

# The Role of Foreign Policy in International Student Mobility: The Case of the Turkish “Opening to Africa” Policy

## Dış Politikanın Uluslararası Öğrenci Hareketliliğindeki Rolü: Türkiye'nin Afrika Açılımı Örneği

Hacer Atabaş<sup>1\*</sup>, Mehmet Köse<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara, Türkiye.

<sup>2</sup>Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Africa Foundation, Ankara, Türkiye.

**Orcid:** H. Atabaş (0000-0003-0138-6673), M. Köse (0000-0001-5250-0742)

**Abstract:** This article examines the relation of foreign policy decisions, specifically the Africa Opening Policies, to international scholarship programs and student mobility from Africa to Türkiye. The background of Türkiye's African policy is discussed, along with policies made by different governments. The article evaluates student exchanges and scholarships in bilateral agreements and regional cooperation between Türkiye and African countries. The central question is how foreign policymaking, specifically the openings in Türkiye's African policy, had an effect on international student mobility to Türkiye. To answer this question, the article uses international scholarship programs as an instrument in Turkish foreign policy in the context of the Africa Opening Policies as a single case study, which is designed to provide an in-depth understanding and contextualization of scholarship programs within foreign policymaking. Examining the policy documents from relevant institutions such as the Council of Higher Education, the Ministry of National Education, and the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the study uses process tracing methodology to show that foreign policy openings and desired relations with a particular country or region affect the design and priorities of international higher education programs. Thus, the article explores foreign policymaking as the driving factor in developing international student mobility in Türkiye.

**Keywords:** Foreign policymaking, Turkish foreign policy, Türkiye-Africa relations, Türkiye Scholarships program, International student mobility, international higher education

**Özet:** Bu makale, dış politika kararlarının, özellikle de Afrika Açılım Politikalarının, uluslararası burs programları ve Afrika'dan Türkiye'ye öğrenci hareketliliği üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. Türkiye'nin Afrika politikasının arka planı, farklı hükümetler tarafından yapılan politikalarla birlikte ele alınmaktadır. Makale, Türkiye ile Afrika ülkeleri arasındaki ikili anlaşmalar ve bölgesel işbirlikleri kapsamındaki öğrenci değişimleri ve bursları değerlendirmektedir. Temel soru, dış politika yapımının, daha özel olarak Türkiye'nin Afrika politikasındaki açılımlarının, Türkiye'deki uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliği üzerinde nasıl etkili olduğudur. Bu soruyu cevaplamak için makale, Afrika Açılım Politikaları bağlamında Türk dış politikasında bir araç olarak uluslararası burs programlarını tekil vaka analizi olarak kullanmıştır ve dış politika yapımında burs programlarının derinlemesine anlaşılmasını ve bağlamsallaştırılmasını sağlamak üzere tasarlanmıştır. Yükseköğretim Kurulu, Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı ve Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı gibi ilgili kurumların politika belgelerini inceleyen çalışma, dış politika açılımlarının ve belirli bir ülke veya bölge ile arzu edilen ilişkilerin uluslararası yükseköğretim programlarının tasarımını ve önceliklerini etkilediğini göstermek için süreç izleme metodolojisini kullanmaktadır. Böylece makale, Türkiye'de uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliğinin geliştirilmesinde dış politika yapımının itici faktör olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dış politika yapımı, Türk dış politikası, Türkiye-Afrika ilişkileri, Türkiye Bursları programı, Uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliği, Uluslararası yükseköğretim

## 1. Introduction

Government policies significantly influence shaping programs for international student mobility. Policies implemented and incentives offered entice students and

provide them with the chance to study abroad. The expected benefits of international student mobility and the objectives of scholarship programs offered to international students overlap considerably; therefore, given

\* İletişim Yazarı / Corresponding author. Eposta/Email : hcer.atabas@bilkent.edu.tr

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the abundance of studies on the objectives of scholarship programs, these objectives can be examined through scholarships. While international scholarship programs have emerged as one of the most important tools governments use in their public diplomacy and international relations initiatives (Eide, 1970; Fischer, 1972), they have also played a crucial part in the efforts of governments to promote economic development and alleviate poverty in the context of these policies (Dassin et al., 2018). In addition to fostering stronger diplomatic and economic ties between governments and improving the caliber of a country's educational institutions (Boeren, 2018), international scholarship programs enable dissemination of technical knowledge and experience (Baxter, 2018), acquiring students a new language, international experience and familiarity with different cultures (Jackson, 2008; Childress, 2009), as well as expanding diplomatic sympathy, fostering peace and mutual understanding, and supporting national security and stability (Chank-seliani, 2018; de Wit, 2002). Government policies, which produce an array of incentives and opportunities to promote international connections and educational exchange, serve as the main organizing principle for international student mobility programs. In Türkiye's experience with these programs, this array has been neglected.

Turkish foreign policymakers have employed various instruments in developing bilateral relations with African countries since their independence. Providing scholarships for higher education to African students has played a pivotal role in establishing enduring relationships. In the 1980s, the enrollment of African students in Turkish higher education institutions stood at approximately 200 individuals, a figure that experienced a tenfold increase by 2010. However, as part of its newly adopted policy aimed at further enhancing its connections with African countries, Türkiye significantly augmented the number of African students studying in its higher education institutions, with the figure standing at approximately 60,000 as of 2023. This article delves into the significance of international higher education programs within the context of Turkish foreign policymaking, examining their instrumental role in facilitating the remarkable surge in the number of African students, and reveals the role of foreign policymaking as the driving factor in international student mobility in Türkiye.

Türkiye has implemented bilateral, multilateral, and unilateral scholarship programs in different periods, in line with the country's foreign policy objectives and capacity. These pioneering international scholarship programs were introduced through bilateral agreements and multilateral programs in the first period between the 1960s through 1990 (Erken, 2015; Yeşilbursa, 2009). The Great Student Project (*Büyük Öğrenci Projesi*, BÖP) portrays the second phase, which was a regionally focused scholarship program targeting the students from kinship

communities of the former Soviet-dominated regions and implemented between 1992-2011 (Yarman Vural & Alkan, 2009). The third phase began with the introduction of the global scholarship program, Türkiye Scholarships, in 2012. The Turkish government unilaterally designed, financed and governed these two scholarship programs. Türkiye also continued to honor bilateral and multilateral agreements.

The presence of international students in Türkiye increased through unilateral scholarship programs in 1992 and 2012, BÖP and Türkiye Scholarship programs, respectively. Before these programs, international students were limited in number at Turkish universities.<sup>1</sup> With the BÖP in 1992, Turkish higher education system experienced an inflow of students sponsored by the Turkish government. However, the number of international students in the country in the pre-Türkiye Scholarship program period remained below twenty-six thousand; half of it was under the government scholarship program (YTB, 2014). As the BÖP focused regionally on the former Soviet-dominated regions, the number of African students was minimal during this period. The Türkiye Scholarships program, introduced later, dramatically increased international and African students in Türkiye. The number of publicly funded international students did not change under the Türkiye Scholarship program. However, the change in the policy to expand the program globally in line with foreign policy, detailed planning and a widely run campaign that helped to attract international students to the Turkish higher education system, as discussed later in this article.

