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A Case Study of Turkey**

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Erasmus Students' Opinions about the Programme: A Case Study of Turkey

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Abstract

This paper aims at finding out, apart from the reasons why they attend the programme, the opinions of ERASMUS students who chose to study in Turkey about the effects of the program on socio-cultural aspects, self-efficacy and the contributions to their professional development. The study was carried out via descriptive model and qualitative research method. The study group consisted of seven ERASMUS students who were studying at different faculties of Akdeniz University in 2015-2016 academic year. The author used a semi-structured interview to collect data and used frequency analysis technique to analyze them. The main results of the study are as follows: 1. The most favorable reasons to join the program were to study abroad while trying to get to know a different culture 2. The program helped the exchange students remove of existing prejudice against other countries and cultures. 3. Students got more self-confident 4. They thought the programme contributed to their professional development to some extent. 5. Students complained about poor language skills of the lecturers and students.

Keywords: ERASMUS students, student mobility

Introduction

Erasmus, one of the education programs of European Union, arranges and enhances the corporation at higher education level in the scope of lifelong learning. Over three million European students have benefited from this program with the opportunity to go abroad and study at a higher education institution or train in a company since it started in 1987-88 (European Commission, 2014) and in 2014 the program was restructured under the name Erasmus +: the [program for education, training, youth and sport](#). In the field of higher education, Erasmus+ gives students and staff opportunities to develop their skills and boost their employment prospects. Students can study abroad for up to 12 months (during each cycle of tertiary education). During the period between 2014 and 2020, some four million people are expected to benefit from Erasmus+, including around: two million higher education student, including 25 thousand students on [joint Masters' programmes](#); 650 thousand vocational training and education students; 800 thousand lecturers, teachers, trainers, education staff and youth workers (European Commission, 2014).

One of the key competences of lifelong learning is cultural awareness and expression. Eliot (1973) describes 'culture' as a phenomenon which handles all the characteristics activities and fields of interests of a nation and enhances the human interaction and it is a result of social experience (Kreps, 1986). It is also described as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.' (Hofstede, 1994).

In the framework of Erasmus programme, promoting the development of personal skills, such as intercultural awareness, openness and flexibility (European Commission, 2014), exchange students have the chance to get informed about different cultures and societies, and improve their language skills, and thus, as well as professional development, they will gain international and intercultural social experience. That is to say the program helps students gain cultural awareness and find the opportunity to exchange ideas and values, which helps form and develop respect, tolerance, understanding and peace among people from different origins and cultures and creates environments where there is no gender, race, language and religious discrimination.

Turkey became one of the members of Erasmus program in 2004 in the framework of Bologna Process after the Helsinki Summit, where Turkey was admitted as the candidate membership of the European Union. Since the involvement of Turkey in this program, which is seen a way of turning her face to Europe, Turkish students have also started to benefit from the program, focusing on different subjects in various European countries. The number of ERASMUS students and trainees coming to Turkey is less than half of the Turkish ERASMUS students going to other European countries between the years 2009/10 and 2016/17 (Ulusal Ajans / National Agency, 2018).

In Higher Education, internationalization and globalization are the characteristics of current development of society and production of knowledge is inevitable in that sense (Wiers-Jenssens, 2008). Turkish Higher Education is also in process of internationalization. Council of Higher Education 2016-2020 Strategic Plan (YÖK / CoHE, 2015) is aiming at increasing the internationalization level of Turkish Higher Education system. Therefore, in scope of globalization, international students will contribute to internationalization process of the higher education system being a pushing factor to increase the quality, autonomy and cooperation between higher education institutions which is quite a challenge though, as Teichler stated (2015). Yet, there is no doubt that Turkey, having a very important geopolitical position, being a bridge between Europe and Asia with its historical, cultural and natural wealth has a lot to offer

to international students. It is obvious that Erasmus+ program is of great importance concerning its contribution to this internationalization process.

