

## International Student Mobility: Socioeconomic Factors and Encountered Problems in the Eskişehir Sample<sup>1</sup>

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### Uluslararası Öğrenci Hareketliliği: Eskişehir Örnekleminde Sosyoekonomik Faktörler ve Karşılaşılan Problemler<sup>2</sup>

#### Abstract

International student mobility is gaining importance due to globalisation and the expansion of cultural and academic interactions between countries. Türkiye has drawn considerable attention from international students in recent years, ranking among the top 10 countries globally in terms of the number of international students it hosts. This study examines the challenges faced by international students studying in Türkiye and the socioeconomic push-pull factors that influence their educational choices. The research employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. International students studying at universities in Eskişehir were selected through snowball sampling, and interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form. The results revealed that international students encounter challenges such as discrimination, language learning difficulties, and cultural adaptation issues in Türkiye.

**Keywords** : International Student, Mobility, Education, Socioeconomic Factors, Adaptation.

**JEL Classification Codes** : A14, F22, Z13.

#### Öz

Uluslararası öğrenci hareketleri, küreselleşmenin etkiyle giderek önem kazanmakta ve ülkeler arasındaki kültürel ve akademik etkileşimi arttırmaktadır. Son dönemlerde uluslararası öğrencilerin dikkatini çeken Türkiye, barındırdığı uluslararası öğrenci sayısı ile dünyada ilk 10'a girmeyi başarmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye’de eğitim gören uluslararası öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları sorunları ve eğitim tercihlerini şekillendiren sosyo-ekonomik itici-çekici faktörleri incelemektir. Çalışma, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat tekniğiyle yapılmıştır. Eskişehir’deki üniversitelerde öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrenciler, kartopu örnekleme yöntemi ile seçilmiş ve görüşmeler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak yapılmıştır. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre, uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye’de ayrımcılık, dil öğrenme zorlukları ve kültürel adaptasyon gibi sorunlarla karşılaştıkları belirlenmiştir.

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**Anahtar Sözcükler** : Uluslararası Öğrenci, Hareketlilik, Eğitim, Sosyoekonomik Faktörler, Adaptasyon.

## 1. Introduction

Migration has historically shaped the economic, cultural, and social dynamics of many societies. From the conceptual aspect, migration refers to people leaving the regions where they were born to become residents of other areas, with millions seeking better opportunities in different countries. For example, as stated in a report by Gallup Research Company, approximately 750 million people worldwide are estimated to be willing to migrate to regions with better conditions (Gallup, 2018). A significant portion of these individuals (23%) prefer the United States of America, with others preferring the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Spain, Italy, and other European Union countries (Ratha et al., 2022: 35; Nghia, 2019: 759). Although not all aspiring migrants can fulfil their desires, many begin their journeys to achieve their dreams. The World Bank's 2023 report indicates that approximately 184 million people worldwide, including approximately 37 million refugees, migrate for better economic opportunities or are displaced due to socio-political reasons (World Bank, 2023). The primary reasons for migration include economic issues, natural disasters, sociopolitical factors, demographic growth, educational opportunities, and conflicts. Although migration generally manifests in various forms, educational migration has gained significant importance in the modern era. In particular, international student mobility (ISM) is a key phenomenon, emphasising the academic aspect of migration while fostering knowledge, cultural exchange, and economic contributions across borders. Furthermore, large-scale migration is not limited solely to economic and sociopolitical reasons; educational migration has become a significant driver of global movement. In addition, the opportunities presented by globalisation have made international student mobility (ISM) one of the most prominent indicators of educational and cultural exchanges between countries. Millions of students crossing national borders to pursue education not only improve their academic knowledge and skills but also expand the sociocultural diversity of the host countries (Lipura & Collins, 2020: 343). This is not a one-sided endeavour; institutions and states that aim to benefit financially from the widespread mobility of international students show interest in them.

It is essential to distinguish between the concepts of mobility and migration to gain a better understanding of this subject. The concepts of mobility and migration, which lay the foundation of this study, are often used interchangeably in the literature (Anderson & Blinder, 2024: 2; Kajsa, 2019: 27). The concept of mobility, as used in the literature, refers to short-term spatial relocations, whereas migration means longer-term or permanent relocations (Castles, 2010: 1566-1567). However, as can be seen in King's (2002: 90) statement, "*never-straightforward boundary between migration and mobility*," it is complicated to make distinct separations between these two concepts. Nonetheless, the term "mobility" is predominantly preferred in studies on student movements (Carbajal & Calvo, 2021: 418; Castles, 2010: 1567). The primary reason for this preference is the constantly

changing factors (job opportunities, lifestyle, welfare, etc.) that influence whether a student will remain in the host country after completing their education (Alberts, 2017: 36; Cheung & Xu, 2014: 212; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 2; Nghia, 2019: 760). Moreover, similar to the conceptual discussions on migration and mobility, a distinction should also be made between international students and those from other countries. For instance, as emphasised by OECD (2011: 65), international and international students are examined in two categories. UNESCO and OECD define international students as those who leave their countries to enrol in higher education, whereas international students are not citizens of the country in which they reside, either having long-term residence or being born there. Therefore, international students and those who have migrated alone or with their families for reasons such as work, asylum, war, and other similar reasons, as well as those born in the host country (UNESCO, 2018: 97; Kyei, 2021: 299). For all these reasons, this study prefers the term "mobility" over "migration" to emphasise the change of countries by international students for educational purposes.

There are numerous studies on ISM in the international literature, making the topic rich in resources (Alberts, 2017; Brooks & Waters, 2011; De Haas et al., 2020; Kajsa, 2019; King, 2002; Lomer, 2018; Nghia, 2019; Tarc, 2019). Many studies on ISM are shaped within the framework of micro approaches. From a macro perspective, it can be stated that host countries strive to develop policies and create socioeconomic environments that enhance the internationalisation of their education systems and attract high-quality ISM (Böhm et al., 2004: 12; Knight, 2004: 8; Kondakci, 2011: 576; Qiang, 2003: 248-249; Tarc, 2019: 716). Examining these studies, the factors that attract or deter students from studying abroad are generally discussed, along with the willingness of countries to develop their student policies and implement innovations within their education systems to attract high-quality international students (IS). Therefore, host countries develop policies to increase the number of successful international students by establishing research funds and fostering cooperation among educational institutions (Fakunle, 2021: 674). Furthermore, international students contribute to the sociocultural structure of the host region by developing significant ties with local people. Thus, the international mobility of educated human capital tends to move from less developed or developing regions to developed ones (Beine et al., 2001: 276; Docquier & Rapoport, 2011: 682-683; Rasamoelison et al., 2021: 3913). Developed countries aiming to enhance their educated human capital are enacting numerous social and economic regulations related to international students to attract high-quality students. In this regard, significant educational and life opportunities in developed countries become pretty appealing to students who compare their domestic opportunities with those of other nations. Developed countries receiving migrants significantly enhance their global competitiveness by facilitating the acceptance of international students (Yıldırım et al., 2021: 109). Besides macro factors, the micro approach views international students as consumers who migrate to create new job opportunities and develop their academic skills (Lomer, 2018: 11). Micro-level studies on ISM often focus on "attractive" (Findlay et al., 2011: 124; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002: 83-84), "motivational" (Brooks & Everett, 2009: 334; Zhou, 2015: 7), and "determinant" factors to understand why and where international students are willing to

study (Gonzalez et al., 2011: 123; King & Raghuram, 2013: 127). The factors are divided into three parts in the micro model to better capture the complexity of international student experiences. The micro model is also categorised in this way to reveal the interactions between students' desires, motivations, and the contextual realities of their chosen destinations. Ultimately, such a distinction helps to understand how different elements shape students' decisions about international education (Gonzalez et al., 2011: 123; King & Raghuram, 2013: 127). In addition to students' desires and aspirations, the living standards of the destination country can also be considered a micro factor. These factors generally reflect students' psychological and socioeconomic desires (Lipura & Collins, 2020: 345). In this respect, the micro approach examines students' migration motivations at more socio-psychological levels. This approach evaluates the push and pull factors that encourage students to pursue education abroad, taking into account each student's individual preferences and needs. For instance, a student's motivation to study abroad might be driven by the desire to attend a high-quality university, whereas another student might prioritise the aspiration to live in a country with better living standards. Research on the micro approach often highlights students' deprivation of educational opportunities in their home countries and their desire to attend a high-quality university (Fakunle, 2021: 674; Böhm et al., 2004: 12).

