





# Investigating Student Churn Among Business Schools in Higher Education

## Öğrencilerin Yükseköğretimde İşletme Okulları Arasında Değişiklik Yapmaları Üzerine Bir Araştırma

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### Özet

Çalışmamızın amacı, öğrenci değişiminin nedenlerini ve öğrencilerin eğitim kariyerlerine bir işletme okulunda başladıktan sonra neden ayrılıp başka bir üniversiteye kayıt yaptıklarını incelemektir. Mart 2019 - Mayıs 2019 tarihleri arasında, Türkiye'nin başkenti Ankara'da bir işletme okulundan diğerine geçiş yapan 31 öğrenci (11 kadın, 20 erkek; ort. yaş: 21,12; dağılım: 19-25) ile nitel bir metodoloji izlenerek öğrencilerle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış, analiz sürecinde nitel verileri analiz etmek için QSR NVivo 12 for Windows yazılımı kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, öğrenci kaybının ana nedeninin eğitim dili olarak İngilizce kullanımına ilişkin engellerle ilişkili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bunu okul veya bölümden memnuniyetsizlik takip etmektedir. Öğrencilerin başka bir üniversiteyi tercih etme nedenleri arasında seçilen üniversitede arkadaşlarının olması, eve yakınlık, yönlendirmeler ve aile üyeleri de yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, üniversite yöneticilerine yükseköğretimde öğrenci kaybının nedenlerine ilişkin önemli bilgiler sunmaktadır. Sonuçlar üniversite türüne göre incelendiğinde, devlet üniversitelerinden ayrılan öğrencilerin üniversite veya bölümden memnuniyetsizliklerinin, vakıf üniversitesinden ayrılanların ise yabancı dil sorununun üniversiteden ayrılmalarında daha etkili olduğu görülmektedir. Çalışmanın bulgularına göre, üniversite yönetiminin öğrencilerin yabancı dil becerilerinin nasıl geliştirileceği üzerine yoğunlaşması, araştırma ve inovasyona daha fazla yatırım yapması ve öğrenciler arasındaki iletişimi geliştirmek için sosyal faaliyetleri artırması gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** İngiliz Dilinde Eğitim, Özel Üniversiteler, İlişkisel Pazarlama, Öğrenci Kaybı, Derinlemesine Mülahakat

In a digitalized global market environment where there is stiffening competition, private higher education institutions realize that they have to find new ways to redesign their value proposition to attract, acquire, and retain students. Therefore, higher education institutions should make efficient plans to compete and maintain its position in the market (Chandra et al., 2018). In the highly competitive higher education market, university image is

### Abstract

The purpose of our paper is to examine what the reasons for student churn are and why students begin their educational careers in a school of business and then leave and register at another university. Following a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 students (11 females, 20 males; mean age: 21.12; range: 19 to 25 years) who had switched from one business school to another in Ankara, the capital city of Türkiye, and QSR NVivo 12 for Windows was used to analyze the qualitative data. The findings reveal that the main reason of student churn is associated with obstacles regarding the use of English as the medium of instruction. This is followed by dissatisfaction with the school or the department. The reasons for students preferring another university are also related to having friends at the university chosen, proximity to home, referrals, and family members. The study provides important insights to university administrators pertaining to the reasons associated with student churn in higher education. When the results are examined by university type, it is seen that the dissatisfaction with the university or department was the primary reason for the students who left the state universities, while the foreign language problem was the reason for the students who left the foundation universities. Considering the findings of the study, the university administration should concentrate on how to improve students' foreign language skills, invest more in research and innovation, and increase social activities to improve communication among students.

**Keywords:** English as the Medium of Instruction, Private Universities, Relationship Marketing, Student Churn, In-Depth Interview

very valuable for a university as it affects student satisfaction and retention (Landrum et al., 1998; Alves & Raposo, 2010; Brunner et al., 2008). A university's image and reputation have a strong influence on students' choice of universities they would like to attend (Philip, 1995). The presence of a favorable learning environment, quality infrastructure, and appropriate tuitions as well as work-integrated learning and teaching excellence can help such universities attract and

