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## **Social Interaction Between Students: Local and International Students' Experiences at a Turkish University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between local and international students has become one of the most important topics in the literature on the internationalization of education; however, these discussions have focused mainly on Western countries and on the perspectives of students who are from similar home countries. The views of students who choose to study abroad in Turkey offer different perspectives. Forty-two international and 35 local students enrolled at Istanbul Bilgi University participated in the study. No students reported an absence of relationships between local and international students; no international participants mentioned loneliness, exclusion, or isolation, even though these concepts appear in many studies of students in Western countries. All students who reported having poor relationships with other groups identified the language barrier as the main cause, and introversion in both local and international students may have prevented meaningful relationships.

**Keywords:** friendship, international students, social interaction, Turkey

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between local and international students is an important aspect in the study abroad experience because of its effects on the satisfaction levels of international students. Research has shown that a good relationship between host and foreign students leads to high satisfaction (Gareis, 2012; Gareis et al., 2011). Many studies have stated that the lack of social integration of international students is a

source of dissatisfaction and leads to negative feelings about the host country (Herman, 2004; Lee, 2010; Zhou & Cole, 2017).

Most research on the experiences of international students has focused on English-speaking host countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and some Asian countries, such as China, Singapore, Japan, and Korea, that have developed economies since many international students have studied in these countries. However, parallel to social and economic developments throughout the world, regional higher education hubs have emerged in different destinations. Turkey has been viewed as a regional hub in many recent studies (e.g., Kondakçı, 2011; Barnett et al., 2016; Kondakçı et al., 2018). According to statistics from the Higher Education Council of Turkey (HEC, 2018), there were 14,690 international students in 2003; 48,183 students in 2013, and 125,138 students in 2018. This increasing number of international students in Turkish higher education demonstrates that Turkey can be regarded as an attractive higher education option in the Middle East and can serve as an alternative to popular higher education destinations.

Although the emergence of new educational hubs has created a need for research on these destinations, little research has adequately explored the experiences of students in these destinations. Therefore, the experiences of both local and international students regarding the friendships they develop during their studies in Turkey, which is defined as a nontraditional destination (Jani, 2017; Kondakçı, 2011), will contribute to the current literature on the internationalization of education.

## **Main Discussion on the Relationship Between Local and International Students**

The relationship between local and international students has become one of the most important topics in the literature on the internationalization process of higher education. Within the relevant literature, language ability is regarded as an important factor in the establishment of intercultural friendships and successful interaction. Two perspectives need to be noted about this issue. First, students whose native language is not English encounter challenges at universities in which English is the primary language. Many studies (e.g., Bennett et al., 2013; Gareis, 2000; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017) have revealed that students whose mother tongue is not English experience difficulties in their relations with staff and peers at English-speaking institutions. In these instances, only the foreign students perceive language to be a barrier. They generally complain that local students and staff think that they should be proficient in English. Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that international students in New Zealand believed that their lack of proficiency in English hindered their relations with their hosts. Lee (2010) posited that language differences were viewed as significant obstacles for students from nonwestern countries who attended universities in the United States and Europe.

Second, local and foreign students studying at a university where English is the language of instruction in a non-English-speaking country experience difficulties with language. Kondakçı et al. (2008) found that poor English language skills resulted in poor interaction at a Belgium university. While local students stated that foreign students' poor proficiency in English adversely impacted social interaction, foreign

students cited local students' language preference as the reason for poor social interaction. Lau and Lin (2017) found that international and local students in Taiwan perceived language to be an obstacle for social integration. Local students were perceived to be overly anxious about making mistakes, and they appeared to be obsessed with a native accent. The international students whose first language was English experienced discomfort with this situation; they stated that local students avoided communicating with international students.

In addition to the language barrier between local and international students, various studies have established that personality traits impact intercultural friendships. Sawir et al. (2008) revealed that different personality traits between foreign and local students were perceived to cause loneliness. They found that foreign students who were lonely were often introverted. Peifer and Yangchen (2017) examined personality as a variable of college students' intercultural competence. In their study, extraversion and agreeableness were perceived to be important factors in social interaction. Liu and Huang (2015) demonstrated that extroverts were more likely to initiate social interactions with people from diverse backgrounds than were introverts. Ang et al. (2006) found a relationship between business undergraduate students' personal traits, particularly agreeableness and extraversion, and their communication skills.

