



Academic Integration of Kilis 7 Aralık University's International Students into the Higher Education System*

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Abstract

Understanding international university students' integration levels and problems contribute to filling a huge vacuum in the research on refugees, which frequently overlooks the experiences of specific groups. Similarly, higher education policies rarely pay attention to or include the perspectives of international students. As a result, by considering the experiences of K7AU's international students -the majority of whom are refugees- the current study will shed light on the problems they face. This paper presents the findings of a research project (BAP Project: .22.001) intending to evaluate how effectively international students have integrated into Kilis 7 Aralık University (K7AU) and the Turkish higher education system. It also tries to determine the students' challenges and offer solutions thereunto. Considering the scope of the Council of Higher Education's internationalization mission and vision, the research aims to establish the academic integration levels of international students studying at K7AU and identify the obstacles they have encountered. A survey devised for this project is used to determine the academic integration levels of the students, and the data has been evaluated using the SPSS program. The study also intends to give various recommendations based on quantitative assessments and relevant findings. Overall, by considering the experiences of international students of the K7AU the study aims to contribute to the improvement of relevant higher education policies.

Key Words: International students of Kilis 7 Aralık University, Academic integration, Problems, Challenges, Solutions

Kilis 7 Aralık Üniversitesi'nde Okuyan Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Yükseköğretim Sistemine Akademik Entegrasyonu

Özet

Uluslararası öğrencilerin entegrasyon düzeylerini ve sorunlarını anlamak, akademik alanda sıklıkla gözden kaçırılan mülteciler üzerine yapılan araştırmalarda büyük bir boşluğu doldurmaya katkıda bulunacaktır. Benzer bir şekilde, yükseköğretim politikaları uluslararası öğrencilerin bakış açılarını nadiren dikkate almakta ve içermektedir. Bu çalışma, Kilis 7 Aralık Üniversitesi'nde (K7AU) okuyan uluslararası öğrencilerin üniversiteye ve Türk yükseköğretim sistemine ne kadar etkili bir şekilde entegre olduklarını ölçmeyi amaçlayan bir araştırma projesinin (BAP Projesi: .22.001) bulgularını sunmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışma, uluslararası öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları tespit etmeye ve buna yönelik çözümler

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sunmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, çalışmanın temel amacı YÖK'ün uluslararasılaşma misyon ve vizyonunun kapsamını dikkate alarak K7AU'da öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrencilerin akademik entegrasyon düzeylerini belirlemek ve karşılaştıkları engelleri ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu proje için hazırlanan anket öğrencilerin akademik entegrasyon düzeylerini belirlemek için kullanılmış ve veriler SPSS programı kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışma nicel değerlendirmelere ve ilgili bulgulara dayanarak çeşitli önerilerde bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, K7AU uluslararası öğrencilerinin deneyimleri dikkate alarak, karşılaştıkları sorunlara ışık tutmayı ve onlara yönelik ilgili politikaların geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kilis 7 Aralık Üniversitesi Uluslararası Öğrencileri, Akademik Entegrasyon, Sorunlar, Zorluklar, Çözümler

Introduction

Higher education institutions (hence referred to as HEIs) in Europe and other regions place an increasing amount of importance on the internationalization of higher education (IoHE) (Hudson, 2016; Knight, 2004). International students are a significant aspect of internationalization policies and practices of tertiary education worldwide. They comprise one of the main objective and assessment criteria of universities that argue to be international.

Internationalization is seen as the magic key to achieving the vast expansion of HE systems, particularly through increasing the number of international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Hudson, 2016). Looking at the expansion of higher education enrollments throughout the course of the 20th century, Schofer and Meyer (2005) found that nations with strong ties to the global system have higher enrolment growth. Similarly, as Türkiye's economy has been integrated into the global system since the 1980s, the aims and scope of the internationalization of its universities have undergone significant transformations, at a time called the neoliberalisation of Turkish higher education by academics working in this field (Birler, 2012; İnal & Akkaymak, 2012). However, Türkiye's internationalization policy and its effects on university administrations, academics, and students have yet to be thoroughly studied in light of the recent growth of Turkish HEIs (Günay, 2011; Özoğlu et al, 2016) and rising numbers of international students in the last two decades (Ergun & Kondakci, 2021; Şeremet, 2015).

