported on incidences of frustrations because of the language barrier.

YS: you can never be able to explain your frustration because sometimes I wanted to really scream out when I leave my room but there's no language. What do I say I mean incapability of explaining yourself it's like I don't know like being a handicap. Whenever I have to go to a place like a hospital school or something I need to bring someone along who understands the Turkish language. That's very frustrating because when you are translating information gets missing definitely. You are speaking some way and the person is translating it the other way doesn't really capture what I'm trying to say and that frustrates me (YS, female participant from Nigeria).

Turkish is the only institutional working language in most of the institutions in Turkey. International students face challenges in service giving institutions like hospitals and banks. Moreover, banners, directions, warning notices and guides written on machines are in Turkish adding to the language barrier they face. The following extract is a good example of the challenges they face.

SF: I have one experience which I found very hilarious. I went to the hospital to see a psychiatrist, you know in psychiatrist you have to explain yourself you have to talk a lot. For a doctor you can say for example "basim agriyor" I got a headache or I got a stomach ache and something like that. But for a psychiatrist you have to talk you have to explain, so one day I went to the psychiatrist's office and then I sat down and immediately I started talking in English. And then the psychiatrist looked at me and said I can't speak English. And then I said I can't speak much Turkish either, and then he said try. I cannot explain like my heart very well, but he insisted and I said I cannot sleep. He asked it why and then I said because I cannot speak Turkish. You know I wanted to go and finish it faster because I cannot explain why I cannot sleep or other things in Turkish so I want to finish and go back to my dormitory. So this was too much and I cannot explain all these things or all my feelings in Turkish (SF, female participant from Georgia).

The above accounts support findings of different researchers' arguments that language barrier is the most profound challenge affecting international students'

social and academic lives (Andrade, 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017).

### 4.3. Academic Challenges

International students face different academic challenges in their studies in Turkey. Many of the academic related challenges stemmed from the previously discussed language barrier. The following are the main academic related challenges:

**Language barrier.** language barrier hinders international students from realizing their full potential in their academic life. Most of the participants stressed on medium of instruction discrepancy as the main challenge in their academic life. Most programs in most of the universities are in Turkish (Bilecen, 2009). However, there are some programs and courses which are offered in English or in both English and Turkish. This being the case participants noted that in reality there is discrepancy between the proposed medium of instruction and the actual language of instruction. So the participants reported that courses or programs which were supposed to be in English are being taught in Turkish. For example one participant who enrolled in a hundred percent English program shared her experience (see the excerpt below). Moreover, international students enrolled in Turkish taught programs reported that even though they take a one year preparatory Turkish course prior to their actual studies it is not sufficient to succeed in their respective programs. One participant (see the excerpt below) said that language barrier hindered him from using his full potential.

*KW: So for me my department is supposed to be a hundred percent in English. But apparently it is not. Even in the labs they speak in Turkish and they want me I don't know to completely understand and perform like the Turks. And I feel dumb because they make me feel dumb. And then at the same time the students also complain that they should explain to them in Turkish instead of English whereas I cannot understand Turkish. So yeah it has been tough. (KW, female participant from Pakistan)*

...

*AP: Well, I don't know but when we talk about the academic success the language barrier is the biggest obstacle I think. Ummm so for me I had had the problem of not understanding everything the teacher is saying and also when I read the materials or the lectures or books it was really difficult for me to grasp the whole concept or idea. This challenge really limited my academic success my grades and my performance was less than I expected or less than I planned (AP, male participant from Palestine).*

Other language related academic challenges include lack of publicity where by events, programs, notifications, rules and regulations in universities are written in Turkish and international students missing many opportunities. This is similar to (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017) findings where they observed international students facing challenges of following foreign universities' rules and regulations. Additionally, language barrier limits international students from actively engaging in campus social life, festivals, events etc. Turkish history course is a

course which is initially designed for Turkish students. However, international undergraduate students are forced to take this course along with the Turkish students, which the participants referred as being difficult.

***Isolation from classmates:*** international students face exclusion in their academic life. Participants noted that they faced difficulty in integrating with their Turkish classmates even after spending year or more together. Both female and male participants, irrespective of their racial and cultural backgrounds said that they faced exclusion from classroom networks which are important for sharing information and notes. Other researchers observed the same thing. For example (Choo & Singh, 2013) observed that foreign students find it difficult to become friends with host nationals. (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) also observed that language barrier and socio-cultural differences hindering foreign students from making effective interactions with their American peers.

In this study, for example, one participant as reproduced in the first excerpt below said that it is difficult integrating with Turkish students as a foreign student. Another participant said that lack of close friends and classmates to share the loads of assignments and the tensions together made her struggle hard in her academic life (see the second excerpt below). And the reason for the non-interaction between international students and Turkish students according to the participants is lack of getting together events and language barrier. The students suggested that real and all-inclusive get together events should be organized in the universities where the students (both international and Turkish) and the teachers can be present. This lack of sense of belonging in university social networks is the reason for dissatisfactions in their academic and social life (Gu et al., 2010).

*Ummm apart from that being unable to integrate with Turkish students is also another problem in my academic life. So in universities especially when you are studying undergraduate there is this kind of networks between students and in this networks they share notes and they also share previous exams umm exams from previous years. So if you are not well integrated in this kind of groups or if you don't have good friends I mean Turkish friends you cannot get this kind of resources. So me being like a foreigner makes that more difficult, and also it is difficult for some Turkish students too because some of them they don't get these things like me. But me being a foreigner is more difficult (OD, male participant from Iraq).*

...

