Evaluation of the Adaptation Processes of International Students Participating in Educational Mobility Through the Türkiye Scholarships Program

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Türkiye's higher education scholarship programs were rebranded in 2012 under the name "Türkiye Scholarships," the Presidency has since coordinated the program for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). The primary goal of the Türkiye Scholarships is to provide equal opportunities for successful students worldwide to receive scholarship-based education that meets international standards. International students act as ambassadors for shaping Türkiye's global image. Educational mobility supports national development goals and promotes educational diplomacy as a form of soft power. Given its impact on diplomacy, academia, and the economy, understanding international students' experiences is essential. This study therefore examines the adaptation processes of students participating in educational mobility through the Türkiye Scholarships Programme. The study employs a basic qualitative research approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Türkiye Scholarship recipients studying at Sakarya University using an interview form developed based on relevant literature. The data were analyzed through descriptive analysis. The identified themes include: "Reasons for choosing Türkiye," "Students' perceptions of intercultural adaptation—levels of proximity/distance (belonging, integration, alienation)," "Needs, opportunities provided by the program, and expectations." Findings indicate that students adapt quickly to Turkish culture, facilitated by traits such as hospitality, helpfulness, and warmth prevalent in Turkish society. While the program's academic opportunities are generally well-received, students highlighted shortcomings regarding scholarship amounts and accommodation conditions. The study's results can potentially inform the development of practices and policies to enhance understanding of intercultural adaptation processes.

Introduction

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International student mobility is regarded as a key parameter for fostering development in numerous domains, including economic, cultural, and academic progress. The higher education sector, with its research and development capacities, international education centers, joint education programs, global partnerships, and infrastructure for academic mobility, plays a significant role in establishing and strengthening international relations between countries and regions. In the case of Türkiye, scholarships offered to international students serve as a tool to attract talented and motivated individuals, introducing them to Turkish culture and language while promoting these internationally. Education mobility involving international students not only supports developmental goals but also constitutes an integral part of educational diplomacy. Cowan and Arsenault (2008), Peterson (2014), and Khan et al. (2020) describe educational diplomacy as a soft power instrument employed by states in their engagement with the international community. A globally advanced education system—one that integrates into international academic and scientific arenas while meeting the demands of an innovative, high-technology economy—becomes a competitive advantage for modern states in the "global competition for minds." In this context, international student mobility gives states a strategic advantage in strengthening their soft power and fostering global influence.

In 2012, Türkiye's higher education scholarship programs were rebranded as "Türkiye Scholarships," their implementation has since been carried out under the coordination of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). The Türkiye Scholarships program provides a comprehensive support package that includes a monthly stipend, accommodation, tuition fee coverage, health expenses, a one-year free Turkish language course, and contributions towards international travel costs.

Today, many countries consider international student mobility a matter of competition and seek to leverage international education to achieve economic, cultural, and academic benefits (ytb.gov.tr). International students engage in intercultural communication abroad, gain valuable experiences that shape their identities, and return to their home countries with their perceptions and impressions of the host country. These experiences often lead to widespread influence as returning students share their acquired knowledge and perspectives.

Consequently, international students play a crucial role in fostering educational diplomacy, contributing to the host country's emergence as a center of influence in global relations. International education programs within the framework of educational diplomacy provide significant benefits to both international students and host countries, particularly in terms of education, economy, society, and culture. Moreover, disseminating the host country's language and culture is strategically significant, aligning with states' broader policy objectives. At the core of this strategic policy lies the concept of culture as a complex whole encompassing traditions, customs, knowledge, and skills (Güvenç, 1974). According to Humboldt (1995), culture's identity and uniqueness, expressed through language, can only spread effectively through cultural interaction. In this context, international students are essential bridges fostering intercultural connections. Kaya and Kentel (2005) emphasize that such intercultural exchange goes beyond mere interaction; it resists confining cultures to isolated domains and facilitates meaningful cultural exchange. Over time, such interactions can mitigate issues like racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and ethnocentrism, strengthening intercultural relationships. This study examines the adaptation processes of international students participating in educational mobility through the Türkiye Scholarships Programme. The central research question is: "What are the adaptation processes of Türkiye Scholarship recipients?" The research also provides an evaluation based on first-hand data regarding the opportunities offered by the Türkiye Scholarships Programme to international students.