This study primarily aims to investigate the status of international students at Kilis 7 Aralık University (henceforth K7AU). Using a survey of 241 international university students, carried out in the academic year 2021-2022, the study seeks to elaborate on the prospects of their integration into Turkish higher education system. Our participants come mainly from Syria and a variety of other countries such as Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Congolese, Moroccan, and Somalia. Therefore, the profile of international students will be compared to the national data, and the survey findings will be presented and evaluated vis-a-vis the national data and research looking at the status of international students at the tertiary level. The survey mainly aims to understand the demographic structures of K7AU's international students and their economic situation. In addition, it aims to examine and evaluate K7AU's international students' social integration level and their university life.

In what follows we will first present the background of the study, followed by an elaborating section on the numbers of international students in Türkiye and Kilis. The third part provides further information regarding the data and the method. And the last part of the study presents the main findings of the survey. The article concludes with several suggestions for policy makers, university administration, and international students studying at Turkish higher education institutions.

Background: International Students

Students who continue their education at various levels in a different country other than the country where they were born or raised are defined as international students (Alkın, 2020). However, there is hardly a consensus on the terminology regarding students who study abroad.

The most frequently used ones are foreign students (yabancı öğrenci), international students (uluslararası öğrenci), global student (küresel öğrenci), cross border student (sınır ötesi öğrenci) and overseas student (denizaşırı öğrenci (Altbach & Engberg, 2014; Cubillo et al, 2006; Harris et al, 2002; Kell & Vogl, 2012; Varghese, 2008). In Türkiye, while “yabancı öğrenci” is used most frequently in parallel with the legal terminology, “misafir öğrenci” or “uluslararası öğrenci” are also used commonly by various universities to refer to their students who do not have Turkish citizenship.

In the years leading up to the turn of the twenty-first century and the first quarter of the twenty-first, there was an increase in the quantity of international student mobility as a result of the globalization process. Internationalization of higher education has grown in significance in both higher education policies and practices of most nations due to the rise in the number of students who want to study in places other than their home country (Yardım et al, 2018). The top five destinations for students looking to study abroad are the United States, Australia, England, Germany, and Canada, according to statistics from the report Education at a Glance 2021 (OECD, 2021). Türkiye has made some progress toward integrating international students into its educational system, especially since the 1980s when the country was incorporated into the global economic market thanks to its EU bid. The Republic of Türkiye up to the 2010s adopted a strategy based on the notion of sending students overseas and accepting more foreign students (Alkın, 2020). Currently, many Turkish universities, if not all of them, can be said to aspire to internationalization (Efe & Özer, 2022). By increasing the possibility that Turkish graduates continue their studies on the continent, Türkiye's EU bid, notably the Bologna process, plays a major part in making this goal a reality (İnal & Akkaymak, 2012).

Additionally, the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) works with the EU Framework Programs to internationalize research fundings and step up the development of project agendas with a focus on the market (Birler, 2012). In this respect, it is plausible to argue that up until the 2010s, Türkiye adopted a strategy focused on the notion of sending students abroad rather than accepting foreign students and making its HE system more appealing to international students (Alkın, 2020). Nevertheless, both the Great Student Exam (BP) created for the citizens of the Turkic Republics that gained their independence in the area as a result of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 and the Foreign Student Exam (YÖS) organized by the Higher Education Institution (YÖK) since 1981 can be considered as precursors to the systematic policies to be adopted in Türkiye in the ensuing years. In order to oversee and carry out all procedures about foreign students who would be enrolled in academic programs in the Republic of Türkiye, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı) was founded in 2010. Since 2012, scholarships and bursaries for higher education students have been grouped under the term Türkiye Scholarships (Özkan, 2020). Thus, there has been a significant increase in the number of students who want to study in the Republic of Türkiye.

