

A Qualitative Study of Erasmus Program Challenges and Paradoxes Based on the Experiences of Students from Turkey

Erasmus Programına Katılan Türk Öğrencilerin Deneyimlerinden Hareketle Ortaya Çıkan Zorlukların ve Çelişkilerin Nitel Bir Analizi

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Özet

Uluslararasılaşma, özellikle Erasmus programı, son yıllarda Türkiye'deki yükseköğretim alanını ve bu alanın paydaşlarını etkileyen başlıca süreçlerdendir. Uygulandığı coğrafyada ve Türkiye'de en bilinen ve yaygın öğrenci hareketlilik programı olan Erasmus, başladığı yıldan itibaren artan sayıda kurum ve öğrenciyi dâhil ederek dikkatleri üzerine toplamış başarılı bir örnek olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Erasmus programının öğrencilere sağladığı sosyal, kültürel, akademik ve profesyonel faydalara ve yaşanan zorluklara; Bologna Süreci'nin Türk yükseköğretimi üzerindeki etkilerine yönelik konular daha önce yapılmış farklı nitelikteki çalışmalarda ele alınmıştır. Bu kapsamda, hazırlık aşamasında, misafir eden kurum ya da ülkede ve döndükten sonra yaşanan çeşitli akademik, sosyal, kültürel ve bürokratik zorluklara değinmek mümkündür. Ancak, yaşanan zorluklarla ilgili olarak, yeterince veya hiç ele alınmamış konular da bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışma daha az ele alınmış konulara değinmeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu kapsamda ele alınan başlıklar, farklılıklar üzerinden geliştirilen politika ve uygulamalar, proje yönetimi alanında yaşanan sıkıntılar (kapsayıcı olmak, finansal konular, sonuçlar) ve tüketim yaklaşımının uluslararası deneyimlere yansımaları olarak özetlenebilir. Bu konular, Erasmus programının kapsayıcı olma, ortak bir anlayış geliştirme ve farklı açılardan gelişim sağlaması gibi genel hedeflere ulaşma konusunda çelişkili bir resim ortaya çıkartabildiğini göstermektedir. Dolayısıyla, bu başlıklarla program hedefleri ve sonuçları arasında ortaya çıkabilen farklılık ve zıtlıkların farkına varılmalı ve özellikle uygun öğrenci danışmanlığı, beklenti yönetimi ve daha esnek değerlendirme-yerleştirme yöntemlerinin geliştirilmesinin önemi değerlendirilmelidir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Erasmus, Türkiye, yükseköğretimde hareketlilik.

Abstract

Internationalization agenda, especially the Erasmus framework, has become a significant process affecting the Turkish higher education. Erasmus, as being the most influential and preferred mobility scheme, has attracted significant attention and witnessed increasing number of students in years. There are various studies on the outcomes of the Erasmus program in terms of social, cultural, and academic gains of students as well as associated challenges and influence of the Bologna Process on the Turkish higher education outlook. However, there are less visited concepts in terms of challenges that need further attention. This paper addresses these less visited subjects such as project management/implementation issues (diversity, funding, and outcomes), politics of difference, and consumerist approaches. The findings suggest that these issues may complicate program implementations and run the risk of hindering general program targets, leading to a paradoxical outlook such a becoming exclusive to certain group of students, emphasizing difference rather than mutual understanding, seeing the experience as a to-do list item. So, the tension between various issues such as consumerist approaches, politics of difference and project implementation issues and general program targets and outcomes must be acknowledged towards emphasizing the critical role of appropriate student advising and expectation management as well as development of flexible and diverse evaluation-placement methods for efficient and positive program implementation.

Keywords: Erasmus, higher education, mobility, Turkey.

International/global education opportunities have become one of the most pronounced agenda items of the higher education outlook, expanding over a vast geography, which

in turn translates into numerous opportunities in conventional and/or innovative ways at the institutional, national, and/or interstate level (Altbach, 2013, 2014; Altbach & Teichler, 2001;

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A brief summary of this study was presented at the 4th International Higher Education Studies Conference (IHEC 2019) organized by YÖÇAD in Çanakkale, Turkey.