Cultural difference has been shown to be another factor influencing the relationship between local and international students. Many scholars have indicated that local students in traditional destinations have an ethnocentric attitude toward international students. In a study of Chinese students in American colleges, Heng (2017) found that they encountered negative attitudes from local students. Ward and Masgoret (2004) discovered that Asian students in New Zealand faced more problems in their relations with host students compared with students from Europe and America. Trice (2007) found that international students' lack of social interaction with domestic students in the United States led to cultural differences. As a result of differences in cultures and existing biases of local students in many Western countries, loneliness, exclusion, and isolation emerged as considerable problems faced by international students. Many studies have proposed that if international students are radically different from locals in terms of culture and ethnicity, loneliness and exclusion will occur. For example, in a study of international students in the United States, Zhou and Cole (2017) claimed that those who came from East Asian countries experienced friendship as a challenge and experienced loneliness and social isolation because of their cultural differences. In another study on international students in Australia, Marginson et al. (2010) revealed that more than half of the international students encountered significant cultural barriers in friendships with local students and felt isolated.

University policies on internationalization are another factor in the formation and quality of friendships between local and international students. Bennett et al. (2013) stated that even if English-speaking universities have many international students from different countries and cultures, self-generated intercultural student interactions in these institutions must be encouraged. Jon (2013) asserted that institutional involvement is needed to overcome challenges and to provide positive relationships between domestic and international students. Nesdale and Todd (2000) found that

interventions such as orientation programs, mentoring programs, hall tutorials, and floor-group activities were important for students' intercultural acceptance, cultural knowledge, and openness. Leask (2009) noted the importance of strategies applied at an Australian university to increase international students' satisfaction levels with social interaction. These strategies included conversation groups for improving language and learning abilities and cross-cultural lunches.

In sum, relevant literature has indicated that the lack of language ability, cultural differences, and different personality traits are central to creating barriers in relationships between local and international students. These barriers lead to the international students desiring to remain in social groups from only their own country, having poor relationships, and feeling isolation. University policies for international students are considered an important tool to overcome these three barriers and to support and promote good relations between local and international students. Focusing on the relationships between local and international students at a Turkish university will offer new findings for the current literature and offer insight for other higher education institutions in non-English-speaking countries supporting international students.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design and Data Source**

A qualitative research design using a case study was employed. Qualitative studies focus on understanding and interpreting the nature of the research problem rather than on the quantity of observed characteristics. In a case study, phenomena, events, actions, processes, or social units such as groups, institutions, and communities are analyzed. Case studies have proven to be suitable where contextual conditions are pertinent to the phenomenon under inquiry. Therefore, this method affords researchers the opportunity to gain deep holistic views of the research problem to help describe, understand, and explain a research problem or situation (Tellis, 1997).

In this qualitative study, I collected data through semistructured interviews, and I analyzed using content analysis. To select participants, I employed purposive sampling, and 77 individuals (42 international and 35 local students) enrolled at Istanbul Bilgi University (IBU). IBU is one of Turkey's top five private universities with the largest number of international students in Turkey. The university was founded by a group of entrepreneurs and academics in 1996; it is one of Turkey's largest private universities. In 2006, IBU entered into a long-term collaboration with Laureate Education, one of the most important international education networks in the world.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection process for international students started with a meeting at the International Relations Office at IBU. During the meeting, I explained the aim of the study to the international office team. The international office requested a 2-week

period to identify prospective interviewees. After 2 weeks, we scheduled a second meeting. I was introduced to 18 volunteer international students and I explained the purposes of the study to them. These 18 students agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. Each of the 18 students was asked to refer other students willing to participate in the study, and 24 additional students eventually joined through this snowball sampling method. This sample size was accepted as appropriate because a saturation point was reached after the interviews exceeded the 42nd interviewee. As I saw similar instances over and over again, I became empirically confident that a category was saturated (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Urquhart, 2012).

I employed a similar process to collect data from Turkish students. The 10 local students who participated in the study volunteered from among students in my classes. I mentioned the study in my 2017–2018 classes, and I asked students whether they wished to volunteer for the study, keeping in mind that it would involve interviews conducted in English. Over a 3-week period, 10 students informed me that they would be happy to contribute. I held a meeting with these 10 students and explained the purpose of the study in greater detail. These 10 students agreed to participate in in-depth interviews with me. Each of the 10 students was asked to refer other students willing to participate, and 25 of their friends joined the study. I conducted the same interview with these 25 students. Again, a snowball sampling method was employed. The final sample size was 42 international students (22 female and 20 male), and 35 Turkish students (16 female and 19 male). Table 1 presents the number of international students and their countries of origin.

