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UNVEILING STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH CAMPUS DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION – A CASE OF A TURKISH FOUNDATION UNIVERSITY

KAMPÜSTE ÇEŞİTLİLİK, HAKKANİYET VE KAPSAYICILIK KONUSUNDA ÖĞRENCİ DENEYİMLERİNİ ORTAYA KOYMAK – BİR TÜRK VAKIF ÜNİVERSİTESİ ÖRNEĞİ

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore university students' experiences with bias, discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization within their campus environment. By shedding light on individual experiences, this study contributes to the existing literature on the subject and provides valuable recommendations for universities to foster a more inclusive and supportive campus atmosphere. In the study, a research design incorporating qualitative methodology and a focus group approach was employed. The study group consists of 10 students studying at a foundation university in Istanbul. Research findings showed biased attitudes towards international students in academic and social realms, leading to their alienation and exclusion. This divide was further amplified by language barriers, hindering international students' engagement in courses and related activities. Additionally, it has been determined that, besides the stress created by rigorous academic demands, the lack of awareness about health issues among academic and administrative staff disadvantages students experiencing mental health problems. Instances of exclusion based on religious and gender identities further underscored the need for a more inclusive and empathetic campus environment. Research findings can inform policy decisions and guide institutional practices to enhance access, retention, and success rates for marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Keywords: Diversity, equity, inclusion, higher education, international students, language barrier

JEL Classification: I23, 124, M14

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Öz

Bu çalışma, üniversite öğrencilerinin kampüs ortamında önyargı, ayrımcılık, dışlanma ve ötekileştirme deneyimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma bireysel deneyimlerin ışığında alan yazınına katkı sağlamakta, üniversitelerin daha kapsayıcı ve destekleyici bir kampüs atmosferi oluşturmasına yönelik değerli öneriler sunmaktadır. Çalışmada nitel yöntembilim ve odak grup yaklaşımı araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır. Çalışma grubu İstanbul ilinde bir vakıf üniversitesinde öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrenci kapsamındaki 10 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Araştırma bulguları, uluslararası öğrencilere yönelik akademik ve sosyal alanlarda önyargılı tutumlar olduğunu, bunun onların yabancılaşmasına ve dışlanmasına yol açtığını göstermektedir. Bu ayrımın dil engelleriyle daha fazla derinleştiği, uluslararası öğrencilerin derslere ve aktivitelere katılımı engellediği belirlenmiştir. Ayrıca, yoğun akademik taleplerin yarattığı stresin yanı sıra akademik ve idari personelin sağlık konularındaki bilinç eksikliğinden dolayı

mental sağlık sorunları yaşayan öğrencileri dezavantajlı duruma düşürdüğü belirlenmiştir. Dini ve cinsiyet kimliklerine dayalı dışlanma örnekleri, daha kapsayıcı bir kampüs ortamına duyulan ihtiyacı daha fazla vurgulamaktadır. Hazırlanan bu çalışma ile yeterince temsil edilmeyen öğrenci grupları için eğitim ortamını daha kapsayıcı hale getirmek üzere yükseköğretim kurumlarının politikalarına ışık tutmak, bu öğrencilerin başarı oranlarını artırmak amacıyla kurumsal uygulamalara rehberlik etmek hedeflenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çeşitlilik, hakkaniyet, kapsayıcılık, yükseköğretim, uluslararası öğrenciler, dil engeli

JEL Sınıflandırılması: I23, 124, M14

1. Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) represents initiatives for promoting equal opportunities and cultivating a sense of inclusivity for individuals of diverse backgrounds in various contexts, such as education, workplaces, and society at large. DEI has received significant focus in higher education (Fuentes et al., 2021), and higher education institutions have started to show commitment toward DEI by issuing statements and forming committees. One of the key factors contributing to it is the remarkable shift in student demographics and a significant rise in student diversity. Although embracing the principles of DEI is cited as an essential characteristic of a reputable and high-caliber university, effectively implementing them remains a challenging task (Moriña, 2017). Efforts are still needed to ensure equal educational opportunities for all, as they are crucial for shaping individual development, facilitating knowledge creation, and fostering innovation.

