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**AĞRI İBRAHİM ÇEÇEN ÜNİVERSİTESİ'NDEKİ ULUSLARARASI
ÖĞRENCİLERİN ADAPTASYONU, ENTEGRASYONU VE
SÜRDÜRÜLEBİLİRLİĞİ**

Adaptation, Integration and Sustainability of International Students at Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen
University

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Adaptation, Integration and Sustainability of International Students at Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University

MİKAİL PUŞKİN - DAVUT DAĞABAKAN

Öz

Makale, 2020-2021 yıllarını kapsayan Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen Üniversitesi'nde öğrenim gören 300'den fazla uluslararası öğrencinin uyum, entegrasyon ve sürdürülebilirlik konularını araştıran bir projenin yöntemini ve bulgularını içermektedir. Bu çalışma, araştırma paradigmlarına (sembolik etkileşimcilik ve etnometodoloji), veri toplama stratejilerine ve analizlerine yönelik üçgenleme yaklaşımına dayanır. Ayrıca, çalışma, uluslararası öğrencileri tüm Türk üniversitelerinin akademik sistemine entegre etmeyi amaçlayan evrensel standartlaştırılmış bir programın kurulmasına öncülük etmektedir. Araştırmanın ön ve ana araştırmanın bulguları, finansal güvence ve yabancı dil bilgisi gibi beklenen kilit konuların yanı sıra, belirgin, hatta bazen daha acil konuların aile durumu, çalışma koşulları, sağlık güvenliği, donanım ve öğrenme materyallerine erişimi ile birlikte dijital okuryazarlık gibi konuları içerdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Diğer bulgular, uluslararası öğrencilerin şeffaf olmayan reklam şemalarının yanı sıra gri işgücü piyasası için kolay hedefler haline geldiğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bazı konular sınırlı kaynaklar ve yöntemsel düzenlemelerle ele alınabilirken, diğerleri uluslararası öğrencilerin küresel pazar çekiciliği açısından yükseköğretim sisteminin yapılandırılma şeklinin temelden yeniden düşünülmesini gerektirir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: uluslararası öğrenciler, öğrenmenin sürdürülebilirliği, uluslararası eğitim, öğrenci sorunları

Abstract

The article covers the procedure and findings of a project investigating the issues of adaptation, integration and sustainability of over 300 international students at Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University, 2020-2021. Relying on the triangulation approach to research paradigms of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, the research acts as a precursor to the creation of a universal standardized program aimed at integrating international students into the academic system of all Turkish universities. The findings reveal that besides the issues of financial security and foreign language knowledge, the salient issues include family situation, working conditions, health security, access to equipment and learning materials, digital literacy. International students become easy targets for the grey labour market and untransparent advertisement schemes. Some of the issues can be addressed with limited resources and procedural adjustments, others require a fundamental rethinking of the way the higher education system is structured in the view of the international student global market attractiveness.

Keywords: international students, learning sustainability, international education, student problems

1. INTRODUCTION

International students' mobility has been the subject of investigation across the globe for many years. Particularly, the research in Turkey understandably focuses on students studying at the major universities in the biggest cities of the country, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Eskisehir, Bursa, Konya (YÖK: Council of higher education, 2019, p. 22). With the aim of increasing international students' inflow to lesser-known locales, current research investigated international students at Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University, - a state university located in the poorest region by GDP per capita (Celebioglu & Dall'erba, 2010, p. 388) to the East of the country. A place with extreme climate and altitude, low population density concurrent with a lack of entertainment industry sites, complex ethnic composition, and conservative mindset of the native population, the university presents a unique setting for investigation. The research was carried out within the BAP¹ project framework. Although initially planned without the expectation of a lasting global pandemic, circumstances have forced us to quickly adapt to the developing circumstances.

The majority of 307 international students came from remote warm countries of Africa and East Asia. The primary interest of this research was to identify their reasons for choosing to come here and stay, their needs and expectations (met and unmet), reasons for abandoning their studies, difficulties they are faced with in their educational, social, and even personal lives. We consider our international students not only in the context of their experiences here, but also as voluntary "cultural ambassadors" (Ergin & Türk, 2010, p. 36). Upon return to their homeland, they share our acquired culture, knowledge, traditions with their compatriots necessitating and justifying not only research, but also adjustment of educational practices and policies of the country.