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acquire potential students (cf. Dang & Hathaway, 2015; Polkinghorne et al., 2017; Varshavskaya & Podverbnykh, 2021). A student's satisfaction with a university is based on that person's experience with the university (Ahmad et al., 2021). When students in higher education are satisfied, they are loyal to the university and contribute to its market performance (Kolar et al., 2019). Studies have shown that students' top priority in choosing a university is the facilities offered by the university, with quality coming second (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016; Kotler & Fox, 1995). As a result of the university's offerings, successful relationship management practices lead to student engagement and success, higher student retention rates, better academic performance, a sense of belonging, and reduced dropout rates (Snijders et al., 2020). More importantly, universities establishing and maintaining strong relationships with their students can enable them to get involved in the co-creation value process (cf. Hashim et al., 2020). By doing so, these universities can create genuine value in educational services and accomplish the acquisition and retention of students. Despite this realization, students in higher education switch from one university to another university due to a number of reasons associated with financial problems, poor adaptation to a new environment, poor social relations, poor course delivery modes, failure at the existing university, and/or insufficient academic faculty performance (Willis, 2005). Investigating the expectations of students towards the university, the reasons for their satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction and revealing the results may guide the university administration to reduce student losses and increase satisfaction. Since there are not enough studies on the reasons for student attrition in the higher education market in Türkiye, the study is conducted with the Turkish sample.

Currently, there are 49 private universities and 92 public universities in Türkiye that have business schools. The medium of instruction in business schools is either English or Turkish (Sarigul & Sengelen, 2022). Universities that include a foreign language as a requirement in their curricula require students to obtain sufficient scores on internationally recognized English language proficiency tests or in-house exams or complete one-year language preparatory classes (Council of Higher Education, 2022). The Middle East Technical University, which was founded in 1956, was the first public university where English was the medium of instruction (Kirkgoz, 2007). It was observed that students and their families wanted to attend higher education institutions with English medium instruction (EMI) during the 1980s. This is not surprising since English is current lingua franca of higher education in the world (Cankaya, 2017). Several public universities started to offer EMI such as Bogazici University, while some of these universities preferred a hybrid model (Turkish and English) such as Dokuz Eylul University.

A number of wealthy businessmen invested in higher education and established private universities through their foundations. Such private universities are also known as

foundation universities in the Turkish higher education system. Bilkent University was the first foundation university established in 1984. Türkiye has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of private universities. Information obtained from the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) at the time of our study showed that there were 75 private (foundation) universities. According to the statistics produced by the Council of Higher Education (2022), there are eight million students in the Turkish higher education sector. According to the relevant statistics for 2021-2022, the total number of students is 4,579,047, with 2,364,584 male students and 2,214,463 female students enrolled in an undergraduate program. Of the total number of students, 4,152,633 are at public universities and 426,414 are at private (foundation) universities (Council of Higher Education, 2022).

In today's global higher education market, companies need talented individuals who possess sufficient foreign language skills to communicate effectively and efficiently with their global stakeholders. (Sarigul & Sengelen, 2022). Therefore, the entrance exam scores for business schools where the medium of instruction is English are higher than these for business school where the medium of instruction is Turkish (Cokgezen, 2014). Under these circumstances, millions of students in Türkiye are interested in attending a university with EMI because they feel that they will receive quality education and find a good job upon graduation. There are also plenty of students, who prefer these universities due to their willingness to study abroad (Gokmenoglu & Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2013). Nearly half of the student population (over 4 million) is enrolled in distance learning programs. Nevertheless, the demand for higher education has always transcended the supply in Türkiye. Access to higher education is managed through a very competitive annual nationwide selection and placement exam run by the Measurement, Selection and Placement Center (OSYM) (British Council, 2021). However, such an exam-oriented educational system precludes students from focusing on or prioritizing foreign languages such as English (Can & Can, 2014). While there is a tendency toward foreign language education in Türkiye, there are challenging issues with learning and teaching (e.g., lack of adequate qualified instructors and language laboratories) foreign languages (Can & Can, 2014; Isik, 2008, 2011; Kocaman, 2012; Ozmat and Senemoglu, 2020). In such a competitive market environment, both public and private universities offer attractive packages to students during the recruitment process and try to retain them. As a result, many universities are beset with problems with retention rates (Guilbault, 2018).

If higher education institutions are unable to reduce or minimize student churn or dropout, which is known as the negative form of retention (Tight, 2020), it gives rise to a number of critical problems and outcomes. First, the literature provides evidence that trying to attract and acquire new customers is more expensive than retaining the



existing ones (Mosavi et al., 2018). Therefore, loss of current customers is likely to lead to substantial tangible costs. This is also true in an environment where various higher education institutions have failures in student retention (Cao et al., Dewberry & Jackson, 2018). Second, students' switching behaviors are likely to exert a negative influence on academic and university support staffs' perceptions of motivation and job security. That is, students leave the university due to problems stemming from the quality of education (cf. Dollinger et al., 2018). This can erode their morale and motivation as well as raise concerns about job security. Third, student retention rates are followed and announced by ranking bodies such as the US News, Times Higher Education, and World Report (e.g., Poole et al., 2018). These rankings serve as important sources of information for both students and their families.