Scholars have concentrated their research efforts on examining various aspects of DEI within higher education. Fuentes et al. (2021) highlighted the need for guidelines to integrate DEI principles into the syllabus to foster an inclusive learning environment and enhance students' cultural competence. Lange et al. (2019) explored the experiences and success of LGBTQ individuals in higher education, highlighting diversity, inclusivity, and equitable engagement. Liou et al. (2021) examined the challenges faced by Latinas in higher education and how they navigate and resist negative expectations. Morris et al. (2022) investigated institutional barriers to integrating gender into UK higher education curricula and stressed the need to overcome these obstacles to promote gender equity and social justice. Thomson et al. (2022) focused on advancing gender equality in European higher education by providing collaborative support and overcoming institutional barriers. Wong et al. (2021) investigated university students' views on racism in England, revealing growing concerns about racial inequalities in higher education. Tudor (2021) advocated for decolonizing gender

studies in Europe by integrating DEI principles and challenging Eurocentric perspectives. While many studies have been conducted on the challenges and best practices related to DEI in higher education, there remains a need for additional research in this domain. One primary rationale for this is the distinctive socio-cultural, historical, and political context that varies across countries, which profoundly shapes the dynamics of DEI. Therefore, conducting country-specific studies allows for a deeper understanding of the specific challenges, opportunities, and nuances of DEI within that particular context.

Turkey exhibits remarkable diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and various other identities within its population. Likewise, universities in Turkey encompass a mixture of employees and students who come from various backgrounds and possess distinct identities. With its diverse population and unique socio-cultural context, Turkey presents a distinct and important case for examining DEI in higher education.

This study aims to provide insights into the challenges and barriers faced by students from diverse backgrounds on campus. It also offers valuable suggestions for creating a more inclusive and supportive campus environment. To do so, this research employs a focus group methodology to collect data and uses thematic analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of individual experiences encountered by these students. This study is conducted at a foundation university located in Istanbul, Turkey. The university is selected due to its diverse student population and its commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within its campus community.

2. Literature Review

Turkey has a remarkably varied population regarding ethnicity, language, religion, and various other identities. In recent years, Turkish higher education has developed innovative policies for inclusivity, diversity, equity, access, and internationalization. As part of these policies, there has been a particular focus on attracting international students to Turkey (Şahin & Eriçok, 2023). Efforts include developing legal documents, conducting specialized studies, and restructuring universities to enhance diversity. The aim is to diversify scholarships and improve services related to housing, social conditions, and counseling. Additionally, the implementation of exchange programs supports academic development and enhances student competencies (COHE, 2017; Yücel, 2023).

As per the data provided by the Council of Higher Education (COHE), the total number of international students enrolled in Turkish universities in 2022 amounts to 260,000 (Table 1) (COHE, 2022). These students primarily originate from Syria, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Despite the Muslim majority, Turkey also accommodates individuals adhering to Christianity, Judaism, and other religious faiths (State, 2022). According to the data provided by COHE, 55,667 students with disabilities are enrolled in Turkish universities (COHE, 2022). Turkey also encompasses diverse groups in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQI+ is an inclusive term encompassing individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (Ozturk, 2011).

Table 1: Number of International Students in Turkey (2022)

Uyruk	Total
Syria	53097
Azerbaijan	28922
Turkmenistan	15578
Afghanistan	9002
Germany	4822
Bulgaria	4734
Albania	1083
United States of America	1002

The diversity among university students and faculty extends beyond language, religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Additional factors such as political ideologies, body type, clothing choices, mental health, and socioeconomic status contribute to this diversity (Genitin, 2022; Ozturk, 2011). Considering a workforce and student body composed of individuals with varying backgrounds and identities, fostering DEI practices within universities is of great importance.

Diversity refers to variations within a specific environment, encompassing distinctions in race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic class, particularly in educational and professional contexts (Direito et al., 2021). A diverse university deliberately recruits and supports these diverse students and staff.

Inclusivity is achieved through purposeful actions aimed at making individuals feel acknowledged, listened to, and embraced. It involves fostering an environment where employees and students feel comfortable expressing their needs and cultivating a sense of belonging (Bonaventure University, 2022). In an inclusive setting, individuals are free to be themselves without concerns about concealing any aspect of their identity (Heinz, 2022). Diversity, equity, and inclusion are interconnected concepts, with the success of one relying on the success of the others (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Sengupta et al., 2019). Equity acknowledges the existing disparities between individuals from different identities and backgrounds. It aims to provide access, resources, and opportunities, especially for those with underrepresented and historically disadvantaged identities, in order to eliminate these inequalities and ensure equal rights for all (Heinz, 2022). In an equitable environment, individuals are not disadvantaged due to their background or social position (Rosencrance, 2021).