The Significance of the Study

There are a variety of national studies about Turkish students who participated in Erasmus exchange program: Önder & Balcı (2010) investigated the impact of the program on the students; Yağcı et al.(2007) analyzed the satisfactory levels of the Erasmus students; Demir and Demir (2009) looked through the contribution of the programme to the students; Mutlu et al. (2010) made a comparative study between European Union Erasmus students and Turkish Erasmus students about personal and cultural change taking place; Aydin (2012) examined the contributions of the program to the participants and the problems they encountered before, after, and during the participation process; Özdem (2013) did a research on Erasmus students' suggestions to faculty members, the university management team, the university Erasmus coordinator unit and other students who want to go abroad; Yücel (2013) investigated Erasmus students' experiences related to language and culture; Ersoy (2013) investigated the intercultural experiences of the Erasmus students; Unlu (2015) searched the teacher candidates' opinions on Erasmus student exchange program; and Karatekin & Taban (2017) investigated the global citizenship levels of Turkish Erasmus students. Yet, there is a gap concerning the researches about the incoming Erasmus students to Turkey.

This current study is among the very few ones; e.g. Oner, 2015 searched for how participation to Erasmus program influences the perceptions of students about Turkey and its membership bid and Keles, 2012 examined the intercultural communication barriers exchange students had during their stay in Turkey, about incoming ERASMUS students to Turkey in literature. This current research, therefore, aims to put forth the reasons why students attend Erasmus programme and to evaluate, in particular, three different dimensions of the programme: socio-cultural experience, self-efficacy and professional development.

Methodology

The main purpose of this research is to define the opinions and experiences of ERASMUS exchange programme students who came to Turkey to study. This study was designed as a case study, one of the approaches of qualitative research, which allows the researchers to have the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events (Yin, 2009).

Participants

The researcher selected a random sample of seven Erasmus students coming from different European countries to study at a state university in Turkey. The participants were coded as A, B, C, D, E, F and G. The demographic information - their nationality, gender, age and major - related to these participants is given in Table 1.

Table I. Demographic Features of the Participants

Participants	Home country	Gender	Age	Major	Type of study
A	Germany	Male	25	Sports	Undergraduate
B	Holland	Female	21	Tourism	Undergraduate
C	Austria	Male	22	Sociology	Master degree
D	Poland	Female	22	Tourism	Master degree
E	Germany	Male	23	Sports	Undergraduate
F	Czech Republic	Female	21	Fine Arts	Undergraduate
G	Holland	Female	20	Tourism	Undergraduate

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview, one of the qualitative data collection tools, was used in order to obtain broader information in scope.

The face to face interviews were made by the researcher in fall semester of 2015-2016 academic year and each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. During the interviews, some other related questions were directed to the participants in order to get in-depth information. The interviews were recorded and then they were deciphered and encoded under some themes. While these themes were specified, field experts were consulted to increase the reliability of the study.

According to this analysis, participants’ opinions about the programme were categorized under three sub-dimensions: Socio-cultural dimension, self-efficacy dimension, and professional development dimension.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the data of the study is given as frequency and percentage distributions and selected opinions of the participants are quoted directly by giving their codes.

Table 2. Reasons to Attend Erasmus Exchange Programme

Reasons for joining	f	%
Education	5	71.42
Culture	4	57.14
Entertainment	4	57.14
Abroad experience	5	71.42
Travelling	3	28.17
Finding a job in the global market	4	57.14
Improving foreign language skills	3	28.17
Climate	3	28.17
Self-discovery	2	14.28

As shown in Table 2, majority of the respondents stated that education and study abroad experience (f=5; 71,42%) were the primary reasons for students to join the programme. Finding a job in the global market, getting to know another culture and having entertainment (f=4; 57.14% each) followed these preferences. Traveling, developing foreign language skills and climate (f=2;

28,17%) were other aims stated. Only one respondent expressed that (f=1; 14,28%) self-discovery is the reason to join this exchange programme. Some of the responses are as follows:

Participant A: *Study abroad experience, entertainment and culture; because I come from Germany and there is a different culture in Turkey and this is the main reason why I am here... ”*