Recent studies showed that international student mobility toward developed countries has been rapidly increasing due to factors such as job opportunities, high quality of life, continuing education, wars, and religious and political conflicts (Carbajal & Calvo, 2021: 419; Khalid & Urbański, 2021: 244; Zanabazar et al., 2021: 8). Even though the number of international students studying in different countries was approximately two million in 2000, this number reached six million as of the year 2019 (Fidler et al., 2023: 353). From a proportional perspective, the number of international students enrolled in higher education increased by 152% between 1998 and 2019 (Weber & Van Mol, 2023: 1). Additionally, as indicated in OECD data, the number of international students in higher education reached a record high in 2021. In 2021, more than 4.3 million international students were studying in OECD countries, with the majority coming from China and India. According to the OECD, "Most international students in OECD countries come from Asia. In 2021, nearly 60% of international students in the OECD came from Asia, mostly from China and India. Compared to 2014, the share of international students from Asia has increased, while the share from Europe has decreased. This increase was particularly strong in the European OECD countries, where the share of Asian students increased from 30% to 36%." (OECD, 2023: 34). This increase in international student mobility is closely related to the frequently discussed topic of internationalising higher education. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to the rise of the middle class and increased mobility opportunities in developing countries, including high-population countries like China and India (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013: 3; Weber & Van Mol, 2023: 2). Developed countries, on the other hand, place great importance on increasing the number of international students to meet labour force needs and sustain economic development in the face of ageing populations (Bryla, 2018: 2-3; Tremblay, 2005: 3). From this perspective, international students are considered ideal

immigrants for developed countries thanks to their young age, entrepreneurship, skills, and language abilities (Scott et al., 2015: 2). The relationship between migration and education draws the attention of universities, governments, and researchers, who see creating attractive educational opportunities as crucial (Böhm et al., 2004: 11; Brooks & Waters, 2011: 18; King & Sondhi, 2017: 95; Lomer, 2018: 13).

The United States of America, Germany, and the United Kingdom are among the most prosperous countries in establishing funds and encouraging students to increase their ISM. For example, in 2020, 80% of international students coming to the United Kingdom from less developed and developing countries were from non-EU countries (Fidler et al., 2023: 354). The number of international students choosing the United States of America increased from 842,384 in 2014 to approximately 1,057,188 in the 2022/23 academic year (Statista, 2024). Similarly, the number of international students in the United Kingdom also increased from 428,724 in 2014 to 679,970 in the 2021/22 academic year (Cuibus & Walsh, 2022). Between 2019/20 and 2022/23, the number of international students studying abroad in Germany increased by 11.3%, from 411,601 to 458,210 students (Erudera, 2024). Despite being primarily a student-sending country, according to UNESCO data, approximately 51,146 Turkish students were studying abroad as of 2023. This number has been consistent in recent years, reflecting Türkiye's growing trend of sending students overseas for higher education. In addition to this information, Türkiye has recently risen to 10<sup>th</sup> place among countries receiving international students (UNESCO, 2023). The number of international students choosing Türkiye increased from 48,183 in 2014 to 336,366 in 2023 (YÖK, 2023).

## **2. Problems Encountered: Socioeconomic Push and Pull Factors**

The significant increase in ISM worldwide has led to students facing specific challenges. Studies in this area identified numerous issues such as language learning difficulties, cultural adaptation, academic achievement, feelings of loneliness, discrimination, and relationships with the local population (Bohon et al., 2005: 45; Yeh & Inose, 2002: 70; Yılmazel & Atay, 2022: 2). Even though various assumptions were proposed to analyse these problems, the push and pull models are the most used in the literature. The push and pull model aims to explain the primary reason for the formation of ISM using the labour market example (Todaro & Maruszko, 1987: 113). Push factors affecting students' mobility decisions argue that ISM cannot be reduced to students' psychological preferences. Instead, it is necessary to focus on students' socioeconomic status and the political conditions of their country. For instance, Findlay (2011: 183) notes that universities in the United Kingdom offer significant opportunities through their active recruitment policies, which generate financial returns from international students through accommodation and tuition fees (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014: 466). When considering the pull factors, job opportunities, housing conditions, and high welfare levels in the destination country play important roles in driving student mobility. In addition, sociopolitical factors such as quality healthcare services and ease of cultural adaptation influence students' preferences (Carbajal & Calvo, 2021: 422; Khalid & Urbański, 2021: 250).

Several theories have been developed to explain the push and pull factors that contribute to ISM. Human capital theory provides a significant framework for understanding the relationship between education and economic development. Human capital theory (HCT) assumes that education improves individuals' productivity skills and capacities (Bahat & Karakütük, 2024: 132). HCT states that education, as an investment in individuals, contributes to the cognitive stock level of productive human capacity, thereby increasing work efficiency (Almendarez, 2013: 21-22). For instance, Psacharopoulos & Woodhall (1997) consider quality education as an investment in human capital, highlighting that providing quality education to individuals yields stronger outcomes than physical investments. Similarly, Becker (2009) asserts that improving human capital is crucial in safeguarding a nation's economic interests. From these perspectives, the core argument underpinning HCT is that individuals' learning capacities are more valuable than other resources involved in producing goods and services. When human resources are utilised effectively, the resulting outcomes are highly productive for individuals, institutions, and society (Schultz, 1961: 1-2). For example, Becker (1992: 85), a key advocate of the theory, emphasises the multifaceted educational dimension of human capital, stressing the societal benefits of education in his statement, "*Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are capital too, in the sense that they improve health, raise earnings, or add to a person's appreciation of literature over much of his or her lifetime.*" Therefore, higher education is a deliberate investment that prepares individuals for the workforce, enhances productivity, and supports international growth and development. Psacharopoulos (2008: 446) emphasises the significance of human capital in yielding important macroeconomic, political, and cultural outcomes and highlights its positive implications at the micro level by demonstrating how individuals' educational levels affect their income. Furthermore, Psacharopoulos (2008: 446) suggests that educational investments produce higher returns, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. In this context, improving the quality of education and fostering multicultural education systems contribute to accelerated economic growth and enhanced social welfare (Aksoy et al., 2011: 69-70; Özsoy, 2016: 165). With the internationalisation of education, the mobility of students between countries is increasing, thereby accelerating the acquisition of international economic, cultural, political, and communicative capital. International students learn foreign languages, acquire cultural knowledge, and develop the ability to adapt to the norms of their host countries, thereby sustaining intercultural communication. Moreover, they seek knowledge about foreign labour markets, institutions, and legal systems to strengthen their capital (Gerhards & Hans, 2013: 100). International student mobility can also be considered a means of investing in human capital. Consequently, perceiving education and living abroad as investment tools, they are motivated to pursue education in regions with high levels of human capital. In this context, international students aim to move to places where they can achieve higher returns through the capital they gain via education (Van Weber & Von Mol, 2023: 3).