Numerous studies have provided evidence of the challenges and discrimination that international students encounter when integrating into university life and culture within higher education institutions. Among them, Park et al. (2017) examined how international students at US universities navigate language barriers and discrimination, highlighting DEI factors like social support and mentoring as crucial for successful adaptation. Similarly, Ye (2018) examined the experiences of international students in Japan. Tavares (2021) found that despite the university's DEI commitment, international students felt excluded due to insufficient intercultural awareness, poor social integration, and limited curriculum internationalisation. Tamtik and Guenter (2019) urged universities to address these issues and recognize international students as a marginalized group in EDI efforts. Other

studies have found that students who are unable to communicate in the language of the country where they are studying may experience social isolation, as they are unable to actively participate in extracurricular activities and in-class discussions (e.g., Bhowmik & Kennedy, 2022).

Likewise, research has revealed instances of discrimination experienced by students in higher education institutions based on their religious identities, highlighting the absence of an environment where students and employees can freely practice their religious beliefs (Islama & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Aune, 2017). Other studies have demonstrated instances of racism experienced by both staff and students at universities (e.g., Koo et al., 2021; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2020). Most importantly, gender disparities have put individuals at a disadvantage within university settings. Particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), women are underrepresented and face sexism, stereotypes, derogatory remarks, discrimination, and even sexual harassment (Sengupta et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies have also revealed that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who may possess less knowledge about the university system and experience greater financial hardships, may face additional challenges that hinder their success (Brown et al., 2016; Houle, 2014). The mental health problems experienced by university students can be considered as another aspect of diversity, placing them at a disadvantage and detrimentally impacting their academic performance (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Woodhead et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

We chose a qualitative approach and conducted a focus group to best capture the nuances of student experiences in this distinctive academic context. Qualitative research is designed to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions within a specific context. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to generalize findings to larger populations, qualitative research aims to explore and describe the richness and complexity of human experiences (Krueger, 1994). This approach is particularly useful for uncovering nuanced insights that are often missed in quantitative studies.

Focus groups were selected as the method of data collection because they facilitate interactive discussions among participants, allowing them to share and build on each other's perspectives. The use of focus groups aligns with the goal of qualitative research to understand and describe diversity rather than generalize findings. Krueger (1994) emphasizes that the aim of focus group discussions is not to extract meaning or generalize but to understand and describe diversity, shedding light on how participants perceive their situations. In focus group discussions, participants actively contribute to shaping concepts and frameworks, fostering mutual learning. Together, they build a reservoir of knowledge from their unique experiences. This method is effective for exploring how participants construct their understanding of DEI and how their experiences shape these perceptions (Morgan, 1997).

The study utilized a purposive sampling method, which consists of selecting participants with specific characteristics that align with the research objectives (Taherdoost, 2016). This approach enabled us

to delve deeply into the multifaceted aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion from their unique perspectives. Participants were selected based on two primary criteria. The first criterion involved the English language proficiency of students, as the study aimed to involve both international and national students who were expected to engage in English discussions actively. The second criterion focused on targeting third or fourth-grade students with a significant level of university experience. In collaboration with academic instructors, a list of potential participants was compiled using this sampling method. Then, the students were asked whether they would participate in the research. Prior to the interview, students received a concise overview of the study's objectives.

The optimal number of participants in focus group discussions varies according to different sources, with recommendations spanning from 4 to 10 participants (Edmunds, 2000). Edmunds (2000) cautions that exceeding 10 participants can lead to reduced group dynamics, less participant interaction, and increased difficulty in group management. To ensure an effective and interactive focus group, a manageable group size of 6-10 participants for 1–2-hour sessions was recommended (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). It should also be noted that for qualitative research sampling, choosing the right individuals with particular characteristics who fit with the goals and purposes of the study is more critical than the size of the sample (Tracy, 2013).

In line with this recommendation, a 1.5-hour online interview was conducted involving 10 participants who had confirmed their willingness to participate. The sample comprised five males and five females, with three of them being international students and the remaining participants being Turkish. You can find the details of the participants in Table 2. The study obtained ethical approval from the university where the research was conducted. The focus group was conducted in June 2023.