Being the primary source of ethnocultural diversity, they help local faculty and students develop intercultural sensitivity. They provide direct access to mutual practical information on other cultures and traditions (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016, pp. 1822-1823). On the other hand, studying in a foreign country brings numerous social problems (Kondakci, 2011, p. 573). Foreign living conditions, different food culture, financial problems, difficulties in balancing personal and academic life, unemployment, academic expectations (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016, p. 1823). Foreign language itself can constitute a major challenge to begin with.

Nowadays countries compete to get a wider share in the foreign student market and endeavour to prepare an ideal environment for international students (Kondakci, 2011, p.573). According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2020), one of the most profitable exports of the century is the foreign student market. China alone pays 1 billion US dollars a year for its students' education abroad. The annual income of the USA from its expenditures on education is more than 30 billion dollars (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016, p. 1822-1823).

Even though multiple studies have already been conducted on the subject, (Kağnıcı, 2012), (Kondakci, 2011), (Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Kondakci, & Cakir, 2011), (Snoubar & Celik, 2013), (Bilecen, 2009), there is no country-wide universal framework instructing how to receive, adapt, aid, and integrate foreign students (Çağlar, 1999, p. 134). Each university essentially develops their own approaches and thus, metaphorically speaking, reinventing the wheel. Our hypothesis is that Turkey needs a well-tailored standardized holistic program aimed at hosting international students, which would take into account all potential adjustment and adaptation problems faced by the said students as well as by the people working and studying alongside them and servicing them. We believe that by investigating the experience of foreign students at Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University and sharing the results of the research with academic community, we can provide a foundation to the development of a universal foreign student adjustment program for the whole country.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research falls within the category of case studies (Yin, 2017) relying on the paradigms of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 2008) and ethnomethodology (Lüders, 2004). We believed that foreign students

¹ Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen Üniversitesi Bilimsel Araştırma Projeleri, Project No: YDYO.20.001, 30.06.2020 – 30.12.2021.

come to Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University with their own preconceptions and cultural perspective, acting as a prism through which they see and interact with the local population, their classmates, peers, teachers, and the city administration.

In order to get the full picture of the experience that foreign students go through, it was essential to implement a complex framework of data collection in terms of both the participants and types of approach. Having started our preliminary research in April 2020, we relied on the triangulation approach (Flick, 2004, p. 178) for data sampling methods.

Our data collection methods stemming from the symbolic interactionism approach include semi-structured interviews (Titrek, Hashimi, Ali, & Nguluma, 2016), narrative-biographical interviews (Rosenthal, 2004), focused interviews (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) and surveys (online and face-to-face) (Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The ethnomethodological approach was implemented in the form of ethical participant observation (Hopf, 2004).

Triangulation applied to the methods of analysis allowed us to implement thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016) as the main method of data evaluation, since it allows the patterns to emerge from the data rather than having the researcher approach it with preconceived notions. We have furthermore implemented conversation analysis (Allen & Guy, 2011) and qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004).

Prior to starting the project, we have carried out a preliminary study by distributing a brief questionnaire to the international students, followed by individual semi-structured interviews to get a better understanding of their condition and provide possible immediate aid. The questionnaire included 16 multiple choice questions each supplemented with an option to provide own answer in extended format so as to enable the participants to convey information we might not have considered when formulating the questionnaire. We inquired about the students' impression of the university environment, local students and staff, the necessities they may be lacking, as well as basic data about age, income, employment, marital status and the attitude to education procedures and facilities at the institution all conducted anonymously or with individual-identifying data removed.

It should be noted that due to Covid-19 restrictions and regulations, some interviews were conducted online via various tele-conferencing platforms (such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and Signal). While conducting interviews through a virtual environment reduced the beneficial effect of direct face-to-face communication, it offered a degree of necessary detachment and objectivity in the face of sometimes saddening data revealing traumatic experiences of the participants. Owing to our preliminary research, we have prepared for such possibility during the interviews by relying on previous research specifically focusing on the subject (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2007), (Oppong, 2020), (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2007). On the positive side, the digital medium of communication enabled convenient recording of interviews providing subsequent ease of analysis (Frauendorfer, Mast, Nguyen, & Gatica-Perez, 2014).

Besides the standardized data sampling procedures, we also had the opportunity to gain further insight into the students' lives via our professional interaction as employees of the International Office. As the said interaction followed outside the strictly regulated scope of communication within the research project framework, we did not include it into our formal analysis despite its high informative value.