Türkiye has been near the top of the list of countries hosting the highest number of international students in its higher education institutions over the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there are not enough studies analyzing the relationship between foreign policy making and the development of international student programs in Türkiye. As in a few cases referred to in this article, scholarship programs are analyzed mainly within the framework of their contribution to public diplomacy. Stating that international education is a pillar of Türkiye's foreign policy, especially towards the Sub-Saharan Africa region, Djamanca (2018) evaluates Türkiye Scholarships as a cultural diplomacy program Türkiye implemented to exercise soft power and to improve its image. Although the study focuses on the role of scholarship programs and international education in understanding international cooperation, it presents a limited approach to the dynamics of Türkiye's foreign policy towards sub-Saharan Africa due to its analytical framework around the concept of soft power.

Another study conducted by Ünal (2019) of Kyrgyzstan graduates from Turkish universities, focuses on the success of internationalization in higher education for building public diplomacy capacity through Turkish alums in

<sup>1</sup> The examinations of documents regarding treaties with partner states reveal the limited quotas spared for international students. Other means for international students to be hosted at Turkish universities are unknown for the period. For the official numbers kept after 1982 see Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> According to the data compiled from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023) and YÖK Higher Education Information System (2023). On the other hand, considering the most current statistics compiled by YÖK, YÖK President Özvar stated that Türkiye is one of the top ten host countries of international students (Kasap, 2022).

the public sector and politics. Ünal evaluated scholarship programs and internationalization in higher education as a public diplomacy tool that supports Türkiye's foreign policy. However, this analytical framework considering scholarship programs as a public diplomacy tool to bring up societal leaders and training elites, leads to a narrow understanding of the scholarship programs.

Although different studies examine whether the selected foreign policy targets to be achieved through international student mobility (Kelkitli, 2021; Mohammed, 2017) or include the evaluation of the program through the problems experienced by the students (Şimşek, 2022; Baydemir, 2020), they remain very limited in revealing the foreign policy targets by examining the process of the policymaking. An article by Aydınli and Mathews (2021) evaluate the implementation of internationalization by analyzing the strategy document for Türkiye's internationalization policy in higher education in connection to its foreign policy goals. They argue that the internationalization strategy, which is a means of improving status in the global political arena, can be interpreted as a "status inconsistency" due to the mismatch between policy objectives and actual capacity. As discussed below, student mobility and academic engagements have been part of Türkiye's bilateral and multilateral relations, proving that governments set the vision for higher education institutions within their foreign policy concept. Gökhan Çetinsaya, a former president of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), also argues that the internationalization of higher education shall align with the foreign policy objectives (2014). Whereas YÖK and universities are responsible for implementing the policy and the capacity-building for internationalization, the article by Aydınli and Mathews reveals that the higher education council and universities have not been able to develop capacities consistent with the aimed status. Nevertheless, the deficiencies in the capacity of these institutions cannot be connected to the deficiencies in the foreign policy capacity.

In order to fill the gap, this article analyzes how foreign policy decisions, particularly Africa Opening Policies, have led the international scholarship programs and increased student mobility from Africa to Türkiye. To this end, the background of Türkiye's African policy and the policies made by different governments are discussed. Then, student exchanges and scholarships are evaluated in bilateral agreements and regional cooperation between Türkiye and African countries. While analyzing these issues, how foreign policymaking precipitates the internationalization of higher education, specifically how the openings in Türkiye's African policy relate to student mobility from Africa, becomes the central question.

The analysis of international scholarship programs as an instrument in Turkish foreign policy in the context of the Africa Opening Policies is examined as a single case study in this article. To acquire an in-depth insight and contextualize the phenomenon of scholarship programs within foreign policymaking, we have designed a single

case study covering the Republican period of Turkish foreign policy, particularly around international student mobility decisions. Process tracing methodology is embraced as the most efficient means to answer the question "how," in this case analysis, which strengthens and relates the inferences drawn from the policy documents examined. Throughout the history of the Republic, how the foreign policy towards African countries is shaped, is revealed from the parliamentary minutes regarding government programs. Then by examining bilateral agreements and summit declarations in the documents published in the Official Gazette and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, how educational issues, specifically scholarships, are used in developing relations with certain countries and in the making of foreign policy towards these countries is sought. Finally, review of relevant institutions' policy documents, such as the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), the Ministry of National Education, and the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) show that the openings in foreign policy and the desired relations with a particular country or region affect the international scholarship programs' design and priorities in the programs. Along these lines, foreign policymaking is explored as the main driving factor in developing international student mobility in Türkiye.

## 2. The Formulation and Development of an African Policy in Turkish Policymaking

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the priority of domestic issues and the continuing colonial rule in Africa shaped Türkiye's African policies, and Africa was rarely on the agenda in Turkish foreign policy (Özkan & Akgün, 2010). During the discussions of the program of the first Bayar Government, established in 1937, a member of the parliament stated that European countries were searching for new methods to ensure the continuation of domination in Asia and Africa (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013a). This expression reflects the spirit of its time. Colonial rule in Africa and the continuing domination of Europeans in these areas prevented policymaking towards these regions. Through examination of negotiations of the government programs from the parliamentary minutes, we noticed that the African agenda is absent in the programs during the first couple of decades.

There were only two Turkish embassies, Cairo and Addis Ababa, on the continent of Africa until 1952 (Daban, 2021). However, after the Second World War, Africa Opening policies were on the Turkish foreign policy agenda at different times. There were attempts to develop and institutionalize this policy through political, economic, cultural, and social programs. It is possible to see the efforts to re-establish and develop relations with Africa on the foreign policy agendas of governments after the 1960s, at the time when African countries began to declare their independence. However, specific engagements in Türkiye's policies, searching for a place in the Western bloc during the Cold War, also resulted in limitations for adopting policies towards Africa. Türkiye abstained and

even took a negative stance towards the fights for freedom and independence of North African countries in the first half of the 1950s (Ataöv, 1976). The memoirs of retired Ambassador Mahmut Dikerdem show that Türkiye made a political and diplomatic choice to act in harmony with its allies in NATO regarding the independence movements (cited in Tepeciklioğlu, 2012).