**Table 1: International Students and Their Countries**

Country	Number
Afghanistan	5
Azerbaijan	3
Egypt	4
Iran	4
Iraq	2
Jordan	2
Libya	3
Pakistan	5
Palestine	3
Morocco	2
Saudi Arabia	1
German	2
Syria	6
TOTAL	42

To explore the students' views, I conducted semistructured, face-to-face interviews, lasting 30–40 minutes. I conducted all interviews in English, as it is an

instructor language at IBU, and the common language among all participants in the study (including the author, local students, and international students). I asked the international students if they had any Turkish friends. If they answered in the negative, I asked them to share the reasons why. If they responded in the affirmative, I asked them to share facets of their relationship. I also asked them to share their views on the internationalization policies of the university, such as orientation programs for international students, and their experiences participating in social clubs and activities at the university, and working on projects with local students. I asked the local students similar questions in face-to-face interviews lasting 30–40 minutes. I asked them about the academic and social contributions made by international students and their feelings about this. I then analyzed all interview data through content analysis. My data analysis process included recording the interviews with the students' consent and transcribing them verbatim. These steps ensured my familiarity with the data. I coded each transcript, and emerging codes were grouped together to derive common themes.

## RESULTS

The results of the semistructured interviews revealed the foreign and local students' ideas about their relationships. The findings are organized into two parts: perspectives of the international students and those of local students.

### **Friendship on Campus: Perspective of International Students**

Interview results revealed that none of the international students denied having friendships with their Turkish peers. Furthermore, they did not mention feelings of exclusion. Of the 42 international students, 19 (45%) said that they had many Turkish friends and had not experienced any problems related to their friendships with them. A student from Iran stated,

I did have Turkish friends within the university. They were able to help me a lot in my daily life, they helped me explore the city of Istanbul, they made me see Turkey in the eyes of a Turk, how a Turk sees it and it changed my perspective a lot of Istanbul and its people. I've enjoyed it a lot, and so, I will miss Istanbul.

A Syrian student shared,

I've participated in three clubs so far as one of them being a group being conservative and great group called Anadolu Gençliği. As I socialize, it was kind of easy for me to have friends in universities that included locals and international friends. Also, I've had great time with my Turkish friends doing the class projects. It's good to be not alone during my university education times.

Another student from Azerbaijan added,

I have many Turkish friends in campus. Last year, we went to Büyükada together with my Turkish friends. We did barbeque and had so much fun.

Also in Istanbul, we went to two or three museums. One month ago, we went together to Bial in Taksim as you know. It was a great time.

A German student elucidated,

Here, I live with my grandmother, she is Turkish. First, I was a little hesitant and afraid, but now, my friendship in campus is very good and strong. I have a lot of friends. We study together in the projects and always have a cup of coffee or beer after class or at night.

Of the 23 international students, 21 stated that they experienced language problems with their Turkish peers, citing poor English skills of the locals as the reason. A student from Jordan shared, "It is generally communication problems. People here do not like to speak English; thus, as international students, it is hard for us." A student from Palestine explained, "Turkish students are very kind, but most of them cannot speak English. When I start speaking Turkish, life got easier definitely."

Thirteen students identified introversion and shyness of their Turkish peers as a reason for the lack of friendships. They further explained that because English was not a common language on the campus, Turkish students lacked self-confidence. A Russian student advanced the following explanation: "Finding a friend is really hard because I don't know why but when they have to speak English, Turkish people get so stressed and shy." An Egyptian student spoke about the shyness of Turkish students:

Sometimes, I cannot understand why they don't want to speak English. In class, they can understand everything and do all assignments or project in English, but I think because of the insufficiency of just speaking in English or may be shyness personality, in spite of their welcoming approaches, it is hard to make a contact for extra dialogs with them.

Six of the 23 international students cited personal factors as the reason for having limited relationships with Turkish students. A student from Pakistan stated, "My friends are mostly Pakistani. I haven't really participated in a social activity or any social club because I am trying to adjust my new life style and have set my GPA." A Jordanian student shared, "I have many friends from my country in my university or different universities. So, I don't need Turkish friends, I am happy with my friends, I am not willing to make Turkish friends."