Fourth, students who are not committed to the university may generate negative word-of-mouth communication and erode the image and reputation of their former university (cf. Cownie, 2020). Therefore, student churn is still a major problem globally, awaiting an immediate solution (cf. Chrysikos et al., 2017; Yair et al., 2020). It is also important to explore and have an understanding of the reasons of student churn in higher education because "There is no clear understanding of the underlying factors leading to a student dropout" (Gupta et al., 2020, p. 189). Lastly, we collect data from students in Türkiye, who left their universities but continued their higher education at another university. At a time where student retention becomes a pressing issue in the Turkish higher education system, our study will delineate useful strategies about how to reduce or minimize student churn.

Against the above backdrop, our study set out to investigate the following fundamental questions: (1) what are the reasons of student churn? and (2) why do students begin their educational careers in a school of business and then leave and register at another university? To address these issues, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 students in Türkiye, who switched from one business school to another business school at a different university. Considering that there are very few studies on student churn in the field of Turkish higher education, the originality of this study is confirmed.

## Background

A search made in the relevant literature presents several useful student retention and/or churn models such as the undergraduate dropout model (Spady, 1971), longitudinal model of dropout (Tinto, 1975), or nontraditional student attrition model (Bean & Metzner, 1985). It seems that Tinto's (1975) work has received significant attention in the literature (e.g., Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Hakyemez & Mardikyan, 2021;). According to this model, the dropout process is related to the longitudinal process of interactions

between the individual and his or her integration into the academic and social systems of the university (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) further states, "...a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" (p. 94). This implicitly shows that students may show switching behaviors or dropouts. However, students do not leave the department or the university only due to academic failure (involuntary dropout) but also other reasons such as financial stress and poor academic faculty performance (Ashour, 2020; Willis, 2005).

The relevant literature seems to be replete with studies focusing on student dropout or churn and retention. For example, Elliott and Healy (2001) found that student centeredness, campus climate, and instructional effectiveness exerted a positive influence on student satisfaction, which is one of the antecedents of retention. Another past study in the Brazilian private Higher Education setting indicated that frontline employees and management practices and policies as the indicators of trust positively influenced student loyalty (Perin et al., 2012). Giannakos et al. (2017) reported that cognitive gains (e.g., progress in critical thinking) and supportive environment boosted students' perceptions of degree's usefulness, while personal values, satisfaction with learning, teaching quality, and degree's usefulness enhanced student retention.

In a study carried out in Ghana, Anabila et al. (2019) found that private universities' market orientation fostered their market performance (e.g., student retention) and further concluded that these universities should focus on development of emotional bonds with students and delivery of superior service value to them to boost their market performance. Wild and Heuling's (2020) research in Germany reported that cognitive skills and conscientiousness impacted student dropout. A study of higher education students in the United Kingdom demonstrated that students' positive attitude to course, self-efficacy towards the course, and subjective norms about course completion mitigated their intention to withdraw (Dewberry & Jackson, 2018).

A study done in Australia illustrated that students in higher education who were Indigenous, had disabilities, or were from rural areas had heightened risk of dropout (Li & Carroll, 2020). In their qualitative study, Gupta et al. (2020) reported that many university employees were not aware of dropouts and the negative financial outcomes of these dropouts for the university and the economy. Another study carried out at a university in Indonesia documented that student motivation boosted student academic achievement, while the quality of lecturers and student academic achievement positively influenced student retention rates (Setiawan et al., 2020). In addition to these findings, Lane's (2020) recent review demonstrated peer mentoring

as an effective strategy to be used for retaining first-year college students. Studies also highlighted the importance of interventions during the first year of higher education to prevent or minimize non-completion/dropout (Ortiz-Lazano et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2016).

Yair et al.'s (2020) study showed that the majority of the students continued their education at different universities by delineating some cues about their institutional transfers. Their study further showed that few students shared their decisions with the administrators and peers before their departure. In their recent systematic review of retention strategies for online students, Seery et al. (2021) cogently discuss that trying to identify students who are likely to dropout is important to design retention and supportive programs. This actually highlights the critical role of being 'proactive' and taking actions beforehand to control and reduce student churn. According to the findings of a study in Pakistan, financial assistance, supervisory expertise, and infrastructural support positively affected the quality of higher degrees by research, which in turn led to potential student satisfaction (Saleem et al., 2020). It seems that higher education institutions may acquire and retain a number of students when they take into consideration such quality components.