Table 2: Details of Participants

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Faculty
P1	Male	Azerbaijan	Faculty of Aviation and Aeronautical Sciences
P2	Female	Turkey	Business Administration
P3	Male	Pakistan	Faculty of Aviation and Aeronautical Sciences
P4	Male	Turkey	Business Administration
P5	Female	Nigeria	Faculty of Social Sciences
P6	Male	Turkey	Faculty of Aviation and Aeronautical Sciences
P7	Male	Turkey	Faculty of Social Sciences
P8	Female	Turkey	Business Administration
P9	Female	Turkey	Engineering
P10	Male	Turkey	Engineering

Participants were questioned about their experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus, instances of bias or discrimination faced, and suggestions for promoting DEI on campus. In the development of interview questions, a comprehensive approach was pursued, drawing from multiple sources to ensure the validity and reliability of our data collection instrument. An extensive

review of the existing literature in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education was conducted, allowing key themes, concepts, and potential areas of interest to be identified. In addition, best practices from universities renowned for their success in implementing DEI initiatives (e.g., the University of Michigan) were used. Conducting pretests on research questions was integral to increasing their validity (Hu, 2014). This process involved testing the questions on a small group of individuals to assess their clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the study, thereby improving the overall quality and validity of the questions. Students were initially provided with a detailed explanation of diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure a clear understanding of the concepts. Following the introduction, they were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Have you ever encountered any instances of bias, discrimination, or prejudice on campus related to your identity? If so, could you describe those experiences?

- How do you perceive the university's efforts in supporting and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus? Do you believe that the university provides adequate resources and support for students from diverse backgrounds? If not, how can the university enhance its diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives?

The interview session was recorded with participants' consent, and the audio recordings were transcribed to serve as valuable data for subsequent analysis and research purposes. Manual thematic analysis was employed to analyze the document and identify the key topics and themes that emerged from the data. Data saturation, often considered a key determinant of nonprobability sample sizes in qualitative research (e.g., Guest et al. 2006), was maintained throughout the focus group discussion, ensuring a comprehensive grasp of participants' experiences. It is attained by sustaining discussions until no further novel information or insights are derived from the participants.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, both researchers attended and engaged in the focus group session. Following the completion of the focus group discussions, both researchers independently analyzed the data. This approach was designed to ensure that interpretations and findings were not influenced by a single perspective. After the initial analysis, the researchers then came together to compare and synthesize their individual results. The results showed consensus on the emerging themes and conclusions and further underscored the credibility of the findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Personal Encounters with Bias, Discrimination, or Prejudice on Campus Related to Identity

In contrast to the existing literature, the students in this study did not discuss topics such as gender discrimination or racism (Koo et al., 2021; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2020; Sengupta et al., 2019). while these issues often take precedence in many settings, they did not emerge as significant concerns at this university. Furthermore, the students did not express any apprehension regarding socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown et al., 2016; Houle, 2014). Instead, language barriers and the challenges faced

by international students emerged as the most significant issues, as perceived by both Turkish and international students. The research findings shed light on the prevalent biased attitudes of local students towards their international counterparts, not only in academic settings such as classrooms and group projects but also in social interactions, such as student clubs. International students expressed their feelings of alienation, lack of acceptance, and exclusion from their peers. Here are some sample phrases provided by the participants:

"I have observed the presence of unconscious biases among students towards international students. This is perhaps due to the language barrier. For instance, when forming groups for course assignments, Turkish students often abstract from including international students because of the language barrier. This exclusionary behavior is also evident in social interactions, such as student clubs, where international students are usually left out. Because of the perceived challenges posed by language and cultural differences, I feel like they are just not giving us a chance." (P4)

"International students get discriminated during one-on-one interactions and friend groups with Turkish people. Turkish students don't want to speak English or may not trust their communication skills. So, they avoid speaking English, which then obviously discriminates international students. Then Turkish people form their own friend group, and international people are forced to form their own separate groups against this huge pile of people." (P2)

Another challenge raised by international students has been related to the non-inclusive actions of the instructors. Despite the curriculum being in English and the requirement for courses to be taught in English, participants have complained about instructors using the country's language without providing translations. This practice has been perceived as discriminatory, placing international students at a significant disadvantage and creating an unequal learning environment. The participants shared the following sample phrases:

"I have received numerous complaints from my international friends regarding the instructors' use of Turkish as the primary language of instruction without providing translations or switching back to English. Even when important points need to be emphasized, the instructors tend to revert to Turkish. Then, people who do not speak Turkish completely miss the point. This remains a continuous source of complaint among my friends. Many faculty members also lack English proficiency, which then leads them to revert to Turkish during in and outside class interactions. Consequently, international students face difficulties in understanding their classes and course materials. (P2)

"This semester, I was the only international student in one of my courses, with the rest comprising Turkish students. Although the course is supposed to be in English, the instructor preferred to teach in Turkish since I am the only person who does not understand the language. I sent him an email explaining my difficulty in comprehending Turkish and requested that he deliver the lectures in English. While he started to lecture in English for the first ten minutes of the class, he then switched back to Turkish. Because it's a numeric class, I managed to understand the course to some extent, as numbers are not language-dependent. But what if the course was more language-intensive?