The primary goal of Türkiye's scholarship programs, known as "Türkiye Scholarships" since 2012, is to offer students worldwide the opportunity to study in Türkiye. These programs operate within a scholarship framework, fostering academic achievement and enhancing cultural interaction to bolster Türkiye's influence on the international stage. Nations increasingly recognize higher education programs supported by scholarships as tools of soft power (Atkinson, 2010). Educational diplomacy is being strengthened through educational exchange initiatives and funding provisions that cover living, health, and education expenses (Melissen, 2005). In this context, the Türkiye Scholarships program defines the pillars of its internationalization strategy as follows: 'academic development and interaction,' 'economic growth and solidarity,' 'social and cultural exchange,' and 'advancement of political and diplomatic relations' (turkiyeburslari.gov.tr). Facilitated through exchange programs, educational diplomacy is considered a significant soft power element, enabling nations to shape global perceptions and foster goodwill through non-coercive means. Cowen and Arsenault (2008) highlight that an innovative and technologically advanced economy requires a globalized, integrated education system, which modern states increasingly view as a competitive advantage in the global "competition for minds." Education and culture have become the most effective instruments of soft power, enabling states to build political influence and exert persuasive capabilities (Nye, 2005; Gauttam et al., 2024; Wojciuk et al., 2015). Prominent examples of soft power in higher education include the Fulbright Programme, British Council initiatives, German Academic Exchange Service programs, and Erasmus Mundus projects. These initiatives foster the exchange of education, culture, science, knowledge, and expertise, benefiting the host country and all stakeholders involved.

Educational mobility provides a sustainable path to achieving foreign policy goals, reshaping perceptions of nations, and strengthening international relations (Hong, 2014; Nikolayevich, 2013). International students gradually develop affinity and social capital by learning the host country's language and engaging with its scientific and cultural achievements (Nye, 2005; Peterson, 2014). However, the factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad are critical to understanding the dynamics of international education. Becker and Kolster (2012) identify these factors as promotional campaigns, the availability of international student policies, the reputation of educational institutions, the quality and prestige of education, mutual recognition of diplomas, cost of living and education, safety levels, and the presence of international programs and migration policies. International students are also viewed as pivotal actors in fostering intercultural relations. Through informal and unstructured interactions, they act as carriers of culture without requiring formal diplomatic protocols, thereby minimizing misunderstandings in intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). The interaction between Turkish and international students during their educational experiences in Türkiye further contributes to establishing genuine connections, paving the way for long-term and robust relationships. Türkiye leverages international education as a strategic foreign policy tool, particularly in its immediate region, to expand its influence and gain international community support (Akgün & Çelik, 2023). Recent data shows approximately 301,694 international students in Türkiye, including 15,000 Türkiye Scholarship recipients (turkiyeburslari.gov.tr). At Sakarya University, for instance, 568 Türkiye Scholarship students are currently enrolled (SAÜ, 2024). According to Böhm et al. (2020), five primary factors attract students to specific countries: quality of education, employment opportunities, availability of scholarships and financial support, personal safety, and accessibility of education and lifestyle. The United States remains the top destination for international students, followed by the United Kingdom (39%), Canada (5%), and Australia (3%) (Vaxevanidou, 2018; Miladinovic, 2024). Türkiye, through its international education initiatives, not only competes on this global stage but enhances its cultural diplomacy and regional influence, reinforcing the role of education as a vital element

of its foreign policy strategy (Özoğlu et al., 2012).

Method

Research design

This study examines students' cultural adaptation processes in the Türkiye Scholarships Programme. In line with this purpose, the main research problem is: "What are the adaptation processes of Türkiye Scholarship students?" The sub-problems are as follows:

Research sub-question 1: Why do scholarship students choose Türkiye as an international student?

Research Sub-question 2: How do students perceive intercultural adaptation and cultural closeness/distance levels?

Research Sub-question 3: What are students' needs, opportunities, and expectations regarding the Türkiye Scholarships program?