Seven participants mentioned the school management's lack of intervention in their relationships with Turkish students. A student from Afghanistan reasoned,

I think, the school management can be responsible this poor relationship. They can encourage and support the relationship between us. I wish that the international center was given more opportunity to create events for international students to get together with national students.

An Egyptian student also suggested,

The university management can organize different clubs or activities for us. I feel like the clubs can be more inclusive for international students, not just

Turkish. There are many clubs in university in different areas, but most of them are entirely in Turkish, so I have not been part of them.

Table 2 displays the main themes related to the problems between Turkish and international students from the perspective of the international students.

**Table 2: Reasons for International Students' Inability to Make Friendships**

Common themes	Issues
Language barrier	Inability of speaking English of national students
Personality traits	Shyness attitudes and introversion personality of national students Introversion personality of international students
Unwillingness to make friends from host country	Lack of willingness to make friends because of the presence of home country students
University policy	Lack of social club for international students Lack of common activities with national students

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### **Friendship on Campus: Perspective of Local Students**

Results of interviews with Turkish students revealed that none of them denied any dialog between them and international students. However, 22 (63%) of the 35 Turkish students said that although there was dialog between them, it was limited. They explained that their friendships with the international students were generally limited to class activities. They perceived language as the most important obstacle for good friendships. They explained that conversation between the two groups was limited because neither group was native English speakers. They gave the following reasons for the barriers they encountered in their relationships with international students: 18 explained their own level of English was poor; 15 noted that neither group could speak English perfectly; five cited cultural differences; 12 spoke about the effects of introversion; three mentioned the high-income level of the internationals; and nine perceived that the international students were unwilling to form friendships.

Generally, studies in the relevant literature about regard cultural differences as a barrier for both groups of students in their communications with one another. In this study, despite international students not mentioning localized cultural differences, a few local students (five) mentioned cultural differences as a problem in their communication. Another point of difference in the current literature was that income levels were defined as a barrier by local students. In addition, although international students did not mention any feelings of exclusion, Turkish students criticized themselves in a more nuanced way where they viewed themselves as being part of



the cause of exclusion owing to poor relationships with local students and demonstrated their sensitiveness.

One Turkish student stated,

There is a limited dialog only on lectures because of the language barrier, their high-income level, and my shy personality. I do not trust my English skills, and also, I think they are very wealthy, they always wear luxury brands, and this creates a barrier between us.

Another explained, “They are introvert, there are some cultural differences between us. Because of their different attitudes, they are close to people from only their country.” A third noted,

There is a limited dialog only on lectures because of cultural differences, their lifestyle, different cultural background, language barrier (for both sides, it is impossible to speak English perfectly). I think we usually try to communicate with people who have some similarities with us and so international students who speak the same main language are together.”

Another local student added,

There is a limited dialog because of the language barrier; most cannot speak Turkish, and I cannot speak English very well. I am ashamed when I talk to them because I am afraid of being misunderstood. Therefore, I only communicate with an international student when necessary. I think that we are doing the wrong thing because as long as we continue to do so, we feel like excluding them and they feel lonely.

Table 3 displays the main themes related to the problems between the Turkish and international students from the perspective of the Turkish students.

**Table 3: Reasons for National Students’ Inability to Make Friendships**

Common themes	Issues
Language barrier	Poor English practice of local students
	Being a non-native speaker in a common language at campus for both student groups
Personality traits	Shy and introvert personality of national students
	Introvert personality of international students
Social factors	Cultural differences
	High-income level of international students
	The existing population of international students in host country

Of the 35 Turkish participants, 13 (37%) asserted that they enjoyed good friendships with international students and did not encounter any problems. With the exception of four students, local students believed that international students made important contributions to their country and life. However, the four who disagreed stated that most of the foreign students came from the Middle East and not Europe. Because their traditions and customs were similar to those of the Turks, they had nothing new to offer. For example, one local student stated, "I know that most of the foreign students come from the Middle East, so I do not agree with the fact that the students from the Middle East also have something to offer us." Another student said,

They choose studying in Turkey because the university acceptance conditions for international students are much easier than those of ours. I don't like that many of the inbound students come from Middle East countries. I think that there can't be a contribution to my country from these students.