The first attempts came in Türkiye's African policy in the second half of the 1950s. The policy of the USA, a NATO ally, to establish relations with the newly independent states probably affected this change (State Department, 2022). When pioneering sub-Saharan African countries declared their independence, Türkiye recognized their independence and the independence of others and began to establish relations with these countries. Türkiye opened a consulate in Nigeria in 1956 and an embassy in Ghana in 1957 (Özkan & Akgün, 2010). Delegations representing Türkiye were sent to the independence ceremonies of Cameroon in 1960 and Sierra Leone in 1961 (Daban, 2021). Between 1952 and 1968, nine embassies were opened, and the number of diplomatic missions on the continent increased to eleven (Daban, 2021). Government programs and the General Assembly meetings of the programs in this period show that the governments welcomed African countries' independence and showed their desire to establish relations in the 1960s. Delegations were sent to the newly independent countries to show their goodwill and interest in establishing or developing commercial and cultural relations (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013b, p. 1500; 1748). In the Ürgüplü government's program, established in 1965, the independence movements witnessed on the African continent were considered to be the most important political event of the age, and the participation of African countries in the family of free nations was welcomed. They stated that they wanted to provide all kinds of support through bilateral and multilateral relations, hoping that African countries would undertake their development and welfare, free from external interventions (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013b, p. 1958). African nations' independence and the development of bilateral relations were also included in the policies of the first Demirel government that was established subsequently (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013c, p. 2206; 2334; 2422).

Although improving relations with African countries were one of the foreign policy objectives of the governments established in the 1970s, problems in foreign policy and lack of capacity played a role in the failure to develop a policy towards Africa (Özkan, 2012). After the second half of the 1970s, more concrete policy proposals appeared on the agenda. Since the economy and economic development had a significant magnitude on the agenda of Türkiye in this period, building economic relations with African countries and providing development came to the fore. During the Irmak government's program discussions, Erbakan proposed the development of relations with Africa and establishing free trade zones with them (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013d, p. 4453). Gündüz Ökçün, the Minister of

Foreign Affairs between 1978-79, attempted to develop an African policy. The first institutional step of the Africa Opening Policy was taken by establishing the Africa Department in the ministry (İncesu, 2020). During this period, Türkiye supported African independence movements, participated in peace initiatives, and provided emergency and development aid (Tepeciklioğlu, 2012). According to İncesu's statements, who was the head of the Africa Department between 1978-80, priority was given to improving economic and political relations to build successful and permanent relations with Africa. Trade delegations were sent to Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan, and several preliminary agreements were signed. Official visits were paid mutually, and Türkiye opened two new embassies in Somalia and Tanzania (İncesu, 2020). In a speech Ökçün made in the Senate, he pointed out that there had been no contact with 14 member states of the UN until that time, Ökçün stated that close relations should be established with developing countries, including African countries, in terms of national interests and international visibility, and that they would appoint ambassadors (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Cumhuriyet Senatosu, 1979). Stating that they define Türkiye as a Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean, and a Balkan country in their government programs, Ökçün referred to their aim to develop economic and commercial relations with the countries in the region. He also claimed that the geography, which includes the Horn of Africa, would have a significant place in Türkiye's policy, just as it has a significant place in the regional and global dimensions (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Cumhuriyet Senatosu, 1979).

The political discourse shaped in this period significantly differs from a couple of angles. First and foremost, there is an effort to define Türkiye as an African country based on historical and cultural ties and to create a view of an insider. The other difference is the aim of creating a cooperation ground in economic development, which Africa also needs. In order to show its solidarity, Türkiye made an effort to provide humanitarian and development aid to some African countries, despite its limited financial capacity (Özkan & Akgün, 2010).

The embargo declared against Türkiye during the Cyprus case caused unexpected complications in foreign policy, the need for economic opening, and the political environment led to Africa Opening Policy initiatives. Contrary to NATO, Northern and Western countries, and African and Islamic countries, such as Libya, supported Türkiye in this period. Türkiye was in a deep economic crisis and needed to initiate trade openings. The parliamentary composition of that time, *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party – MSP), with a policy agenda of improving relations with the non-Western bloc and Muslim countries and the CHP, which wanted to be in close contact with developing countries within the scope of the ideological priorities of the party, became effective in this foreign policy change. To sum up, Africa was rarely in Türkiye's foreign policy agenda until the end of WWII; after the 1950s, the policy was adopted in line with the

priorities of its NATO allies; during the 1960s, with the independence of African nations, Türkiye wanted to establish relations with the new African countries, and finally, Türkiye sowed seeds for its independent African policy in the 1970s.

After the transition to the civilian government interrupted by the military coup in 1980, Türkiye reignited its Africa opening policy and added a humanitarian and development dimension to its policies. In 1985, Türkiye introduced a 10-million-dollar-aid package to support the drought in sub-Saharan Africa (Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2018). It participated in humanitarian aid activities initiated by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and played an active role in organizing aid campaigns, including the Turkish Red Crescent and the Diyanet Presidency. It implemented humanitarian and development projects in certain sub-Saharan African countries, including Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan. With this initiative, Türkiye, perhaps for the first time after many years, took part in international aid efforts to this extent as a donor country (Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2015).

New openings in Turkish foreign policy followed the Cold War and were also widely reflected in the relations with African countries. Economic relations were intensified with North African countries during Turgut Özal's presidency. Nigeria and Egypt were among the founders of the D-8, established during Erbakan's prime ministry. An important initiative was taken in 1998 by announcing the Opening to Africa Policy, developed through extensive meetings and consultations. The plan had comprehensive targets, including high-level official visits, increasing diplomatic representations, improving economic and commercial relations, signing technical and scientific cooperation agreements, and expanding economic and technical assistance as well as humanitarian aid (Hazar, 2016). During his parliamentary speech on Türkiye's efforts to open new areas in foreign policy, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit stated that Türkiye is a European, Balkan, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian country as well as being partly African and that Türkiye's new openings in international relations yield positive results (Neziroğlu & Yılmaz, 2013d, p. 7974). 1998 Opening to Africa Policy did not have an opportunity to be implemented due to political instabilities and economic crises in Türkiye.

Türkiye's current African policy is the outcome of the last two decades of AK Party governments (Özkan & Akgün, 2010). During this period, relations with Africa progressed in many directions. High-level relations were advanced with reciprocal visits and mutually increased diplomatic missions. Türkiye secured representation in the African Union and regional economic communities, joined the African Development Bank, increased investments and trade relations, undertook socio-cultural and educational projects, and increased the exchange of people. Africa has become one of the AK Party governments' most persistent and improved foreign policy openings.

Bilateral relations have been upgraded to the continental level and are institutionalized in Türkiye-Africa Summits. Türkiye-Africa summits were held three times in 2008, 2014, and 2021.

Student mobility has become one of the essential products of the most recent move in the Turkish African policy. The following section evaluates international student mobility and its contributions to bilateral relations. After placing international student programs as an operation of foreign policy, we return to student mobility between Türkiye and Africa and emphasize the policies of international student policies as a significant part of bilateral cooperation.

