

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN TOURISM

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Abstract

Technological advances and increased intercontinental mobility have made the world smaller. Today, it is common to encounter people from different cultures in a country or even a town, whether as visitors, students, or workers. Consequently, microscale education systems have shifted from homogeneous to more heterogeneous environments that reflect diverse cultures and associated values. More specifically, student exchange programmes, such as Erasmus, are considered the main drivers of strengthening intercultural communication in education. Simultaneously, it is crucial to emphasize the role of intercultural education in tourism. In this study, individual interviews were conducted with tourism students residing in Turkey who were pursuing tourism studies. This study aims to identify the opportunities and challenges that international students encounter during their education in Turkey, particularly from academic, social, and cultural perspectives. A qualitative research plan was developed using content analysis, and the opportunities and challenges encountered by the students were presented through themes based on the interviews, focusing on their experiences during the pandemic. In line with this study's findings, the opportunities and challenges of intercultural education in tourism were comprehensively addressed. The students' plans were examined within the framework of push-and-pull theory, and recommendations for the future were presented to universities.

Keywords: Cross-cultural education, tourism education, international students.

OPORTUNIDADES E DESAFIOS DA EDUCAÇÃO INTERCULTURAL NO TURISMO

Resumo

Os avanços tecnológicos e o aumento da mobilidade intercontinental tornaram o mundo um lugar menor. Hoje em dia, é comum encontrar pessoas de diferentes culturas num país ou mesmo numa cidade, seja como visitantes, estudantes ou trabalhadores. Como resultado, os sistemas educativos em microescala passaram de ser ambientes homogêneos para sistemas mais heterogêneos que representam diversas culturas e valores associados. Mais especificamente, os programas de intercâmbio de estudantes, como o Erasmus, são considerados as principais razões para o reforço da comunicação intercultural na educação. Ao mesmo tempo, é muito importante enfatizar a importância da educação intercultural no turismo. Neste estudo, foram realizadas entrevistas individuais com estudantes de turismo residentes na Turquia e cursando o curso de turismo. O objetivo do estudo é identificar as oportunidades e os desafios que os estudantes estrangeiros enfrentam durante a sua educação na Turquia, particularmente de uma perspectiva académica, social e cultural. Foi desenvolvido um plano de investigação qualitativa, com análise de conteúdo, e as oportunidades e desafios encontrados pelos estudantes foram apresentados por meio de temas extraídos das entrevistas, com foco nas suas experiências. Em consonância com as conclusões deste estudo, as oportunidades e os desafios da educação intercultural no turismo foram abordados de forma abrangente. Os planos futuros dos estudantes foram examinados no âmbito da teoria push and pull, e foram apresentadas recomendações às universidades para o futuro.

Palavras-chave: Educação intercultural; Educação em turismo; Estudantes estrangeiros.

OPORTUNIDADES Y RETOS DE LA EDUCACIÓN INTERCULTURAL EN TURISMO

Resumen

Los avances tecnológicos y el aumento de la movilidad intercontinental han hecho del mundo un lugar más pequeño. Hoy en día, es habitual encontrarse con personas de diferentes culturas en un país o incluso en una ciudad, ya sea como visitantes, estudiantes o trabajadores. Como resultado, los sistemas educativos a pequeña escala han pasado de ser entornos homogéneos a sistemas más heterogéneos que representan diversas culturas y valores asociados. Más concretamente, los programas de intercambio de estudiantes, como Erasmus, se consideran las principales razones para reforzar la comunicación intercultural en la educación. Al mismo tiempo, es muy importante destacar la importancia de la educación intercultural en el turismo. En este estudio se realizaron entrevistas individuales a estudiantes de turismo residentes en Turquía. El objetivo del estudio es identificar las oportunidades y los retos a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes extranjeros durante su educación en Turquía, especialmente desde una perspectiva académica, social y cultural. Se desarrolló un plan de investigación cualitativa mediante el análisis de contenido, y las oportunidades y retos a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes se abordaron a través de temas derivados de entrevistas centradas en sus experiencias. En consonancia con los resultados de este estudio, se abordaron de manera exhaustiva las oportunidades y los retos de la educación intercultural en el turismo. Se examinaron los planes de futuro de los estudiantes en el marco de la teoría del empuje y la atracción y se presentaron recomendaciones a las universidades.

Palabras clave: Educación intercultural, Educación turística, Estudiantes extranjeros.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Education tourism has been defined in various ways in the literature. Franco et al. (2022) define educational tourism as students travelling outside their country of residence for

educational purposes and developing their knowledge and skills. Ritchie et al. (2003), on the other hand, define educational tourism as individuals travelling to a different destination with the desire to participate in any learning activity, without the requirement of being a student. Tomasi



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et al. (2020) emphasize the variety of education and define educational tourism as travel to destinations away from home for formal or informal learning.

Looking at the development of educational tourism worldwide, it is evident that it has grown since the 1970s. According to OECD data, the number of international students (IS) studying abroad was less than 1 million before 1980 but reached 3.5 million in 2013 and 4.4 million in 2019. International student mobility continued even during the pandemic. It is estimated that the number of IS will reach 7.2 million by 2025 (OECD 2025).

According to the Higher Education Council's 'Internationalization Strategy Document for Higher Education 2024-2028,' approximately 350,000 IS are studying in Türkiye as of 2024. This number makes Türkiye the eighth country in the world with the most IS. The target is to increase the number of IS to 500,000 by 2028 (Daily Sabah, 2025).

Due to the nature of educational tourism, IS' spending is spread across every corner of the country, benefiting local grocery stores, school canteens, cafes, restaurants, and all merchants in shopping centers throughout the year (ISSA, 2018). In Estonia, the tax contribution of IS reached 23.5 million euros in the 2022/2023 academic year (Uni-Italia 2023).