According to Cokgezen's (2014) study, the language and academic performance of the university, tuition costs, and the population of the city were among the factors considered in the selection of a university. According to this research, students at private universities placed a higher value on academic performance than students at public universities, who were more price sensitive. As technology advances, competition becomes much more difficult. Business schools compete not only with one another, but also cope with a variety of other factors such as online education providers, social platforms, and consultants (Schlegelmilch, 2020). However, business models in these schools have not encountered the changes needed as a result of advances in technology (Trkman, 2019). With the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, it is likely that interest in such training will grow as students learn about the advantages and disadvantages of online platforms (Ali et al., 2022; Batanero et al., 2022; Salas-Pilco, Ynag and Zhang, 2022; Schlegelmilch, 2020). Given that nearly half of Türkiye's student population (over 4 million) is enrolled in distance education (British Council, 2021), preventing them from shifting to such platforms or programs will be a priority.

According to Schlegelmilch (2020), the future of business schools is dependent on their current reputation, resources, capabilities, and development trajectory. The stronger the university's reputation, the more students will prefer to receive a diploma from a reputable institution with a strong brand rather than from online platforms. Therefore, it is important for business schools to consider radical business model innovation. Trkman (2019) considered

digitalization to be a driver of change since it led to an increase in business education providers. Therefore, the framework of business schools needs to be modified and regulated concurrently with digitalization by incorporating responsible management principles into their educational procedures and the curricula they have been using (Maloni et al., 2021). The more business schools educate their students on the successes and challenges of responsible management education, the more successful and effective they will be in developing the next generation of responsible business leaders (Maloni et al., 2021). At the same time, since business schools, unlike other faculties, are likely to educate and train future business leaders, it is important to adapt business education models to bear a responsible management approach (Maloni et al., 2021).

Though the theoretical models and the findings of the studies given above have enhanced the understanding about student retention and churn or dropout, there is still a need for empirical research about what the reasons of student churn in a competitive digitalized educational environment are and why students start their higher education at a university and then register at another university. Our study seeks to have a deep understanding of these reasons by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with students in Türkiye.

## Method

Based on interpretive paradigm, qualitative research designs involve collecting and analyzing non-numerical for understanding concepts, opinions, or experiences. Among these designs, phenomenology aims to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon by holding the view that human beings extract meaning from the world through their personal experience (Husserl, 1931; Hycner, 1985).

Delving into the experience of individuals is perceived to be a complex phenomenon (Jarvis, 1987) since it holds not only complexity of human nature, but also because an individual's experience is a multidimensional phenomenon, that is, psychologically-oriented, culturally-driven, and socially-structured (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). In this study we employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to reveal the reasons of churn based on students' experiences.

## Sample and Data Collection

We utilized a purposive sampling technique (also known as judgmental sampling). Which provides valuable sampling type for special situations in exploratory research. The technique requires the judgment of an expert in selecting cases, or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2014). In this study, we purposively selected cases who switched from one business school to another. Between



March 2019 and May 2019, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 students (11 females, 20 males; mean age: 21.12; range: 19 to 25 years) who switched from one business school to another in Ankara, the capital city of Türkiye. Students switching from one university to another are represented in the Appendix II by assigning a different code to each university. Although universities in Türkiye are located throughout the country, nearly 40 percent of them are located in Ankara and Istanbul, and the sample of this study consisted of three different private universities in Ankara due to the ease of data collection and cost.

10 out of the 31 students who transferred to different universities came from different cities. Their years of birth were from 1994 to 2000. When the official secondary data were examined, the annual transition figures of university students in Türkiye could not be determined. According to the information obtained from the Higher Education Council at the time of our study, there were 14 private universities and eight public universities in Ankara. We contacted the student affairs of each university to reach students in their business schools. However, only three private universities permitted us to conduct interviews with students. According to the information obtained from interviews with the student affairs departments of three different private universities, 47 students transferred from

■ **Table 1.** Codes, common themes and main theme obtained for each student

Student no	The # of code that appeared in open coding	The # of themes that appeared in axial coding	The # of main themes that appeared in selective coding
1	28	15	6
2	32	19	6
3	26	14	6
4	30	18	6
5	27	15	6
6	27	14	7
7	28	16	6
8	33	19	6
9	30	16	7
10	28	15	7
11	28	15	6
12	28	15	6
13	26	13	6
14	29	16	7
15	29	16	7
16	26	14	6
17	28	14	6
18	33	19	6
19	30	16	6
20	28	15	6
21	31	15	7
22	30	17	6
23	28	15	6
24	28	15	6
25	31	18	9
26	27	14	6
27	27	14	6
28	26	14	6
29	27	15	6
30	29	17	7
31	27	15	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>885</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>196</b>



another business school to a private university's business school during the academic year in which the interviews were to be conducted. Students were contacted; nine students were unable to be reached using their contact information; seven students declined the interview request, and 31 students agreed to participate in an interview. There was no intervention in the gender distribution of the students. In order to eliminate selection bias in the sample, interviews were conducted with students who had switched schools during the academic year within the timeframe of the interviews. Additionally, it was ensured that the population was similar, and identified according to similar criteria, and the interviews were conducted within the same timeframe.