*I am the only foreigner and African in our class and literally I have no one to talk to and to interact in the class. I am struggling a lot with my assignments and projects. I'm studying Computer Engineering and we have this a lot of projects so it's really hard to do them alone, but since I have no friends and no classmates who can interact with me I do it alone and I know the struggle. Sometimes I miss important information from teachers and from senior students because of this non-interaction. And even in my dormitory there is no one from my department, I went to class alone, I attend my lessons and I came back to my dormito-*

*ry alone that's how it is (BT, female participant from Ethiopia).*

Black international students from Africa reported that they face additional challenges and stereotypes because of their race. As the extracts reproduced below show participants reported that they face tension because of the constant attention exerted on them. Moreover, students from Africa are also subject to stereotypes adding more pressure to their studies. One participant for example said that as a black student he is the center of attention whereby the teacher easily notices him and asks him questions is giving him hard time in his studies (see the excerpts below).

*I was worried anyways I ended up... by the way in my class I am the only black one and everyone pays attention to what I have to say. So that's how it is, I don't know, I don't know what to do actually. And then I'm tired of being the center of focus. And in exam times I don't even want to go and see my papers (MH, male participant from Burkina Faso).*

...

*I understand like most of the lesson I mean like 80% but I miss a few things and sometimes there are things I don't understand, and I don't ask. Because I am the only black student in my classroom and imagine like being in a class full of students and the black guy raises his hand to ask question in Turkish. Everybody is like always paying attention to you so you always like. I've been together with these students for like 3 years, I've been learning with these students for 3 years and to this day I feel like a foreigner (SM, male participant from Kenya).*

## 5. Discussion

The number of international students pursuing higher education overseas is increasing every year. Turkey with its efforts in attracting international students is trying to take a bigger piece of the pie. With the increasing student mobility, there come adaptation challenges that need to be assessed and researched. The aim of this article is to understand the adaptation challenges faced by international students in Turkey. As findings of the study show international students face a variety of problems ranging from academic to cuisine; from religion to language; from norms and values to beliefs. Those challenges make adaptation very difficult; affecting students' social and personal life to the extent of some students abandoning their studies and going back to their respective countries (Bulix, 2015; Titrek et al., 2016). Using Lewthwaite's model international students react to their new environment mainly by changing themselves by socializing with the community and other international students (Lewthwaite, 1996). While some were reported avoiding the new environment either by going back to their home countries or a different country.

The research demonstrated that coming from all corners of the world and different socio-cultural background international students face challenges in adapting and integrating to Turkish culture. The main socio-cultural adaptation challenges being; norm and value differences, asking questions, food and cuisine,

dormitory culture, and nonverbal cues. International students come to Turkey without prior knowledge about the Turkish culture and social life.

Language challenge is the most severe of all other challenges making socio-cultural and academic adaptation very hard. This is in consistent with findings of researchers like (Özoğlu et al., 2015; Titrek et al., 2016; Andrade, 2006; GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The most common language related challenges are unable to communicate with Turkish community using a language other than Turkish, miscommunications and misunderstandings, speech handicap, difficulties in service giving institutions.

Socio-cultural adaptation challenges seem to fade away as time passes, while academic challenges stay throughout the academic periods taking different forms. This is in consistent with (Gu et al., 2010) observations. In their study of foreign students in UK they found that adapting to a new academic environment seemed to last longer and continuing throughout their stay with challenges and loads such as completing assignments and improving their academic writing.

Most of the academic barriers are because of the language barrier. If the departments in English medium of instruction were in English as they should be most of the academic challenges would have been reduced.

Unfavorable attitude towards foreign students (especially scholarship students) among some teachers and Turkish students is also another problem. An awareness creation on intercultural communication and international students' mobility should be made for Turkish students and staff working in universities.

Some female students and male students from Africa reported incidents of sexual harassment in Turkey. They reported incidents like verbal assault, sexual comments, being stalked in streets and physical touching.

In addition to the challenges, they face as foreign students black international students face additional challenges because of their race. This intersectional disadvantage comes in the form of racism, pressure, stereotypes, and prejudices in and outside class room. Some students reported about some faculty members and local students talking negatively about their home country and culture in classrooms.

Therefore, for a better academic performance and better intercultural communication get together programs at the university level (involving international students, local students, academic and administrative staff) should be organized. Guidance and counseling services in a language other than Turkish should be made available in universities for international students. A supportive guideline with specific information that can assist them at each stage of their journey can also be helpful (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017). For prospective international students who want to come to Turkey having a basic understanding of the Turkish language can be helpful for their adjustment journey.

Extracurricular activities can help foreign students improve their language skills, integrate with the locals easily and help them in their adaptation journey (Cathcart et al., 2005; Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007). Therefore, in campus extracur-

ricular activities involving international students and local students should be organized.

As the number of international students increases so does the social, economic and academic related challenges. So, assessing international students' adaptation challenges is timely and crucial as the findings will pave the way for other researchers who are interested to conduct further studies. On top of that findings of the study can give international students insights on possible challenges and prepare themselves accordingly.

Despite the socio-cultural and language related adaptation challenges, the respondents acknowledged the helpfulness and friendliness of the Turks and the Turkish culture in general. Many well integrated themselves with the Turks; mastering Turkish language, Turkish culture and excelling academically. Such students seem to have reached what Lysgaard called "the mastery stage" in which they totally adapt and integrate into the new culture (Lewthwaite, 1996). Amir Zakaria known as Çorumlu Amir is an example. Amir is a Central African Republic international student who studied Engineering in Turkey. Amir became a famous celebrity in Turkey with his social media videos that he made in Turkish language.

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## Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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