In the 2023-2024 academic year, IS in the United States contributed 43.8 billion dollars to the economy through transportation, accommodation, and other living expenses (AAU, 2024). The effects of educational tourism extend beyond its economic value. IS makes a significant contribution to the internationalization of universities.

They also contribute to the community's understanding of other cultures and to the development of its vision beyond educational institutions (Northumbria University, 2023).

Although there is no common consensus on the classification of educational tourism, it is generally divided into four main categories (ISSA, 2018).

- IS enrolled in higher education (undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral, etc.)
- IS enrolled in secondary education (IS residing in the country)
- IS coming for Turkish language education (private Turkish language courses, TÖMER students)
- Course participants coming from abroad for short-term education (seminars and courses lasting 1-2 weeks in fields such as health, hospitality, fashion design, marketing, etc.).

This study was conducted on international undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students studying at higher education institutions in Türkiye to investigate the factors that motivate students from different countries to study in Türkiye, how they evaluate the Turkish education system, the difficulties they encounter while studying in Türkiye, and the opportunities they gain. Another objective is to investigate the plans and the factors that influence their decisions to stay in Türkiye, move to another country, or return to their home countries.

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed that numerous studies have examined IS educational processes. However, these studies have focused more on topics such as cultural adaptation (Salimullina et al., 2019; Sicat, 2011;

Zhao et al., 2023) and culture shock (Goldstein & Keller, 2015; Rueda Zabalegui & Gracia Crespo, 2021; Saylag, 2014).

The lack of research on IS study plans in Türkiye constitutes the original value of this study. Additionally, it aims to fill a gap in the literature and to make theoretical contributions by examining foreign students' future decisions in light of Push and Pull Theory.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Cross-cultural education

According to Banks (2009), intercultural education is a learning process that enables effective and understanding-based communication with individuals from diverse cultures. Banks (2009) emphasizes that one of the fundamental aims of intercultural and multicultural education is to develop students' understanding, tolerance, and respect for different cultures, and that cultural conflicts can be reduced through education. According to UNESCO (2006, p. 18), intercultural education aims to promote mutual understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence among different cultures. According to the OECD (2018, p. 4), intercultural education develops an individual's capacity to communicate effectively by understanding other perspectives.

The historical origins of intercultural education lie in the waves of migration and globalization that gained momentum after World War II. In the 1960s, intercultural education became part of educational policies in the United States with the multicultural education movement (UNESCO, 2006). The United States is one of the countries considered a pioneer in intercultural education. Banks' (2009) work, "Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives," is a fundamental resource for the theoretical framework of intercultural education.

It focuses particularly on integrating ethnic minorities and immigrants into the education system of the native population. It emphasizes that multicultural curricula develop students' tolerance, empathy, and sense of social belonging.

The Council of Europe stated that intercultural dialogue should be supported through education and, starting in 2020, promoted the concept of intercultural competence and published various documents for educators. The Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany are known for their multicultural education policies, and the intercultural teaching programmes implemented in these countries are supported by teacher training (Council of Europe [COE], 2020).

Intercultural education research in Australia has focused on Aboriginal communities and Asian immigrant students. Nakata (2007) criticizes the Western academy for devaluing the knowledge produced by Australia's indigenous peoples (Aboriginal communities) and for excluding indigenous knowledge, arguing that intercultural skills should support cultural diversity and education.

Zhao et al. (2023) state that in Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia, which are attracting an increasing number of IS, China is the world's largest source of IS, and intercultural education is gaining importance. A study conducted on Chinese students in Malaysia investigated the factors affecting their cultural adaptation.

According to a survey conducted by Anderson et al. (2006), even short-term study abroad programmes increase IS' cultural awareness and enhance their cultural sensitivity. Interest in intercultural education has increased significantly in Türkiye, particularly in recent years. The integration of migrant and refugee students into education (Kıral & Beyli, 2021; Tunga et al., 2020), interaction with IS (Türel, 2021; Sönmez and Aluç, 2024), and the experiences of students coming to Türkiye through exchange programs such as Erasmus (Baykara & Kuzulu, 2021; Cepni et al., 2018).

2.2 Cross-cultural education in tourism

Tourism, by its very nature, is an area of interaction between different cultures. Therefore, it is important for individuals working in the tourism sector to have intercultural interaction skills. Multicultural teams are common in hotels, airlines, airports, and travel agencies. This requires cultural harmony and awareness among the employees. Employees interact with one another and with tourists from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

According to Reisinger and Turner (2003), effective communication with tourists is possible by being sensitive to their cultural differences. Cultural conflicts can be prevented with appropriate training (Chen, 2010). Jack and Phipps (2005) addressed the intercultural conflicts experienced by Turkish tourism employees with foreign tourists, discussing the role of inadequate training in managing these conflicts and emphasizing the importance of intercultural training.

Reisinger and Turner (2003) discussed in detail how communication problems arising from cultural differences in tourism services can be overcome through education. Ladegaard and Jenks (2015) found that practical intercultural training is necessary to establish effective communication in multicultural environments, such as the tourism sector.

A review of the literature reveals studies on intercultural education for IS (Sobkowiak, 2019; White & Saqipi, 2021; Zerman, 2014). However, only a limited number of studies have been conducted directly with tourism student samples. Shi's (2021) doctoral thesis, completed at Purdue University, titled 'Intercultural Learning in Hospitality and Tourism Students—Curriculum Design Perspectives,' examines the intercultural learning experiences of undergraduate students in tourism and hospitality education and how this process can be enhanced through curriculum design.