The study employs a basic qualitative research method. Researchers conducting basic qualitative studies focus on how people interpret their lives, construct their worlds, and assign meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2018). Additionally, qualitative research is a type of study that follows a process aimed at uncovering perceptions, perspectives, and meanings in a natural setting by utilizing various qualitative data collection methods such as interviews or observations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

Working Group

The study sample consisted of 30 students from the Türkiye Scholarships Program enrolled at Sakarya University. The participants were purposefully selected from students registered in the Türkiye Scholarships Program, based on the most accessible environment to the researcher. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), purposive sampling (PS) is a deliberate approach to selecting contexts, materials, or participants that exhibit specific characteristics relevant to the research and can provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the purposive sampling method was employed to determine the sample, while snowball sampling was utilized to reach additional participants through the initial contact. As Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) describe, snowball sampling involves identifying an initial participant relevant to the study who subsequently refers the researcher to other participants with similar characteristics. This process continues until the desired sample size is achieved.

Data collection tools

A seven-question form containing semi-structured open-ended research questions was developed. Prior to administering the semi-structured survey, a brief informational session was provided to the students, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher. According to Patton (2002), in semi-structured interviews, the researcher may add questions depending on the flow of the interview or request further elaboration on responses. Additionally, during the data collection process, the researcher focuses on collecting data within the framework of the topic (Neuman & Robson, 2014). In this context, the interview form applied to the students was designed to be topic-centered. As qualitative research requires, the

interviews carried out possessed three fundamental characteristics, as outlined by Kuş (2007). They were conducted in an interview style aimed at capturing the perspectives of the participants, and the flow of the interviews was flexible.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis is a process in which data obtained from responses to predetermined questions are systematically and explicitly described, interpreted, examined in terms of cause-and-effect relationships, and associated with and made meaningful through themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, p. 39). Qualitative descriptive studies are considered the least "theoretical" within the spectrum of qualitative research approaches, as researchers conducting such studies are the least constrained by pre-existing theoretical and philosophical commitments. These studies do not typically adopt approaches based on specific methodological frameworks and distinct disciplinary traditions, such as phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, or narrative studies (Lowenberg, 1993). Qualitative descriptive analysis, which is related to the processes of extracting relevant data, categories, and themes associated with the research topic, constitutes the analytical process of the study. Categories were formed based on the responses to the open-ended research questions developed using the semi-structured interview technique.

Findings

The categories formed from the responses obtained from the students can be listed as follows:

(1) Reasons for choosing Türkiye
(2) Students' perceptions of intercultural adaptation—levels of closeness/distance
(3) Needs, opportunities, expectations

Demographic information
Participant information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Sample Group

		f	%
Gender	Female	12	39.96
	Male	18	59.94
Class	TÖMER	4	13.32
	1st Grade	7	23.31
	2nd Grade	8	26.64
	3rd Grade	6	19.98
	4th Grade	5	16.65
Nationality	Afghanistan	5	16.65
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	5	16.65
	Kazakhstan	5	16.65
	Yemen	5	16.65
	Indonesia	5	16.65
	Egypt	5	16.65
Total		30	100

Of the 30 students who participated in the study, 12 were female and 18 were male. When the distribution of students by grade level is examined, 4 were TÖMER students, 7 were first-grade students, 8 were second-grade students, 6 were third-grade students, and 5 were fourth-grade

students. Regarding the nationalities of the participants, an equal number of students (5 each) were from Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Yemen, Indonesia, and Egypt.

Reasons why students choose Türkiye

Research sub-question 1: Why do Turkish scholarship students choose Türkiye as an international student?

Table 2: Reasons for choosing Türkiye.

	f
I find the education to be of high quality.	9
Our closeness to Turkish culture	21
A new culture and the desire to make a circle of friends	14
Due to its being a Muslim country	24
The quality of living conditions in Türkiye	10
Total	78*

* Multiple opinions were received.