## Data Analysis

Our study employed the qualitative research technique to obtain a thorough understanding of students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in the churn process. To achieve this, we used the semi-structured in-depth interview technique where face-to-face interviews were held with 31 students who had already transferred from one business school to another business school. Questions were formulated according to the type of the information sought (see Appendix 1). A voice recorder was used with the consent of the interviewees to ensure that all information was fully recorded. In the transcription of the audio recordings, we picked the codes needed for the analysis process.

Data analysis in qualitative research includes preparing and arranging the data for analysis. This is followed by decoding the data and combining the codes to reduce the data to themes. Then the data are presented in figures, tables, or in the form of a discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the process, we used the software QSR NVivo 12 for Windows to analyze the qualitative data.

Coding procedures include the major procedures of constant comparison, theoretical questioning, theoretical sampling, concept development, and their relationship (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). First, data coding includes three stages (Bryman & Burgess, 2002): open, axial and selective coding. In open coding, each word is analyzed in detail. Open coding is the most important and challenging stage in coding, which is critical for the accuracy and completeness of coding in other stages. In axial coding, common themes obtained in the open coding stage are combined and linkages are formed. The final phase is the selective coding. In the process of this coding, common themes are converted and the main themes appear. ■ Table I shows the status of the codes, common themes, and main themes for each student during the coding stages.

Following the themes that appear in axial coding, the main themes obtained with selective coding refer to the reasons to quit previous university, selection of a different private

university, sources of information about the university, and reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the university.

## Findings

### Respondents' Profile

Several questions were asked to respondents about their demographic background. This was followed by the questions designed to obtain information in line with the study objectives. Information obtained during the interviews showed that nine students switched from public university to private universities, while 22 students switched from private universities to other private universities. Their years of birth varied between 1994 and 2000 (see the Appendix II). Out of 31 students, 11 were female and 20 were male.

There was no significant difference in the responses based on gender. When the responses were assessed based on the type of school, only one of the students at the public university left the business school because he or she was unable to pass the preparatory class, while the others left their business schools due to disliking the university or department and being unable to adapt to the city. The majority of the students who were unable to pass the preparatory class dropped out of private universities. According to the interviews, only one student left the public university due to a foreign language issue. In contrast to other public universities, it was noticed that the language of instruction at the university where this student left was English, and the preparatory class was required. As a result of the interviews, students who began their education at private universities were generally satisfied with their schools but had language difficulties, whereas those who began their education at public universities were generally dissatisfied with their chosen schools or departments. When we looked at the rates of changing schools and departments based on the number of students, we found that only 10 students changed both their school and department. Other students who transferred to a different university did not change their departments.

It is important to understand why students want to drop out a university they preferred and enrolled in the first place. Therefore, after obtaining their personal details, students were inquired about their reasons to quit the previous university. The research questions were asked to determine "what the reasons for student churn were" and "why students began their educational careers in a School of Business and then left and registered at another university". As presented in ■ Table II, the results of the semi-structured in-depth interviews led to six main themes: Poor English language skills, dissatisfaction with the school or the department, existence of friends at the university chosen, proximity to home, referrals, and family members.



**Table 2.** Qualitative Research Questions and Main Themes

Research questions	Main themes
RQ 1- Why did you quit your previous university?	Poor English language skills (14) Dissatisfaction with the school or the department (9)
RQ 2- What were your reasons to transfer to another private university?	Existence of friends at the university chosen (6) Proximity to home (6)
RQ 3- How did you obtain information about the university you chose?	Referrals (18) Family Members (9)

### Poor English Language Skills

During the interviews, English language skills emerged as the first reason about why students transferred from one university to another one. Only one student transferred from a public university to a private university due to failure in the English preparation class. The rest of the students transferred from their private universities to other private universities due to problems associated with their “English language skills”. Specifically, the abovementioned respondent (#9, female) who was twenty-three years old stated that she was unable to meet the requirements of the English preparatory school and therefore decided to leave the university:

*“When I was choosing among the universities, I had focused on the universities with English as the medium of instruction and English preparatory classes. I never thought that I would have a hard time in the English preparatory class. I wanted to transfer to another university in order not to lose a year due to my difficult times in the preparatory class. In other words, the English preparatory class played an important role for me to leave the university.”*