Somebody could get poor performance because they don't understand what is happening in the class." (P5)

Besides the courses, other career-related activities, including seminars and mock interviews, have also not been inclusive for international students as they were typically conducted in Turkish. Apparently, the language barrier prevented international students from fully participating and benefiting from these events, hindering their ability to prepare for their careers. Here is a sample phrase provided by one participant:

"There is a lack of opportunities to participate in interview simulations as they are consistently conducted in Turkish. This language barrier presents a significant challenge for most international students. For instance, one of our mandatory courses requires attending various campus seminars. As international students, we participate in those events solely for the grades, without having an idea of content due to the seminars being conducted in Turkish." (P5)

The participants have listed examples of alienation and exclusion in various social settings, including student clubs and sports centers on campus. An example given by a participant is as follows:

"International students often find themselves limited to participating only in the International Club. They are not accepted to work in other clubs like dancing, cuisine, sports, or aviation, which I think is a huge drawback for them. We only have a full international lobby in the administrative roles, such as club heads or secretaries, in the International Club. We won't ever be able to get a chance because the clubs are just outnumbered by the Turkish students." (P3)

Two participants have attributed the language and grouping issues to the diverse backgrounds and distinct admission requirements for international and Turkish students. While international students are required to meet well-known and accepted language proficiency standards for admission, Turkish students have the option to complete language school within the university. This disparity can lead to unequal situations and create a sense of imbalance between the two groups. The participants shared the following sample phrases:

"Turkish and international students' competencies and educational backgrounds are totally diverse. International students have a completely different perspective on life and on academia in general. Turkish students come from far different systems. So, the differences in their backgrounds hinder effective communication, and both sides don't really understand each other." (P4)

"Turkish students and international students go through different admission processes, which contribute to segregation. For instance, international students are required to demonstrate proficiency in exams such as TOEFL." (P1)

Three students have voiced concerns regarding mental health, specifically highlighting the challenges posed by rigorous and inflexible academic demands, which intensify stress levels and negatively impact the mental well-being of individuals. Furthermore, the students have expressed

dissatisfaction with the lack of awareness and education about mental health issues among faculty and staff. Sample phrases are as follows:

"During one of my English classes, one of my group members had a serious medical condition, which caused routine seizures when subjected to extreme stress. Although I don't have the exact details of her condition, it was something serious, and she was taking medications. She kindly asked the teacher if she couldn't present on the presentation day, as she did not feel comfortable doing it because of her condition. And the teacher said that she must present just like everybody and disregarded her concerns. On the presentation day, she had a full-blown panic attack and cried in the bathroom for a couple of hours. So, I think that should change." (P7)

"I also struggle with mental illnesses, specifically diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Unfortunately, attending classes often triggers my panic and anxiety attacks. These incidents have become more frequent and consistent since starting university. These anxiety attacks tend to occur at unusual times. In such situations, I have had to go to the campus infirmary, but regrettably, the health professionals there have no idea about mental health or how to treat a patient with mental health problems. Each time I experienced an anxiety attack, I attempted to manage it on my own. However, their lack of knowledge only exacerbated the situation, making it even worse." (P2)

A few participants have brought up the issue of religion and shared their personal experiences of feeling excluded based on their religious identity. One participant specifically mentioned feeling compelled to cover or hide their religious affiliation to avoid discrimination or bias. The statement is as follows:

"A personal prejudice that I've experienced is that I'm Christian by religion, and I have observed this more than once when I'm making friends before the religion part comes we are okay and everything goes well. But the moment I express that I'm not Muslim, it changes the dynamics of the relationship. At this point, I have noticed that I have to refrain from saying what religious background I come from." (P5)

One student raised concerns about gender identity issues and the discrimination she faced on campus due to their identity.