Besides human capital theory, the migration transition theory is the most frequently cited in ISM. This theory, similar to the human capital theory, posits a direct relationship

between economic development and migration, claiming that countries attract migration based on their level of development (de Haas, 2021: 2; Skeldon, 2012: 155; Zelinsky, 1971: 221). As stated by de Haas (2021: 24) and Carling & Schewel (2018: 945), individuals aspiring to migrate to developed countries must enhance their social, economic, and cultural capital to overcome migration barriers. This theory emphasises micro-level reasons beyond macro frameworks, arguing that students' desires for an ideal lifestyle and plans increase their aspirations to study in developed countries (De Haas et al., 2020: 62). Additionally, as the welfare levels in underdeveloped and developing countries rise, so does the awareness of opportunities and conditions in developed countries, thus positively influencing individuals' desires to migrate. Considering the assumptions of push and pull factors, international students perceive studying in developed countries as a window of opportunity (De Haas et al., 2020: 62). Furthermore, Weber and Van Mol (2023: 3) highlight that developed countries also seek to attract international students who are pursuing career advancement and quality education. This approach suggests that the increase in welfare levels in underdeveloped and developing countries concurrently raises the educational aspirations of individuals of higher education age, thereby accelerating student mobility to developed countries. The recent rapid increase in ISM also impacts developed countries. Countries aiming to attract quality international students strive to become centres of attraction by creating new educational policies to compete in the knowledge economy (Khadria, 2009: 107; Raghuram, 2013: 138; Ziguras & Law, 2005: 60).

The push model frequently addresses why students do not pursue education in their home country. This model assumes that factors such as religious intolerance, terrorism, war, inadequate legal systems, unequal opportunities, and poor job prospects in their home countries compel students to seek education abroad (Parkins, 2010: 7). In this context, several studies emphasised unemployment as the most significant push factor. As Ibrahim et al. (2019: 1909-1910) stated, the excessive population growth in underdeveloped and developing countries triggers unemployment, pushing students to seek education abroad. Similarly, Llull (2014: 26) found that students, driven by poor living conditions and limited job opportunities in their home countries, pursue education in developed countries to improve their living standards and those of their families. Urbanski (2022: 13) noted that health, housing, and nutrition problems, as well as natural disasters, also drive students to migrate to other countries. Furthermore, studies argue that educational inequalities, deficiencies in the legal system, and religious reasons drive student mobility (Doerschler, 2006: 1113-1114). These studies suggest that international students seek education in developed countries to enhance their earnings and improve economic conditions.

In conclusion, the notion that the problems students face in both their home countries and host countries are related to push and pull factors is also debated in the literature. In the push-pull model, it is assumed that students make decisions regarding educational mobility in three stages, influenced by these factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002: 82-85). First, students consider the educational opportunities, special conditions, and problems they encounter in their home country. Considering their evaluations, they move to countries where they perceive the pull factors more favourably (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016: 175). In the second

stage, students evaluate the sociopolitical image of the host country. From this perspective, the country with the most attractive pull factors is considered the best place to study (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016: 175; Eder et al., 2010: 233). Here, criteria such as the host country's living standards, costs, safety, political stability, technological facilities, and cultural characteristics are significant. The third and final stage involves deciding which university to attend. Students evaluate factors such as the quality of the university, post-graduation job opportunities, variety of courses, educational programs, and information technologies. This stage is often referred to as "academic pull factors" (Balaz & Williams, 2004: 217; Lipura & Collins, 2020: 345; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002: 83). Although high living standards and good job opportunities in the desired study countries are seen as important pull factors, visa ease, travel, and accommodation costs are significant barriers students face. For example, universities demanding high tuition fees are considered non-economical by students. Moreover, Wilkins et al. (2013: 136) and Naidoo (2007: 287) found that education costs play a significant role in students' choice of study destination.

There is a considerable body of research on ISM in Türkiye. These studies predominantly focus on topics such as the internationalisation of higher education, students' academic experiences, economic and social dimensions, employment, competitiveness, public and education policy, adaptation, and migration (Yalçinkaya & Beşirli, 2022; Metin, 2022; Kethüda, 2015; Topal & Tauscher, 2020; Levent & Karaevli, 2013; Baş & Eti, 2020; Akgül, 2019; Metin & Sevinç, 2024; Gönültaş et al., 2023). In the study conducted by Yalçinkaya and Beşirli (2022), it was found that countries adopting an outward-facing education model experience a faster internationalisation process in higher education, resulting in increased student flows to these countries. Furthermore, one of the significant results of this study is that Türkiye, due to its geographical location, attracts a substantial number of international students from neighbouring regions. Similarly, Metin (2022) emphasises the existence of intense student mobility towards countries that rapidly internationalise their higher education systems, noting that well-educated students in Türkiye increasingly prefer to stay in the countries they move to due to better employment opportunities and favourable immigration policies. Kethüda (2015) argues, on the other hand, that international students choose Türkiye to receive higher-quality education, but they face significant dissatisfaction. Additionally, this study found that due to the high-risk perception of the service sectors in Türkiye, students negatively influence others' decisions to consider studying in the country. Topak & Tauscher (2020) claim that, in addition to historical, linguistic, and cultural factors, Türkiye's geographical location plays a significant role in students' decisions to choose the country for their education. Levent and Karaevli (2013) revealed in their study that economically strong countries are the most preferred destinations for education as students seek better living standards. They recommend increasing employment opportunities and implementing international structural changes in education in Türkiye. Similarly, Baş and Eti (2020) emphasise the need to enhance employment opportunities and enforce anti-discrimination policies. A significant result achieved in this study is that the discrimination experienced by students from Africa creates pressure on their decision to study in Türkiye, highlighting the need for policies that enhance



cultural integration. Akgül (2019) primarily focuses on employment, emphasising that international students are often employed informally in Türkiye. Furthermore, it is noted that when these students return to their home countries, they are more inclined to engage in trade with Türkiye. Metin & Sevinç (2024) reached similar conclusions as the studies above, asserting that internationalisation policies have increased student mobility. Another key result of this study is that students contribute to the national income of the countries where they study while also playing a significant role in human capital development. Finally, in a study conducted by Gönültaş et al. (2023), the challenges faced by students in Türkiye were evaluated, with the first being communication issues with locals due to limited proficiency in the Turkish language. Additionally, it was found that students struggle with adaptation due to cultural differences and lifestyle variations in Türkiye. Similarly, studies show that European students face similar problems to those in Türkiye (Arnot & Pinson, 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Jeffery & Murison, 2011). The results obtained from these studies indicate that international students face numerous challenges, including language barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, housing issues, visa complications, inadequate guidance, discrimination, ineffective teaching methods, loneliness, and strained relationships with others. For instance, in a study carried out by Hari et al. (2023), it was determined that international students receiving education in Canada faced discrimination because of their ethnic origins. These issues prompt students to reassess the critical socioeconomic factors that influence their mobility to desired study destinations. Although pull factors, such as job opportunities and good living conditions, have been widely discussed in studies, micro-level reasons have also been found to influence students' location preferences significantly. In this context, this study aims to examine the problems faced by international students studying in Türkiye and the socioeconomic push-pull factors influencing their educational choices.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Model**