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Bourne, 2011; Teichler, 2009). Internationalization is briefly defined as international, intercultural, and global dimensions in the philosophy and delivery of higher education (Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2020; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut & Klute, 2012). Knight (2004) refers to the multisided explanations of internationalization by underlining the following aspects: a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers; international linkages, partnerships, and projects; international academic programs and research initiatives; delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques; inclusion of an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching learning process. Zhou (2016) states that internationalization of higher education is a dynamic process at five levels (Global, National, Institutional, Program, and Personal), involving five components (Purposes, Outcomes, Programs, Approaches, and Projects) at each level. Chan (2004), in a similar fashion, underlines the importance of following aspects stated in the literature which can lead to challenges for internationalization: mission and objectives, partners, people, projects, time and resources, and communication. As can be traced in the aforementioned studies, it is crucial to take micro and macro level approaches towards implementing sound internationalization agendas. Even when we focus on personal stories and experiences as well as norms, values, and pedagogies, it may be possible to situate those within the wider context of macro level debates since they provide outstanding clues on the process and associated challenges to be able to plan and execute change.

Teichler (2009) explains that “Internationalisation of higher education became a key issue in debates and policies in the 1990s. Experts agree that the single strongest driver for this emphasis was the success story of the ERASMUS programme, which has successfully stimulated and supported temporary mobility of students within Europe.” In a similar fashion, there is considerable literature that underlines the importance of Erasmus and particularly exchanges in the international education scene (Pedro & Franco, 2016; Seeber, Meoli & Cattaneo, 2020). Launched in 1987, Erasmus has become so popular that all of the European youth, training, and education programs have been named after it as of 2014. Participants and beneficiaries all reflect different experiences but the Erasmus programs underlines three key actions (mobility, cooperation, policy) with an emphasis on youth development, inclusion, bringing people together, and opening people’s minds (European Commission Website, 2020). For some, the Erasmus program has also become the symbol of a new European generation that is eager to travel, takes part in virtual mobility, has internation-

al networks, shows intercultural skills, attributes such as flexibility, readiness for change in life, as well as a supranational identification (Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013). Within the Turkish case, Erasmus is by far the most significant international opportunity for university students who wish to spend part of their studies abroad in a different socio-cultural and linguistic setting. Internationalization leads to rethink students’ needs, challenges, and opportunities in a multitude of ways. Opportunities such as Erasmus provide venues and experiences to learn how to survive in an international and intercultural setting as well as skills required to work with people coming from different backgrounds yet again these experiences also involve numerous challenges. Participants and institutions from Turkey generally report numerous positive aspects with regards to the opportunity (Arslan, 2013; Demir & Demir, 2009; Erdem Mete, 2017; Genç İltter, 2013; Kasapoğlu Önder & Balcı, 2010; Turkish National Agency Impact Assessment, 2009; Ünlü, 2015); however, there are also key issues that pose challenges to the implementation and lived experiences. Some of these challenges have widely been studied abroad and in Turkey such as cultural bias, adaptation, language problems as well as financial and bureaucracy related aspects (Ersoy, 2013; European Stability Initiative [ESI], 2014; Önen, 2017; Yağcı, 2010; Yaprak, 2013).

Turkey’s Global Education Agenda & the Influence of the Erasmus Program

Turkey has been an active player in the international education arena and, excluding the individual internationalization efforts of leading higher education institutions, has largely assumed her part in the transnational education movements especially with the impetus of the European Education and Training Policies and the Bologna Process. Thus, the higher education institutions from Turkey, being at the nexus of national transformation as well as global and European level implementations, are no exception to the aforementioned educational transnational movements (Aba, 2013; Kaya, 2015; Yıldırım & İlin, 2017; Yılmaz Fındık, 2016). The annual change in numbers shows a steady increase. In spite of all the challenges and criticism associated with the Bologna Process, student mobility, a crucial dimension/tool of this process, has been very well received by multiple parties as can be seen in the rapid expansion and recognition throughout the country. Additionally, beneficiaries generally report positive feedback in terms of having access to opportunities as well as learning outcomes at different levels (Arslan, 2013; Demir & Demir, 2009; Genç İltter, 2013; Kasapoğlu Önder & Balcı, 2010; Turkish National Agency Impact Assessment, 2009; Ünlü, 2015). As in the case of other European countries, the Bologna Process also speeded



up developments of the Turkish higher education system. Consequently, internationalization and mobility in higher education gained considerable popularity especially after the Erasmus program (Aba, 2013; Turkish National Agency Impact Assessment, 2009). The mid-term evaluation report reflects the key position of the program for individuals and institutions: “Erasmus+ is a comprehensive programme having considerable effect on developing cross-cultural understanding and internationalization for the Turkish beneficiaries. In addition to enabling communication in EU languages, Erasmus+ has also contributed to individuals and institutions to gain prestige through increased cooperation with the EU countries” (National Report on Erasmus+ Midterm Evaluation, 2017, p. 6). Regarding providing access to international education opportunities, as the Turkish National Agency Impact Assessment (2009, p. 61) revealed “few respondents were used to travel abroad for educational purposes prior to becoming a beneficiary of the programme” and “85.4% of the respondents agree that it would not have been possible for them to obtain international experience in the absence of this programme”.