"I'm nonbinary, and we don't have any inclusive restrooms within the campus, so I have nowhere to go, and I feel I don't fit in any type of gendered restroom. Honestly, I don't feel comfortable. As I tend to use women's restrooms, I feel like women accuse me of something. I have actually brought up this matter with both the LGBT club on campus and the health and safety environment department. Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of gender representation within the LGBT club, as well as resources dedicated to addressing the specific needs and concerns of trans individuals. I didn't see any kind of help or support specifically tailored to trans students." (P2)

4.2. Strategies for Enhancing University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives

Considering each other's concerns, students proposed various solutions to address the concerns mentioned. The quotes emphasize the need for enhanced English language support and resources for international students, suggest that instructors should actively assign diverse student groups to foster integration, and recommend that the university's Scola department update its language programs to better support all students in improving their language proficiency. Sample phrases are as follows:

"It is essential that we prioritize the improvement of English proficiency and enhance the availability of resources for international students, because English is the only language we can communicate. Also, a potential solution to address segregation and exclusion among international and national students is to have instructors assign groups for projects rather than allowing students to form their own groups" (P6)

"It would be beneficial for the university's School of Languages to update its language programs and ensure that all students have access to comprehensive language proficiency. Also, the School of Languages can consider removing separate requirements for Turkish and international students. In this way they can avoid this segregation and ensure that everyone is starting at the same level " (P1)

The quotes highlight the need for increased use of simultaneous translation at Turkish events, organizing some events in English, and alternating event languages between Turkish and English to ensure inclusivity for all participants. Also, the participants suggested encouraging international students to lead events can also help overcome language barriers.

"Implementing simultaneous translation for events in Turkish could greatly enhance inclusivity for international students. By providing real-time translation services, students who are not fluent in Turkish would have the opportunity to understand and engage with the content being presented." (P1)

"To address this issue, it would be beneficial if some events are organized in English. I think that international students can be encouraged to organize events for students to have more English events." (P9)

"An event that is held in Turkish today could be conducted in English the following day. If events were held in both languages, it would ensure that no one is left out—Turkish-speaking individuals could understand fully, and international students would also be able to participate effectively." (P5)

A student highlighted the need for greater representation of international students in student clubs and administrative offices to ensure their needs and perspectives are adequately addressed. Additionally, several students proposed solutions for better supporting those with mental health challenges, such as offering alternatives to live presentations for students with anxiety and formalizing these accommodations into a standard procedure. Sample phrases are as follows:

"International students really need more representation at the university. It is crucial to have mandatory representation of international students in administrative roles within student clubs. Having at least one or two individuals in these positions will ensure international students are considered and represented in club activities and decision-making processes." (P3)

"The lecturers shouldn't have the power to force anybody to do anything, especially if it's a medical condition. Everybody's stressed during presentations but especially if a person is being medicated, there shouldn't be any force." (P7)

"Instead of mandating live presentations, teachers could offer alternatives such as allowing students to submit their presentations in written form or as recorded videos. This flexibility would provide students with different options to complete their assignments without exacerbating their anxiety." (P8)

"I believe that once students provide proof of their mental health condition, such as a doctor's report, actions should be taken to ensure their well-being. Universities can develop and implement policies that outline how to support students with mental health problems. These solutions should be shared with professors and teachers to create a supportive environment for students with mental health challenges." (P4)

One student suggested implementing institution-wide education initiatives and establishing a DEI department and a reporting line or channel within the DEI department for addressing bias and discrimination. Another student recommended labeling food items in the dining services to accommodate diverse dietary needs, including vegan, gluten-free, kosher, and halal options. Sample phrases are as follows:

"I believe it is crucial to establish a dedicated DEI department at our university, supported by a comprehensive policy that is actively implemented. Additionally, regular training should be conducted to educate not only students but also staff in an inclusive manner. It is important to ensure that this training is accessible to all individuals. I strongly believe that the university should establish a dedicated reporting line or channel and a platform for all members of our community, including both staff and students, to voice their concerns and seek support on DEI issues. By implementing such a system, we can at least minimize the negative effects of these experiences and ensure that everyone feels heard, valued, and supported within our university." (P1)

"There are many people on campus with specific dietary needs due to medical conditions, such as gluten sensitivity, and it's good that we have gluten-free options. However, some religions also have dietary restrictions—such as kosher requirements in Judaism and halal practices, which involve specific methods of food preparation. Additionally, there are Indian students who might avoid beef and other animal products. While it may not be feasible to cater to every individual preference, we could improve our dining services by labeling food items with tags indicating if they are vegan, gluten-free, kosher, halal, or otherwise. This would help accommodate a wider range of dietary needs." (P6). Lastly, two students suggested having gender-free toilets (P2, P6).