Further limitations of the study, following from the quarantine measures, resulted in inability of some of the participants to continue involvement due to the restrictions, conducting Covid-19 or falling under individual quarantine restrictions due to sharing accommodation with sick individuals, returning to their home countries or being unable and unwilling to participate further for logistical or personal reasons. This nearly halved the data we expected to obtain based on our initial participants' pool that was accessible for sampling during the preliminary research phase.

It should be noted that while our initial pool consisted of 307 international students, as pandemic restrictions have been tightened further, and the education mode had switched to distance learning, we have lost direct access to the majority of participants. While some participated in all surveys and interviews, others either lost interest or the ability to carry on with participation. One of the researchers

has also conducted Covid-19, which forced him to suspend participation for the duration of recovery period.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The application of diverse data sampling and data analysis strategies enabled us to get a better understanding of the students' main problems and consider ways in which they could be addressed.

By applying thematic coding approach to our data and combining it with qualitative and narrative analyses, we arrived at common themes present in the majority of reflections of our students. By cross-referencing the data of our preliminary research, we were able to identify correlation between the common individual situations and the kinds of issues the students were likely to experience.

It should also be noted that we have unavoidably ran into categories cross-over. For example, the mentioning of financial troubles, requests for student jobs, reflections on ticket prices or financial situation of families left home were grouped into "financial issues" category. However, some of these elements were also categorized as "family issues". In total we have generated 9 categories of issues (themes): "financial", "language", "family", "health", "employment", "education", "equipment" and "computer skills", "religion". We have also correlated salience of the topics for the students based on their background and individual situation. The most significant factors affecting the problems were "marital status" and "country of origin" (which we grouped into rich and poor). This enabled us to further break down the themes into high and low salience.

Factors	Salience			
	Marital Status		Country of Origin	
	Single	Married	Wealthy	Poor
Financial	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Language	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Health	High	High	Moderate	High
Employment	Moderate	High	Low	High
Education	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Equipment	High	High	Low	High
Computer skills	High	High	Low	High
Religion	High	High	Moderate	High
Family	Low	High	Low	High

The results presented in the table are perhaps not surprising were it not for the strongly moderating factor of marital status. It was not a significant factor for the students from the richer countries (they did not bring up their family situation in any of the interviews). To the contrary, it appears to almost entirely define the salience of a whole range of factors (issues) for the students from the poorer countries. Individual comfort and sustainability of learning are bound with positive reflection on the factors of high salience. While some issues can be addressed with moderate resource investment, others require rethinking of the way the university program is structured with relation to international students.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Financial factor needs to be strongly considered during the admission process. While discrimination is not acceptable, students themselves need to be instructed on their expected financial investment for the period of their education. Frequently the students had false expectations regarding both their upcoming expenses and the availability of scholarships and jobs. This situation is gravely aggravated by the financial and emotional pressure from the family they left behind (for poorer countries often a wife and children). This situation not only makes it nearly impossible for the students to devote themselves to education, but also pushes them to seek employment at the grey labour market or even to quit the university. Such pressure is not reported by the students who are either single or are coming from a wealthier country even though pressure to join the grey labour market for the poorer students remains.

Language remains one of the key issues, however, as it is an old and well-known one, solutions exist in the form of offering international students language classes and facilitating closer integration with Turkish students. However, a much more attractive option is offering education in English. This opens up the university to a nearly limitless pool of international students from Asia and Europe alike, a solution requiring serious reform and initiative from the Turkish Ministry of Education.

Health (insurance, medication and medical services convenience) has proven to be an important factor for the poorer international students, however, the issue in itself is bound with grey labour market, where students experienced various medical emergencies without the means to get appropriate healthcare as their employment status fell within the grey area. While this might seem to be an inappropriate behaviour on the students' side, a large number of problems are bound with the grey labour market participation. Two possible solutions exist: providing more legal employment opportunities to students; expelling students for participation in such activities, a condition of which they should be notified upon admission.

Employment remains high on the agenda for the students from poorer countries. We have already touched upon the issue in the previous passages. As a possible solution, we suggest creation of a universal database of student workforce, where employers seeking part-time, fulltime or even one-off employees could easily access the student pool. Employment procedure through such a system should be simplified, possibly tax exempted and backed up legally for both the employer and the employees.

Education surprisingly remained of moderate salience for the students with reflections not being different from those common for Turkish students. We attribute this to challenging environment and the need for the students to focus on other issues besides education (family, health, income).