In 2014 a report entitled “Growth, Quality, Internationalization: A Road Map for Higher Education in Turkey” was published by Gökhan Çetinsaya (2014), then the president of the YÖK, in which attracting more international students is one of the main goals of the internationalization of the Turkish HE. However, the real increase in the number of international students in Türkiye came with the mass exodus of Syrians from Syria since 2011 and particularly after 2014, which was dubbed as the “forced internationalization of higher education” by Ergin and de Wit (2020). The presence of Syrian students in all levels of the Turkish education system, including tertiary education, has thus marked the discussions and research on the internationalization of Turkish HE. This is especially important in our case because Kilis is densely populated by Syrians, who are under temporary protection according to Law 6458, and the number of international students at the K7AU is dominated by Syrian

university students. In what follows we will present some preliminary data on the current status of international students in Türkiye and Kilis.

International Students in Türkiye and Kilis

The Council of Higher Education portal's Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) provides the public with the most complete and extensive information on students continuing their education at the associate, undergraduate, and graduate levels in the Republic of Türkiye. According to the information released for the 2020–2021 academic year, 224,048 international students are enrolled in State, Foundation, and Foundation Vocational Schools to pursue higher education in Türkiye. Among these 81,050 are females and 142,998 are males. The gender difference is explained by the high number of Syrian university students (Table 1) as well as their gender-specific problems such as post-war trauma, a lack of resources, and security (Barın 2015; Çakır 2017; Hohberger 2018). According to the data released by the YÖK, a total of 47,482 Syrian students are enrolled at higher education in universities in Türkiye in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Table 1: Number of International Students Continuing their Higher Education in the Republic of Türkiye by Their Nationality (2020-2021 Academic Year)

No	Country/Nationality	Number of Students
1	The Syrian Arab Republic	47482
2	Republic of Azerbaijan	23770
3	Turkmenistan	19384
4	Republic of Iraq	14799
5	Islamic Republic of Iran	11223
6	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	8428
7	Federal Republic of Somalia	8141
8	Republic of Yemen	5829
9	Arab Republic of Egypt	5821
10	Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	5317
11	Federal Republic of Germany	4959
12	Republic of Bulgaria	4432
13	State of Palestine	3935
14	Federal Republic of Nigeria	3174
15	Islamic Republic of Pakistan	2948
16	Republic of Kazakhstan	2909
17	Greek Republic	2827
18	Kingdom of Morocco	2531
19	Republic of Uzbekistan	2421
20	Republic of Indonesia	2252

Anadolu University, Gaziantep University, Istanbul University, Harran University, and Karabuk University stand out in terms of the number of Syrian international students they host.

For the 2020-2021 academic year, the top ten universities hosting the most international students in Türkiye are Eskişehir Anadolu University, Karabük University, Istanbul University, Bursa Uludağ University, Istanbul Aydın University, Bahçeşehir University, Altınbaş University, Atatürk University, Ondokuz Mayıs University, and Trakya University. This reveals that state universities are as competitive as foundation universities in attracting international students.

Figure 1: Number of International Students in Higher Education (Republic of Türkiye)