The qualitative research method was employed in this study to understand and explain the perceptions underlying students' daily life experiences, the problems they encounter during their education in Türkiye, the push-pull factors that influence their decision to choose Türkiye, and their mobility decisions. The interview technique, a qualitative research method, was employed in this study because it focuses on developing an in-depth understanding and allows participants to share their experiences interactively. The qualitative research method was employed in this study to understand and explain the perceptions underlying students' daily life experiences, the problems they encounter during their education in Türkiye, the push-pull factors that influence their decision to choose Türkiye, and their mobility decisions. The interview technique, a qualitative research method, was employed in this study due to its focus on developing an in-depth understanding and allowing participants to share their experiences interactively (Creswell, 2013: 77; Neuman, 2022: 319). This study is based on the push-pull factors influencing international students' decisions to study in Türkiye and the problems they encounter, drawing on

previous studies on the ISM. Moreover, the sub-themes of language learning, the quality of the Turkish education system, experiences of discrimination, cultural adaptation, plans, desires to work or study in developed countries, free education, and Türkiye's geographical proximity to the European Union are examined to determine their influence on students' preference for Türkiye. The distinctive features of this study are its use of a phenomenological design and the in-depth focus this design offers on the experiences of international students in the city of Eskişehir, Türkiye. Furthermore, while other studies predominantly adopt quantitative methods to analyse the current situation, this study employs interview techniques to explore socioeconomic factors that push or pull students toward pursuing education in Türkiye based on the student's perceptions. In this study, following a literature review and analysis of official statistical data, the semi-structured interview technique, a qualitative research method, was selected to understand the problems faced by international students enrolled in universities in Eskişehir, Türkiye and their reasons for choosing Türkiye as a study destination. This study aims to analyse the discussions in the literature on ISM, reveal the connections between frequently used perspectives, and provide a resource for future research. In the international literature, the mobility of international students to Western countries, characterised by high human capital, living standards, and job opportunities, is often discussed.

The primary research question of the present study is: What problems do international students encounter during their education process in Türkiye, and what push-pull factors motivate them to study in the country? Therefore, this study's phenomenological design was chosen for data interpretation, which aims to reveal students' views on the situations expressed in the research problem. This choice is made because it allows delving into the essence of students' views and experiences, facilitating a better understanding of the subject. As stated by Merriam (2009: 23), phenomenological design is effective in studies that employ in-depth interview techniques and is suitable for examining intense human perceptions and emotions. Furthermore, the phenomenological design enables an in-depth examination and interpretation of international students' experiences, as well as the revelation of their understanding and beliefs about various events or subjects (Creswell, 2013: 77-81).

In 2024, the number of international students studying in Eskişehir was 14,223 at Anadolu University, 1,642 at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, and 416 at Eskişehir Technical University (YÖK, 2023). The primary reason for selecting Eskişehir in this research is that it hosts three universities. Additionally, these universities have many international students. Lastly, Eskişehir embodies both the traditional and modern characteristics of Türkiye, providing a suitable environment for examining adaptation processes to cultural differences. Participants were primarily selected from students studying at the Faculty of Theology at Eskişehir Osmangazi University through their social groups. The student selection process began with international students studying at the Faculty of Theology, as they are very active in student social media groups within their own countries, allowing the researcher to reach other students more efficiently. An effort was made to balance the distribution of students' genders and countries of origin as much as possible.

Some students declined to participate in the interviews due to unspecified sensitivities. However, interview forms outlining the researcher's intent were distributed to gain sufficient participants and trust. Snowball sampling was employed to select participants for this study, with strategies developed to ensure an adequate number of participants. Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, is a sampling method that facilitates the identification of study participants. It is often preferred when a sufficient number cannot be obtained through purposive or random sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981: 141; Kennedy-Shaffer et al., 2021: 1919).

### **3.2. Validity and Reliability**

There are many methods to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research. The researcher must detail the data collection process, procedures, and how the conclusions were reached to support the study's reliability. In addition to obtaining at least verbal consent from participants, having the interview questions reviewed and commented on by two experts in the field also increases the study's reliability (Kuckartz, 2014: 160). In this study, to ensure reliability, face-to-face pilot interviews were conducted with five international students studying in Eskişehir before selecting the research samples to formulate the sub-questions. Due to language barriers, two of these interviews were conducted in English. These interviews lasted approximately 12 hours, and the data were transcribed due to the students' sensitivities. Using multiple languages allowed students to elaborate on their thoughts. Pilot interviews are crucial for clarifying issues and addressing future considerations (Kim, 2010: 191). After the pilot interviews, transcripts were provided to participants for verification, further supporting reliability. This step is recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 438-439) and Cresswell and Miller (2000: 125-126) to increase a study's reliability and validity. This approach encourages participants' voices to be heard in qualitative research and promotes a participant-centred perspective. Participant feedback provides an opportunity to correct misunderstandings and fill in missing information, thereby enhancing the realism and reliability of the research results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 246).

### **3.3. Developing Data Collection Tool and Collecting Data**

A semi-structured interview form was used for data collection in the research process. The primary reason for using this form is that semi-structured interview questions provide in-depth data on the topics being analysed (Mason, 2002: 73; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006: 40). However, aspects such as preparing research questions, reaching participants, ensuring participants understand the questions correctly, and transcribing interviews are crucial factors to consider in semi-structured interviews (Neuman, 2022: 441-453). The data collection was conducted with international students studying at three universities in Eskişehir: Eskişehir Osmangazi University (n = 25), Anadolu University (n = 20), and Eskişehir Technical University (n = 12). Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with the participants' permission obtained. However, the study's limitations include students' sensitivities about being recorded, deficiencies in Turkish language skills, cultural

differences, and difficulties with self-expression. The information recorded during the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, with the data being transcribed and the resulting codes categorised. After categorisation, themes were created using a thematic approach that facilitates the revelation of interpretative and descriptive meanings (Xu & Zammit, 2020: 2). Determining the number of participants in qualitative research is challenging (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81-82). The themes derived from the research questions were adapted according to the information provided by participants. Data from all interviews (n = 57) were coded until saturation, adapting to the information provided by the participants. Maxqda 2024 was used for transcribing, coding, and creating themes from the interviews.

Table 1 below categorises the push and pull factors influencing international students' decisions to study in Türkiye, their challenges, and the data collected from their daily life experiences into themes and subthemes.

**Table: 1**  
**Subthemes and Themes**

Themes	Problems and Everyday Life Experiences in Türkiye	Driving Socioeconomic Factors on the Education Path	Attractive Socioeconomic Factors on the Education Path
Sub Themes			
1.	Ethnic Discrimination	War	The Quality of Turkish Universities and its Impact on the Transition to Europe
2.	Language Issues	The Sub-theme of Quality of Education	Scholarship Opportunities Cultural and Religious Affinity
3.	Adaptation to Local Culture	Inequality of Opportunity and Costs	Geographical Proximity to Europe
4.	Education System	Job Opportunities	Job Opportunities

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participating students, with their names coded using nicknames.

**Table: 2**  
**Information about International Students**

Variable	Demographics	n	%
Gender	Male	27	47.37
	Female	30	52.63
Age	18-22	28	49.12
	23-25	22	38.60
	26+	7	12.28
Country	Sudan/Iraq/Palestine	12	21.05
	Greece/Yemen/Egypt/Kazakhstan	12	21.05
	Iran/Georgia/France/Ethiopia/Indonesia/Afghanistan	12	21.05
	Jordan/Uzbekistan/Chad/Zambia/Tanzania/Serbia/Saudi Arabia/Syria/Somalia/Russia/Papua New Guinea/Nigeria/Nepal/Mauritania/Macedonia/Kyrgyzstan/Gambia/Morocco/Burkina Faso/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Azerbaijan	21	31.58
Education Level	Bachelor's	42	73.68
	Postgraduate	13	22.81
	Associate	2	3.51
Programs	Medicine/Divinity	10	17.54
	International Relations/Business Administration/Electrical and Electronics Engineering	9	15.79
	Biology/English Teaching/Pharmacy/Architecture/Medical Laboratory Techniques/Tourism Management/Political Science/Economics	16	28.07
	Computer Engineering/Chemistry/Primary School Teaching/Industrial Engineering/Dentistry/Midwifery/Finance/Chemical Engineering/Civil Engineering/Gastronomy/Psychological Counselling and Guidance/Mechanical Engineering/English Language and Literature/Turkish Language and Literature/Finance/ Law/Control and Automation Engineering/Pre-school Teaching/Public Relations/Mechanical Engineering/Journalism/Environmental Engineering	23	40.35