The theme of equipment is linked with the themes of education and computer skills. Aggravated by Covid-19, the situation where distance education has become the new norm, the need for appropriate equipment has skyrocketed. Most poorer students relied on their smartphones, while access to desktop and laptop PCs remained limited (particularly for those who left the institution to seek employment). This issue can only be addressed by providing access to such equipment whether by expanding library spaces with 24-hour access, creating computer offices in the students' dormitories sector or by providing the students with the opportunity to earn such equipment (renting out older office computers). In this sense, part of the manual labour jobs on campus could be done by students, who would this way earn money or equipment for education without increasing burden on the institution.

Computer skills, at least in their basic form, have become of vital necessity during the pandemic. In this light, computer literacy should either be mandated as a requirement for enrolment or be provided in the form of classes and workshops. Advanced computer skills could also be provided by the university instructors, which could potentially open up virtual labour market to students.

Religion was discussed in every interview, however, without specific negative or positive connotation, rather in comparative light (Turkey and home country). As most of our international students are Muslims, they reported no adaptation or integration difficulties in religious sense.

Family appears to be the most salient factor after finances (for the students from the poorer countries). It is difficult to provide working solutions, besides clear counselling during the admission process so that the students would be fully aware of the financial risks they are placing upon themselves if the

family they leave behind is not financially secure. Besides, the emotional bond can place additional strain on the student, making education highly inefficient.

These factors combined create a complex web of interlinked difficulties, which, together with the students themselves, should be overcome if Turkey is to boost its share of international students import. While some of the pressing issues require serious financial investment, dealing with others requires restructuring of academic programs or creation of new ones geared specifically to accommodate the needs of international students (as well as Turkish students wishing to receive education in a foreign language). Such reform would require boosting language competency of Turkish educators, invitation of foreign educators as well as preparation of a curricula shaped to meet the modern challenges of international higher education sector.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Makale, 2020-2021 yıllarını kapsayan Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen Üniversitesi'nde öğrenim gören 300'den fazla uluslararası öğrencinin uyum, entegrasyon ve sürdürülebilirlik konularını araştıran bir projenin yöntemini ve bulgularını içermektedir. Bu çalışma, araştırma paradigmalarına (sembolik etkileşimcilik ve etnometodoloji), veri toplama stratejilerine ve analizlerine yönelik üçgenleme yaklaşımına dayanır. Ayrıca, çalışma, uluslararası öğrencileri tüm Türk üniversitelerinin akademik sistemine entegre etmeyi amaçlayan evrensel standartlaştırılmış bir programın kurulmasına öncülük etmektedir.

Uluslararası öğrencilerin çoğunluğu Afrika ve Doğu Asya'nın uzak ve sıcak ülkelerinden gelmiştir. Bu araştırmanın temel ilgi alanı, buraya gelmeyi ve kalmayı seçme nedenlerini, ihtiyaçlarını ve beklentilerini (karşılanan ve karşılanmayan), eğitimlerini bırakma nedenlerini, eğitim, sosyal ve hatta kişisel yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları zorlukları belirlemektir.

Projeye başlamadan önce, uluslararası öğrencilere kısa bir anket dağıtarak bir ön çalışma gerçekleştirdik, ardından durumlarını daha iyi anlamak ve olası acil yardım sağlamak için bireysel yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yaptık. Ana veriler daha sonra çeşitli teknikler kullanılarak toplanmıştır: yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, anlatı-biyografik görüşmeler, odaklanmış görüşmeler (çevrimiçi ve yüz yüze) ve anketler. Tamamlayıcı bir önlem olarak, akademik ortamda ve müfredat dışı faaliyetler sırasında etik katılımcı gözlemi de gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Veri analizi yöntemlerinde de üçgenleme yaklaşımı uygulanmıştır. Tematik içerik analizi, verilerden örüntülerin ortaya çıkmasını sağlayan ana veri değerlendirme yöntemi idi. Bununla birlikte, verilerimize konuşma analizi ve nitel içerik analizi de uyguladık. Veri analizi sırasında uluslararası öğrencilerin uyum, eğitim ve yaşam tercihlerini etkileyen dokuz temel faktöre ulaştık: Finansal, Dil, Sağlık, İstihdam, Eğitim, Ekipman, Bilgisayar becerileri, Din, Aile. Bu faktörler arasında en güçlü etkiyi öğrencilerin medeni durumları ve menşe ülkelerindeki ekonomik durum göstermiştir. Bu iki kategori öğrencilerin yaşam tutumlarını ve seçimlerini tamamen farklı bir şekilde şekillendirmiştir.