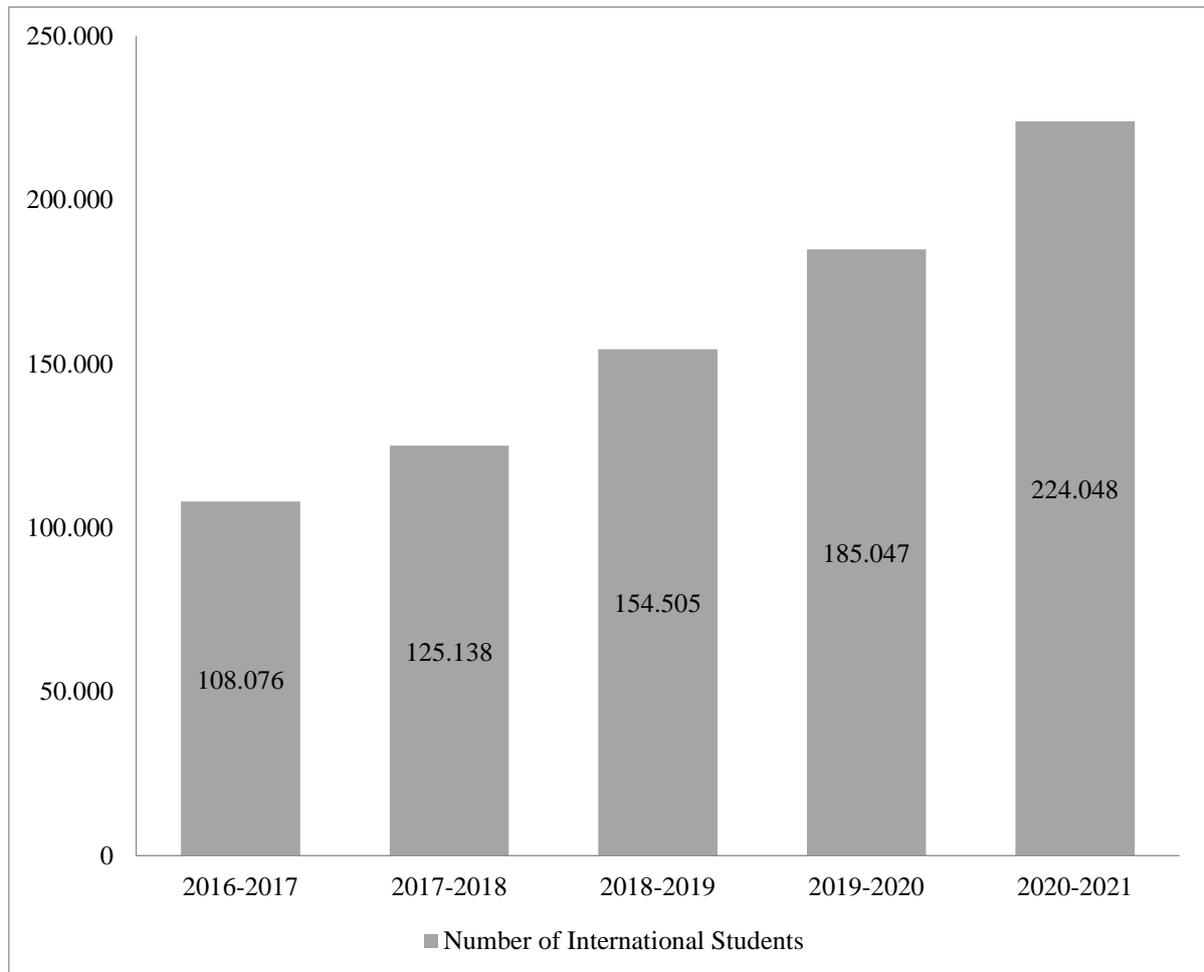
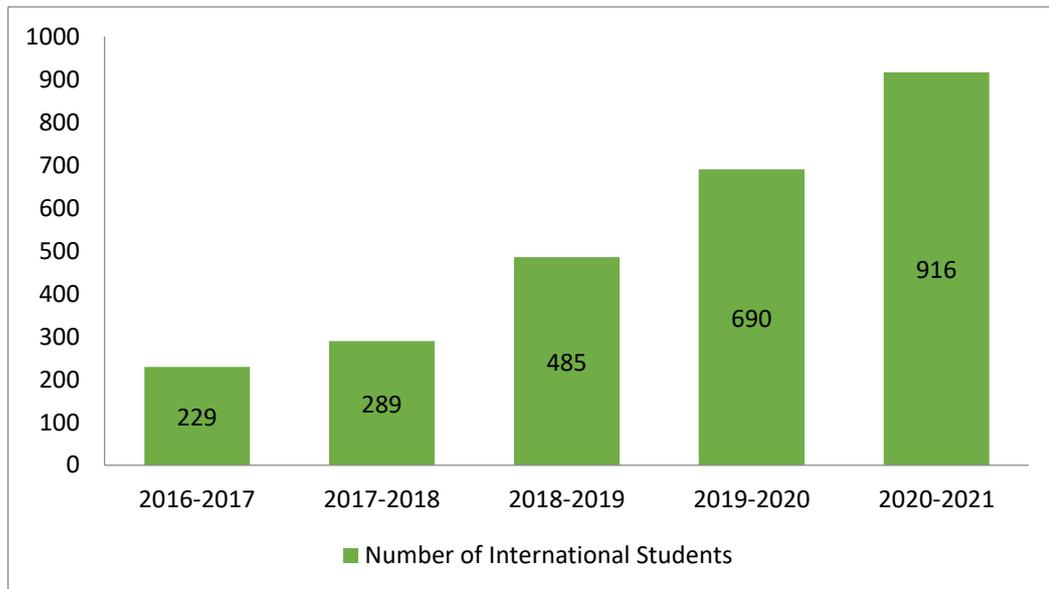