There are a number of studies on the individual and system level challenges that adversely affect the internationalization agenda in Turkey within the European framework. Teichler (2004) advocated the importance of systemic and mainstreamed internationalization efforts while discussing the situation in different parts of the world; however, for the Turkish case, it is still difficult to talk about a comprehensive internationalization strategy and associated activities at different institutional realities (Yılmaz Fındık, 2016). In spite of the increasing numbers, in 2012 only 14,412 Turkish students embarked on the Erasmus student exchange scheme and their ratio among all Turkish students was 0.3%, the lowest ratio among all 33 participating countries (ESI, 2014). Another concern that adversely affects mobility activities is the discrepancy between incoming and outgoing students. From institutional and individual perspectives, previous studies that focused on the reasons of low participation in Turkey mention concerns regarding visa regulations, financial insufficiencies, lack of foreign language skills for outbound students, scarcity of courses in foreign languages, misuse of recognition tools at the institutional level (ESI, 2014; Yağcı, 2010; Yaprak, 2013). Oğuz (2011) underlined the fact that outbound students outweigh inbound students in Turkey and suggests a number of institutional reforms for the universities such as extending closer relations, curriculum development and efficient recognition of credits, promotion of linguistic diversity, and increasing investments. There are also studies that underline concerns about the Bologna Process, the European higher education reform agenda that is closely asso-

ciated with the Erasmus program. Yağcı (2010) suggested the smooth and rapid introduction of the structural reforms in Turkey at the macro level but suggests hesitations at the implementation level. In a similar fashion, Onursal-Besğül (2017) explained the top-down nature of change associated with the process, which complicates real internalization. Kaya (2015) discussed that the most common criticisms directed towards the process were on standardization and commercialization, students opposing the dominant political rule, left wing students opposing market driven and neo-liberal implementations, and rising Euroscepticism.

There are multiple lines of research on exchange students from Turkey that focus on motivational factors and program outcomes. Bozoğlu, Armağan and Güven (2016) identified five main themes in their study of motivational factors towards study abroad that include language learning, personal growth, leisure, academic considerations, and career opportunities. Agreeing on the language learning aspect, Aslan and Jacobs (2014) also state living in a different culture as the main reason behind participation. Prior studies that focus on program outcomes reflect a range of issues. Focusing on teacher candidates' experiences, there are studies that report personal, linguistic, professional, academic, and (inter)cultural acquisitions (Demir & Demir, 2009; Ünlü, 2015). Parallel to the aforementioned studies, the Impact Assessment of the Turkish National Agency (2009) and Papatsiba (2005) report positive outcomes on personal development (self-expression, self-confidence, learning about him/herself, changing life trajectory), career development, language development and additionally suggests obtaining international experience (access/opportunity and learning about daily life). Kasapoğlu Önder and Balcı (2010) evaluated Erasmus program's contribution to personal development, satisfaction with various academic and non-academic (including financing, administration, accommodation, security issues) aspects and concluded that the program had positive influence.

Regarding cultural acquisitions and experiences of the programs, former studies focus on attitudinal, cognitive and/or behavioral change. Demir and Demir (2009) suggested decrease in prejudice in a study carried out with teacher candidates, Arslan (2013) suggested increased respect and tolerance, and the Impact Assessment of Turkish National Agency (2009) reported positive outcomes on cross-cultural awareness and interaction (learning about national and foreign cultures, adapting to foreign cultures, overcoming prejudices, increasing tolerance, familiarizing others' with one's own culture). According to Genç İter (2013) students developed their personal beliefs, values, cross-cultural knowledge and knowledge about their own culture, and the experience made students



more enthusiastic, tolerant and open-minded. Ünlü (2015) findings revealed intercultural experiences and observing multicultural structures as the key outcomes. Research that focuses on the adaptation of Turkish students generally suggests a positive overall adjustment with some aspects that require further attention and improvement.

Besides the positive outlook associated with the aforementioned international experiences, there are also sufficient numbers of studies that describe and analyze challenges. These may be summarized as inadequate language skills, cultural difficulties (bias and differences), perceptions on the home country, and difficulties associated with the implementation of the program. There are studies that mention concerns regarding visa regulations, financial insufficiencies, lack of foreign language skills for outbound students, scarcity of courses in foreign languages for inbounds, and misuse of recognition tools at the institutional level (ESI, 2014; Yağcı, 2010; Yaprak, 2013). In the quantitative Impact Assessment of Turkish National Agency (2009), challenging issues emerged as delays in grant payment, obtaining visas, misguidance by home institution faculty members and international offices. Önen (2017) categorized and defined challenges associated with different phases of the mobility as pre-departure (paper work, selection of courses, communicating with the Erasmus offices, visa procedures, accommodation), during mobility (communication and socializing, different education systems, language problems, economic problems, culture shock) and after the mobility (post-Erasmus syndrome). Ersoy (2013) studied cultural problems of teacher candidates and reported problems regarding communicating in English effectively, cultural differences, and cultural bias in their cross-cultural experiences.