In conclusion, a total of 57 international students participated in this study. To enhance the students' confidentiality and the reliability of the research, nicknames were assigned to the participants. Initially, demographic information about the students was collected through a form provided before the interviews (see Table 2). The present study involved 27 female and 30 male participants. Moreover, 28 participants were between the ages of 18 and 22, 22 were between the ages of 23 and 25, and 7 were 26 and older. Their countries evenly distribute the number of students, as shown in Table 2. For example, the total number of students from Sudan, Yemen, and Palestine is 12, with each country represented by four students in the table. A similar arrangement has been made for other countries to enhance the table's overall appearance. Additionally, the students' educational levels are provided sequentially in the table. Finally, in Table 2, students are categorised by the programs they are enrolled in and distributed equally among each country. For instance, the students enrolled in the faculties of Medicine and Theology consist of 10 individuals, with five students from each faculty. This arrangement was preferred to maintain the visual coherence of the table. Each student took approximately three minutes to answer the demographic questions, which required simple responses.

#### **4. Results**

Three main themes were identified in this study. The first theme addresses the problems encountered and daily life experiences in Türkiye. The second theme, push factors in the education path, examines the reasons that compel students to study in Türkiye due to socio-economic, political, and educational issues in their home countries. Lastly, the third theme, pull factors in the education path, explores the factors that attract students to study in Türkiye. Additionally, the students' responses were not altered, and their answers were presented as they were, without correction for any language errors. When interpreting the interviews, nicknames, gender ("M" for male and "F" for female), age, education level ("B" for Bachelor's, "M" for Master's, and "A" for Associate's), the students' countries, and the departments they study in were indicated in parentheses at the end of each sentence.

##### **4.1. Problems and Everyday Life Experiences in Türkiye**

First, examining the sub-theme of ethnic discrimination, it can be seen that some international students who come from countries with distinct cultures and religious backgrounds experience significant challenges in culturally adapting to life in Türkiye. Among these challenges, the primary issue is being marginalised due to racial differences. Upon arriving in Eskişehir, students faced discrimination and tried to overcome these difficulties by gradually adapting to Turkish culture. Some students attribute this discrimination to the information Turkish citizens acquire from social media.

*"Unfortunately, we occasionally encounter such unpleasant incidents, especially among Arabic students. There are many prejudiced people among the Turks who see fake news on social media and act accordingly. However, many students, including*

*foreigners, help them, so I don't take this issue too seriously (Mohammed Farac, M, 22, B, Palestine, Medicine)."*

*"We generally face it. Due to the news on social media, a great prejudice has formed against all of us. Recently, while travelling by tram, a woman looked badly at a child without a coat and said, 'Look at him, wandering around like Syrians.' The child wasn't Syrian, but it was very clear that she despised and disliked Syrians, as evidenced by her comparison (Sundar, F, 23, B, Syria, Pharmacy)."*

Most of the students in the sample are from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Therefore, Arabic is the official language in most of these countries. The study's results on ethnic discrimination align with the issues students face, as reported by Baş and Eti (2020). In their research, Baş & Eti (2020) found that African-origin students experienced exclusion due to their language and skin colour. However, this study did not find any evidence regarding skin colour; instead, it was observed that students faced discrimination due to the language they used.

Examining the sub-theme of language issues, students encounter many problems because they use their local language in public transportation. For example, students coming from African countries and those whose native language is Arabic are particularly reactive and face the most discrimination. Arabic-speaking students frequently reported being mistaken for Syrians and consequently facing backlash. In addition to social media, international students believe that Turkish families instil negative perceptions and feelings toward Arab ethnicity in their children during their upbringing. Additionally, African students claim that they are marginalised due to speaking Arabic. Therefore, students believe that Arabic-speaking students in Türkiye are perceived as Syrians.

*"Yes, I have often seen them look at me strangely because I am a foreigner. Especially once, they thought I was Syrian because I spoke Arabic, and they started to insult me (Hamadi, M, 25, B, Egypt, Pharmacy)."*

*"For example, when I first arrived in 2019, even if you sat in a seat where two people were sitting on the bus, no one would sit in the seat next to us (Abdulrezzak, M, 24, B, Tanzania, Electrical and Electronics Engineering)."*

*"Yes, I encountered it very often. I lived in Türkiye for six years and faced racism because of my colour or language. In some places, I was expelled for speaking Arabic, and many times, I experienced being called 'black woman' instead of being addressed as 'miss' or 'please' when they forgot my name. There were many instances where I was asked to leave my seat on public transportation (Fatima, F, 23, B, Mauritania, Chemistry)."*

*"Turks are brought up with the education from their families that Arabs are like this or like that, which is a wrong way of thinking (Kadriye, F, 23, B, Iraq, Theology)."*

As shown, another cause of discrimination is related to language use. The results obtained in this study share some similarities with those of Hari et al. (2023). Hari et al. (2023) concluded that Asian-origin students studying in Canada during the COVID-19

period were subjected to various forms of discrimination because of the language they used. In addition to ethnic discrimination, Baş and Eti (2020) also found that students faced discrimination due to their language use, which aligns with the results of this study regarding this sub-theme.

In the sub-theme Adaptation to Local Culture, besides discrimination, another frequent problem for students is the cultural adaptation process. However, some students noted that identifying as "Muslim" helped them avoid issues related to cultural adaptation. Despite claiming that they did not face religious problems in Türkiye due to the majority-Muslim population, most students experienced issues with food, language, and communication with their surroundings. As stated by the students, these problems are easily overcome after the first year, facilitating cultural adaptation. The emphasis on the first year originates from enrolling in preparatory classes and becoming fluent in Turkish by the end of the year. Students who struggle to communicate with locals often cannot form a social circle outside their group of friends from their home country. Adaptation to local food and eating habits continues throughout the preparatory class.

*"Initially, I encountered difficulties, but they were all due to the language barrier. So far, I have learned how to communicate effectively with people and address specific individuals, such as Ajna, a 25-year-old male from Bosnia and Herzegovina who is pursuing a career in preschool teaching."*

*"There are probably some differences between Georgian and Turkish nations, but it wasn't challenging or hard to adapt to Turkish social culture and foods (Nia, K, 25, LÜ, Georgia, Tourism Management)."*

*"Yeah, but not too much. Perhaps the way Turkish people live is a bit different from that in my country. Additionally, I can say that the dorm food is very hard to adapt to (Mohamed Murtada, E, 25, L, Sudan, Mechanical Engineering)."*

Cultural adaptation is one of the challenges frequently faced by individuals who migrate to regions with significantly different cultures from their own. The results achieved in this study align with those reported by Bohon et al. (2005) and Yeh & Inose (2002), indicating similar outcomes. Students often experience adaptation challenges until they become accustomed to the culture of the locations where they pursue their education. Similarly, a study by Gönültaş et al. (2023) highlighted that students who initially struggle with speaking Turkish also face adaptation issues, reaching conclusions consistent with this study.

When the education system sub-theme is analysed, it is very difficult for students studying in different countries to adapt to the education system of the host country they are in. One of the most common problems students face is the difference between the education systems in their home countries and Türkiye. Some students believe the Turkish education system is based on repetitive and demanding exams. Others pointed out deficiencies in instructors' English language skills. Additionally, students frequently emphasised the intensity of course schedules, the strictness of instructors, and adherence to rules.