Another student (#12, female, twenty-one years old) reported that she had to leave the university due to problems surfacing from English as the medium of instruction:

*“I know English is a universal language and I have to learn it. Therefore, I wanted to choose a university where the medium of instruction was English. But I had a lot of difficulties in the courses, and I took a dislike to the courses because I had difficulty in English. For this reason, I had to leave the university which I chose voluntarily.”*

One of the respondents (#31, male) who was twenty-one years old also indicated that English as the medium of instruction made her leave the university:

*“I had never studied English before, I had difficulties as the medium of instruction was English, and I had to leave the university. I left the university due to this problem.”*

The abovementioned findings seem to be consistent with the extant literature. Specifically, in their systematic review, Macaro et al. (2018) highlighted that students had problems understanding both lectures and written materials

in English and reported difficulties communicating in English. In addition, Civan and Coskun (2016) found that students in the Turkish university context who attended Turkish degree programs were more successful than their counterparts attending the universities where the medium of instruction was English.

### Dissatisfaction with the School or the Department

The academic and/or social communities are crucial in determining whether a student will remain in school or drop out. It has been shown that student satisfaction may be related to how well the classroom environment matches with students’ preferences and expectations (Schertze & Schertze, 2004). In our study, dissatisfaction with the school or the department was among the reasons for student churn. That is, they did not like or were not satisfied with the school or the department. For example, one of the respondents (#4, male) who was twenty-two years old highlighted his dissatisfaction with the department:

*“I chose the universities and departments where my score was sufficient. After the beginning of the semester, I realized that the department I chose was not suitable for me and did not satisfy me at all. I decided to quit and transfer to a different university instead of going to the same university every day.”*

Another respondent (#8, female, 21 years old) emphasized her dissatisfaction with the facilities and location of the university and qualifications of the instructors:

*“I left because I realized my vision would never improve if I continued to study there. Neither the facilities nor the location of the university and the quality of the teachers satisfied me.”*

Similarly, one of the respondents (#24, male, twenty-two years old) described his dissatisfaction with the department and the university through the social facilities, physical environment, and lack of information about the university:

*“The social facilities and physical conditions of the university have never been as I imagined. I didn’t even know where the university was before I made the choice. I wish I had attended the orientation days in advance. I didn’t even enjoy the department I studied as I didn’t like the university, and I decided to transfer to another university.”*

It appears that students pay utmost attention to the social facilities, physical conditions, and location of the university as well as qualifications of the instructors, which are important in determining whether they remain in the school or drop out.

### Existence of Friends at the University Chosen

One of the important dimensions of student satisfaction is social life (Schertze & Schertze, 2004). The significant social relationship among university students is often established and maintained through student friendship and friendship in schools. It was observed that one of the most important factors for students to transfer or leave the university or transfer from one university to another university was related to the existence of friends at the university chosen. For instance, lack of close friends resulted in student churn. One of the respondents (#21, male) who was twenty-two years old highlighted the importance of having close friends at the university:

*“I am a person who attaches great importance to the social relations and has a great circle of friends. But I did not have a close friend group at the university. Therefore, I chose this university as I wanted to continue my education at a university where my friends are and whom I can communicate with.”*

Another respondent (#2, male) who was twenty-one years old underlined the importance of friends he could spend good time with:

*“The reason for choosing this university is that my friends are studying here. I attach great importance to my social environment as my happiness in my social life affects every aspect of my life. When I spend good time with my friends, this reflects on my academic success.”*

### Proximity to Home

According to the data obtained from the interviews, one of the important factors for students to choose the university is the distance between their home and the university. This has been underscored as one of the drivers of student choice (Zhu & Reeves, 2019). In addition, students do not seem to be interested in spending much time to reach their university. For example, one of the respondents (#14, male, twenty-two years old) explained the significance of the distance between his home and the university:

*“When I made my choice after the university exam, I never paid attention to how far the school was from my home. The university from which I left was far from my home, this made me wake up earlier and go home later. I chose this university as it was closer to my home because I did not want to spend my time on the roads.”*

Similarly, another respondent (#9, female, twenty-three years old) stated that:

*“I was studying at a university in a different city than the one where I lived with my family. I wanted to transfer to another university as I was not satisfied with my school and department. I wanted to choose one of the universities in the city where I lived with my family. The reason for choosing this university was that it was closer to my home.”*

### Referrals

According to the research findings, students' friends referring them to the university emerged as one of the sources of information for university selection/preference. Not surprisingly, reference groups such as siblings, friends, peers, relatives, and teachers influence students' academic choices (Tamtekin Aydin, 2015). For example, one of the respondents (#14, male) who was twenty-two years old explained that:

*“I did not do enough research while choosing my previous university. That's why I exchanged ideas by asking people I trust while choosing a new university. I got information about their universities from my friends whom I thought our expectations were almost the same. I chose this university as a result of information I got from my friends.”*

Another respondent (#1, male) who was twenty-four years old highlighted that:

*“I was searching the universities on the internet. I asked my friends' advice to make sure that information and promises given on the web pages were true. Information I got from my friends and the internet caused me to choose this university.”*

Similarly, another respondent (#8, female) who was twenty-one years old also stated that:

*“Since I thought that students studying at a university would give the most accurate information about that university, I consulted with my friends from those universities to get information about the universities in my mind. I chose this university thanks to the positive comments given by my friends.”*

Students who were satisfied with different aspects of educational service quality recommended the university to their friends. This is consistent with other studies that word-of-mouth recommendations from friends are an important source of information for students when selecting the university (e.g., Massoud & Ayoubi, 2019).

### Family Members

Family members' detailed information about the university or their financial resources are among the reasons for selecting the university. Specifically, one of the respondents (#3, female, twenty-one years old) stated that:

*“My father used to work at this university. Therefore, he knew a lot about the school. I chose this university based on my father's recommendation.”*





Likewise, another student (#13, male, twenty-four years old) reported that:

*“My uncle is a professor at this university. I got information from my uncle about the department, the teachers, and the social activities of the university. I trust him because he is a professor at this university.”*

Another student (#15, male, twenty-two years old) also underscored the need for obtaining information from their family members regarding the selection of the university:

*“My family is the most important source of information not only for university preference but also for many subjects. That’s why I chose to get information from my family. What they think of the university, whether they can afford it financially, and all their other opinions about my choice are very important to me.”*

The abovementioned findings implicitly demonstrate that students’ parents have a strong influence on their selection process associated with the parents’ financial resources and detailed information about the university (Tamtekin Aydın, 2015).

## Discussion

### Evaluation of the Findings

Our paper set out to address two fundamental questions: (1) What are the reasons of student churn? and

(2) why do students begin their educational careers in a school of business and then leave and register at another university? We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 31 students in Türkiye who switched from one business school to another business school at a different university. The results highlighted six main themes for student churn, which were related to poor English language skills, dissatisfaction with the school or the department, existence of friends at the university chosen, proximity to home, referrals, and family members. Several important observations arise from our study findings.

First, students decide to switch from one university to another university due to problems associated with their English language skills. Though they are aware of the fact that they should learn English, they have difficulty understanding lectures and written materials in English. In addition, the length of time spent to learn English in the preparatory school makes them exhibit switching behaviors. The findings we reported here are congruent with Macaro et al.’s (2018) systematic review that students are beset with problems understanding lectures and written materials in English. Second, students display switching behaviors as a result of their dissatisfaction with different aspects of the school or the department. Lack of qualified instructors and location of the university as well as insufficient social facilities and poor physical conditions of the university mitigate

student satisfaction. Under these circumstances, they prefer to transfer to another university where their expectations regarding the abovementioned issues are met.

Third, students pay great attention to the existence of their friends at the university where they continue their higher education. If they find that they do not have any close friends, they believe they cannot have quality social relations and social life. This highlights the importance of relational capital, which enables individuals to develop quality relations in an institution (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Lack or absence of close friends makes them exhibit switching behaviors. Fourth, one of the reasons for student churn is the distance between students’ home and the university. In line with the work of Zhu and Reeves (2019), the findings implicitly highlight the importance of proximity to home. The distance of the university leads to loss of time. Students need time to study and develop their intellectual knowledge. They need time to get well-prepared for exams and complete their research projects. They believe they can fulfill these requirements when the university is close to the surrounding where they live.

Fifth, information and recommendations given by students’ friends play an important role in the selection of the university. Students consider their friends’ recommendations because they possess first-hand information or experience about the university. This implicitly reveals the power of positive word-of-mouth communication (Mossoud & Ayoubi, 2019). Sixth, the final theme reported in our study is family members. In the family of orientation, students are likely to consider their parents’ and siblings’ ideas about different aspects of higher education (e.g., quality of education, tuition, reputation of the university). Here parental influence on students’ decisions to choose the university is significant (Tamtekin Aydın, 2015).