As can be inferred from previous studies, different advantages and challenges of the Erasmus program have been widely studied. However, these previously studied challenges do not focus on less visited concepts such as issues with regards to project implementation, politics of difference, consumerist practices. Therefore, this study aims to explain the following questions:

- What are some of the critical issues expressed within the course of a mobility period?
- What are some of the less visited challenges and issues?
- How do these issues connect to the overall management and targets of the Erasmus program?

This paper first addresses the global education agenda in Turkey, situates the Erasmus program within that context and then reflects on the less visited challenges, mainly project implementation issues, politics of difference (Doerr, 2017) and consumerist practices (Bolen, 2001). These challenges not only

complicate program implementations for individuals but also run the risk of hindering general program targets by: (i) becoming exclusive to certain group of students, (ii) promoting difference rather than mutual understanding, and (iii) turning the experience into a conventional to-do list/resume item.

Method

The participants in this study were recruited between November 2016 – September 2017 in Turkey. The Erasmus framework was particularly chosen because it is the single most popular study abroad scheme in the country. The participants were university students who had attended the Erasmus exchange scheme. This paper presents the qualitative data and their analyses, including answers to the open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews with students, and field notes. The students were mainly recruited through contacting the private (foundation) and public universities' International Offices (IO's) that send the highest number of exchange students from Turkey. Some were also recruited via contacting foreign universities (personal contacts and institutions with the highest numbers according to the European Commission) and Erasmus Student Network sections. The consent of the Ethics Board of the promoting institution was obtained before the data collection. The research design was shared along with an information letter (e-mail), debriefing note and a letter of consent to be accepted by the participants.

There were 22 respondents. All of them were Turkish citizens born in ten different provinces with four of them having residence in foreign countries. Their average age was 22.4 and 20 of them were female. Four respondents were from public universities, 18 were from foundation universities and, in sum, nine universities' exchange students were represented. The respondents were mostly 3rd and 4th year students in Social Sciences, Engineering, and Business. Most of them lived with their families (13) whereas second and third selections were university dorms (2) and private rentals (2), respectively. 13 of them did not have siblings or parents who studied abroad, 19 respondents' mothers were university/high school graduates and 17 respondents' fathers were university/high school graduates. 19 respondents had travelled abroad before the study abroad experience -- mostly for tourism ($n=19$), which is followed by language school ($n=5$), other exchange program ($n=4$), summer school ($n=4$), internship ($n=3$) and work & travel ($n=1$). The respondents' first language was Turkish and they all spoke English. 14 respondents also mentioned additional foreign languages. English was stated as the instruction language in almost all cases and five respondents also mentioned



home country languages. Approximately half of the respondents ($n=12$) studied abroad during the Fall semester, nine students during the Spring semester and one during the whole academic year. Their host destinations were the following: France ($n=4$), Germany ($n=6$), the Netherlands ($n=8$), Poland ($n=1$), Sweden ($n=2$), Czech Republic ($n=1$).

Content analysis is a method of analyzing written, verbal or visual communication messages (Cole, 1988) towards identifying and explaining patterns and themes, as well as exceptions. It is a deep and systematic reading of body of texts, images, and symbolic matter which is an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and inferential in intent (Krippendorff, 2004). It requires a close reading of different texts and involves interpretation of them into new narratives. Krippendorff (2004) suggests that content analysts have to know the conditions under which they obtain their texts, have to be explicit about whose readings they are speaking about and which processes or norms they are applying to come to their conclusions.