*"This place is more disciplined. In Azerbaijan, the discipline is less than here. However, in terms of rules, for example, there are disciplinary penalties (Asile, F, 22, B, Azerbaijan, Business Administration)."*

*"My worst experience was with the professors. As a foreigner, they don't understand you and expect a lot from us. Considering that Türkiye is an international city and country, it is a significant disadvantage for professors who do not know English (Ajna, F, 25, M, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pre-school Teaching)."*

*"My education in Türkiye is more disciplined and stricter than in my home country."*

*"However, in my home country, the education system is more flexible and offers a wider range of elective courses, allowing me to develop my interests more freely (Rashid, M., 20, B, Afghanistan, Economics)."*

Internationalising the educational system appears to be of significant importance in this context. Enhancing academic competencies and advancing the internationalisation of the Turkish higher education system could provide substantial benefits in addressing these challenges. For instance, similar to the results achieved in this study, Metin & Sevinç (2024) argued for the development of educational policies targeted at international students and emphasised that international students encounter problems with the use of English and the suitability of the educational system during their academic journey. Fakunle (2021) also emphasised in his study that the lack of adherence to international standards in the educational system contributes to specific student issues, suggesting that students seek higher education institutions to advance their development more efficiently.

Similarly, some students criticised the duration of education at Turkish universities in the education system sub-theme. Students from Africa and the Middle East claimed that undergraduate education in their home countries typically lasts three years. The extended duration of schooling is troubling for students, who believe it causes financial and emotional strain when planning for the future. Some students emphasised that the extended duration of education results in wasted time rather than providing quality education.

*"(...) The number of years required to complete a course may differ. Here in Türkiye, 4-year-olds are considered children, while in my country, they are considered 3 years old. We spend more time. (Jahia, K., 20, L, Gambia, Chemical Engineering)."*

*"In my country, I believe a university degree typically takes three years. It varies from department to department, but it usually is three years. It seems like a waste of time (Hanan, F, 20, B, Ethiopia, Business Administration)."*

*"In Burkina Faso, instead of a university entrance exam, there is a Baccalaureate diploma. A bachelor's degree typically takes 3 years, a master's degree takes 2 years, and a doctorate typically takes 3 years. Extending the duration is costly (Gahiji, M, 30, M, Burkina Faso, Biology)."*

The results indicate that while some students highlighted the abundance of exams, others claimed that instructors generally have a disciplined character. Additionally, disciplinary penalties, instructors' language skills, the length of education, and problems



stemming from the rote-learning system are common issues faced by students. Furthermore, students expressed that instructor teaching in Turkish made it difficult for them to participate in classes and that they had to warn the instructors about this.

#### 4.2. Driving Socioeconomic Factors on the Education Path

Sociopolitical and economic issues, as well as the inadequacy of the education system in their home countries, force international students to seek education abroad. The sub-theme of war constitutes an integral part of the research. Most students participating in the study face numerous problems due to the war in their countries. For example, students from the Middle East generally emphasised the impact of war and mentioned that they had to pursue education in other countries due to war-related problems. Students also believe that a peaceful and stable environment enhances educational productivity.

*"Other than the war in our country, an important factor in my education in another country (Sundar, F, 23, B, Syria, Pharmacy)."*

*"I never considered going abroad to a foreign country, and due to the current war, I also cannot return to my country (Meryem, F, 29, M, Palestine, Political Science and International Relations)."*

*"Yes. For example, there was a major sectarian war in Iraq where everyone killed each other. Still, in Türkiye, there aren't as many sectarian problems as possible (Kadriye, F, 23, B, Iraq, Theology)."*

As observed, war is a significant phenomenon that compels students to pursue education abroad. Like the present study, Kyei (2021) emphasises how war influences students' desire to seek educational opportunities abroad. For instance, due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, the Council of Higher Education has provided specific accommodations, such as the option for lateral transfers, for international students in Türkiye (YÖK, 2022).

Another factor emphasised frequently is the sub-theme of quality of education. For instance, students who highlighted the absence of desired programs in their home countries mainly study in engineering faculties.

*"My country has no architecture education; it only offers civil engineering programs. Türkiye is a developed country in architecture, and the relations between my country and Türkiye are improving (Hasan, M, 22, B, Nigeria, Architecture)."*

*"For example, the quality of education in Saudi Arabia is quite inadequate. It is not as high as here (Hanan, F, 20, B, Saudi Arabia, Business Administration)."*

*"Because I wanted to continue my education, but there is no master's program in Jordan for Turkish Language and Literature, I came to Türkiye (Runiriha, F, 29, M, Jordan, Turkish Language and Literature)."*

The cost of living has a substantial impact on students' decisions regarding their education. Additionally, the quality of education in the destination countries plays a crucial

role in shaping their preferences (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). For example, Weber & Van Mol (2023) assert that the quality of education in the chosen country is a key factor in students' choices. Similar results were observed in this study, where students who selected Türkiye expressed that the quality of education here was superior to that in their home countries. In line with the studies above, Kethüda (2015) also concluded that international students travel to other countries to pursue higher-quality education. This study corroborates the results reported in the studies above. However, it also diverges by identifying that students chose Türkiye due to the absence of their desired field of study in their home countries.

In the same sub-theme, inequality of opportunity and costs in students' home countries is also significant. Some students complained about not being accepted into the programs they desired in their home countries and criticised their countries for this. However, a holistic view of the interviews indicates that economic conditions largely determine the students' experiences of inequality. In this sense, inadequate scholarships and high living costs in their home countries are general issues that trouble students.

*"The cost of education in Türkiye is something I couldn't afford compared to my own country (Romario, M, 19, B, Egypt, Architecture)."*

*"Before coming here, I did some research about Türkiye. I found it somewhat affordable financially, whereas the economic cost in my country is high (Kafele, F, 26, B, Yemen, English Teaching)."*

Khalid Urbański (2021) state that disparities in opportunities are a significant factor compelling students to pursue education in other countries. The same study also found that students are motivated to study abroad due to the high cost of education in their home countries. The results of this study align with those obtained in other studies. Furthermore, Parkins (2010) emphasises that disparities in opportunities and education costs are a push factor, driving students to seek scholarship opportunities in other countries for their studies.

The sub-theme of job opportunities shows that one of the most motivating factors for students is different job opportunities. The inadequacy of job opportunities in underdeveloped or developing countries drives students to pursue education in other countries instead of their own. Some students believe they cannot find a job in their home country after obtaining their bachelor's degree. A significant portion of the students who participated in this study emphasised that job opportunities in Türkiye are better than in their own country.

*"There is a job problem in my own country. Now I see this place as my second home and plan to become a Turkish citizen to find a job (Ajna, F, 25, M, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pre-school Teaching)."*

*"I want to venture into Eastern Europe. It is difficult to find a job in my country and Türkiye (Abdurrahim, M, 23, B, Iran, Control and Automation Engineering)."*

*"As I said, I will work wherever I find a job. It is entirely job-related; I will work wherever I find a job, here or in Europe. For example, in Germany or elsewhere (Secat, M, 20, B, Yemen, Industrial Engineering)."*

The literature examining employment opportunities contains numerous studies. In this regard, job opportunities constitute a prominent factor influencing student choices. For instance, studies by Carbajal & Calvo (2021) and Khalid & Urbański (2021) revealed that students migrate to other countries due to job opportunities. After completing their education, they often remain in the host countries because of the abundance of employment prospects. Other studies have reached similar conclusions (see Llull, 2014; Levent & Karaevli, 2013). The results achieved in this study also parallel the sub-theme results of the studies above.