Participant D, *“...Of course, my primary aim to be here is education because my major is tourism and Antalya is a tourism city. There are many hotels and restaurants here... this city is for tourists. I think, the second reason is to gain overseas experience and entertainment – I can’t hide this. I have heard this from Erasmus students:*

Participant F: *The education is really very important. My major is Fine Arts and here; there is Faculty of Fine Arts... I wanted to learn what is important for other students... The travel is very important. The culture and I am hoping to improve my language skills... I need to say that I was also attracted by the climate.*

Participant G: *The culture and study abroad experience; these are very important for me. Thirdly, the entertainment... Another reason was self-discovery; I wanted to see the real me in a different environment, recognizing my strengths and weaknesses. That’s why I am here.*

Academic and intercultural competences are common to all study abroad programmes (Anderson et al., 2006). Apart from that, Erasmus students are triggered by experiential issues while choosing the country they want to study in (Teichler, 2004; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Likewise, leisure and cultural appeal and the desire for new experiences are stated as the most influential reasons to attend the programme by Erasmus students (Jacobone & Moro 2015). Climate is also another factor for exchange students while choosing a country to study (Rodriguez Gonzales et al., 2011). Generating an international dimension of one's CV, helping to find work, consolidating a second language, the experience of travelling and getting to know another institution and culture are also presented in another study (Fombona et al., 2013). The results of this study coincide with the findings of these studies.

Dimension of Socio-cultural Experience

Table 3 displays the positive and negative socio-cultural experience of Erasmus students about Turkish culture and the programme.

Table 3. Socio-cultural experiences

				%
Positive sides				
Turkish students’ desire to introduce their culture				14.28
Lifestyle of Turkish people not being that different from theirs				14.28
Trying to see the different sides of other cultures				85.71
Positive characteristics of Turkish people				42.85
Tasty Turkish food				42.85
Getting used to transportation system				28.57
Finding activities addressing to their interests		√	1	14.28
Facilities on campus		√	1	14.28
Cheapness			√	1 14.28
Negative sides				
Traffic		√	√	28.57

Negative characteristics of Turkish people	√	14.28
Turkish people understanding of entertainment	√	14.28
Turkish people having some prejudices		√ 14.28
Turkish people not knowing a foreign language	√	14.28

As shown in Table 3, the students evaluated their opinions related socio-cultural issues either in a positive or negative way. In terms of approving social realities, ‘trying to see the different sides of other cultures’ was considered as the most important factor (f=6; 85.71%). This result indicates that the students found multiculturalism favorable and they were open to change. Upon concerning negative experiences, Erasmus students stated poor language skills of Turkish people and the way they behave in certain situations as negative parts of their experiences during their stay. Traffic was also expressed as a problem for some participants. Some of the observations and opinions are given below:

Participant A *I got very surprised when I came to Antalya; because I had been thinking that the people were much more traditional and religious... but they are very modern like the ones in Western Europe. And life is really cheap here for a student.*

Participant B, *‘I cannot communicate with Turkish people enough because they don’t speak English and I don’t speak Turkish but it is a good opportunity for me to improve my language skills. I also think I am learning a lot of things about culture. You see the differences; I think this is a whole lifestyle. The people in Netherlands are more stressful; but the people here are more relaxed.*

Participant C *Erasmus means meeting with new people from different countries. You may see their attitudes and the ways they think; you may compare their cultures and everything. This really makes you universal and someone more positive and tolerable.*

Participant D *I have to admit that everything was very difficult for me in the very first weeks - I mean cultural differences, traffic-, but then things started to change. There are a lot of social and cultural facilities to choose among. And life is really cheap here for a student.*

Participant E *The traffic is very bad and public transport is a real problem...Turkish people have a different understanding of passing free time; they can just play okey or backgammon all day; they really don’t know how to have fun and spend good time... The meals are very good and I really love Turkish cuisine.’.*