Figure 1 reveals a steady increase in the number of international students, a result brought about by the aforementioned development in Turkish HE. The majority of these students are enrolled at undergraduate levels of the Turkish HE system as shown in Table 2. **Table 2:** Number of International Students Continuing Their Higher Education in the Republic of Türkiye by Education Levels (2020-2021 Academic Term)

Education-Training Level	Number of Students
Associate degree	27.944
Undergraduate	158.538
Graduate	27.795
PhD	9.771
Total	224.048

According to the YÖK statistics, Kilis 7 Aralık University is among the top twenty universities that host the highest number of Syrian students among higher education institutions. The data on international students registered at K7AU show that the university has 916 students from 13 different countries, representing a steady increase since 2016. Citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic compose the largest group with several 669 among 916 international students (Figure 2). In addition, international students from different geographies and cultures such as Sri Lanka Democratic Socialist Republic, Malawi, Morocco, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Egypt, Palestine, Cameroon, Congo, Somalia, Niger, and Turkmenistan prefer Kilis 7 Aralık University.

Figure 2: Number of International Students Continuing Their Higher Education at Kilis 7 Aralık University



The following table shows that the university has attracted more students who pursue an academic career in administrative sciences. Graduate students constitute

only a small portion (4%) of the total number of international students, four times less than the proportion at the national level (16%).

Table 3: Distribution of International Students Studying at Kilis 7 Aralık University by Educational Units (2020-2021 Academic Term)

Kilis 7 Aralık University-Education Unit	Number of International Students
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences	201
Faculty of Arts and Sciences	102
Faculty of Engineering and Architecture	97
Vocational School of Technical Sciences	87
Faculty of Theology	82
Kilisli Muallim Rifat Faculty of Education	80
Vocational School of Social Sciences	80
Vocational School of Health Services	66
Vocational School of Tourism and Hotel Management	43
Graduate Schools	39
Yusuf Şerefoğlu Faculty of Health Sciences	30
Faculty of Agriculture	9
Total	916

Data and Method

Following a stratified sampling method, we collected survey data from 3 vocational schools, 5 faculties, and 1 graduate school (Vocational School of Social Sciences (10%), Vocational School of Technical Sciences (0,4%), Vocational School of Health Services (14,1%), Faculty of Arts and Sciences (21,2%), Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (18,3%), Kilisli Muallim Rifat Faculty of Education (12,9%), Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (6,2%), Faculty of Theology (12,9%), and Graduate School of Education (0,4%). The survey included 38 questions in total. Grouped under three categories the questions are aimed at first to shed light on the demographics, then the economic status, and finally the academic experiences of K7AU international students. The final section of the survey also seeks to shed light on the sociocultural activities of international students of K7AU. 241 surveys were carried out in the summer of 2022 on campus with international students of K7AU. The frequency analyses of each section were rendered via the SPSS program. The frequencies are separately examined per each category and evaluated respectively in order to increase reliability and validity for questions in each category.