### **4.3. Attractive Socioeconomic Factors on the Education Path**

Considering the quality of Turkish universities and their impact on the transition to Europe, it is understood that the quality of Turkish universities and their role in facilitating the transition to Europe are two of the most emphasised factors driving students to pursue education in Türkiye. The perception that 'Turkish universities' educational system and structure are similar to those in Europe is a significant motivator for students to study in Türkiye. For instance, some students frequently highlight the recognition of Turkish universities in Europe, the ease of acceptance at European universities with the diplomas they receive, and the opportunities provided by the Erasmus mobility program.

*"Turkish universities are increasingly recognised in education quality, and some institutions are globally ranked (Aman, M, 19, B, Nepal, Dentistry)."*

*"Türkiye hosts leading universities with the highest academic quality and a wide range of offerings. Several Turkish universities are internationally recognised as prestigious educational institutions offering top-notch education at reasonable tuition fees compared to similar international institutions' costs (Hajer, M, 30, M, Sudan, Electrical and Electronics Engineering)."*

*"I believe that after obtaining a diploma, it is effective in terms of its recognition by European countries. Because many universities here are reputable and their diplomas are recognised (Helen, F, 23, B, Greece, Theology)."*

*"Yes, the university ECTS system is very close to Europe, and there are a lot of Turkish universities recognised by Europe (Mohamed Murtada, M, 25, B, Sudan, Mechanical Engineering)."*

The cost of living in various countries significantly affects students' preferences. The quality of education and the provision of financial resources to support student's education emerge as attractive factors influencing their choices. Students who perceive the cost of living in Türkiye as more affordable often seek ways to migrate to European countries after completing their education. In this context, Türkiye serves as a transit country. For instance, studies by Ahmad & Buchanan (2016) and Eder et al. (2010) also conclude that living costs

impact students' preferences. The present research shares similarities with these studies. Moreover, regarding students who aim to use Türkiye as a transit route, İçen et al. (2022) suggest that international students studying in Türkiye view the country as a bridge for transitioning to European countries. The present study also reaches similar conclusions.

Moreover, in the scholarship sub-theme, it is found that students who want to study in other countries research the conditions of the country they will go to when making their choice. The first sub-theme used to identify the attractive reasons for students to study in Türkiye is the scholarship opportunities provided by Türkiye for international students. Students frequently mentioned scholarships during the interviews. For example, medical students' attitudes on this issue are pretty strong due to the high cost of medical education in Türkiye and their own countries. However, the scholarship category ranks second after the sub-theme of quality university education in students' preference for Türkiye.

*"A good relationship also facilitates finding scholarships, sponsors, and funding while being here. Many different scholarships are offered to students from my country in Türkiye, making it as easy as studying in other countries (Abdulrezzak, M, 24, B, Tanzania, Electrical and Electronics Engineering)."*

*"The quality of education at universities comes first for me in my decision to study here, but scholarship opportunities are also significant, along with cultural experience and personal interests (Eleri, F, 20, B, Ethiopia, Medical Laboratory Techniques)."*

*"A scholarship was necessary for my education. I earned admission here with a 100% scholarship, so it was a good opportunity for me (Zerina, F, 23, B, North Macedonia, Psychological Counseling and Guidance)."*

In a study by Atabaş and Köse (2023), results similar to those reported in the present study were reached, indicating that scholarships are a significant factor for international students seeking education abroad. Additionally, Balaz and Williams (2004) and Lipura and Collins (2020) highlighted the importance of scholarships in covering living expenses, emphasising that financial support is central to international students' preferences.

Considering the sub-theme of cultural and religious affinity, it is understood that besides scholarships being an essential factor, students' cultural and religious expectations of students also motivate them to pursue education in Türkiye. During the interviews, students emphasised that their families sent them to Türkiye for religious reasons and that the decision was not solely theirs. Some students also stated that they chose Türkiye because they believed they could practice their religious duties comfortably. For students of Turkish descent, the situation differs as they claim to have come to Türkiye by emphasising ethnic similarities.

*"I came to Türkiye because it is a Muslim country (Abdulaziz, M, 24, B, Chad, Theology)."*

*"Among the reasons for choosing Türkiye is the high quality of education. Another reason is that we are Muslims, and Türkiye is a Muslim country, so we feel comfortable here. We are advantaged compared to other countries; we can find a mosque every 200 meters, and nobody interferes with our religious beliefs (Paulias Atopare, M, 21, B, Papua New Guinea, Biology)."*

*"Kazakh and Turks are similar languages and peoples, so this is important (Gül, F, 18, B, Kazakhstan, Gastronomy)."*

*"It was a bit easier for me because my native languages are Kazakh and Uyghur. For example, Turkish, Uyghur, and Kazakh are like each other. That's important in my choice (Sandina, F, 20, B, Kazakhstan, Finance)."*

Although religion is essential, cultural closeness also significantly influences students' preferences. Cultural closeness and religious similarity are among the most frequently emphasised situations in students' decisions to choose Türkiye. One significant result of this study is that the students claim that their cultural and religious characteristics are similar to those in Türkiye. In particular, students of Turkish origin stated that they preferred to study in Türkiye because their language was close to Turkish. In addition, students frequently emphasised that they wanted to study in Türkiye because they believed that religious life in Türkiye was similar to their own country. Moreover, students who feel culturally and religiously close to Türkiye have expressed their desire to pursue education in the country for several reasons. For instance, Türkiye's rich cultural heritage resonates with many students. Blending Eastern and Western cultures creates a unique environment that attracts those interested in diverse cultural experiences. Many students share similar cultural and religious values with Türkiye, fostering a sense of belonging and community. This shared understanding enhances their motivation to study in an environment that aligns with their beliefs. Since the historical ties between Türkiye and various countries create a sense of familiarity, students often feel connected through shared history. Lastly, the perception of Türkiye as a hospitable country enhances students' willingness to study. They believed that Turkish society's warm and welcoming nature could ease their adaptation. The results of this study share similarities with those reported by Yalçınkaya and Beşirli (2022) and Topak and Tauscher (2020), both of which found that international students prefer Türkiye for educational purposes due to geographic, religious, and cultural reasons. The study carried out by Topak and Tauscher (2020) addressed the impacts of cultural, historical, and religious factors on students' educational choices, concluding that these reasons influence students to pursue education in Türkiye. Similarly, Doerschler (2006) and Dustmann and Frattini (2014) argued that cultural and religious reasons affect student choices and noted that students are more inclined to study in countries with higher religious tolerance. The results achieved in this study also align with other studies, showing that students are tempted to study in countries where they can be more comfortable regarding religion and culture.

Even if cultural and religious similarities are often highlighted as pull factors, the geographical proximity to the European sub-theme also takes into account the resemblance of the Turkish education system to that of European countries and Türkiye's geographical

location, which are influential in shaping students' preferences. Arab ethnic students, who could choose from many countries (such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia), have prioritised Türkiye due to its geographical proximity to Europe. Moreover, regardless of their country of origin, some students aim to complete their undergraduate education in Türkiye and then pursue graduate studies in Europe.

*"Türkiye, located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, provides easy access to both continents, making it an attractive location for students seeking to explore various cultures and travel opportunities to Europe (Aman, M, 19, B, Nepal, Dentistry)."*

*"... I also want to conduct my business in Europe; the transition is easy (Kostas Dimitriadis, M, 24, B, Greece, International Relations)."*

*"Türkiye's geographical and educational proximity to Western countries adds to its appeal for education, offering a blend of Eastern and Western influences (Otabek, M, 20, B, Kazakhstan, International Relations)."*

*"I wanted to choose a country close to Iran. I also wanted my family to be able to come to me easily (Farzad, M, 21, B, Iran, Medicine)."*

*"I chose this place because it is close to Iraq. I never considered living in the West (Ashna, F, 23, B, Iraq, Theology)."*

The results achieved in this study are similar to those reported by Zijlstra (2020) and İçen et al. (2022), which highlighted the importance of Türkiye's geographic proximity to Europe in students' preferences. Both studies emphasised that students consider Türkiye's location a significant factor in their decision-making process.