The other local students listed the following contributions of international students: helping them to practice and improve English; learning different cultures; producing new ideas and innovations; learning different ways of thinking, cultural diversity, different perspectives, and ways to contribute to the economy; learning how to respect and understand other people from different cultures; increasing money flow in economy; providing free advertising for tourism; destroying prejudice; encouraging international networks; enhancing social life, providing a livelier campus life; avoiding racism; and accepting new people's ideas. All these increased the Turkish students' tolerance level.

A Turkish student asserted,

Campus life must be always alive, colorful, and active. The more different personality, the livelier the campus life will be. Diversity is good not only for campus life but also for general culture. Diversity brings innovation to us, opens our horizons. Cultural diversity, avoidance of racism, acceptance of new people's ideas will increase our tolerance level.

Another explained, "It is an advantage for us to live together with people from different countries. I also think that if we think about the economy part because I read economy, foreigners also contribute more money flow to our country." A third Turkish student stated, "We are learning their culture and life. During the friendship, we are learning new information about the life and also they are learning our culture." Another added, "They help us to enhance our vision as it helps us to get the opportunities to know different cultures, to destroy prejudice, to get international network, to make practice of English, and to enhance social life." One local student advanced the following insight, "I've learned a lot, I didn't know about these nations and lifestyles; this has changed my perspective. They've made my prejudices disappear." One student stated,

They improve our language, and most importantly, they contribute to our country economy. For living here, they must do shopping, rent or buy a

house or simply they have to eat something, all of these things mean the cash flow for our country.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Clearly, good social relationships with students in the host country improve the experience of international students. Due to the importance of communication between local and international students during university life, many studies have examined both student groups' experiences from this perspective. However, these studies are mostly conducted at popular destinations in the West. This is understandable given that the main flow of movement in students has tended to be from the East to the West. As such, few studies have explored nontraditional destinations. However, the emergence of new higher education hubs reveals the need for new studies that reflect the experiences of students who select less popular destinations such as Turkey. According to HEC (2018) statistics, there has been a 160% increase in the number of students studying in Turkey from 2013 to 2018 and a 752% increase in the last 15 years. This study was initiated in consideration of the remarkable increase in the rates of the number of international students at Turkish universities.

Before mentioning the relationship problems of international students with local peers, I emphasize two noteworthy findings. First, 45% of international students stated that they did not encounter any relationship problems with local students. Second, none of the participants spoke about loneliness, exclusion, and isolation even though these concepts have been mentioned in many studies conducted with students in Western countries (e.g., Gareis et al., 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008).

Many international students at IBU came from countries in the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia-Caucasus, and North Africa and have cultural and religious similarities with Turkish students. The findings of this study are in accordance with the idea that cultural similarities have decreased feelings of loneliness and exclusion among foreign students. In a study on German students at an American university, Gareis (2000) found that these students were satisfied with their relationships with host students and did not experience exclusion. Lee and Rice (2007) interviewed a sample of 24 students from 15 countries at an American university and revealed that different cultural factors resulted in higher levels of stress for Latin American and Asian students than for students from Germany, Canada, and New Zealand. A student from New Zealand stated that she did not experience relationship problems and had not encountered discomfort or disrespect because of her foreign status. A German student added that he had enjoyed positive experiences and would advise his friends to study in the United States. A Canadian explained it was easy to fit into American culture. However, a Brazilian student believed that a professor did not like him because of his poor English, and a Mexican student perceived racism.

Hofstede's (2019) study offers additional meaning for our study. Hofstede developed a model using factor analysis for examining the results of a worldwide survey of employee values by IBM between 1967 and 1973. Hofstede's model has been refined since. The first version of theory stated four dimensions: individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance

and masculinity-femininity. Then, independent research in Hong Kong led Hofstede to add a fifth dimension as a long-term orientation. In 2010, Hofstede added a sixth dimension, indulgence versus self-restraint. Studies conducted by Lee and Rice (2007) and Gareis (2000), as well as the present study, reveal that the similarity of cultural features makes the results more meaningful. According to Hofstede, Germany, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand are considered to be individualistic. However, Turkey, the Middle East, Asia, and African countries as well as Brazil and Mexico are collectivistic. Therefore, the cultural similarity between Turkey and its receiving countries decreases the possibility of missing friendship (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Many studies have revealed that while it is easy to establish relations between people who have similar cultures and values, it becomes more difficult in nonsimilar cultures (e.g., Gareis, 2012; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017; Muttarak, 2014). That is, as McKenzie and Baldassar (2017) said, not all international students are considered to be equally foreign—those who experience loneliness and exclusion are usually from countries that have different cultures.