### 3. International Student Mobility and Growing Diplomatic Capacity

Government policies play a crucial role in international student mobility programs. Governments follow policies and give incentives to attract students and provide an opportunity to go abroad to study. Globally spread international scholarship programs have become one of the principal instruments governments employ in their international relations, public diplomacy activities, and development aid programs (Campbell & Neff, 2020). International scholarship programs have gained a vital position in international relations and the diplomatic capacity of states. The culture of diplomacy is being transformed, and varying actors undertake diplomatic roles. Civil society actors, human rights defenders and activists (Sending, 2011), religious communities (Lynch, 2011), and businesspeople (Seabrooke, 2011) are considered diplomatic actors in nations' relations. Hyphenated diplomatic concepts reflect the multiplication of diplomatic engagements and prove the existence of varying engagements which may facilitate ties and compromise beyond formal diplomatic methods and official actors. The emergence of different types of representation and the evaluation of various actors as "ambassadors" of their shared identities has created a new diplomatic culture. In this culture, international student mobility, promoted by scholarship programs, also serves to develop diplomatic capacity, and international students act as diplomatic actors (Atabaş & Köse, 2023).

On the other hand, the growing concept of public diplomacy in international relations since the 1970s has considered international student mobility programs as powerful instruments in building diplomatic relations. Public diplomacy emerged in the 1970s during the Cold War era and is defined as a type of diplomacy that employs strategies based on propaganda to influence people in foreign countries on various issues, including understanding and influencing public views and perceptions (Gregory, 2008). Public diplomacy took on a new form with an anthropological and ethnographic-based approach after the end of the Cold War, emphasizing the importance of the cultural dimension of identities and the non-state actors aiming to influence public opinion through media,

cultural activities, and student mobility programs (Marsden, Ibanez, & Henig, 2016). International education has been under review in parallel with the public diplomacy discussions as it helps, for example, familiarizing students with the culture of the society they are visiting and bringing their own culture to this society. This provides an inter-communal cultural rapprochement (Eide, 1970), and through this rapprochement creating an environment for interaction where diplomats and policymakers can understand the reactions of the foreign public to certain political moves (Fischer, 1972).

Nonetheless, the scholarship programs exert a more profound influence than merely supporting states' public diplomacy efforts. The programs, which have been a significant source of international student mobility, enable graduates of the programs to return to their countries, having comprehensive and in-depth information about the country that provides the scholarship opportunity as well as a positive perception (Kent, 2018). Moreover, they constitute significant inputs that contribute to the development of the sending country by raising human capital (Perna et al., 2014; Kajunju, 2018; Unal, 2019). Development cooperation policies consider meeting the human capital needs a critical agenda item for developing countries. In the context of these policies, scholarship programs have an essential role in the efforts of states to ensure economic development and alleviate poverty (Dassin, et. al., 2018). Developing countries that do not have enough qualified human resources, send their citizen students abroad for education, and international scholarship programs create an opportunity in this respect in cases where they cannot finance an education abroad (Boeren, 2018; Loerke, 2018). In this context, international scholarship programs are also becoming widespread and diversified. International scholarship programs, whose aims include transferring technical knowledge and experience, raising leaders, and developing social responsibility (Baxter, 2018), as well as strengthening diplomatic and economic ties between countries, and increasing and promoting the quality of the country's educational institutions (Boeren, 2018), plays a substantial role in developing human capital, and in building institutional capacity that are the essential elements of development.

As instruments of international relations, public diplomacy policies, and development cooperation, each overseas scholarship program has its own goals and target audiences within the framework of the described goals and objectives of the related organizations and institutions. Each institution determines strategies and policies to reach its target audience and ensures that the targeted people apply (Musa-Oito, 2018). Scholarship programs may be intertwined with different cooperation models: multilateral mobility programs, inter-institutional collaborations, and bilateral project and program collaborations may include a scholarship instrument (Boeren, 2018). While states develop international scholarship policies based on a specific purpose and rationale, they can potentially have a broad-

er impact on international student mobility programs outside of scholarship schemes. These potential benefits, which are not very different from the goals of the scholarship programs, include for the state to have students acquire skills in a new language, gain experience abroad, meet different cultures (Jackson, 2008; Childress, 2009), to contribute to national security and stability, develop peace and mutual understanding (de Wit, 2002), to develop diplomatic sympathy, and acquire voluntary envoys (Chankseliani, 2018).

These potential benefits of international student mobility have made them attractive to developed and developing countries. In order to benefit from the diplomatic capacity which international students create through the networks, they build and develop capacity that occurs as a result of their training abroad. For this purpose, different models for educational cooperation have come up. While Türkiye chose to engage in bilateral and multilateral agreements, including student exchanges, until the 1980s, it embraced unilateral scholarship programs to attract more international students in the 1990s and improved its program to diversify target regions in the 2010s. The following section elaborates on Türkiye's international student mobility programs in its evolving foreign policy context.

#### 4. Development of International Scholarship Programs in Türkiye

Türkiye began to show an increasing interest in international student programs after the Second World War. During this period, international students in Türkiye were the outcome of multilateral international scholarship programs. For example, the Regional Cooperation for Development, an intergovernmental organization established in 1964 by Türkiye, Pakistan, and Iran, implemented many projects to increase cooperation among member countries, as well as student and expert exchange and scholarship programs (Yeşilbursa, 2009). Until the 1980s, international students studying in Türkiye came under multilateral cooperation or bilateral agreements. The first law regarding the education process of international students in Türkiye, Law No. 2922, was enacted in 1983 by the Consultative Assembly, which was established after the military coup of 1980. This law, rather than a regulation to encourage international students to study in Türkiye, was introduced by the military government on a security basis to monitor the activities of international students during their education in Türkiye (Official Gazette, 1983, 14 October). However, in the Consultative Assembly meetings, member Beşir Hamitoğulları stated that he considers the issue of international students important within the framework of promoting Türkiye and Turkish culture alongside developing academic knowledge, brain power, and technology and revealed that there should be a broader vision other than the limited purpose of the law. Claiming that "these people, who will be the rulers of their own countries, will voluntarily defend Türkiye," Hamitoğulları pointed out

that international students can be essential partners in Türkiye's science, cultural and public diplomacy (Journal of Minutes of the Consultative Assembly, 1983).

There was no strong presence of international students in Türkiye until the 1990s. This scene was changed by the new geopolitical situation that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain. The foreign policy on the axis of the relations between the two blocs and the international student policy shaped in this context, made room to form new international student policies in an environment where unilateral and independent foreign policy steps were taken. In 1992, Türkiye launched the Great Student Project (BÖP) for kinship communities with which it has historical and cultural ties. The BÖP embraced the objectives of contributing to the development of human resources of kinship communities, building close ties, disseminating the Turkish language and culture, and establishing bonds between these communities (Yarman Vural & Alkan, 2009). Scholarships offered within this project's scope were provided to students from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia to study at universities in Türkiye. Figure 1 shows that the number of international students in universities, which was 7,850 as of the year the program was implemented, jumped to around 20,000 in the following year.