The qualitative data were collected via 19 online open-ended questions from 22 students and interviews/e-mail correspondence with 7 students. The questions were on critical experiences, future plans, the nature and extent of intercultural contacts during study abroad, influence of social media, and connection to home and host domains. The qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews/e-mails were saved in a word processor or excel and then analyzed in line with content analysis. The answers to open-ended questions were read several times to identify codes and broader themes. During the first step (open coding), the individual responses were coded for key words. In the second step, the repetitions were detected and the codes were merged where an overlap was identified. The key results were then examined in relation to the research questions and emerging themes such as program outcomes and less visited challenges. The *utterances* from interviews/e-mails, with longer answers, were coded at three levels: initial code, *re-code*, and *selective code*. The utterances were the participants' answers to semi-structured questions and mostly included short paragraphs. *The initial code* was a brief explanation of the utterance whereas the re-code and selective code were higher level categories that represent lower level units. For instance, in one case, initial code was "Explaining whether every young person should benefit from the program and barriers to participation", re-code was "Highlighting language proficiency and financial difficulties", and selective code was "Program challenges". In another example, initial code was "Describing the general negative attitude towards people from Turkey due to

the immigrants in the Netherlands", re-code was "Extrapolation of Turkishness based on established Turkish immigrants in Europe" and selective code was "Elements of ethnic identity construction". The key results were then examined in relation to the research questions and emerging themes. Important quotations and unique excerpts were also marked during these processes. Participant observation was also implemented to better grasp the breadth of issues in a given locale. The students were observed during formal or informal meetings and social activities. The field notes were collected within the Erasmus framework of an institution in Turkey over the course of the study and were then analyzed based on emerging themes and examples taking into consideration the aforementioned coding results and steps.

Creswell (2012) states that for validating findings, triangulation, member checking and auditing may be used by researchers. Triangulation is the process of validating evidence from different individuals, types of data or methods of data collection towards ensuring multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes. Collected data was read and evaluated at different times and the views of Erasmus academic and administrative staff were received across different institutions during meetings and conferences. As part of the triangulation, the findings were also cross checked with issues that were raised during national/international Erasmus meetings.

Results

Internationalization of higher education is a multidimensional and dynamic process which involves many stakeholders and issues. Some of the most important themes that influence the whole global education outlook across different geographies and provide direction to the management of such programs are mission and objectives, partners, people, projects, time and resources, and communication (Chan, 2004; Zhou, 2016). Based on student experiences and narratives, this paper reflects the challenges in relation to project implementation as well as issues of politics of difference and consumerism that have repercussions in terms of aforementioned management related issues.

Challenges in Relation to Project Implementation Aspects

Altbach and Teichler (2001) discussed the long term developments and challenges regarding exchange programs and emphasized issues of diversifying participation, efficiency, accountability, funding, competition paradigm as well as exchange being a peripheral enterprise, all of which also apply to the case in Turkey. Firstly, most of the HEIs in Turkey,



especially foundation universities, still view international programs as peripheral activities rather than integral and central parts of educational and campus life. For instance, using exchange programs as a tool for promotion and increasing student satisfaction are some concerns of this approach rather than placing these implementations as an integral part of their academic and socio-cultural programs as well as learning outcomes. Universities start promoting international programs especially during their information days and info provided during these times may also create a false image and raise candidates' expectations. Secondly, in terms of outcomes, costs, and benefits, there are gaps between expectations and outcomes especially in academic and socio-cultural terms. Program realities, expectations, and outcomes may be as diverse as the involved parties and they may not align accordingly. This difference puts pressure on some students and families who have completely different sets of expectations or priorities before the mobility as they hear from their circles. For instance, the respondents of this study predominantly thought in terms of academic targets before the mobility but after the mobility academic targets lost their primary role to cultural and personal outcomes. Some also mentioned that students might have false expectations in regards to social and academic aspects of the program; it is possible to find an environment that is social and/or academically rigorous. In a similar fashion, in some cases, students have become more independent and their families or social circles took this situation rather negatively. One other concern related to outcomes is whether the experience can be considered real immersion into the local environment or not. Global opportunities may be referred to as being "immersion", especially if they involve and engage participants in the local lives in a multidimensional and deeper way. The positionality of exchange students depicts a complex picture and we cannot argue that the whole experience for all participants is engagement. For some of the respondents of this study, one semester-long exchange can be framed as immersion because it is a totally new experience, students seem to enjoy and they are mostly with foreign/international students whom they recently met. However, based on the level and nature of interaction to the local host culture, respondents' experience may also not be considered immersion due to following traits: Spending time with mostly foreign/international students in a confined atmosphere, doing mostly touristic trips and activities, receiving support from local students for official procedures that actually limit interaction with the locals. Also, there are no reported instances where experiences of negative cultural issues such as intolerance and prejudices were actually utilized as learning opportunities, which may be considered a strong aspect of immersion.