Emphasizing the importance of intercultural learning in tourism and hospitality education, this thesis aims to better prepare students for the global workforce and recommends incorporating interactive, applied learning methods into curricula to develop students' intercultural competencies. Grobelna (2015) and Wijesinghe and Davies (2001) state that higher education institutions' tourism and hospitality programmes should instill in students an appreciation of cultural diversity and respect in multicultural environments.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

In this study, a qualitative case study methodology was adopted to explore foreign students' opportunities,

challenges, and plans in the intercultural tourism education they received in Türkiye. This approach is adopted as a convenient means of exploring complex social phenomena in social sciences (Yin, 2014). To better understand the internal meanings experienced and conveyed, in-depth information was sought from a relatively small number of people.

Although information obtained from groups or individuals can be compared, experiences cannot be generalized to other subjects (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of existing patterns; for example, in this study, the interaction between students, local people, and academics and the effectiveness of a particular intervention in a real-life context were examined.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

Based on the existing literature, nine semi-structured questions were formulated. A pilot test was conducted with an expert panel of two academics in the field of tourism to assess the clarity and understandability of the questions, and only minor wording corrections were made based on the panel's feedback. Pilot interviews were conducted with four participants to evaluate the appropriateness of the questions, and the questionnaire was finalized by relocating only one question (Appendix B).

Qualitative data were collected from 17 IS: 11 from the tourism management department, three from the tourism and hotel management department, and three from the gastronomy and culinary arts departments. As it was not possible to reach all the students in the study, purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used together.

In qualitative research, Creswell (2013) suggested that 10 people should be interviewed, while Polkinghorne (1989), 5-25 people should be questioned. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) recommend selecting samples until saturation is reached. After the 12th participant in the study, the data started to repeat; no new meaningful data could be obtained, and after 17 participants, it was decided that data saturation had been reached, and the data collection process was completed.

In this study, purposive sampling was used, with participants defined by criteria such as being foreign nationals, coming to Türkiye to pursue education, and studying in the tourism department. A coding method was used to protect the confidentiality of the data. S represents a student.

Participants were coded S1-S17, and their personal information was kept confidential. The interviews were conducted in April 2025.

The author requested an interview appointment, explained the study objectives to potential participants, and conducted face-to-face interviews with those who agreed. The interviews ranged in length from 17 to 32 minutes. Before beginning the interviews, the author obtained permission to have the participants' voices transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3. Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from the 17 IS were analyzed using content analysis. The meanings assigned to

meaningful sections (such as words, sentences, or paragraphs) within the data are referred to as codes. Codes form the basic unit of analysis in the content analysis. The classification of codes obtained from each other is referred to as categorization. The categories were then grouped under a theme.

These themes are important because they reveal the dimensions of the research problem (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the author used an inductive method, creating codes and themes from the students' responses to his questions. To ensure the reliability of the research data, the coding was reviewed by two separate experts and

analyzed using the kappa statistic. Developed by Cohen (1960), the kappa statistic measures the degree of agreement between the coding results of independent evaluators. In this study, the kappa value was calculated as 0.82. Landis and Koch (1977) interpret a correlation between 0.81 and 1.00 as 'excellent agreement'. This ratio indicates that the independent evaluators agreed on the coding and that the data were reliable. At the end of the research, six themes, 13 subthemes, and 41 codes were created.

4 FINDINGS

Table 1: Profile of Students

Students	Gender	Age	Nationality	University	Department	Stage
S1	Female	35	Iranian	Istanbul Ha*** Univ***	Tourism Management	PhD
S2	Female	29	Iraqi	Istanbul Ha*** Univ***	Tourism Management	Master's
S3	Male	25	Iranian	Istanbul Me*** Univ***	Tourism Management	Bachelor's
S4	Female	24	Iraqi	Istanbul Me*** Univ***	Gastronomy and Culinary Arts	Bachelor's
S5	Male	26	Macedonian	Istanbul Be*** Univ***	Tourism Management	Bachelor's
S6	Male	27	Egyptian	Istanbul Be*** Univ***	Tourism Management	Bachelor's
S7	Female	28	Azerbaijani	Istanbul Be*** Univ***	Gastronomy and Culinary Arts	Bachelor's
S8	Male	27	Bangladeshi	Istanbul Univ***	Tourism Management	Bachelor's
S9	Male	26	Uzbek	Istanbul Univ***	Tourism Management	Bachelor's
S10	Male	30	Iranian	Istanbul Univ***	Tourism Management	Master's
S11	Female	33	Hungarian	Istanbul Univ***	Tourism Management	Master's
S12	Male	29	Kazakh	Istanbul Ay*** Univ***	Tourism and Hotel Management	Bachelor's
S13	Male	25	Croatian	Istanbul Ay*** Univ***	Tourism and Hotel Management	Bachelor's
S14	Male	36	Greek	Istanbul Me*** Univ***	Tourism Management	PhD
S15	Female	32	Azerbaijani	Istanbul Me*** Univ***	Tourism Management	Master's
S16	Male	23	Somalian	Istanbul Ar*** Univ***	Tourism and Hotel Management	Bachelor's
S17	Female	34	Indonesian	Istanbul To*** Univ***	Gastronomy and Culinary Arts	Master's

Source: Own elaboration.

There were 17 students in the study, including 10 males and 7 females. The average age of the students is 28.7, and they are studying tourism management, tourism and hotel management, gastronomy, and culinary arts.

Arts. Most were bachelor's students (10), five were master's students, and two were PhD students. Diversity was sought through the nationality of the participants.