The number of students who reported finding the education to be of high quality is 9, the number of those who feel a closeness to Turkish culture is 21, the number of those who desire to acquire a new culture and environment is 14, the number of those who consider the fact that Türkiye is a Muslim country to be important is 24, and the number of participants who view the quality of living conditions in Türkiye positively is 10. These data reveal the different expectations and perceptions of students regarding their educational and living experiences in Türkiye. The fact that Türkiye is a Muslim country and the feeling of closeness to Turkish culture play significant roles in the preferences and expectations of the students.

The responses to the question regarding what prior knowledge the participants had about Türkiye and education in Türkiye, as well as what encouraging factors influenced their decision, are as follows: 12 students indicated that they chose Türkiye based on recommendations from many friends who were studying there. 9 students stated that they perceived Türkiye as very modern. Additionally, 9 students mentioned that they chose Türkiye because it would be difficult to go to Europe for education, and they could gain acceptance easily from Türkiye. The statement of S4 summarizes the situation:

S4: *My friend studied here and said a lot that you would be comfortable going to Türkiye; besides, our region is not as modern as Türkiye, and it is challenging to go to Europe for education; it is not that easy to get accepted... (*Kazakhstan, 3rd grade)

Students' Perceptions of Intercultural Adaptation - Levels of Closeness/Distance

Research Sub-question 2: What are the students' perceptions of intercultural adaptation and cultural closeness/distance levels?

Under this category, the following aspects are described: 'Language proficiency and interaction,' 'Perception of closeness to the host culture,' 'Perception of distance from the host culture,' 'Students' perceptions of integration,' and 'Students' perceptions of academic integration.'

Language Proficiency and Interaction

Under the category of language proficiency and interaction, the adequacy of communication skills and academic Turkish language proficiency were posed as two separate questions. 28 students indicated that they found their Turkish language skills to be sufficient. However, 2 participants (1 Egyptian and 1 Indonesian) stated that their Turkish language skills were inadequate, particularly in communication. Overall, the participants expressed that their level of Turkish was suitable for communication. Regarding whether they found their academic Turkish language proficiency sufficient, 24 participants stated that they struggled while receiving education in Turkish and did not consider themselves adequate.

Perception of Closeness to the Host Culture

Table 3: Areas of Closeness to the Host Culture.

	f
Hospitality	12
Kindness/warmth	7
Islamic culture	14
Eating and drinking habits	12
Total	45*

* Multiple opinions were received.

Islamic culture is prioritized among the topics perceived as close to the host culture. The ability to comfortably perform their religious practices and rituals removes the barrier to their cultural alienation due to the similarity of the religion-based cultural background. Additionally, 7 students expressed that values such as kindness, warmth, and sensitivity in Turkish society are elements of closeness. Furthermore, 12 students indicated that similarities in eating, drinking habits, and foods are also primary factors in establishing cultural closeness. Hospitality is also seen as a characteristic that shares commonalities with their countries (12). Students stated that these shared cultural features facilitate their connection to the host culture.

S1: *The fact that it is a Muslim country is very comforting for me and my friends; I feel a strong sense of closeness to this country; it feels like home to us.* (Bosnian, 2nd grade)
Perception of Distance from the Host Culture

Table 4: Perception of Distance from the Host Culture.

	f
I do not feel the distance	19
Local students are reluctant to make friends	7
Some people may show negative attitudes	4
Total	30

Students highlighted that the introductory events organized during the first weeks in the university environment were effective in the communication and adaptation process. Among the participants, 19 indicated that they did not feel distant from local students, while 7 expressed that local students were reluctant to form friendships. These findings suggest that social relationships between international students and local students are generally evaluated positively. However, the few students emphasizing the reluctance of local students to form friendships indicates that social integration can be challenging in some cases. This situation underscores the importance of increasing intercultural interactions and implementing supportive programs that facilitate integrating local students with international students.

Additionally, 4 students reported that some service providers, such as vendors, taxi drivers, and shop owners, exhibited negative attitudes toward them.