Participant F *There are a lot of facilities on campus, which is really good. That’s not the case in my home institute ... I think there are two types of Turkish people. First type is very nice – they try to know you and try to help you; but the second type is very rude; they know that you come from another country and they think that they may do everything only because I am a foreigner But there are very nice people as well; e.g. in the apartment where we are living: they always try to help us; they give us meal even if we don’t request them to do so.*

Participant G *I think that everybody is very curious but they hesitate to speak. For example; five pairs of eyes are staring at you in the faculty but nobody is speaking to you and this is very annoying. They also have some prejudices; e.g. after they learn that I am Dutch, the next question is that ‘Do you smoke, too? This is really annoying. I say that Netherlands is not made up of only Amsterdam; there are other nice places and natural beauties.*

Intercultural sensitiveness is of great importance to build up and improve human relationships (Coffey et al., 2013). Living and studying in a different country thereby being exposed to a different cultural, political and economic atmosphere have invaluable impacts on

the students, preparing them for their future personal and professional lives and Erasmus is a good opportunity, exposing students to such environments, helping them develop their multicultural skills and European consciousness while strengthening their competences, being an effective means of acquiring foreign language skills, greater self-awareness and the possibility of gaining and maintaining employment (Jacobone & Moro, 2015).

General Self-efficacy Dimension

Table 4 reveals the respondents' opinions concerning the changes taking place in their general self-efficacy.

Table 4. Effects on general self efficacy

Self-efficacy	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	f	%
Learning how to live without family and friends		√		√	√			3	42,85
Learning how to solve the problems				√				1	14,28
Learning how to stand on their own feet				√		√		2	28,57
Getting more independent						√		1	14,28

Participant A *Living far away from my family has definitely taught me a lot, thereby improving my self-confidence and the conscious that I can overcome difficulties even if I am alone in a different country.*

Participant B *This programme has taught me a lot so far. I am more independent and learnt to take the responsibility of my own decisions and my own life in general.*

Participant D *I have learnt how to live without my family and to find solutions to my problems on my own.*

Participant E *You learn how to organize yourself. There are many things you need to do. Of course, you receive some support from Erasmus Office and other people but in general you are own your own; fFor example, finding a place to stay and arranging your lesson, trying to get to know a new environment, culture... You have to overcome all of these.*

Participant F *You become more independent and you are always on your own. And this helps learn how to stand on your own feet, making you feel more mature and self-confident.*

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives, which is the foundation of human motivation, performance accomplishments, and emotional well-being (Bandura, 1997). Some studies proved that the Erasmus programme enabled the students to boost their self-confidence (Curras et al., 2015), letting them go out off their comfort zones (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2016). Erasmus programme, therefore, is a good opportunity for the students to become more independent - maybe living away from their families for the first time in their lives- developing their self-efficacy.

Professional Development Dimension

Table 6 shows the participants opinions related to the effects of the programme on their professional development.

Table 5. Opinions about Professional Development

Positive effects	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	f	%
Being able to write ‘study abroad! experience’ in my CV		√	√		√	√		4	57.14
Developing language skills			√			√		2	28.57
Strengthening social network			√					1	14.28
Opportunity of taking different courses useful for my career					√		√	2	28.57
Negative sides									
Simplicity of the lessons	√	√				√	√	4	57,14
Slow flow of the program	√				√		√	3	42,85
Lack of discussion in class		√	√	√		√			57,14
Poor language skills of the academic staff			√	√		√		3	42,85
Lack of materials in English	√				√		√	3	42,85

The participants stated that putting study abroad experience in their CVs (f=4; 57,14%) is very significant for their career. Taking different courses and developing foreign language skills (f=2; 28.57%) are another contributions of the programme to their professional development. Strengthening social network was also seen important by one participant concerning professional development. Simplicity of the lessons, the slow pace of the curriculum, lack of discussion in class (f=4; 57,14 each), poor language skills of the academic staff and lack of materials in English (f=3, 42,85% each) were expressed as the negative sides of the programme concerning participants’ professional development. The participants expressed their opinions as follows:

Participant A, *‘Writing overseas education experience in my CV is very significant for my future because mobility is important and it tells something about your personality and your courage.’;*