### Implications for University Administrators

The findings of our paper provide a number of implications for practice to control and reduce student churn. Specifically, university administrators should focus on how they motivate their students to be fully engaged in the development of English skills. Establishing an educational environment where students can enjoy reading, writing, and speaking English would boost their willingness and motivation to learn English. This can be achieved through the successful implementation of social and culture activities. Students who contribute to and/or attend these activities would feel that they are one of the members of such educational environment. This is so important because having English as the medium of instruction, if managed well, gives rise to positive outcomes in addition to reduction in churn rate. For example, university administrators can attract international students and instructors, prepare local students for the competitive global labor market, enable local students to pursue master or doctoral degrees in foreign countries, and enhance the image of the institution.

Second, gathering data from prospective students in high schools would enable university administrators to be proactive and ascertain a number of reasons resulting in student churn in higher education. The implications derived from these studies can be used by university administrators to mitigate student churn. Third, university administrators need to invest in research and innovation. Such investment would boost the publication performance of the university and result in new inventions in the field of engineering. It would also contribute to the ranking of the university in Times Higher Education and/or Academic Ranking of World Universities. Under these circumstances, most of the students are unlikely to sacrifice valued things such as attending a reputable university.

Fourth, university administrators should focus on attractive and social activities that would enhance the communication among students with different nationalities. Under these circumstances, students would have the opportunity to communicate with each other in English. To achieve this, university administrators need to offer attractive scholarships to outstanding foreign students. As a result, this practice could help university administrators to control student churn due to the use of English in curricula. Lastly, university administrators can assess students' happiness and quality of life. This is important because they should consider students as individuals with unique needs. By doing so, they would have the chance to receive feedback from students about the educational environment and find out whether students would like to learn and flexibly and autonomously (cf. Efthymiou & Zarifis, 2021; Xie, 2021).

A few suggestions can be made for Turkish higher education policy. First, in order for students to graduate prepared for the demands of the business world in the context of Industry 4.0, university academic boards may be advised to review and improve their course curricula. Second, as Trkman (2019) and Schlegelmilch (2020) emphasize, business schools need radical innovation models. Therefore, it would be a significant step for Turkish business schools and other universities to adopt the flexible education model implemented by Sabancı University for the first time in Türkiye, where students have the freedom to choose their majors, and there are no circumstances such as having to repeat classes or being expelled due to foreign language difficulties. At the same time, by incorporating active learning strategies that develop case-based learning and think-match-share abilities in business schools and involve students in the learning process, students' decision-making, problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking skills can be improved (McDonald et al., 2022) and thus meet the needs of the business world more easily. The third suggestion can be put into practice using Tinto's (1975) model. This model suggests that the dropout process is related to the individual's long-term process of interaction and integration into the academic and social systems of the university. Therefore, the university administrators should prioritize student academic and social clubs in order to facilitate student integration.

If the university that accepts a transfer student's registration considers the factors that lead students to change universities and modifies its policies accordingly, it will decrease student losses by raising the satisfaction level.

The study addresses the concept of student churn in the Turkish higher education system and business schools and gives recommendations to university administration based on the findings. Since there is little research on business schools and the concept of churn in Türkiye, it is anticipated that this study will make a substantial contribution to the literature and will be a pioneer study.

### Limitations and Future Research

Our paper has several limitations that highlight the need for future research. First, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 31 students in Türkiye to have a deep understanding of what the reasons of student churn were and why students displayed switching behaviors. Since the study aims to examine a specific situation, there is no need for generalization. However, in future studies, the number of universities and samples studied can be increased, and literature can be added to help generalize the findings. In future studies, conducting such interviews in different developing countries would enable us to make comparisons about the reasons regarding student churn. Second, future research can utilize a mixed-methods approach. That is, in-depth interviews would provide a detailed picture about the reasons leading to student churn, while model development and testing would show the underlying mechanisms (e.g., student disengagement, moral disengagement) through which poor English language skills, dissatisfaction with the school or the department, existence of friends at the university chosen, proximity to home, referrals, and family members are linked to student churn. In addition to the above-examined factors, future research may also examine whether the reasons for dropout differ between disciplines and look at the lack of effective internship programs within business schools or other disciplines and their effect on students' churn. This is important because these programs provide students with real work-based experiences (To & Lung, 2020), and can even affect their career considerations (Rothman & Sisman, 2016).



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#### ■ Appendix 1. Question form

##### A- Questions about personal information

A1- Can you tell us about yourself? (e.g., birth of year, city of residence)

A2- Which university do you attend?

A3- Which department do you attend?

##### B- Questions about the reasons of student churn

B1- Why did you quit your previous university?

B2- What were your reasons to transfer to another private university?

B3- How did you obtain information about the university you chose?

B4- Are you satisfied with the university?

B5- Are you dissatisfied with the university?

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