S6: *"My friend and I took a taxi, and as soon as we started talking, we were treated harshly; this happened a few more times, and we thought it was because we were foreigners."* (Afghan, 3rd grade)

S9: *"I wanted to join a sports club, but after not seeing good attitudes, I gave up."* (Afghan, 2nd grade)

S15: *"A few times, my friend and I felt uncomfortable while sitting in a café and wanted to leave; the waiter and the owner made us feel bad, even though they did not say anything directly."* (Yemeni, 3rd grade)

S24: *"When I first arrived, my Turkish wasn't good, and I encountered negative attitudes while trying to buy something in some shops. Now it's better, but it seems like some shop owners treat us differently; I haven't experienced anything too serious, though."* (Indonesian, 3rd grade)

Students' Perceptions of Integration

Table 5: Activities Conducted for Adaptation.

	f
I'm not doing anything	20
I focus on Turkish	7
I stopped wearing local clothes	3
Total	30

Among the students participating in the study, 20 indicated that they did not make any special efforts during their cultural adaptation processes, while 7 stated that they focused more on learning Turkish. Additionally, 3 students mentioned that they had stopped wearing local clothing. Overall, the students have no distinct approaches to cultural adaptation strategies. Those who reported not wearing local clothing initially wore it and attracted attention but later felt uncomfortable and stopped wearing it. Generally, a significant portion of the students noted that they experienced a rapid adaptation process and emphasized that it did not require considerable effort.

S4: *"I do not have any effort to adapt to Türkiye; our cultures are close. Some things are different, but this place has been familiar to me since childhood, even if I had not come."* (Kazakhstan, 3rd grade)

S30: *"I knew* Türkiye *from TV series; it's easy to live here. There is no need to do anything to adapt."* (Egypt, 2nd year)

Students' Perceptions of Academic Integration

Table 6: Perception of Academic Competence.

	f
The lessons were not difficult for me	12
I focus on Turkish	28
I had a hard time in the lessons	18
Total	48*

*multiple opinions were received

According to the data presented in Table 6, students' perceptions of academic competence vary. Twelve participants indicated that the courses did not challenge them, while 28 mentioned that they focused on learning Turkish. Conversely, 18 participants reported that they struggled significantly in their classes. These results reveal that students experience different difficulty levels and adaptations in their academic experiences. The high emphasis on learning Turkish suggests that the language is crucial to academic success. However, the notable rate of struggle in courses indicates that some students face challenges related to language or content during their adaptation process.

It is noteworthy that those who reported difficulties in their courses are primarily enrolled in verbal fields (S1, S2, S4, S8, S12, S15, S16, S17, S18, S19, S20, S21, S22, S24, S26, S28, S29, S30). The data emphasize the importance of Turkish language proficiency, especially in verbal disciplines.

Needs, Opportunities, Expectations

Research Sub-question 3: What are students' needs, opportunities, and expectations regarding the Türkiye Scholarships program?

This program, initiated in 2012, seeks to enhance international educational collaboration by offering comprehensive scholarships that encompass tuition fees, accommodation, and health insurance, attracting thousands of applications from around the globe annually. Overall, students emphasize that the Türkiye Scholarships Program provides strong support in both economic and social aspects.

Level of Needs Fulfillment by the Türkiye Scholarships Program

Table 7: Fulfillment of Financial Needs by the Türkiye Scholarships Program.

	f
I think it meets my needs completely.	22
Partially covered	4
Inadequate to meet our needs	4
Total	30

The data presented in Table 7 reflect students' opinions regarding the Türkiye Scholarships Program's level of fulfillment of financial needs. Twenty-two students indicated that the scholarship fully meets their needs, while 4 stated that they are partially met. Another 4 expressed that the program falls short in addressing their financial requirements. These findings suggest that the Türkiye Scholarships Program broadly provides adequate financial support;

however, some participants report deficiencies.

Students who indicated that their needs are met, partially met, or unmet often complain about the high cost of living in Türkiye. Common concerns include the high cost of basic living expenses and accommodation, as well as the limited availability and high expense of social activities. The views of the few participants who raised these concerns highlight the importance of reviewing the support provided by the scholarship and making improvements while considering individual differences. On the other hand, it appears that the program generally achieves high satisfaction in meeting students' needs.