Table 2: Main Findings of Research

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	f
The process of coming to Türkiye	Reason to choose	Cultural similarity	8
		Knowing Turkish	5
		TV series	5
		Education quality	2
		Touristic country	6
		Desire to learn about different cultures	4
Educational environment in Türkiye	First impression	Very beautiful country	8
		Warm and helpful people	6
		Crowded cities	3
	Style of teaching	Lack of practice lessons	3
		Insufficient in-class activities	2
		Productive theoretical lessons	7
	Style of exams	Unlimited repetition	5
		Lack of exam number	3
		Late announced exam dates	7
Difficulties experienced	Interaction and communication with faculty members	Late announcement of exam results	6
		Very good communication	8
		Never discrimination	4
	Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in terms of education	Always a helpful approach	7
		Language barrier	10
		Cultural differences	10
		Having problems	3
	Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in general	Health services	3
		Economic situation	4

Opportunities gained	Benefits of studying in Türkiye in terms of education	Career	7
		Job	3
	Benefits of studying in Türkiye in general	Different perspectives	9
		A new culture	7
A new language		7	
Future plans	Staying in Türkiye	New people	5
		Cultural similarity and social harmony	5
		Employment opportunities	5
	Going to another country	Academic career	3
		Economic conditions	4
	Return to own country.	Unemployment	3
		Citizenship difficulties	2
Recommendations for universities	Educational advise	Homesickness	2
		Practice-based lessons	3
		Well-planned exams	6
		Support finding a job	3
	General advise	No advise	5
		Easy campus transportation	4
		Accommodation options	6
	No advise	7	

Source: own elaboration.

4.1 Findings related to themes

Based on the participants' responses to the study's questions, six themes were identified. These were: "The process of coming to Türkiye," "Educational environment in Türkiye," "Difficulties experienced," "Opportunities gained," "Plans," and "Recommendations for universities" (see Table 2).

4.1 Findings related to the theme "The process of coming to Türkiye"

Based on the participants' responses to the question, "How did you decide to study in Türkiye? Why did you choose Türkiye?", the sub-theme "Reason to choose" emerged, while the sub-theme "First impression" emerged from their responses to the question, "What did you feel when you first arrived in Türkiye? What were your first memories?"

4.1.1 Findings related to the sub-theme "Reason to choose"

Based on participants' answers to the questions, six codes were created for the sub-theme "Reason to choose": "Cultural similarity," "Knowing Turkish," "TV series," "Education quality," "Touristic country," and "Desire to learn about different cultures." Participants stated that they decided to study tourism in Türkiye because they found Turkish culture similar to their own, were curious about Türkiye as seen in Turkish TV series, wanted to learn about a different culture, already knew Turkish, and considered Türkiye a tourist destination. Only two participants stated that they chose to study in Türkiye because they believed the quality of education there was better than that in their home country.

S1: "My father has been trading with Türkiye for many years, so I have visited Türkiye many times. I felt culturally close to the country and knew a little bit of Turkish. I chose to study here because I thought it would be easy for me."

S3: "Turkish TV series are very popular and loved in Iran. I saw them on TV and was particularly curious about Istanbul, so I wanted to study here."

S7: "I think Türkiye is a true tourist destination. I feel that it does not receive the recognition it deserves, and that saddens me. In particular, Turkish cuisine is vibrant. I am studying gastronomy. I want to learn the local dishes and open a tourist restaurant specializing in Turkish cuisine in my home country, Azerbaijan."

S16: "Life in Somalia is tough in every way. The Government does not allocate sufficient funds for education. I came here because Türkiye has a good educational system. My younger siblings will also study here."

4.1.2 Findings related to the sub-theme of "First impression"

Based on participants' answers to the questions, three codes were created for the sub-theme of "First impression": "Wonderful country," "Warm and helpful people," and "Crowded cities." Participants generally stated that Türkiye is a wonderful country, that the Turkish people are very warm and helpful, but that they found Istanbul, in particular, to be very crowded.

4.2 Findings related to the theme of "Educational environment in Türkiye"

Participants were asked, "What do you think about the education system in Türkiye (teaching style, examination system, interaction with faculty members, etc.)? Would you evaluate its positive and negative aspects?" Based on their responses, the sub-themes "Style of teaching," "Style of exams, and "Interaction and communication with faculty members" emerged.

4.2.1 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Style of teaching"

Based on participants' answers to the questions, four codes were created for the sub-theme "Style of teaching":

"Lack of practice lessons", "Insufficient in-class activities", "Productive theoretical lessons", and "Unlimited repetition". IS evaluated Türkiye's education system, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. The findings show that while positive evaluations (the high quality and productivity of theoretical lessons, teaching staff patiently repeating unclear points) were more prevalent, negative evaluations (insufficient in-class activities, lack of practical lessons) were also made.

S8: "I am delighted with the approach of the teaching staff at the university. Even though my Turkish is not very good, I understand very well. They teach the lessons with foreign students in mind, and when they sense that we do not understand, they repeat it."

S2: "Clubs are very active at our university. I am a member of the travel club and participate in trips to learn about Türkiye's history. We also organize trips to hotels, museums, and other historical sites. However, these are extracurricular activities. There are no in-class activities. In some weeks, managers from the industry should come to the classes."

S5: "Almost all the courses we take in the first two years are basic business courses. We start taking tourism courses from the third year onwards. Additionally, we have almost no practical courses. I don't think this is right."

S13: "The courses are mostly theoretical, but tourism should be a practical field. The only practical component is the internship. We do internships at hotels, but there are no practical courses at school except for front office automation using Opera. Even the ticket sales course is theoretical."

4.2.2 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Style of exams"

Three codes were created for the sub-theme "Style of exams"; "Lack of exam number", "Late announced exam dates", and "Late announced exam results". It was observed that IS had an unfavourable opinion of the exam system at Turkish universities. According to the findings, students complained about the low number of exams, the late announcement of exam dates, and the late announcement of exam results. A few participant statements are as follows:

S5: "At our university, there are only two exams during the semester. One was a midterm exam, and the other was a final exam. When I researched, I found that this is also the case at other universities in Türkiye, and I was shocked. In our country, three exams are conducted during the semester. There are two midterm exams and one final exam in the course. In addition, surprise quizzes are conducted. Frankly, I find the number of exams here to be low."