As Gareis (2000) found, language ability plays a significant role in the establishment of intercultural friendships and successful interaction. In this study, 55% of international and 63% of local students stated that their relationships with other groups were inadequate and limited to activities in class. All the students in this study who stated they had poor relationships with other groups advanced language barriers as the main reason.

English is the medium of instruction at IBU and was a common language for local and foreign students. However, both student groups were not native English speakers and they encountered communication problems. International students declared that Turkish students did not want to speak English but preferred to speak their own language on campus. That is, even in English-speaking institutions, if the local language is not English, foreign students experience difficulties because of the local students' inclination to speak their primary language. Both groups acknowledged that they felt more comfortable socializing with each member within their group than interacting with other students. Two solutions may be proposed to solve this problem. If the country and its language have an economically and socially important position in the global world, the students could be compelled to learn the basics of the local language of the host country. Second, policies for encouraging intercultural relationships should be improved by the universities to lessen anxiety and shyness between the two groups of students. For Turkey, the second solution may be more logical, developing appropriate policies for encouraging intercultural relationships.

In this study, both groups of students perceived personality traits and some social factors to be the reasons for poor relationships. These characteristics included shyness, introversion, personality, and unwillingness to become friends because of different income levels. Many studies have found that people from Eastern countries score high on agreeableness, whereas people from Western countries score high on extroversion (e.g., Eap et al., 2008; Mastor et al., 2000; McCrae et al., 1998). The findings of these studies revealed that individuals high in agreeableness and extroversion were skilled at minimizing conflicts in their relationships. In direct

contrast to many studies conducted in Western universities, none of the participants in the current study mentioned that Turkish students were unwelcoming, distant, or cold. However, most stated shyness and introversion as reasons for poor relationships. The following expression from a Chinese student in Heng's (2017) study can be seen as an example that gives the comparison between a Western and an Eastern country from the perspective of those students studying in a Western country:

I hope that USA peers can be more warm, I try to speak with them, but often I feel that they don't want to speak with me. In China, when meeting an overseas person, Chinese tends to be warmer, but not here.

In this study, both groups of participants generally showed agreeableness toward the other group but were not extroverted. It appears that introversion may have prevented them from having meaningful relationships. It is possible that their introversion was linked to their poor language skills and may have also resulted in the anxiety to which some participants referred. A participant in a study conducted by Kudo and Simkin (2003) reflected similar feelings: "I could talk a lot with Asians with no embarrassment. But when I was with Australians, because they were native speakers of English, I got very nervous and couldn't speak at all."

Given the effects of language barriers (for both groups), cultural differences (international students did not state cultural differences, only local students did), and the existing population of international students in Turkey, the participants in this study showed a preference toward cultivating friendships with people in the same group. The findings of a number of studies concur with those of this study. A participant in a study conducted by Bennett et al. (2013) stated, "I normally see people from the same culture all together." Another from research conducted by McKenzie and Baldassar (2017) shared, "I've noticed that international students tend to group together, particularly if they all speak the same language, and are from the same country." Participants in Kudo and Simkin's (2003) study explained, "I don't become close with someone who has nothing in common with me. It is not because I don't like him/her" and "other Japanese and I have the same values and share the same information. So, I find it easier to talk with Japanese people than with people in this country." In the current study, the reason for the willingness to be in a homogenous group was related to a lack of language ability rather than to cultural differences. Kondakçı et al. (2008) revealed that local and foreign students formed their own homogeneous groups not to socialize but when working on projects, because of their poor language skills and inability to communicate effectively with those whose primary language was different.

In this study, another issue defined by international students was the lack of club and social activities for providing relationships between local and international students, highlighting the inadequacies in this area. Similar to this particular finding, foreign participants in Kondakçı et al.'s (2008) study, which utilized Belgium as a nontraditional destination, suggested that the school's management should encourage students to establish an international student organization and to organize intercultural events. That is, as Jon (2013) stated, the mere presence of international students on a campus does not equal meaningful internationalization nor does it necessarily lead to the interaction of foreign and domestic students. Engaging both