Opportunities Provided by the Türkiye Scholarships Program

Table 8: Opportunities Offered to Students by the Türkiye Scholarships Program

	f
I made friends from different nationalities	22
I improved my language	18
I got to know Turkish culture more closely	28
I gained life experience in a developed country (TR)	27
My self-confidence increased	21
I think I studied at a good university	26
I am considered important in my own country	18
Total	160*

*multiple opinions were received

Students' experiences in Türkiye yield benefits across various dimensions. Twenty-two participants indicated that they formed friendships with individuals from different nationalities, while 18 reported improvements in their language skills. The number of participants who stated they became more familiar with Turkish culture was 28, representing one of the highest proportions, and 27 participants expressed that they gained living experience in a developed country like Türkiye. Additionally, 21 participants noted an increase in their self-confidence, 26 believed they received an education at a good university, and 18 felt their experiences were valued in their home countries. These findings demonstrate that the Türkiye Scholarships Program provides academic gains and positively affects students' social, cultural, and personal development. In particular, the opportunities to form friendships with individuals from diverse backgrounds and to learn more about Turkish culture appear to strengthen students' intercultural interactions. Furthermore, aspects of individual development, such as increased self-confidence and the experience of living in a developed country, can be considered significant gains that may contribute to students' future careers and personal lives.

Students' Expectations from the Türkiye Scholarships Program

Table 9: Student Expectations from the Türkiye Scholarships Program.

	f
Economic support should be increased	30
Housing support should be provided	7
Turkish course should be more comprehensive	22
I have no expectations; they are met	2
Total	61*

*multiple opinions were received

Students' expectations and suggestions regarding the Türkiye Scholarships Program focus on various areas. All participants (30) indicated that economic support should be increased, while 7 students emphasized the importance of providing accommodation assistance. The number of those who believe that Turkish language courses should be made more comprehensive is 22. In contrast, only 2 students stated that their expectations were met and had no additional requests. These findings suggest that the existing support provided by the program significantly contributes to meeting students' needs; however, improvements are necessary, particularly in areas such as economic support, accommodation assistance, and the scope of Turkish language courses. The fact that all participants expressed a need for financial support highlights that this is one of the most critical areas for students. Additionally, the requests for more comprehensive Turkish language courses underscore the importance of developing language skills for students' academic and social integration processes. These results emphasize the need to create policies based on student needs to make the program more effective.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study evaluates the cultural adaptation processes of international students participating in the Türkiye Scholarships Program and examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities these students face during their transition to life in Türkiye. Challenges encountered by international students include language barriers and cultural adjustment issues, all of which can negatively impact their academic performance and mental health. To alleviate these challenges, the Türkiye Scholarships Program offers robust support mechanisms, such as orientation programs, community-building initiatives, and intercultural contact programs. These support mechanisms help students build social connections and enhance their understanding of Turkish culture (tyb.gov.tr). While the program has made significant progress in supporting international students, ongoing research is needed to develop adaptation strategies in higher education environments and to understand the complexities of students' experiences better.

As a program centered on educational diplomacy, the Türkiye Scholarships Program continues to expand its scope progressively, reinforcing its role in fostering international academic and cultural exchange. In this context, educational diplomacy (Millar et al., 2025) refers to the strategic use of education to foster international relations, cultural understanding, and collaborative engagement among nations. Educational diplomacy stands out for its role in strengthening global connectivity and cooperation, as well as supporting intercultural understanding. As a concrete manifestation of educational diplomacy, scholarship programs facilitate academic mobility and foster cross-cultural interactions. According to Knight (2022), educational diplomacy also contributes to cultural diplomacy. It can enhance relationships and mutual understanding between societies while counterbalancing threats such as rising nationalism, populism, and geopolitical tensions. Moreover, educational diplomacy can facilitate scientific collaborations and the development of science diplomacy. Such a relationship can help parties navigate sensitive political disputes by focusing on scientific or technological questions and cooperation. On the other hand, Gauttam et al. (2024) stated that specific key criteria must be met for education to be utilized as a tool of soft power on an international scale. These criteria are as follows: (i) the internationalization of higher education, (ii) the utilization of reputed institutions and the enhancement of education quality, (iii) the development of strategies to promote cross-border student mobility, (iv) aligning educational programs with foreign policy objectives, and (v) improving students' experiences in host countries and integrating these criteria positions education as a powerful tool within a country's soft power strategies. Gauttam et al. (2024) highlight that addressing these elements collectively

can significantly enhance a nation's influence on the global stage.