Even though the BÖP significantly contributed to internationalization in higher education in Türkiye, the project implemented between 1992-2011 only partially reached its goals. The graduation rate of scholarship holders from the programs they were enrolled was relatively low, which makes the efficiency of the program questionable (Özoğlu, et. al., 2015). According to the researchers,

the project did not fully reach the expected goals because the number of qualified students who applied remained low, the universities were not actively involved in the process of scholarship promotion, and the inefficiency of public services, such as visa and health coverage, and inadequate support in Turkish language teaching and the overall educational needs of the international students (Vural & Alkan, 2009; Özoğlu et. al., 2015).

Scholarship programs through bilateral and multilateral agreements continued alongside unilateral programs for all parts of the world. Until the early 2010s, geographical proximity and cultural, religious, and ethnic affinities were prominent in international students' decisions to study in Türkiye (Özoğlu et. al., 2015). Fundamental changes and centralization in international student policies came in 2012 with the reconfiguration of Türkiye's international student strategy and scholarship programs, in line with new openings in foreign policy. Publicly funded scholarship programs were coordinated under the Prime Ministry and acquired a global dimension. An international student strategy was introduced. It was aimed at increasing the capacity of Türkiye to attract students from various countries. In this context, Türkiye Scholarships was planned in line with Türkiye's foreign policy, to serve the goals of public diplomacy and education diplomacy, to contribute to academic and scientific development in Turkish universities, to support development cooperation policies and to contribute to the internationalization of higher education (YTB, 2012; Official Gazette, 2014, 17 June).

Türkiye Scholarship programs employed new strategies to attract students globally and to provide easy access for international students to apply through an online sys-

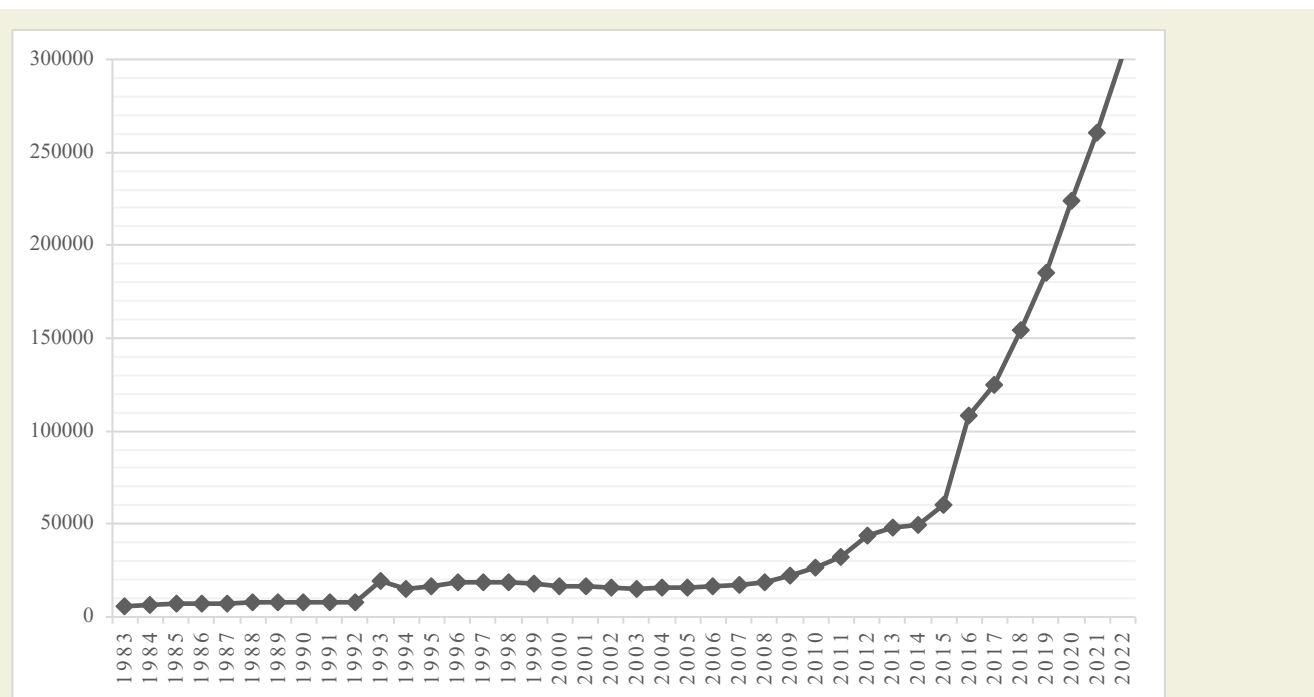


Figure 1. Total Number of International Students in Türkiye's Higher Education Institutions (1983-2021)

Source: Prepared by the authors based on YÖK Statistics

tem. The programs and quotas given to countries within the program were planned according to foreign policy priorities and the developmental need of the targeted countries, as well as facilitating diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations. The program also contributed to the internationalization of higher education and the capacities of higher education institutions (Alkın, 2020). Due to these new strategies followed by the Türkiye Scholarship programs, the number of international students in Türkiye has increased exponentially. The momentum of the increase in international students in Türkiye can be seen in the graph above as of 2012. A decade after the program's introduction, the number of international students approximated 200,000, and according to YÖK President Erol Özvar's statements, the number is even more than 300,000 (Kasap, 2022).

The analysis of the relationship between this practice and foreign policy is presented in the next section by drawing attention to the trend of student mobility from Africa to Türkiye after the "Opening to Africa" policy, which aims to improve Türkiye's relations with African countries. The internationalization of higher education employs strategies in line with the economic and foreign policy goals of Türkiye per its position in the world, according to Gökhan Çetinsaya (2014, p. 169). He emphasizes the necessity of a political vision, policy, and target on which steps taken within the scope of internationalization should be based. Internationalization practices in Turkish higher education are also expressed in connection with the openings and developments in foreign policy (Çetinsaya, 2014). We should note that, along with the Türkiye Scholarships, YÖK has incentivized universities in their internationalization efforts by giving more autonomy in their recruitment of international students. Moreover, many universities aggressively increased recruitment efforts to diversify their financial resources.