Last but not the least, diversification of participation due to financial concerns and socio-cultural issues appear as important debates during the course of this research. On the financial front, especially financial worries regarding exchange rates and inadequacy of Erasmus mobility grants have repercussions on diversifying participation and reaching out to a diverse body of students in Turkey. As one student explained "*even if students pass the language evaluation at home, paper work, flight and other expenses create serious burdens. Mobility grants help to an extent but they are not enough.*" Due to the unfavorable exchange rates and inadequacy of the mobility grants, students decide not to attend the program and cancel participation. In such an environment, only students who can afford to cover the costs are able to attend. This situation in turn started to affect the number of students that can actually go abroad under the scheme of exchange partnerships. In line with the observations from the field, almost all universities have the issue of drop outs after placing students due to visa related difficulties, family disapproval and having applied "just to try". It was also possible to hear during Erasmus meetings that students consider not applying to the program in the very first place due to economic and linguistic reasons. The Impact Study of Turkish National Agency (2009) demonstrates this outlook: more than 57% of non-mobile students consider financial issues to be the most important obstacle for mobility. According to the very recent study by British Council, Next Generation Türkiye (2017), planning to go abroad for work or study purposes is very common, especially amongst those who have a secular way of living, due to the despair arising from current socio-economic circumstances. Youth from different backgrounds believe in the value of such an experience but especially those who are more educated, more privileged in terms of socio-economic resources and unemployed have a stronger stance. If finances become an increasing concern and socio-cultural division within the society grows, there may be a danger of only those more advantageous students benefitting from the program which is against the very rationale of the program to promote diversity and inclusion. Doerr (2017) discusses that some argue study abroad is for the privileged class to use the encounter with difference and global competence as a result, as a resource to build cultural capital which in turn reinforces differences in a given society.

Considering the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants of this study and their prior international experiences, as well as increasing financial and social concerns of attending to the program, it is possible to argue that Erasmus experience could very well contribute to a divide amongst the youth, at the expense of less privileged. Looking at diversification of partici-



pation from a socio-cultural angle, participants of this study already demonstrate some level of socio-cultural capital to survive in a foreign and multicultural setting (parents' education level, prior experience/travels etc.) and half of them believe that the experience is not fit for everyone and that Erasmus attendees must have acquired some academic, linguistic, and social skills to be able to attend and benefit from the program: "1- I believe people who can get most benefit out of this study program should join. 2- I do not think that every student must attend to the program; instead, only those who qualify must benefit from it. But criteria may be lowered. 3- Even though I support that everyone should attend, doing exchanging is not only full of laughter and there are very bad moments of it as well. That's why there should be criteria for the attendants." There are former studies that discuss the socio-cultural status of Erasmus students vis-à-vis Europe and European identity. In relation to these findings, Wilson (2011) discusses that former Erasmus students may be more pro-European than their peers because students who take part are already more pro-European and expecting the program to create Europhile 'Erasmus generations' seems to be unrealistic. In a similar fashion, discussing the effects of the program on European identity, Kuhn (2012) suggests the explanation that Erasmus exchange does not strengthen European identity since it addresses students who already feel European and misses reaching out to low educated individuals.

Politics of Difference

Doerr (2016) suggests "encounters during study abroad occurs in a specific space and time and are imagined, arranged, and managed in particular ways, especially through the discourse of immersion which creates and articulates notions of "abroad" and cultural otherness in specific ways". In her studies on the politics of difference, Doerr (2017) further underlines learning as othering and construction of differences at different levels during study abroad. According to this view, study abroad privileges particular types of difference in the name of learning them because it aims at global competence through learning about others and paradoxically, the prerequisite for acquiring such competence is the existence of difference in the world. Again in line with this view, as Doerr (2017) puts it, the resolution to this paradox lies in the construction of difference through the very act of acknowledging certain acts as 'learning'. Since the process of studying abroad highlighted, constructed, and sustained the difference to be learned, as global education is becoming a buzz word, it is important to be aware of politics of difference and situate various types of constructed differences all worthy of being learned in equal terms. Doerr (2017) states that "acknowledgement of 'learning' through immersion

-without clear structure or markers of learning- constructs cultural difference of the host society". Politics of difference can also be traced in the experiences of participants of this study. It goes without saying that one of the main aspects of the Erasmus experience is making students experience different routines and exposing them to different educational and socio-cultural environments; however, the ways in which these differences are constructed, recognized and managed become crucial for learning.

Firstly, politics of difference was evident in the ways home and host domains were actually depicted. Half of the respondents mentioned that the home and host institutions were significantly different and most of them stated that the academic environment was as expected. Host domains were mostly explained with freedom, new knowledge, capabilities, and opportunities whereas home domains with comfort zone and the loved ones. Additionally, some European destinations were observed as viable destinations by participants and their families in Turkey. For instance, some families were willing to support only if students went to conventionally popular study destinations like Germany and France. Families also think students may delay their studies and they may not get any gains by studying in "untraditional" destinations. Some students clearly mentioned that the education level and reputation of countries and institutions influenced their study abroad destination decisions.