Among these criteria, the fifth, "enhancing students' experiences in host countries," closely aligns with the objectives of this study. Within this framework, interviews conducted with international students participating in the Türkiye Scholarships Program have provided valuable insights into their adaptation processes in Türkiye, perceptions of cultural proximity and distance, interaction dynamics, and the opportunities afforded by the scholarship program.

The interviews involved 30 students from six countries, revealing the reasons for their choice of Türkiye, their perceptions of intercultural adaptation, and their needs, opportunities, and expectations. The reasons students chose Türkiye include Türkiye is a Muslim country, where many students feel a cultural affinity; the quality of education, which is perceived as high; a desire for the cultural experience; and favorable living conditions. This aligns with Kondakçı (2011), who identified key factors for choosing Türkiye as the quality of academic institutions, the desire to explore different cultures, Türkiye's geopolitical position, and its historical heritage. Similarly, Mete & Özgenel (2021) noted motivations such as obtaining quality education, benefiting from scholarship opportunities, experiencing different cultures, political uncertainties in their home countries, affection for Türkiye, and job opportunities. Moreover, Enterieva & Sezgin (2018) highlighted that students from Turkic Republics chose Türkiye for quality education and a promising future and career. Students view Türkiye as a country offering quality education compared to their home countries, and despite some challenges, they also find the quality of life to be high (Radmard, 2017). Tamtekin Aydın (2021) noted that particularly, students from Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen cited fleeing war conditions and seeking refuge in Türkiye. These students said they did not consider other options given their dire circumstances and felt extremely grateful to be alive and in Türkiye. In recent years, student mobility has been observed to increase in Turkish universities, primarily from countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa. Due to negative attitudes toward Muslims in many countries, students are seeking a country where they feel secure. Students also mentioned the influence of their families on their country selection. Given Türkiye's supportive policies, shared religious and socio-cultural similarities with these countries and encouraging parental attitudes, Türkiye is increasingly becoming a preferred destination for international students. The findings of this study align with these trends and insights.

Students' perceptions regarding intercultural adaptation constitute one of the most critical parameters of the study. In this context, language and culture are two fundamental elements that mutually shape each other. While language serves as a tool for transmitting cultural values and communication, culture determines language usage patterns and meanings. Language becomes essential for facilitating students' interactions and supports their social and academic integration. According to Al-Krenawi & Al-Krenawi (2022), language is the most significant factor affecting a student's relationship with the host culture. The limited interaction between local people and international students due to language barriers makes it difficult for students to feel secure when they arrive in a new place. In the study, students perceive their knowledge of Turkish daily as sufficient, but they struggle academically with the language. In this regard, as Ercan (2012) noted, language skills are related to academic coordination, including attending classes, working in groups, asking questions, and expressing ideas verbally or in writing. The lack of language skills among students can hinder their motivation, deprive them of social activities, and distance them from the host culture. As Lin and Hongtao (2017) point out, Nye, one of the theorists of soft power, states that a nation creates attraction through its language and culture. Unlike hard power based on economic and military strength, soft power relies on persuasion rather than coercion and incentives, with this attraction also stemming from the

nation's values and foreign policy.

Islam culture is prioritized in the category of perceived proximity to the host culture. Hospitality, culinary culture, kindness, and warmth are other perceptions of cultural proximity. This allows students to interact comfortably with the host culture. Undoubtedly, as stated by Inglehart et al. (2004), the less the norms and values shared by people in one country differ from those in another, the smaller the cultural distance becomes. This, in turn, plays a significant role in the decision-making process of international students.

Similarly, a study by Topal and Tauscher (2020) reported that international students did not experience cultural pressure in Türkiye and could practice their beliefs freely. This finding highlights the importance of a culturally inclusive environment in shaping the experiences and decisions of international students. Undoubtedly, the significance of daily experiences for students is substantial. At this point, the study by Wu et al. (2015) on international students in the United States is noteworthy. Students reported experiencing social isolation, loneliness, and prejudice during their learning processes in American society. In research conducted by Lee & Rice (2007), Middle Eastern, Asian, Indian, and Latin American students studying in the U.S. were found to be subjected to verbal and physical discrimination.