S6: "Exam dates are announced a few days before the exam. Additionally, there are sometimes three examinations in one day. This is mentally exhausting. Exam scheduling should be improved. After all, we are not Turkish, and Turkish is a foreign

language for us. Perhaps Turkish students do not find it difficult, but we do."

S10: "Exam results are announced very late at the university. Last semester, I only found out my midterm results right before the finals. I guess this is because it is a state university. I have friends who attend private universities. They find out their results very quickly."

5.2.3. Findings related to the sub-theme of "Interaction and communication with faculty members"

Three codes were created for the sub-theme "Interaction and communication with faculty members": "Excellent communication", "Never discrimination", and "Always helpful approach". It was found that IS evaluated the teaching staff's communication positively. Students stated that they had excellent communication with faculty members, that faculty members never discriminated between Turkish and IS, and that faculty members always took a helpful approach. The statement of the student with code S4 on this subject is as follows;

S4: "The teaching staff are very positive, helpful, and communicate very well with us. They never make us feel like outsiders and do not discriminate against us."

4.3 Findings related to the theme of "Difficulties experienced"

Foreign students were asked, "What were the most difficult things you encountered in terms of adapting to Türkiye in general and to education in particular?" Based on their responses, the sub-themes "Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in terms of education" and "Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in general" emerged.

4.3.1 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in terms of education"

It has been determined that the most challenging aspect of education in Türkiye for IS is the foreign language. It has been determined that students from Turkic republics adapt quickly, while those from distant regions experience greater difficulty.

4.3.2 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Difficulties of studying in Türkiye in general"

When IS were asked what they found most difficult in Türkiye in general, four different codes emerged. These were: "Cultural differences", "Housing problems", "Health services", and "Economic situation". Some of the statements made by students who said that cultural differences, in particular, made things difficult for them are as follows:

S2: "The Turkish people are very hospitable and helpful. If they see a foreigner, they immediately take an interest. I did not have any problems with the local people, but I cannot say the same for Government

officials. I want to tell you what happened to me when I went to the immigration office to renew my residence permit. It was a cold and rainy winter day. It was very crowded. They did not let us inside and made us wait in the cold for hours in the garden. Their attitude was also nasty. I felt very foreign that day. I remember coming home and crying for hours, wanting to return to my country."

S11: "The Turkish people are generally very nice, but unfortunately, taxi drivers are dishonest. Whenever I take a taxi in Istanbul, they take the long way and charge me a lot. I do not take taxis unless I have to. I wonder if this is just in Istanbul or if it is typical of Türkiye."

S15: "I find Turkish food very greasy. Also, there isn't much meat; they eat mostly vegetables. Maybe it's because I'm Azerbaijani that I find it difficult."

S17: "They didn't want to rent me a house because I'm black, so I had to stay in a dormitory. Houses in Istanbul are ancient and extremely expensive. Other than that, the people I met were actually all good people."

One of the most challenging things for foreign students is related to health services. They stated that, because they are foreigners, they can only receive treatment at private hospitals and that health services are costly. Similarly, they noted that inflation is rising in the country, prices are increasing, and this situation is causing hardship for themselves and their families.

4.4 Findings related to the theme of "Opportunities gained"

Based on the responses to the question "What did being a student in Türkiye bring to you?", two sub-themes were identified; "Benefits of studying in Türkiye in terms of education, and "Benefits of studying in Türkiye in general"

4.4.1 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Benefits of studying in Türkiye in terms of education"

When looking at the opportunities gained in terms of education, Career', job, and different perspectives emerged. Students stated that they had secured promising careers by studying in Türkiye, that diplomas obtained in Türkiye are recognized in Europe (as indicated by code S14), that three students currently working part-time at hotels have been offered job guarantees after graduation, and that the vast majority of students have gained different perspectives that have contributed to their personal development.

4.4.2 Findings related to the sub-theme of "Benefits of studying in Türkiye in general"

When foreign students evaluated the opportunities they gained by studying in Türkiye, they stated that they felt very lucky to have experienced a new culture, learned a new language, and met new people, thereby expanding their horizons.

4.5 Findings related to the theme of "Plans"

Based on the participants' answers to the question "What are your plans after graduation?", three sub-themes emerged: "Staying in Türkiye", "Going to another country", and "Return to own country". Of the 17 participants, 10 stated they wanted to stay in Türkiye and pursue this career, 4 expressed a desire to settle in another country, two mentioned returning to their home country, and one remained undecided. All participants indicated a desire to work in the tourism sector.

Students who wish to remain in Türkiye were asked, 'What factors are motivating you to remain in Türkiye?' Based on their responses, the codes 'Cultural similarity and social harmony,' 'Employment opportunities,' and 'Academic career' were created. Some student responses are as follows:

S3: "I am currently working part-time in the front office department of a five-star hotel in Istanbul. After graduating, I want to stay here and advance my career."

S13: "Türkiye is a beautiful country, and it is close to my own country both geographically and culturally. I want to continue my academic career here by first pursuing a master's degree and then a doctorate."

Two codes were generated based on the statements of two students who planned to return to their home country. These were recorded as "Citizenship difficulties" and "Homesickness. The students' statements are as follows:

S9: "After I finish my studies, I need to obtain citizenship to stay in Türkiye. At this stage, that isn't easy. Therefore, I will return to my country, but I plan to come back as soon as possible."

S7: "To be honest, I love my country and miss it very much, so I will return to my country and open a restaurant specializing in Turkish cuisine. However, I never intend to sever my ties with Türkiye."