Daha zengin ülkelerden gelen öğrenciler için çoğu zorluk seviyesi düşük ile orta arasında değişmektedir. Finansal ya da istihdamla ilgili sorularla çok fazla ilgilenmiyorlardı, yeterli bilgisayar becerilerine sahiptiler ve menşe ülkelerinde bıraktıkları ailelerini geçindirme konusunda çok fazla endişe duymuyorlardı. Ayrıca diğer gruplara kıyasla daha az dindardılar. Daha yoksul ülkelere gelen öğrencilerin yaşam tercihleri, geride bir aile bırakıp bırakmadıklarına veya bekar olup olmadıklarına bağlı olarak önemli ölçüde farklılık göstermiştir. Geride bir aile bırakan öğrenciler gelir elde etme konusunda çaresiz kalmış, neredeyse her işi kabul etmiş ve ev sahibi ülkenin diline çok fazla odaklanmamıştır. Aynı zamanda yoksul ülkelere gelen ve ailesi olmayan öğrenciler mali durumları ve işleri konusunda daha az endişeliydi. Ev sahibi ülkenin dilini öğrenmeye daha fazla önem vermişlerdir.

Bulgular hem kamusal hem de kişisel sorunlara ilişkin karışık bir tablo ortaya koymaktadır. Daha varlıklı ülkelere gelen öğrenciler esasen hayatlarını çalışmalarını sonlandırarak kadar zorlaştıracak hiçbir zorlukla karşılaşmazken, daha yoksul ülkelere gelen öğrenciler sürekli bir mücadele halindedir. Burada, kabul sürecinde dikkate alınması zor olan beklenmedik faktör, yoksul bir ülkeden gelen uluslararası öğrencinin ailesinin olup olmamasıdır. Bekar erkek ve kadınlar daha az kaynağa ihtiyaç duymakta, eğitimlerine odaklanmak için daha fazla zamana sahip olmakta, geçimlerini sağlamak için riskli işlere girmeye daha az meyilli olmakta ve ev sahibi ülkenin toplumuyla bağlantı kurmak için daha fazla çaba sarf etmektedir. Aynı zamanda daha yoksul ülkelere gelen ve aileleri olan öğrenciler, ailelerini uzaktan desteklemenin hem mali hem de psikolojik yükünü çekmek zorunda kalmıştır. Bu durum eğitime odaklanmalarını neredeyse imkânsız hale getirmiş ve çoğu zaman eğitimlerini erken sonlandırmalarına yol açmıştır.

Tartışma bölümümüzde, tespit edilen her bir faktör için bir dizi olası çözüm sunuyoruz. Uluslararası öğrencilere kabul edilmeden önce finansal ve kariyer danışmanlığı verilmesi çok önemlidir. Çoğu zaman uluslararası öğrenciler mali imkânlar konusunda abartılı ve gerçekçi olmayan beklentilere sahip olmaktadır. Diğer konular, yerel devlet kurumlarıyla daha sıkı işbirliği gerektirmektedir: yarı zamanlı iş havuzunun oluşturulması, dil ve bilgisayar becerileri için mesleki atölye çalışmaları ve kurslar. Karşılama paketi, net koşulları olan cep telefonu sözleşmelerini de içermelidir. Öğrencilerin eğitimleri için bilgisayarlara erişebilecekleri ve kendi ülkelerindeki akrabalarıyla iletişim kurabilecekleri özel alanlar oluşturulmalıdır. Bu tür amaçlar için eski ekipmanların kullanılması mümkündür, böylece maliyet tasarrufu sağlanır ve çevre üzerindeki baskı azaltılır.

Uluslararası đrenciler, gri iřgücü piyasası ve Őeffaf olmayan reklam programları iin kolay hedef haline gelmektedir. Sorunlardan bazıları sınırlı kaynaklar ve prosedürel düzenlemelerle ele alınabilirken, diđerleri yükseköđretim sisteminin uluslararası đrenci küresel pazarının ekiciliđi göz önünde bulundurularak yapılandırılma Őeklinin temelden yeniden düşünülmesini gerektirmektedir.