## 5. Opening to Africa and Student Mobility from Africa to Türkiye

African students studying in Türkiye have increased significantly in the last ten years. The total number of African students in the Turkish higher education system was 59,004 in the 2022-2023 academic year, corresponding to 33% of all international students. This increase in the number of African students, 1,915 of the total of 25,545 international students in the 2011-2012 academic year, can be explained by the expansion and institutionalization of Türkiye's Africa opening policy.<sup>3</sup>

As outlined above, international students' presence in Türkiye accelerated after the 1950s. Student mobility programs, based on regional and bilateral cooperation, have always been shaped by the direction of Turkish foreign policy. The increase in student mobility from Africa has followed a similar path. Türkiye's political, economic, and cultural cooperation was almost non-existent in the initial years of the independence waves in African coun-

tries. Limited cooperation with North African countries gradually expanded to West and East African countries in the later years. The picture becomes more apparent when we examine the educational and cultural agreements that constitute the legal basis of student mobility programs. The agreements signed with Libya (1959 and 1977), Morocco (1966), Tunisia (1967), Algeria (1967), Senegal (1969), Nigeria (1981), Sierra Leone (1981), Sudan (1982), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire) (1983) included provisions on student mobility or scholarships. As with these countries, some of which have strong cultural ties to Türkiye, the presence of international students in Türkiye during this period was generally based on intergovernmental cooperation.

On the other hand, eight out of the fifteen embassies opened on the African continent before the 1990s, except for Sierra Leone, were in these countries. In most African countries where diplomatic representations were opened, Türkiye signed agreements, including student mobility programs. Between 1983-1990, 1,000 out of all 1,500 African students attending Turkish higher education were from the countries where these agreements were signed (YÖK, 2023). Although international students came primarily from neighboring countries such as Iran, Syria, Greece (Western Thrace), and Iraq in the 1980s, African countries, such as Sudan and Nigeria were among the top ten sending countries. Figure 2 reflects the total number of students from African countries studying at Turkish higher education institutions, whose statistics have been recorded since the establishment of YÖK in the 1980s. Until the introduction of BÖP in 1992, Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, and Tunisia were the primary sending countries. Furthermore, agreements with student exchange clauses signed with Mali (1999), Gabon (2000), the Republic of Congo (2000), and Cameroon (2002) drew students from these countries as well, despite limited numbers between 1990 and 2002.

While these letters of agreements reveal bilateral strategies for student mobility with specific African countries, global programs have also started to be implemented. With the announcement of the Opening to Africa Policy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1998, a new window opened in African relations. During this period, Türkiye aimed to improve its relations with Africa regarding its regional and global political and economic goals in foreign policy. The action plan stated that there was an insufficiency in infrastructure for Türkiye and Africa to build their relations and aimed at developing institutional infrastructure and initiatives in different fields. Some of them were to increase the number of Turkish diplomatic representations, to appoint accredited representatives from Türkiye, to become a member of African Union institutions, and to develop military, economic, and cultural relations with Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999). The plan explicitly referred to student scholarships to increase the total quota allocated to African countries from 205 by making the scholarships attractive (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999: 8). As in other

<sup>3</sup> The numbers were compiled from the student statistics of the Higher Education Council Higher Education Information Management System (YÖK 2023).



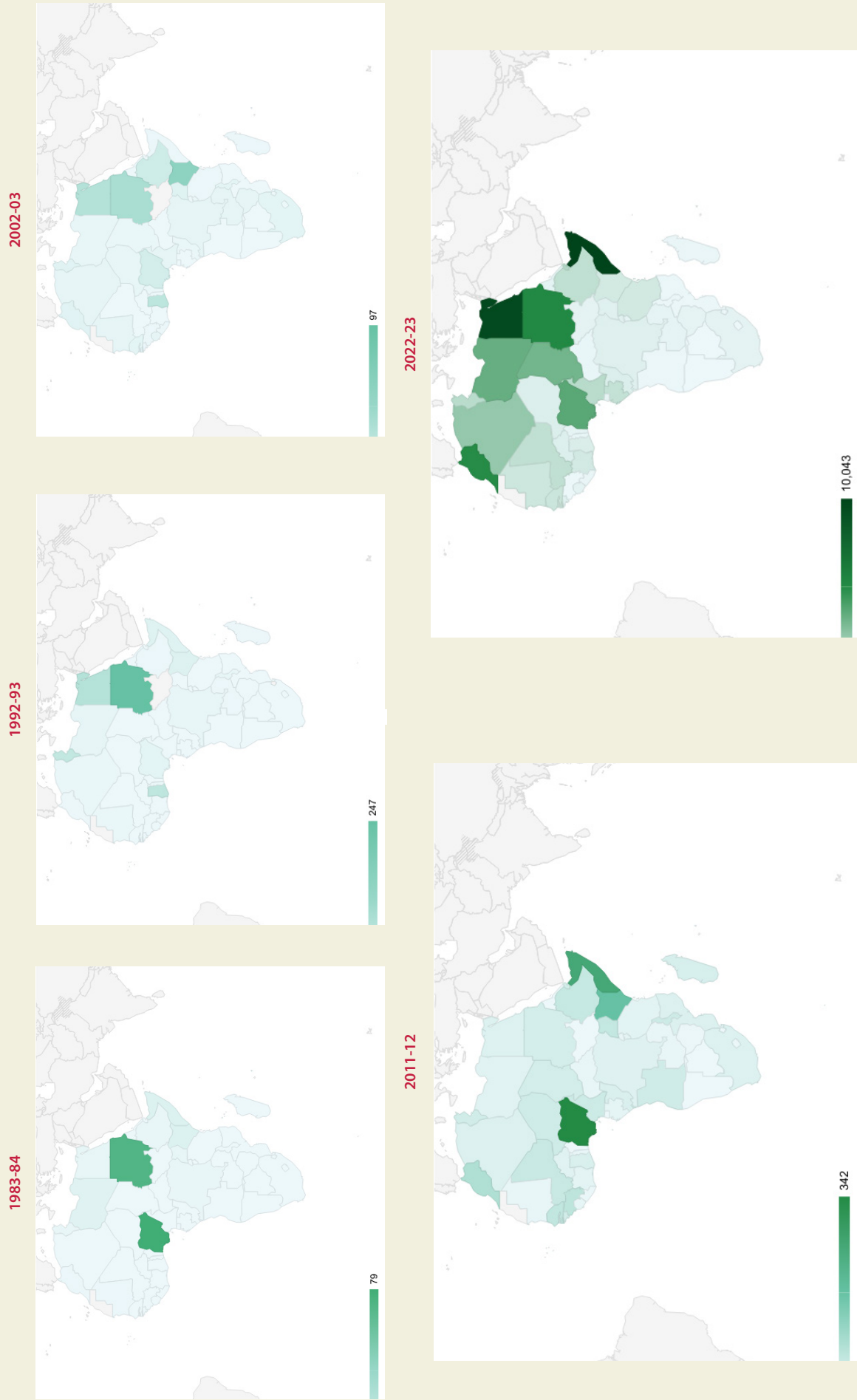


Figure 2. Total Number of Students from African Countries Enrolled at Turkish Universities in the Given Academic Years