domestic and international students in curricular and extracurricular activities can lead to them enjoying mutually beneficial experiences. Moreover, universities should not just develop superficial internationalization policies but ensure that all students understand the internationalization process so that they can contribute to it. Notably, even if the international students who study in traditional destinations such as the United States and Australia experience difficulties making friends, they appreciate the established policies about international students' programs. For example, Heng (2017) stated that while the participants in their study mentioned many academic and social challenges that they as Chinese students faced in the United States, most of them appreciated the efforts of the university's international student office to organize activities such as theater performances, international student coffee or meal hours, dance parties, and mentor/buddy programs. Despite their wishes for workshops on tax and immigration matters, they emphasized their gratitude to the international student office for organizing social activities for them. The high level of international student satisfaction with university policies on social interaction is not surprising for institutions with a longer history of hosting international students. However, if a country does not have a long tradition of receiving foreign students, there will be a number of challenges to overcome. One challenge is likely to be insufficient internationalization policies that deal with the social interaction of their students. New destinations such as Turkey need the organized support of government internationalization policies, which further need to be supported by host universities to address communication problems among local and foreign students and to generate a positive communication culture between them. This intervention should be planned in a way to allow both groups of students to contribute to it in a natural way.

In this study, contributions made by international students to their host country were explored. Only four (7%) of the local students noted that the international students did not make a contribution, and this seemed to be due to their opinions about the Middle East. Many studies have investigated the pragmatic relationship between local and international students (e.g., Bennett et al., 2013; Eve, 2002; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Spencer-Rogers & McGovern, 2002). These studies have revealed that intercultural friendships on campus are frequently understood in a pragmatic way by both groups of students. While local students benefit from the social and emotional experiences of this relationship, international students benefit from academic support, particularly language support. In a study on American and Australian institutions, Lindsey Parsons (2010) revealed that contact with international students positively impacted a wide range of outcomes for their local students, including language proficiency, international knowledge, cross-cultural skills, and international attitudes and behaviors. Jon (2009) found that Korean students' participation in an international summer program with international students in Korea contributed to the Korean students' growth and development. In accordance with the current study, the Korean students in Jon's (2009) study described the following positive impacts that resulted from their interactions with international students: gaining different experiences; ensuring personal growth such as feeling more responsible and having leadership roles in the buddy program; acquiring different perspectives about their future plans, such as becoming courageous and making network opportunities for studying abroad;

and having opportunities to practice their English. That is, there are many positive effects of a good relationship between local and international students. There are numerous social benefits such as increasing the cultural diversity of universities and countries and enriching the research and learning environment. Furthermore, international students enrich their host university with new research ideas and skills. When they return to their home country, they do likewise and, if necessary, enhance the diplomatic, social, and economic networks of their country. Some international graduates can also remain in the country to work and live and provide skills to the country. Tamaoka et al. (2003) asserted that having a good friend will help the cultural adaptation of foreign students, leading to positive feelings about the host country. These positive feelings are likely to result in positive word-of-mouth advertising about the country. Consequently, establishing friendships among local and international students will significantly contribute to the internationalization process in the higher education system of a country.

### **Implications and Limitations**

In the past, Turkey has been generally viewed as a major sending country for international students; however, it is now a receiving country for students from nearby geographical areas. Both the increasing number of inbound students and the aforementioned studies (e.g., Kondakçı, 2011; Barnett et al., 2016; Kondakçı et al., 2018) are a reminder that, despite important developments in Turkish higher education, there is insufficient research on the experience of international students in Turkey. Even if the motivation of international students for studying Turkey are not the same as those of international students studying in more traditional countries, these developments in Turkish higher education should be carefully observed. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by providing insights from international students choosing a university in a nontraditional destination that is outside of major receiving countries. Moreover, as the home countries of study participants are generally different from those highlighted in existing research, this study on international students with similar cultural backgrounds will provide an interesting perspective for policymakers and academics.

However, the study has several limitations. First, it was limited to one institution. Future studies should cast a broader net. Regardless of the insight given here into the personal views and perspectives of the students interviewed, conducting additional work with students from other universities would widen the perspective. Second, participants did not use their native languages in the interviews and were sometimes unable to produce fluent communication. For this reason, some students who did not trust their own ability to speak English likely did not participate. This leads to the third limitation of this study, in that the qualitative data collected suffered from participation reluctance. The volunteers were likely more extroverted and confident, but by the same token may have had different views on the interview topics than the introverted individuals who did not participate. Therefore, it is recommended for future researchers to account for such limitations in their work.

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