Students who did not want to stay in Türkiye were asked, 'What factors are driving you to leave Türkiye?' Based on their answers, the codes 'Economic conditions' and 'Unemployment' emerged. The statement of the student with code S16 is as follows:

S16: Living conditions in Somalia are very difficult. I cannot go back there. Even though conditions in Türkiye are relatively better and my family is here, I will go to whichever country offers me a good job, as I currently have no job security."

4.6 Findings related to the theme of "Recommendations for universities"

Based on the answers given by foreign students to the question, "What advice would you give about universities in

Türkiye?”, two sub-themes were identified: “Educational advice” and “General advice”

4.6.1 Findings related to the sub-theme of “Educational advice”

Based on the educational recommendations of foreign students, the codes “Practice-based lessons”, “Well-planned exams”, “Support finding a job”, and “No advice” were created. Most students expressed the view that more emphasis should be placed on practical lessons and that the exam schedule should be better planned, while three students stated that students should be supported in finding employment. Five students, however, stated that they were very satisfied with the education system and had no recommendations to make.

4.6.2 Findings related to the sub-theme of “General advice”

Three codes emerged regarding students' general recommendations for universities: “Easy campus transportation,” “Accommodation options,” and “No advice.” Students expressed that campus transportation should be easier to use and that accommodation options should be offered, while some offered no recommendations. A few student comments are as follows:

S2: “University campuses are usually located in areas of the city that are difficult to reach. Sometimes we are late for classes. I think they should be located in more central areas.”

S17: “Rents in Istanbul are very high for students. It is almost impossible to find accommodation near the university. Schools should provide accommodation for students.”

4.7 Synthesis of Findings through Push-Pull Framework

The findings of this study are synthesized in Figure 1, which presents an integrated framework grounded in Lee's (1966) Push-Pull Theory. This theoretical lens, widely applied to migration studies and subsequently adapted to international student mobility research (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009), provides a comprehensive structure for understanding the complex decision-making processes of international students throughout their educational journey in Turkey.

The framework illustrates three distinct yet interconnected stages of the international student experience. The first stage captures the initial motivation phase, where push factors from their home countries shape students' decisions to pursue tourism education in Turkey and pull factors from Turkey.

Push factors identified in this study include limited educational quality in home countries (n=2), economic hardships, and the desire for cultural experiences (n=4), which propel students to seek opportunities abroad. Simultaneously, Turkey's pull factors—cultural similarity (n=8), the appeal of Turkish television series (n=5), existing Turkish language proficiency (n=5), and Turkey's status as a tourist destination (n=6) – attract students to this particular

educational context. This dual mechanism aligns with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) seminal work, which emphasized that destination choice results from both homeland constraints and host country attractions.

The second stage encompasses the educational experience in Turkey, characterized by a duality of opportunities and challenges that significantly influence students' subsequent decisions. On the opportunities dimension, students reported substantial educational benefits, including career advancement prospects (n=7), immediate job opportunities (n=3), and the development of different perspectives (n=9). General benefits extended beyond the classroom, encompassing new cultural experiences (n=7), language acquisition (n=7), and expanded social networks (n=5). These findings resonate with Deardorff's (2006) assertion that intercultural education develops competencies extending far beyond academic knowledge, fostering personal and professional transformation.

However, these opportunities are tempered by significant challenges. The most pervasive educational barrier identified was the language barrier (n=10), which affected both classroom performance and social integration. Additional challenges included insufficient practical lessons (n=3), problematic examination scheduling (n=7), and delayed result announcements (n=6). Beyond the educational sphere, students confronted cultural differences (n=10), housing difficulties (n=3), healthcare access issues (n=3), and economic challenges (n=4). The prevalence of these difficulties underscores the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation, supporting previous research on acculturative stress among international students (Ali et al., 2020; Yassin et al., 2020).

Notably, despite these challenges, students overwhelmingly praised their interactions with faculty members, reporting excellent communication (n=8), an absence of discrimination (n=4), and consistently helpful approaches (n=7). This positive relational dimension appears to serve as a protective factor, mitigating some of the structural and systemic challenges students encounter. This finding aligns with research emphasizing the critical role of institutional support in international student retention (Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024).

The third stage represents the post-graduation decision point, where a new configuration of push and pull factors determines students' future trajectories. Three distinct pathways emerged from the data, each influenced by different combinations of factors. The majority of participants (n=10, 58.8%) expressed intentions to remain in Turkey, motivated primarily by pull factors including cultural similarity and social harmony (n=5), employment opportunities (n=5), and academic career prospects (n=3). This finding diverges from traditional applications of push-pull theory, which typically focus on factors influencing initial destination choice rather than post-study retention. As noted in the conclusion, while Liu and Bray (2007) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) examined cultural similarity as a factor in choosing study destinations, this study reveals that cultural similarity operates equally powerfully as a retention factor, encouraging students to remain in the host country after graduation.

A smaller group (n=4, 23.5%) planned to relocate to third countries, driven by push factors emanating from Turkey's economic conditions (n=4) and unemployment concerns (n=3). These students viewed their Turkish education as a stepping stone rather than a final destination, seeking better economic opportunities abroad. Only two participants (11.8%) intended to return to their home countries, driven by homesickness (n=2) and difficulties with citizenship acquisition (n=2). One participant remained undecided, reflecting the fluid and context-dependent nature of such decisions.