Survey Findings

To start with the demographics of our participants, 20,7% are between 17-19, 44,8% are between 20-22, 18,3% are between 23-25, and 6,6% are between 26-28, and the rest is over 29 (5,2%). It means that 65,5% of the survey participants consist of international students between the ages of 17-22 and the remaining age groups make up 24,9% of the participants. This is a proportionate distribution when compared to Turkish students. Table 4 illustrates the age range of the participants.

Table 4: Age Range Distribution of Kilis 7 Aralık University's International Students

Age Range	Ratio (%)
17-19	20,7%
20-22	44,8%
23-25	18,3%
26-28	6,6%
29	5,2%
Total	100%

Table 5 contains information about the gender of the participants. Of 241 participants 62,9% (one student did not specify gender are females, thus n=151) and 37,1% are males (n=89), which is higher than the gender distribution of K7AU international students (50% male, 50% female). The proportion of female international students is lower at the national level, particularly for Syrian students (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2020).

Table 5: Gender Distribution of Kilis 7 Aralık University's International Students

Sex	Ratio (%)
Male	37,1%
Female	62,9%
Total	100%

Table 6 shows the distribution of the monthly income of the participants. In terms of economic status, the majority of K7AU international students come from low-income families. Only 6,6% of the participants' families earn more than 6.001 TL per month, which is slightly over the national minimum wage. 10% of the participants' families make between 4500 TL and 6000 TL monthly, or around the national minimum wage, and the remaining 83,4% make less. This alone explains the economic challenges students may experience during their tertiary education in Kilis. However, it is to be noted that low income is also a significant instrument in the choice of the university among international students, a finding which can be reflected in Turkish students' selection of the university, as well. In line with this,

13,3% of the participants work in full-time or part-time jobs (n=32). And, only 4,1% of the participants receive scholarships and the rest is thought to be dependent on family income. Therefore it could be expected that 47,3% of our participants have trouble paying their tuition fees. In addition, K7AU's international students generally spend their expenses on accommodation and nutrition. It can be inferred from this fact that they have a very limited budget in such areas as clothing, culture and arts, education, stationery, and entertainment.

Table 6: Income Status Distribution of Kilis 7 Aralık University's International Students

Amount of Income (per month)	Ratio (%)
4499 TL and less	83,4%
4500-6000 TL	10%
6001 TL and more	6,6%
Total	100%

12,4% of participants checked "married," while 85,5% selected "single" (only 5 students did not specify their marital status). The economic situation, social-cultural integration, and academic achievement of international students can all be influenced by marital status; however, further research at the national level is required to draw a meaningful correlation. 5% of married international students at K7AU have one child, and 5,8% of married participants have two or more. 80,1% of international students came to Türkiye between 2011-2016, signifying the fact that they are mostly Syrian students. Of these, 82,6% sought refuge in Türkiye due to events in Syria after 2011. Therefore, the term "forced internationalization of higher education" fits well with the statistics of K7AU's international students due to the high proportion of Syrian students.