fields, the implementation of the Opening to Africa plan in education was not possible to implement to the fullest extent due to the political instability and inefficient economic conditions of this period. The acceleration of the implementation of the African policy was achieved by proclaiming 2005, the African year, becoming a member of African organizations, and opening diplomatic missions in different countries in Africa. When the African policy was developed and institutionalized with the intensification of diplomatic relations, mutual visits, and economic cooperation, student mobility and scholarship programs were also on the agenda on almost every platform. During the first two decades of the second millennium, the provision of student mobility and scholarships took more in bilateral agreements, such as with Ethiopia (2004), Madagascar (2005), Mauritania (2005), Djibouti (2009), Egypt (2011), Ghana (2013), Guinea (2013), Liberia (2014), Namibia (2014), Ivory Coast (2015), Benin (2016), Rwanda (2016), Somalia (2016), South Sudan (2017), Zambia (2018), Gambia (2018), Niger (2018) and Chad (2019).

"Cooperation Framework for Türkiye-Africa Partnership," signed after the first Türkiye-Africa summit held in 2008 with the theme of "Cooperation and Solidarity for a Common Future," pointed out that the scholarships granted for African students were inadequate and an increase in the quotas was encouraged. Improving human resources, student and academic mobility programs, and cooperation between educational institutions were included in the final document at the second Türkiye-Africa summit held in Malabo with the theme of "A New Partnership Model for Strengthening Sustainable Development and Integration" (Özkan & Orakçı, 2021). The third Türkiye-Africa summit in Istanbul in 2021 emphasized supporting education at all levels, including student mobility and the Türkiye Scholarships program, to achieve the objectives of Türkiye-Africa cooperation and to increase youth employment. The Turkish government tasked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with coordinating and following up on the implementation of the outcomes of the summits, so that the "partnership for a common future" would be achievable (Prime Ministry Circular Order on Africa Strategy, 2010).

Student mobility was generally one way toward Türkiye. Turkish students' ability to move to Africa to study was limited to a few countries with limited numbers and programs. South Africa, Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco were the few countries where Turkish students took classes. The total number of African students in Turkish universities through bilateral agreements is estimated at around 4,000.<sup>4</sup> Until 2011, the allocated quota was predicted to be around 5,000, which shows that the achieved results stayed below what was planned and expected during these five decades. Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) scholarships were another instrument for African students studying in Türkiye. IsDB scholarships priori-

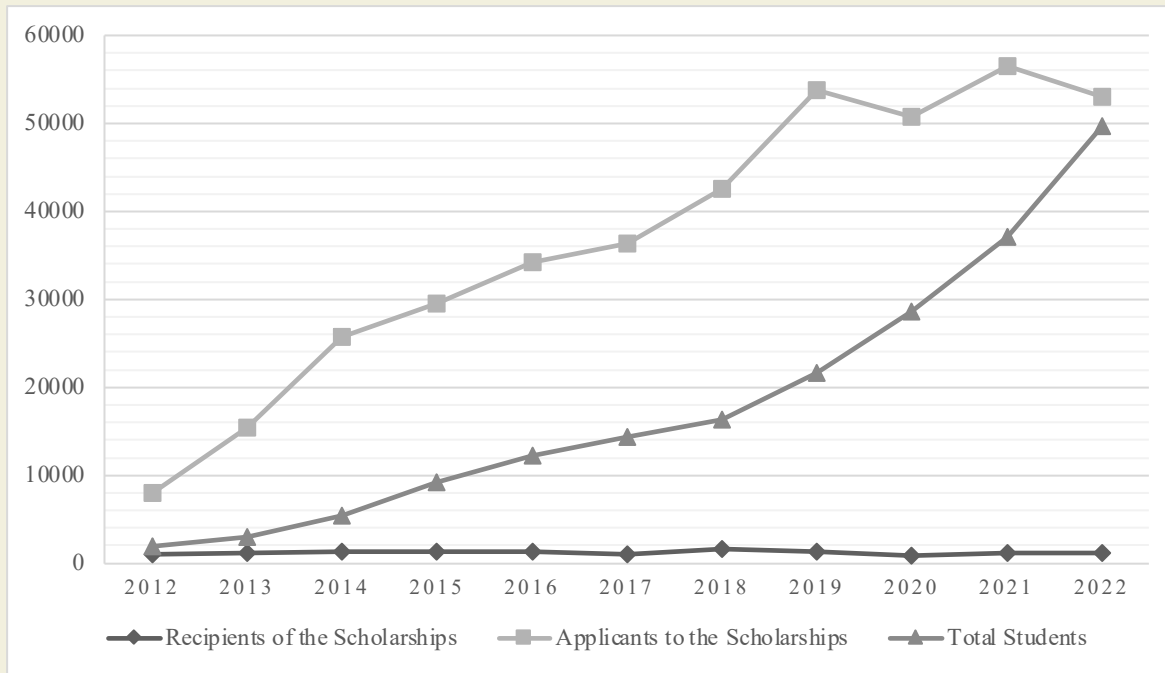
tized Muslim minority students, particularly in medicine and engineering, and many Muslim students took this opportunity to study in Türkiye. African students in Türkiye held 1,972 IsDB scholarships between 1983-2021. The program continues in coordination with Türkiye Scholarships programs managed by Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) (YTB, 2021).

During the last two decades, the efforts and initiatives to develop multidimensional and multilayered foreign policy have been sped up. Foreign Policy initiatives and openings have been planned and executed from the Pacific to Latin America. This era has also witnessed growing interest and achievement in African policy. A new program called Türkiye Scholarships was introduced in 2012 to align the scholarship programs with the new dynamics of Turkish Foreign Policy. The program resulted from an extensive review of past experiences, various programs managed by different public bodies, and global trends and best practices. The objectives and principles can be exerted from YTB's founding act passed through parliament in 2010. An upgraded new body, the International Students Evaluation Board, was formed to plan and coordinate Türkiye's inward international student strategies and programs chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister with the participation of undersecretaries and directors of stakeholder government entities. The Board was tasked with determining the general policies, developing strategy, and deciding the guiding principles and processes for international students. The secretariat of the Board was created under the administration of YTB, and this department is also responsible for implementing the Türkiye Scholarships program under the guidance of the Board.<sup>5</sup> The department's responsibilities include, executing the Türkiye Scholarships program based on the strategy, organizing programs for international students to gain a better understanding and insights about Türkiye, and conducting activities for alumni to maintain and improve ties between graduates and Türkiye, in order to contribute to the relations between nations and countries.