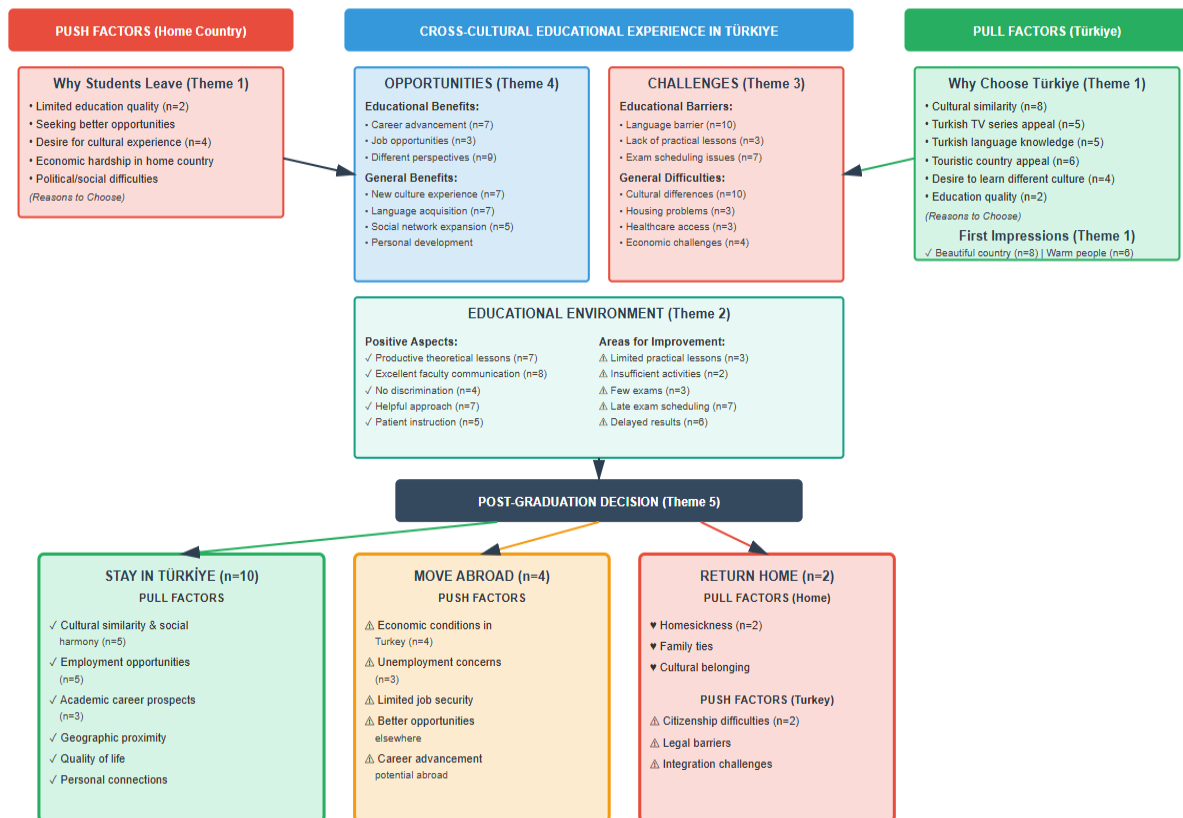
The framework demonstrates that students' post-graduation plans are not predetermined but emerge dynamically from their accumulated experiences during their studies. The decision-making process is fundamentally shaped by how students perceive and navigate the tension between opportunities and challenges in the Turkish educational context. Students who successfully leveraged opportunities – securing employment (n=3), building professional networks, and achieving cultural integration – were more likely to view Turkey as a viable long-term destination. Conversely, those whose experiences were dominated by unresolved challenges, particularly economic

instability and legal barriers, were more inclined to seek alternatives.

This synthesis reveals several theoretical and practical implications. First, it extends Lee's (1966) Push-Pull Theory beyond initial migration decisions to encompass post-study retention, demonstrating that push and pull factors operate continuously throughout the international student lifecycle. Second, it highlights the mediating role of educational experience quality in shaping retention outcomes. The framework suggests that institutions cannot rely solely on initial attraction factors; they must actively address challenges and maximize opportunities to convert temporary student migrants into long-term skilled residents.

Third, the framework underscores the context-specific nature of push-pull dynamics in tourism education. Unlike students in other disciplines, tourism students' decisions are particularly influenced by industry-specific factors, such as hospitality-sector employment opportunities, cultural tourism potential, and the practical applicability of the intercultural competencies they develop during their studies. The emphasis on practical training deficiencies (n=3) and industry connections in student recommendations reflects the professional orientation of tourism education.

Figure 1. Integrated Framework of Cross-Cultural Education in Tourism: A Push-Pull Analysis



Source: own elaboration.

Figure 1 thus provides both a descriptive account of international students' experiences in Turkish tourism education and an analytical tool for understanding the complex interplay of factors shaping their future trajectories. It reveals that while challenges are significant and widespread, the majority of students perceive sufficient value – whether cultural, professional, or personal – to outweigh

these difficulties and commit to remaining in Turkey. This finding suggests that, with targeted institutional interventions to address identified challenges, Turkey's tourism education sector has substantial potential not only to attract international students but also to retain them as valuable human capital, contributing to the country's tourism industry and broader society.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

IS face several challenges while studying abroad, alongside the opportunities they gain. Zhu (2021) notes that such experiences have a positive impact on career goals.

The study investigated students' reasons for choosing Türkiye, and cultural similarity was found to be the most significant factor. In particular, students from Iran, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, known as the Turkic republics, stated that they found Turkish culture similar to their own. The literature demonstrates that cultural proximity plays an important role in migrants' destination choices (Evan, Fišerová & Elgnerová, 2025) and that cultural similarity positively affects travel intentions (Ng, Lee & Soutar, 2007).

It is also possible to say that the same situation applies to students' university choices. Language similarity is also an important factor among cultural similarities. The results of an in-depth study conducted between 2000 and 2015 using data from 102 countries show that IS either prefers developing countries with a different official language or developed countries with a common language (Wei et al., 2019). Türkiye's status as a developing country and the fact that Turkish differs from the official language of the participants in the study support this finding in the literature.