Looking at our findings as to academic hardships, the biggest challenge for international students at K7AU is the linguistic barrier. Only 17,4 % of the participants use Turkish "very regularly," and 20,3% said they use it "frequently." The rest of the participants use it "mildly regularly" (53,1%), "seldom" (6,2%), and "hardly ever" (2,1%). The rate of reading books regularly by the international students of K7AU is reported to be 17,4%. Furthermore, the majority of international students use Turkish at medium and frequent levels in daily life. The rate of international students following the mass media in Turkish is around 68,9%. Only 43,6% of our participants are satisfied with the accommodations at K7AU, while 46,9% of participants are pleased with how clean the campus and common spaces are. Again, it should come as no surprise that the majority of participants (51%) are satisfied with the on-campus dining options. The University's social/cultural, as well as sports facilities, are the two crucial areas that require improvement for international students. Only 27% of participants think that the University's sports facilities are adequate, and only 26,5% of participants think social and cultural activities are satisfactory.

While 30,8% of the students are satisfied with the university's meeting/fusion activities, 35,3% reported that they are not satisfied. Regarding the question of whether they are satisfied with the attitude of the administrative staff and the

university, the rate of those who do not agree is 14,9%, and the rate of those who agree is 64,7%. The percentage of respondents who are not satisfied with the attitude of the academic staff at the university is 10,4%, while the percentage of respondents who are satisfied is 71,4%. The percentage of respondents who responded negatively and positively for the question of whether they are contented with the attitude of their Turkish peers towards themselves is 10% and 72,7%, respectively.

One of our positive findings related to the high level of satisfaction of the participants (61%) with the University's newly constructed library. Finally, the socio-cultural integration-related findings of the international students of the K7AU reveal significant indicators for the success of the university in accommodating its international students. For instance, 78% of the participants said that they have at least one Turkish friend. More importantly, 24,1% of the participants spend time with their Turkish friends every day, 36,9% do so occasionally, and 10,8% do so at least once per week. This is thought to be an important element that helps international students improve their Turkish skills and acquire more information about the Turkish language and culture, yet this is an area that needs further attention, particularly qualitative, to fully understand how international students socialize and to what extent this strengthens their academic and social integration.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings reveal that both the demographic structure and economic status of international students of the K7AU are functional in understanding their integration levels. To start with the first significant element of the demographics of our participants is the proximity of the university to their families. Recalling that most of our participants as well as the international students of the university consist of Syrian students this is not a surprising finding. In other words, the majority of K7AU's international students choose the school because it is close to their families (53,5 %), a selection that is also explained by the economic status of the students. Therefore, in order to increase the number of international students they enroll, higher education institutions are advised to take geographic proximity into account.

Our second most significant finding relates to the linguistic barrier, which is also a crucial element across all international students in Türkiye. Despite the fact that Syrian students and students of other nationalities spend an additional foundation year learning Turkish and some of them have already attended secondary school in Türkiye, the linguistic barrier remains a primary obstacle for Syrians and other nationalities alike. Therefore, Turkish universities, particularly those hosting high numbers of international students, are recommended to lead further Turkish language courses or activities that will strengthen their academic integration and social integration into the academic system. As for students, in order to improve their Turkish skills, they are advised to socialize with their Turkish friends more frequently.

Our findings demonstrate that economic status is an essential part of student integration. As shown in our study, the international students of the K7AU generally spend their expenses on accommodation (73,9%) and nutrition (54,8%). They spend less money on clothing, culture and arts, education, stationery, and entertainment. Thus, more funding is required to provide international students with

scholarships to aid in their academic integration. Considering the fact that economic status is an important factor in choosing the K7AU both for national and international status, the economic circumstances of the K7AU are expected to be lower than their peers in other Turkish university. This is also revealed by the finding that the rate of K7AU international students who are paid in any job is 13,3%, and the rate of those who do not work is 85,1%.

Our results need to be extended by further research into the status of international students in other universities, particularly those hosting a high number of international studies. Finally, further qualitative research is needed to understand in depth the reasons for the difficulties international students face in Türkiye.

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Çatışma beyanı: Makalenin yazarı, bu çalışma ile ilgili taraf olabilecek herhangi bir kişi ya da finansal ilişkileri bulunmadığını dolayısıyla herhangi bir çıkar çatışmasının olmadığını beyan ederler.