As outlined in the first section, the third phase of Türkiye's international student programs is globally designed and implemented. The first program representing the new vision was the Türkiye Scholarships program, introduced in 2012. Previous programs were terminated or revised according to the new strategy and principles. Thematic and regional programs designed within the Türkiye Scholarships program reflect new multidimensional and multilayered foreign policy. One of the visions and principles of the Türkiye Scholarships is a program to contribute to Türkiye's regional and global strategies and improve bilateral political, cultural, and economic relations within its foreign policy perspective. The African scholarship strategy under the Türkiye Scholarships program also reflects this vision of improving bilateral and regional cooperation with Africa. The objectives of scholarships granted for Africa reflect Türkiye's Africa

<sup>4</sup> The total number of students from Africa who were enrolled at Turkish universities is 3992. See Table 1. The minimal number of African students coming to Türkiye in the early 1980s implies that there had been only a few African students until the 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> The department, which was first established under the name of the Foreign Students Department, was changed to the "International Students Department" in 2012.



**Figure 3.** Number of Applicants to Türkiye Scholarships, Scholarship Recipients, and Total Students Studying in Türkiye from African Countries

**Source:** Data is compiled from YÖK and YTB annual reports by authors.

Opening Policy, which contributes to improving the relations with African countries and their development.

The new changes in international scholarship strategy led to a dramatic increase in African students over a short period of time. Internationalization strategy of higher education outlined and coordinated by Higher Education Council (YÖK) led to increase of self-sponsored students from Africa. The Türkiye Scholarships program acknowledges Türkiye's responsibilities according to the bilateral agreements and plans them within the scope of the program. The applications of African students for the Türkiye Scholarships program continued to increase through 2012-2022 due to easy access and increased awareness about Türkiye and its programs. Over this period, 11,920 African students were granted scholarships to study in Türkiye. The programs offered within the planned quota are updated regularly based on the needs of the recipient country and Türkiye's strategy.

Widespread promotions of the Türkiye Scholarships program in African countries has contributed significantly to the increase in African students seeking to study abroad to consider Türkiye as an option. As a result, the number of privately sponsored African students coming to Türkiye for their higher education has increased rapidly, reaching 59,004 in the 2022-2023 academic year, from 1,915 in 2010-2011. Figure 3 shows the annual number of the scholarship holders, the total number of students studying with scholarships or by their own means, and the applications to scholarship programs from African countries. The change particularly reveals that the promotions of the Türkiye Scholarships program is generally effective for promoting higher education in Türkiye.

In 2002, students from the African continent in Turkish educational institutions amounted to 390, representing 35 out of the 54 countries in Africa. However, following the implementation of the Opening to Africa policy, the number of students significantly increased to 1,915, encompassing 47 African countries by 2011, a pivotal year before the initiation of Türkiye Scholarships. The commitment to the initiatives for the African opening policy is reflected in international higher education programs, such as the internationalization strategy and scholarships conducted by the relevant institutions in the next period. As illustrated in Figure 2, as of 2023, the current data reveals the enrollment of approximately 60,000 students from all African countries.

## 6. Conclusion

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, colonial administrations that continued in the African continent prevented the establishment of relations with the region. Relations gradually developed in the following years with the countries that gained independence. At that time embassies opened and limited bilateral agreements were made. The limited interactions started to progress in the 1980s, and Türkiye was involved in aid programs in Sub-Saharan Africa with a humanitarian policy. Relations started to build more intensely and widely in the 1990s when Türkiye renewed its foreign policy to diversify the collaborated regions. Türkiye started showing increasing interest in regions with which it had no or weak contact. Türkiye's foreign relations gained various dimensions in Africa, and the diplomatic traffic intensified after the AK Party government declared the year 2005 as the African Year.

In the era of globalization, when states diversified the instruments, they use in their international relations through internationalization policies in education and international scholarship programs became widespread, Türkiye also used this instrument as a method for implementing its foreign policy. States that regulate and often manage the process with their policies to encourage their students to study abroad or to encourage international students to study in their country see international education as a public diplomacy activity with which they aim to familiarize international societies with their culture and politics. Moreover, International education and international scholarship programs that play a substantial role in developing human resources and building institutional capacity, both essential development elements, are vital tools to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties between countries (Boeren, 2018).

Türkiye started to show interest in international student programs after the Second World War, just like other global examples, and it has been involved in the process with some bilateral or multilateral agreements. Beginning in the 1980s, it became more aware of this strategic use and built its unilateral scholarship program. It first targeted the Turkic Republics with the Great Student Project (BÖP) announced in 1992. Although it started to build relations with various regions with new directions in its foreign policy in the 1990s and 2000s, the international scholarship program followed this trend a bit later and was reformulated in 2012, diversifying its target audience with effective announcements and promotions all over the world. Despite the Opening to Africa policy initiatives after 2005, students from African countries' interest in Türkiye was strengthened through the implementation of the scholarship programs following this policy.

The intensification of African policy was reflected in the new international scholarship programs introduced in 2012. The Türkiye Scholarships program aims at implementing the program in line with foreign policy priorities, more remarkably with the policy of Opening to Africa. The number of African students in Türkiye increased tremendously both under scholarship programs and private sponsorships in the last ten years. This increase is because a large group of people developed an idea about education in Türkiye and preferred to study here by their own means or with special scholarships, because of the

scholarship programs' promotion effect.

As stated above, compatibility with the African strategy, improving relations with these countries, and contributing to their development are some of the aims of the scholarships given to African students. Although the number of scholarships given has not changed, the fact that the number of African students, which was not more than 2,000 before the scholarship program was put into practice, reached 60,000 as of 2023 reveals the role of YTB in the opening to Africa policy. In the making of the Türkiye Scholarships program, the aim of contributing to Türkiye's regional and global strategies and developing political, cultural, and economic relations with strategically important countries has become prominent, and the link between foreign policy, which reflects national interests, and international student scholarships come to the forefront, especially in the case of Turkish African policy. The institution's work has increased the interest in Türkiye's international student program, and undoubtedly shows the effect of the expansions in Türkiye's foreign policy towards Africa on student mobility from Africa.

The literature on international higher education depicts that international student scholarships are some of the instruments that states use in international relations. However, countries adopt these programs with various objectives, and the primary objectives of the countries may differ, such as creating a positive perception of the host country, developing human resource capacity in the context of development cooperation, creating and spreading political influence, contributing to international peace and acquiring cultural ambassadors. The scholarly investigations concerning international student mobility in Türkiye, which are very limited in number, primarily focus on analyzing the implications of foreign policy developments on adopting such programs. These studies, constrained in their scope, rely on specific assumptions about foreign policy objectives, thereby hindering a comprehensive understanding of the policymaking process governing these programs. This article aims to elucidate how adherence to this policymaking process influences Turkish international higher education programs in the context of its "Opening to Africa" agenda. By adopting this approach, evaluating the impacts of these programs will render more robust and substantiated explanations.

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