The job opportunity's sub-theme is among the most frequently discussed topics in interviews, serving as both push and pull factors. This is primarily due to the lack of job opportunities in their home countries and the belief that they will earn higher incomes in developed countries. Poor economic conditions in their home countries and inadequate job opportunities motivate international students to seek education in countries with better employment opportunities and higher living standards. This expectation motivates students to pursue education in developed or developing countries. Besides the lack of job opportunities, students also emphasise the working conditions, income, and living standards in the countries they wish to visit during interviews. Although finding a job seems to be a general reason, students who emphasise job opportunities expressed that they are in Türkiye to have a more comfortable life.

*"There are many factories in Eskişehir. They produce a lot of things. That's why I looked it up on Google. There is a sugar factory in Eskişehir. There is trade, and there are factories related to chemical engineering. I wanted to come here (Abidemi, M, 28, B, Zambia, Finance)."*

*"If I find a job here, I will work (Secat, M, 20, B, Yemen, Industrial Engineering)."*

*"One of the reasons is that my country has numerous problems; education is frequently interrupted. There are no jobs; life is difficult (Abubakar, M, 19, B, Sudan, Civil Engineering)."*

The studies conducted by Carbajal and Calvo (2021), Khalid and Urbański (2021), and Zanabazar et al. (2021) also share similarities with the results obtained in this sub-theme, which indicate that students are drawn to countries with higher job opportunities. Metin (2022) and Levent and Karaevli (2013) reached similar conclusions, asserting that job prospects are a significant factor that attracts students to pursue education abroad.

In conclusion, the most frequently expressed push and pull factors for international students (n = 40) are the desire to continue their education. The second reason is Türkiye's cultural and religious similarity to their home countries (n=38). The third factor attracting students to study in Türkiye (n = 28) is its comparatively affordable economic conditions. Other frequently mentioned topics include scholarships (n = 28) and friends' recommendations (n = 12). Lastly, Türkiye's proximity to Europe has also influenced students' decisions to study there (n = 35). However, this result does not imply that all students will migrate to Europe for further education or employment. For instance, 18 students expressed their intention to stay in Türkiye after completing their education. Additionally, 13 students, including most medical students, plan to return to their home countries after completing their education. Finally, considering the problems encountered, international students studying in Türkiye have reported negative experiences due to discrimination (n = 15), difficulties in learning the language (n = 32), cultural adaptation (n = 27), and the complexity and length of the education system (n = 30).

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study emphasises that international student mobility to Türkiye is quite intense and demonstrates that the interaction of various factors shapes this mobility. Therefore, the challenges students face and the reasons for choosing Türkiye are crucial topics that need to be analysed at individual and societal levels. These results offer valuable insights for developing policies to enhance the educational experiences of international students in Türkiye. Examining the results achieved, the present study first focuses on the profiles of international students studying in Eskişehir and the problems they encounter. Interviews revealed that students in Eskişehir experience discrimination, difficulties in learning the language, cultural adaptation issues, and concerns related to the education system. Some students were found to face discrimination based on their ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, challenges in learning Turkish and adapting to a different culture are significant difficulties students encounter. Furthermore, the reasons why students choose Türkiye were examined in detail. Factors such as the quality of education at Turkish universities, the country's religious and cultural similarity, geographical location, economic opportunities, and scholarship options are considered influential in students' decisions to choose Türkiye. A significant result in the present study is the systemic similarity between universities in Türkiye and those in Europe. In this respect, Türkiye's perception as a bridge to Europe plays a vital role in students' decisions to choose Türkiye. Moreover, in addition to the scholarship opportunities provided by Türkiye, the relatively lower costs of education and living compared to other countries also influence students' decisions.

According to the results achieved in this study, students face significant challenges in the social integration process in Türkiye due to language barriers and ethnic discrimination. Arabic-speaking and African-origin students, in particular, frequently reported being excluded because of their skin colour and the language they speak. Students are often subjected to various forms of discrimination, primarily due to social media and misconceptions held by the local population. Such discriminations hinder students' long-term cultural adaptation. Another significant result of this study is that students experience difficulties adapting to local food and lifestyles, especially during their first year in Türkiye. It was found that preparatory classes and Turkish language courses helped students successfully navigate the process of societal adaptation. From this perspective, the first year is a critical period for students in terms of cultural integration and socialisation. Another significant result is that students are primarily motivated to choose Türkiye because its education system is similar to that of Europe, making Türkiye a gateway for transitioning to Europe. Mainly from the perspective of international students, programs like Erasmus are essential for facilitating future transitions to Europe. Additionally, transitioning to Europe has a significant impact on the students' long-term educational and career plans. A final notable result is the significant increase in students' motivation to find employment in Türkiye. Many students said they would consider staying in Türkiye if provided with quality job opportunities. It is also understood that many students choose to study in Türkiye due to difficulties in finding employment in their home countries.

This study offers suggestions for better analysing ISM's multidimensional nature and developing policies in this area. First, policy recommendations are prioritised and listed in three sub-recommendations: scholarships and financial support, improving the quality of education, and integrating into the labour market. In the context of scholarships and financial support, Türkiye should allocate more financial resources to increase the quality of international student mobility. Existing scholarship programs should be expanded to allow more students to benefit from these opportunities. Special emphasis should be placed on scholarship programs for disadvantaged groups to increase their access to educational opportunities. The second recommendation is to enhance the quality of education in Türkiye and its compliance with international standards. This way, the aim should be to attract more quality international students to the country. Additionally, Turkish universities should be encouraged to participate in international accreditation processes, aligning the education system with global standards. Incentives should also be provided for academic staff to gain international experience and improve their foreign language proficiency. The third recommendation involves developing policies to facilitate the integration of international students into the labour market after their education. In this context, post-graduation residence and work permits should be simplified, and programs should be established to assist international students in finding employment. Finally, support policies should be developed to encourage employers in the country to hire international students.

In conclusion, this study also offers other research suggestions. More detailed and comprehensive studies on the problems faced by international students in Türkiye should be carried out. These studies should examine students' motivations for choosing Türkiye



through various factors such as educational quality, economic opportunities, and cultural interaction. Additionally, it is recommended to investigate the bureaucratic, language, and cultural barriers that students encounter during the adaptation process. Furthermore, researchers interested in exploring this topic could delve deeper into the sociocultural adaptation processes of students and conduct long-term observations to gain detailed insights into the challenges they face. Specific issues such as language barriers, discrimination, the commodification of higher education, religious challenges, and family pressures can be investigated using mixed methods. Lastly, it is recommended that those interested in this topic also focus on the labour market and discuss the challenges faced by international students in this area. Moreover, as this study primarily focused on students from low-income countries, researchers are encouraged to enrich their work by examining students' experiences from developed countries and the push-and-pull factors that lead them to pursue education in Türkiye. Addressing language barriers and cultural adaptation, universities in Türkiye could offer more comprehensive orientation and cultural integration programs specifically designed for international students. These programs could provide practical insights to help students adjust to life in Türkiye more easily. Additionally, guidance and support programs could be developed to help international students adjust to the Turkish educational system. These would focus on specific topics such as the exam structure and academic expectations, helping students to enhance their academic performance. Given the frequent reports of discrimination, universities might consider implementing cross-institutional policies to combat discriminatory practices. Awareness campaigns could also be developed to counteract biases stemming from social media and foster greater community engagement.

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