Participant B, *‘This program is very significant as overseas education experience is specially requested in CVs. I will develop my foreign languages and I will strengthen my social connections and these will be very significant for my carrier.’;*

Participant C, *‘Selecting different lessons is significant for your future...Erasmus provides you with this opportunity. I think that I have selected right lessons.’*

Participant D *The level of classes is very low. When I compare them with the ones in my homeland, I see differences; e.g. in business English course, it seems like that Turkish students start to learn English. There is no homework and presentation. This is better for me. I don’t have to study a lot, so I am able to set aside time for myself.*

Participant E *I don't think that I have received the important lessons for my carrier, here. Only, the painting lesson is good; but that is the same with the one in my homeland and it is nothing special. Learning language has become more significant than ever and Turkish as second language.*

Participant F *Sometimes I find the level of lessons very low. I was not satisfied with the lesson in my homeland; but I became happy when I took the lessons here. The level is very high compared to the lessons in Turkey. Turkish is the most difficult course; all other lessons are taught from the books. If I need to learn a lesson from the book, I can do this myself. In some lessons, presentations are made but the level is still not very high. In Netherlands, reading the presentations is not allowed. Even if it is allowed, we need to say new things. Here, they only read; they do not say new things and there is no discussion about it. What's more... I wish more students would speak English or German with me and there were more resources in my own field in the library – especially resources in English.*

Participant G *English proficiency level of the lecturers is very low. Lessons are mostly teacher-centered and listening is boring and sometimes, the teacher does not understand us when we ask questions. If they were good at English, they would prepare more creative lessons and there would be a discussion environment. There are also lecturers who are competent in English, but not many. Another thing is that I have not learned much here compared to my homeland. Of course, I have learned something but the lessons are very slow and the content of the lessons are not satisfactory; we may finish what we did in a term here in two months in Netherlands.*

Enhancing employability (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2016) is one of the outcomes, participants expect from Erasmus programme. Five years after graduation, the unemployment rate of youngpeople who studied or trained abroad is 23% lower than that of their non-mobile peers (European Commission, 2018). Meanwhile, learning or improving fluency in a language is another contribution of the programme to the students, which is highly important in a global market. In general, learning in a new environment has good impacts on exchange students' professional / academic development.

Regarding the participants' opinions about professional development, it is possible to say that they seemed generally more negative than positive about their experience. Since Erasmus exchange programs having a key role in formation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have created a pressure on national higher education system and instructional systems through a structural change, the evaluation of instructional environments have emerged as a necessity (Boyacı, 2011). Turkish Higher Education system, therefore, needs to increase the quality of teaching and learning, making innovations in curriculum and training academic staff for the tertiary education.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Erasmus program includes the mutual interaction between the higher education institutions and aims to make contribution to the students at four basic points: academic issues, culture, improving foreign languages and better career opportunities and in this study, the author investigated the reasons of study abroad, opinions on socio-cultural experiences and self-efficacy

and professional development of seven Erasmus students coming from different countries in Europe to a state university in Turkey to study.

The author got certain during the interviews that students openly cited their opinions, and although they felt strange living in a different culture in some aspects, their overall opinions were positive about the programme and living in Turkey, in terms of their socio-cultural experiences, improving their self-efficacy and professional development.

Erasmus which is one of the programs managed by European Union and foreseeing the student exchange between higher education institutions is based on the understanding of a multicultural and multilingual education. In line with this target, it aims to serve for universal peace and in this study as well, exchange students had positive attitudes about Turkey, despite not being a European country.

Since this current study was conducted with a limited population at only one state university, the results obtained were confined to the data collected qualitatively by asking open-ended questions and further studies need to be done with greater numbers in different universities in Turkey, using a mixed method. This study may also lead to some considerations concerning the Erasmus program planning, especially in terms of promoting the English proficiency of the lecturers as well as the content of the curriculum enhancing innovation and the lesson materials. More lessons in English have to be provided with the exchange students so that Turkish universities will turn into academic environments that are the candidates of attraction for more students so as to compete on the higher education market worldwide.

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