In Türkiye, responses regarding the perceived distance from the host culture indicate that 19 students do not feel distanced from local students, while 7 express that local students are reluctant to establish friendships. Türel (2021) found that international students with religious or linguistic unity adapt more quickly to the culture and adopt integration strategies. Additionally, it was noted that these students sometimes face discriminatory behaviors or attitudes from city residents, which the researcher attributed to the small population structure and the low number of incoming international students. Similarly, Tozan (2019) observed that YTB scholarship international students experience both gains and problems related to culture, language, religion, ethnicity, and social environment. Some Arab and African students reported facing prejudiced and exclusionary treatment due to their religion and ethnicity. In this study, a few students similarly mentioned experiencing negative attitudes from service providers such as vendors and taxi drivers. Many respondents indicated that they did not engage in any activities aimed at integrating into the host community. Students emphasizing the proximity of their cultures stated that they are familiar with Türkiye and do not feel foreign. Overall, there appear to be no significant cultural adaptation strategies among students. Cultural adaptation strategies are incorporated into countries' international programs as a key component of educational diplomacy. As Bochner (1981) and Gudykunst (2004) highlighted, educational diplomacy, mainly through international programs, plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural competence. This competence enables the development of individuals who embrace other cultures and maintain their ethnic identity. Such individuals have the potential to cultivate mediating personalities, significantly contributing to global peace and mutual understanding.

In the category concerning the needs, opportunities, and expectations related to the Türkiye Scholarships Program, interesting data emerged. Twenty-two students stated that the scholarship fully meets their needs. Four students indicated that it only partially meets their needs, while another four expressed that the program is inadequate in addressing their financial requirements. These results suggest that the Türkiye Scholarships Program generally provides adequate financial support, although it does not fully meet the expectations of some participants. On the other hand, the issue of accommodation is noteworthy. This issue has also been highlighted and discussed in the works of Altybaeva (2020) and Yontar (2019). The government provides each international student studying under the Türkiye Scholarships

Program free accommodation in dormitories. Therefore, a more detailed evaluation is needed to understand why accommodation is perceived as a problem. In the same study, graduate students reported inadequate conditions for studying in dormitories. Students have complained about the high cost of living in Türkiye. The opinions of a small number of participants who stated that the support is insufficient to suggest that the scholarship program needs improvement and should consider individual differences. However, it is evident that the program is generally successful in meeting students' needs and provides high satisfaction. Students mentioned various benefits of studying in Türkiye through the program, which has contributed to their social and individual development. In research conducted by Aras & Mohammad (2019), most students expressed satisfaction with the program. In the same study, 65% of students said they would recommend studying in Türkiye to others. The findings indicate that students in the Türkiye Scholarships program are open to Turkish culture and values and are likely to promote Türkiye upon returning to their countries. Therefore, according to Budak (2021), international students play a significant role in transforming their countries, making the selection of high-capacity students a critical consideration.

The Türkiye Scholarships Program offers significant opportunities for international students. However, it has become clear that students need more support with living expenses and language assistance. All students have voiced the demand for an increase in the scholarship amount. Additionally, requests to expand Turkish language courses highlight the importance of language proficiency for students' academic success and social integration processes.

Students remaining in Türkiye during their university education through the Türkiye Scholarships adopt Turkish culture and local customs, effectively promoting Turkish culture abroad. All programs and projects carried out by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities strengthen bilateral relations with other countries and facilitate progress in economic, social, and cultural collaborations, enhancing educational diplomacy. In this context, any arrangements to support students' social and academic integration will strengthen these programs. Therefore, it is recommended that advisory and guidance units work actively to increase support mechanisms for the monitoring of students.

This study employs a descriptive methodology to examine the adaptation processes of international students. However, it does not aim to explore the relationship between cultural adaptation and various variables. Future research examining cultural adaptation with different variables could provide significant contributions to the literature. Such studies would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the adaptation processes of international students and support the development of strategies to facilitate these processes.

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Data availability*:* The data of this study can be shared upon a justified request.

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