Secondly, politics of difference usually defines and reinforces the bold differences between home and host domains and reflects each as homogenous entities (Doerr, 2017); however, it is also possible to witness traces of this concept within personal and group relations. For instance, participants reported to be more separated with the locals and closer to other foreign/international students. Especially, the mutual exchange/international student identity is built upon this concept of difference that is empowering the exchange/international students in terms of security, cooperation, and decreasing uncertainties but at the same time creating an exclusionary space distant to the local domains and people. Another reflection of politics of difference was the ways in which participants explained the different characteristics between migrants and exchange students from Turkey in their host destinations. According to their views and experiences, exchange students from Turkey were associated with modernity and Western values whereas migrants were associated with the tradition and religious conservatism. The participants mentioned that these views were also pronounced by their peers. A study conducted in the Netherlands (Schmitt, 2014), in a similar fashion, underlined different identity constructions between migrant youth



and students from Turkey even though they shared a mutual cultural heritage. From another perspective, “learning” in terms of personal, academic, and social aspects as a result of lived difference was associated with positive outcomes of the program by the participants whereas difference was presented as a negative aspect in relation to faced prejudices and stereotypes. However, these negative instances could also very well be considered and managed as powerful learning tools if they were managed or supported accordingly. Students were also asked how they would transfer gained skills to their home domains and the responses were mostly pointing at personal acquisitions rather than stating how they would benefit from these within their home institution domains upon return. So, students -in fact- have an idea about what has personally changed and how but not exactly how they would manage and direct this difference within their routines back at home.

Consumerism

Consumerism is another concept associated with the experiences of exchange students. Woodson (2013) suggests that consumerism is much more than the act of purchasing, also including the promotion of consumer needs. In the higher education literature, the concept of consumerism is associated with increasing tuitions, achievement level of students in terms of performance and learning, changing stakeholder and funding structures of universities (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017; Harrison & Risler, 2015). In a consumerist model of education, the demands of students are met with the supply by educational institutions. In such a model, university students and their families may view professors and university staff as their employees and curricular as well as extracurricular offerings as commodities. Accordingly, rather than viewing education as a means for personal, intellectual, and professional growth, students and families increasingly seek for different kinds of benefits, sometimes at odds with preset rules and regulations. In line with the aforementioned definitions, based on the ways in which students and families approach, it is possible to refer to the Erasmus experience as a commodity-service, just like touristic packages.

Firstly, international programs such as Erasmus have become part of marketing/recruitment efforts even before students enter universities and institutional messages usually refer to constantly establishing international connections and sending students abroad. On the other hand, these opportunities are actually not automatic and depend on a number of academic assessments at home and host domains. In the case of observations carried out within the framework of this study, despite the fact that home and host institutions’ assessment info were

shared with students, it was possible to witness students expecting automatic participation. When/if students were not automatically accepted and asked for additional testing/assessment by the host domains due to their academic standing and/or requirements of individual institutions, complaints were raised both by the students and their parents. It was even common to observe families becoming involved in the student-related processes (receiving information, double-checking the status of their children etc.). It was also possible to observe students asking for exceptions to apply after the deadlines based on their academic records. Secondly, having heard and observed their peers, students developed prescribed expectations about the socio-cultural and educational realities abroad which may be distant to their realities and coping skills. As a result, it was possible to observe students complaining about the lack of standards in terms of academics, infrastructure and/or the ways and means in which they received support at home and abroad. Thirdly, when students and families learned that they were supposed to carry out preparations for the exchange period on their own, some were surprised, confrontational and stated their expectations in terms of finding housing and applying for a visa/residence permit. In a similar fashion, some students expected instructors to study the list of available courses and make suggestions to them instead of studying the information and paying organized visits to the faculty members to receive academic advice before departure. Fourthly, it was observed that most of the beneficiaries did not become part of organized efforts to provide feedback, reflection and support to their peers after the experience upon return. Considering the importance of peer support in study abroad (Lo, 2006; Yıldırım & İlin, 2017) and an influential example of such efforts (Erasmus Student Networks, ESNs) all over Europe, the results of observations suggest that the program may be observed as a personal service that is taken and completed. Finally, when selecting study destinations, some students determine socio-culturally popular destinations which again points at the direction of seeing study abroad as a touristic time abroad. It was possible to observe students openly stating their preference in being well known and popular destinations.