5. Conclusion and Discussions

DEI initiatives within universities hold great importance due to their ability to address the challenges mentioned earlier and accommodate a wide range of individuals. By fostering diverse representation and creating an inclusive learning environment, universities provide crucial support to students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, inspiring them and bolstering their belief in their potential and capabilities. Diversity on campus also enhances cultural awareness, enriching dialogues and dismantling prejudices (Clayton, 2021). Inclusivity fosters a broad range of perspectives and encourages creativity, which is fundamental to the educational journey in a diverse academic culture (Bleich et al., 2015). Moreover, a diverse, equitable, and inclusive university environment equips students with valuable skills. It encourages critical thinking, fosters an understanding of diverse perspectives, and promotes conflict resolution through compromise and mutual understanding. Ultimately, it leads to improved academic performance (Tavares, 2021).

This study utilized a focus group approach involving ten international and national students to investigate the DEI-related challenges they experienced at a foundation university in Istanbul, Turkey. Unlike what's commonly found in the existing literature, the students involved in this study did not bring up subjects like gender discrimination or racism (Koo et al., 2021; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2020; Sengupta et al., 2019). Research findings showed biased attitudes towards international students in academic and social realms, leading to their alienation and exclusion. Another important topic was the mental health problems caused by tough academic demands. These pressures created a lot of stress and showed that the faculty and staff didn't know enough about mental health problems. Also, instances of people feeling left out because of their religion or gender highlighted the need for a friendlier and more inclusive campus environment.

Each country has its distinct own socio-cultural, historical, and political context, which significantly influences the dynamics of DEI. Consequently, conducting country-specific studies becomes crucial in understanding the dynamics and complexities of DEI within those unique contexts. Similarly, the characteristics of each organization shape the dynamics of DEI. While overarching principles and frameworks can guide DEI efforts, implementing effective DEI practices necessitates consideration of the organization's unique context, culture, and demographics. This approach ensures that the policies remain relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of the diverse individuals within that setting.

Given that this study is preliminary and exploratory in nature, it is essential to emphasize that even within a single focus group, these initial findings have illuminated significant insights into the subject matter. This emphasizes the presence of many unexplored aspects that require more in-depth investigation through further studies. This research is a stepping stone prompting the need for further investigation. We hope that these findings serve as a catalyst for future research, encouraging scholars to delve deeper into this area. While this single focus group has offered valuable perspectives, additional research is needed to expand and validate the emerging themes and hypotheses, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Considering that context can greatly

influence necessary DEI practices, future research could examine diverse university settings in different cities, encompassing both private and public institutions. This could unveil context-driven differences.

6. Recommendations

By incorporating participants' concerns and suggestions, the study has generated valuable insights regarding the implementation of DEI practices. These findings are supported by similar research conducted in other contexts, strengthening their relevance and validity. Furthermore, the text references universities that have already adopted and implemented these suggestions.

6.1. Concerning Language Barrier

It is recommended that universities establish policies and programs tailored to the specific needs of international students to ensure their successful integration and support. These initiatives may include encouraging faculty and staff to engage with international students, implementing language learning opportunities to enhance their proficiency in the local language, providing cultural orientation training to familiarize them with the new environment, facilitating practical experiences and internships to help them gain valuable skills and build professional networks (De Wit, 2020; Knight, 2011; Tavares, 2021).

In order to ensure equal access to education for all students, universities with English as the medium of instruction should take measures to maintain consistency in language usage throughout lectures. It is crucial for faculty members to adhere to the use of English during class, refraining from switching to the local language. Instructors can also contribute to an inclusive classroom environment by establishing guidelines for using a common language during discussions. Measures such as having instructors assign groups for projects rather than allowing students to form their own groups can indeed help address potential biases or inequalities that may arise from self-selection.

Universities should conduct a comprehensive assessment of their language education programs and admission criteria for national and international students to ensure fairness and avoid creating inequality. This evaluation should identify the specific areas where students face difficulties and determine the reasons behind the inadequacies in their English capabilities. Based on the findings, universities can develop targeted interventions to enhance the language programs and ensure they effectively equip local students with the necessary language skills. In this way, universities can ensure all students start their academic journey at the same level.

To ensure that events at the university are accessible to all students, it is essential to consider the linguistic diversity of the student body. This means offering multilingual support, translations, or interpretations. Moreover, staff members at various campus facilities, such as student services, libraries, dining halls, and administrative offices, should be proficient in English to communicate and assist international students effectively. Lastly, international students should be given equal

opportunities to engage in diverse clubs and activities. Having a mandatory representation of international students in administrative roles within student clubs will promote inclusivity and ensure that international students' unique perspectives and needs are considered and represented in club activities and decision-making processes.