The study's findings indicate that IS' first impressions of Türkiye upon arrival are that it is a country with helpful, hospitable, and warm-hearted people. There are also studies in the literature that examine these characteristics of the Turkish people across their historical, social, and cultural dimensions.

A study by Cetin and Okumus (2018) found that tourists who interacted with locals in Istanbul perceived the Turkish people as sincere, helpful, and hospitable. In particular, the Turkish culture of hospitality and the daily tradition of offering tea or coffee are concrete manifestations of this hospitality.

Similarly, Tasci et al. (2021) emphasized in their study on cross-cultural differences in hospitality that Turks display open, tolerant, and helpful behaviours and attitudes towards foreigners. Gannon (2004), on the other hand, approached the subject spatially, treating Turkish coffeehouses as places of social interaction. He stated that Turkish coffeehouses are not only places where drinks are served, but also places where hospitality and friendship are cultivated.

The research revealed that the only factor students found challenging in education in Türkiye was the language barrier. In particular, students with no prior knowledge of Turkish reported greater difficulties communicating in class and on exams, as well as in interactions with the local community.

Although they began their studies after completing a one-year Turkish preparatory programme, it must be acknowledged that studying in a completely different language is quite challenging. In this regard, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye has launched a new initiative in 2024. This new project, which has been piloted at seven universities so far, will see the curricula of all Tourism Management and Gastronomy and Culinary Arts programmes in Türkiye updated, with the language of instruction becoming 100% English. Russian, Chinese or

Arabic is becoming mandatory as a second foreign language (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2024).

Aiming to increase Türkiye's global power in the tourism sector, this project is expected to eliminate the language barrier for foreign students, enabling more students to study in Türkiye and enjoy a more comfortable educational experience. In addition, implementing this project is likely to improve IS's academic success. Indeed, studies in the literature show that language barriers increase IS' stress levels and negatively affect their academic success (Ali et al., 2020; Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023; Alkhaldi & Bista, 2025). A study conducted in Malaysia found that language inadequacy negatively affects the sustainability of learning (Yassin et al., 2020).

While IS generally struggle with cultural differences, they also face other difficulties, including housing problems, healthcare issues, and economic hardship. Students stated that housing is expensive in Türkiye, especially in university areas. Cepni et al. (2018) also mentioned in their study that Erasmus students experience housing problems. Karakulukcu (2020) stated that IS find Türkiye expensive. Similarly, Kiroğlu et al. (2010) found that foreign students reported that the money sent by their families was insufficient.

In this study, students mentioned that theoretical lessons were very productive, but that the number of practical lessons was insufficient. Kolb (2000), while explaining the experiential learning process, argues that for newly acquired knowledge to become permanent, students must engage in practical applications. This is especially important in applied sciences such as tourism.

Some students emphasized the lack of in-class activities. Gastronomy and culinary arts departments also promote intercultural interaction by preparing and presenting dishes from various cultures. At an event organized by the Gastronomy and Culinary Arts Department of Hasan Kalyoncu University in 2022, IS and Turkish students came together to teach each other how to prepare dishes from their own cultures (Anadolu Agency, 2022).

In order to facilitate intercultural learning, universities should increase the number of such culturally interactive events. Indeed, research shows that intercultural interaction accelerates sociocultural learning by providing opportunities to apply intercultural skills. (Deardorff, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).

The research revealed that IS gain opportunities by studying in Türkiye, such as meeting new people and experiencing different cultures, gaining new perspectives, learning a new language, and gaining work and career experience. All of these can be considered advantages that contribute to the personal development of IS. Previously, it was observed that the international internship programme (Cultural Exchange Programme) in which Brazilian tourism students participated at Walt Disney World in the United States contributed to their motivation and professional development (Freire & Tomazzoni, 2017).

Another study on Brazilian university students' participation in academic exchange programmes abroad also shows that such international experiences contribute to the development of students' personal and professional skills (Novais & Bridi, 2023).

When evaluating the findings related to students' plans, Lee's (1966) push-pull theory and its applications in the context of IS (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008) were taken as a basis. Students' decisions to remain in Türkiye or return to their home countries were evaluated within the framework of this theory. In this context, push factors included economic difficulties, citizenship issues, homesickness, and unemployment, while pull factors included cultural similarity, social integration, and job and career opportunities.

Studies in the literature show that cultural similarity and social integration are pull factors. However, these studies generally appear in students' destination choices for studying (Liu & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In this study, the pull factors for staying in Türkiye are different. Nikou and Luukkonen (2023) investigated the factors that attract IS to stay in Finland and found that, as in this study, the desire to stay increases with greater cultural integration. However, examining push and pull factors for IS studying in Türkiye adds unique value.

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APPENDIX A

Descriptive Questions

- Gender:
- Age:
- Nationality:
- University:
- Department:
- Stage:

APPENDIX B

Research Questions

- 1-How did you decide to study in Türkiye? Why did you choose Türkiye?
- 2-What did you feel when you first arrived in Türkiye? What were your first memories?
- 3-What do you think about the education system in Türkiye (teaching style, examination system, interaction with faculty members, etc.)? Would you evaluate its positive and negative aspects?
- 4-What were the most difficult things you encountered in terms of adapting to Türkiye in general and to education in particular?
- 5-What did being a student in Türkiye bring to you?
- 6-What are your plans after graduation?
- 7-What factors are motivating you to remain in Türkiye?
- 8-What factors are driving you to leave Türkiye?
- 9-What advice would you give about universities in Türkiye?

CRedit author statement

Term	Definition	Author 1
Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims	x
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models	x
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components	x

Term	Definition	Author 1
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	x
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data	x
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	x
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	x
Data Curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later reuse	x
Writing - Original Draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation)	x
Writing - Review & Editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre-or post-publication stages	x
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	x
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	x
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	

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