Having observed students and had discussions with staff serving at different institutions, the feeling of entitlement emerged as an important issue and increasing trend in defining exchange students’ attitudes and behaviors. It is possible to observe students being dissatisfied with one or more aspects such as schools’ academic approach, countries, cities, facilities, registered courses, new bureaucracy, credit/grade transfers, claiming that they deserve a better experience and outcome. But, it is also the attitude that requires attention with which



these issues are being faced and shared. Challenges and unexpected events are only normal and expected aspects of such an international program; however, it should not be forgotten that these moments are also learning and development opportunities rather than “low quality service” related concerns.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper focused on student narratives and observations within the field of Erasmus towards highlighting less visited concepts and challenges vis-à-vis experiences of students from Turkey. The research questions included critical issues in relation to the course of the mobility period and how these issues connected to the targets of the Erasmus program. In particular, the issues can be grouped under the following themes: general project implementation related challenges (targets and outcomes, funding, diversifying participation), consumerist approaches, and politics of difference. The results show that diversifying participation due to financial, academic, and socio-cultural reasons as well as supply-demand may be a serious challenge. From a project implementation aspect, it is also a challenge to align budgetary, educational, and socio-cultural concerns to achieve expected results for individual institutions and participants. Additionally, approaching global education opportunities from a more consumerist angle and experiencing politics of difference at different levels, undermine aspects such as cooperation, inclusion, and mutual understanding.

Studies on youth in Turkey generally underline the dominance of conservative values, benefitting from limited socio-cultural opportunities as well as prejudices towards certain groups (Next Generation Türkiye Report, 2017; Uyan Semerci, Erdoğan & Sandal Önal, 2017). Against this backdrop, every opportunity for experiencing cultural diversity and exchange that leads to self-awareness and management as well as cultural awareness is essential for different parts of the society. For this reason, Erasmus study abroad experience is a critical opportunity and exerts potential to serve for individual and societal development. Also, taking into consideration its importance in terms of expediting visa-residence permit issues as well as provision of financial grants, the opportunity becomes unique and offers advantages. Having discussed former studies at the nexus of European education and training programs and Turkish higher education outlook, one of the main aims of this paper was to reflect on to challenges that have been less visited and studied such as consumerist approaches, politics of difference, and issues related to project implementation towards sustainable change and development. These issues are important to consider otherwise there may be a risk of running exclusive programs to certain groups, promoting difference rather than a mutual understanding and transforming the

experience into a tick on the to-do list rather than an opportunity for academic and personal growth.

De Wit, Hunter, Johnson and Van Liempd (2013) reflect on an outline of the trajectory of studies on the internationalization of education and particularly state their consent with the focus that moves away from internationalization as a set of activities towards seeing it as an encompassing process and concept meaningful for individuals and the society. Such an action involves comprehensive planning, sound cooperation and communication as well as continuous assessment at all levels. The tension between consumerist approaches, politics of difference and project implementation issues and general program targets and outcomes must be acknowledged towards emphasizing the critical role of appropriate student advising and expectation management as well as development of flexible and diverse evaluation-placement methods for efficient and positive program implementation. Firstly, the importance of sound project management at the institutional level is very important since the whole process involves management of different stakeholders (students, families, faculty, staff etc.) and priorities. Secondly, university faculty and staff must be aware of the fact that differences and challenges are not always barriers but may be utilized for learning so there must be mechanisms to make students aware and learn from more negative experiences as well. Thirdly, as much interaction as possible with locals and all students must be sustained at school as well as via various extra-curricular channels. Fourthly, country level program admission/attendance requirements may be reviewed since students have different expectations and achievement levels. Fifth, re-entry/reverse culture shock is an important and understudied dimension of the exchange experience, generally resulting in stress and estrangement, due to a number of personal, social and cultural situations in the aftermath of the experience (Brubaker, 2017; Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014; Young, 2014). Institutions, to better ease the reintegration phase, could provide tools and means for formally and informally evaluating the global education experience which would in turn connect the experience to students' continuing studies, future plans as well as supporting other mobile or immobile students. Last but not the least, internationalization must be reflected in institutional strategy documents and mobility of students should be covered from that perspective, taking into consideration educational aspects and learning outcomes.

Internationalization of higher education is a recent, multi-dimensional and growing phenomenon in scope and size, which in turn must be reflected in scholarly work. This paper points at and explains a number of important less visited themes that influence program implementation and outcomes based on student experiences but also taking into account the national Erasmus program agenda and actors. It is imperative to consid-



er these less visited themes in constructing and responding to program development and management. In a more comprehensive study, students with more diverse backgrounds could be included as well as administrators and faculty at different levels to see the breadth of answers and themes. Studying different international programs would also bring richness to the field in terms of assessing how program dynamics would matter in terms of institutional and individual experiences.

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