6.2. Concerning Mental Health

Universities can develop and implement policies that outline how to support students with mental health problems. These policies should be shared with professors to create a supportive environment for students with mental health challenges. Additionally, measures can be taken to address test anxiety, such as offering the option for students to take exams in a separate quiet room and providing extra time if needed (Woodhead et al., 2021). Moreover, having a dedicated mental health support system within the medical unit can ensure that students have access to the necessary resources and professional help when needed.

6.3. Concerning Gender Identity

Although there is a demand for gender-free toilets and change rooms from non-binary individuals, it seems very unlikely due to the cultural, social, and legal factors in the country. Some universities in Tukey have attempted to open gender-free toilets; the attempt, however, was stopped by political pressures (KaosGL, 2016; Unikuir, 2023). Conservative values, often influenced by religious beliefs, can lead to resistance towards LGBTQ+ rights and concepts such as inclusive restrooms. There are no specific laws in Turkey explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ rights, and same-sex relationships are not legally recognized. This lack of legal recognition affects the government's stance on policies related to gender identity and inclusivity. Instead, universities may ensure that there are policies that explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and expression. They may also offer specialized counseling services that are knowledgeable about and sensitive to the needs of non-binary individuals.

6.4. Concerning Religion

It is crucial to create dedicated spaces, such as prayer rooms and meditation rooms, that cater to the diverse religious practices and beliefs of all stakeholders (Islama & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). It is crucial to consider the sensitivities of individuals, including the location of these spaces, to ensure that everyone's religious practices are respected and accommodated in a considerate manner.

6.5. DEI Policy and Manager/Dean Responsible for DEI

It is recommended to establish a dedicated DEI department at the university, supported by a comprehensive policy that is actively implemented. They may consider designating a manager or dean responsible for executing policies, programs, and initiatives aligned with the university's DEI objectives (Worthington & Stanley, 2020).

6.6. DEI Metrics

To effectively monitor and assess the progress of universities' DEI efforts, it is essential to develop measurable metrics and regularly analyze performance (Brancaccio-Taras et al., 2022). These metrics may include indicators such as the demographic diversity of faculty and staff, the number of reported and resolved DEI cases, and salary disparities. By utilizing such metrics, universities can track their progress and identify areas for improvement.

6.7. DEI Data Collection and Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students and staff regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, universities should actively collect and analyze data through anonymous surveys. This data analysis can help identify biases or issues that need to be addressed (University of Michigan, 2023a).

6.8. DEI Platform

Creating platforms that foster an open dialogue and encourage all students and staff to express their differences, share their stories, voice their concerns, and seek support on DEI issues is essential (University of Michigan, 2023b).

6.9. Discrimination and Harassment Reporting System

Establishing effective mechanisms not only for students but staff as well to report instances of abuse and harassment anonymously is of utmost importance. In addition, formal systems and policies must be developed to handle and address cases of prejudice or discrimination, ensuring that appropriate actions are taken (Harvard University, 2023).

6.10. Mentoring System

Universities may implement a mentoring system to provide necessary guidance and support for underrepresented students such as international students. This system can connect these students with mentors with similar backgrounds and identities, including fellow students and faculty (Cornwall, 2020).

6.11. Mandatory DEI Training

It is essential to provide comprehensive education and training to all stakeholders on DEI. These training programs can enhance awareness of hidden barriers and unconscious biases, fostering a positive shift in behavior and ultimately creating a more inclusive environment (Imperial College, 2023).

6.12. Pedagogical Training

Educators might be unaware of the challenges faced by students from underrepresented groups, as indicated by the participants. Therefore, educators should undergo pedagogical training that equips them with the necessary tools to create inclusive classrooms. It should also enable educators to explore potential barriers to learning, such as unconscious and implicit bias, micro-aggressions, stereotype threat, and fixed mindsets (O'Leary et al., 2020).

CONTRUBUTION RATE	EXPLANATION	CONTRIBUTORS
Idea or Notion	Form the research idea or hypothesis	Özge Yanıkoglu & Sena Kılıç
Literature Review	Review the literature required for the study	Özge Yanıkoglu & Sena Kılıç
Research Design	Designing method, scale, and pattern for the study	Özge Yanıkoglu & Sena Kılıç
Data Collecting and Processing	Collecting, organizing, and reporting data	Özge Yanıkoglu & Sena Kılıç
Discussion and Interpretation	Taking responsibility in evaluating and finalizing the findings	Özge Yanıkoglu & Sena Kılıç

Author Contribution

Conflict of Interest

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