



## SOME REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF TURKISH ERASMUS STUDENTS OF ELT DEPARTMENT

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of Turkish ELT students of Erasmus programme with specific reference to how they manage to adapt to a new culture. Data were collected by Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale, reports of former Erasmus students, and interviews. Consistent with the “culture shock” literature, findings reveal that students experienced problems at affective, behavioural, and cognitive levels and that they developed various strategies to handle these problems. In addition to such inhibiting factors of the adaptation to the new culture as language or communication competence, amount and quality of contact with host nationals, and cultural distance, most students reported on bias towards the home country as the greatest obstacle to the adaptation process.

**Keywords:** *Cultural adaptation; Erasmus programme; student mobility; ELT student-teachers.*

### INTRODUCTION

Erasmus programme allows for the EU level student mobility which has been supported already for 20 years starting in 1987 (Rivza, 2007). The programme is beneficial in providing higher education students to acquire new knowledge and experience in an international environment. At the same time, however, it poses the challenge of how to adapt to a different culture, which may be defined as ‘culture shock’ as first coined by Oberg (1960; in Irwin 2007). He describes the phenomenon as ‘precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse’ (1960, p. 177). In other words, as Oberg puts forth, if one defines and negotiates reality through the symbolic representations of life, then one must question this reality when faced with alternative representations. When the symbols used to describe and conceptualise the world are alien, this can lead to feelings of isolation or even a loss of identity. On the other hand, in spite of its negative connotation, culture shock is not an acute illness. The meaning attached to the word ‘shock’ refers to the rapidity of the physical movement, but the emotions and feedback emotions may occur over a relatively long period of time. The severity of the symptoms of culture shock is discussed to be related with various factors such as communicative competence (Brown, 1980; Acton & Felix, 1986), prejudice toward host culture as well as acute criticism from host culture (Barna, 1976), intangibility of differences in cultural values, expectations and roles (Dale, 1996), and the changes our bodies go through in order to deal with the bombardment of the new stimuli (Toffler, 1970), among others. The extent to which a person can cope with the effects of culture shock can be said to be dependent on one’s emotional resilience, flexibility or openness, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy (Kelley & Meyers, 1995; in Karaeminogullari, Dogan, & Bozkurt 2009). Emotional resilience is the ability to maintain the positive attitude toward the host country in spite of the difficulties one may encounter. In other words, it is the ability to develop appropriate coping strategies when needed. Flexibility or openness, as the name suggests, refers to the tolerance one shows to all aspects of the new environment with a wish to learn more about the host culture. Perceptual acuity has to do with the skills acquired to recognise and interpret the cultural symbols and the degree to which a person feels effective and relaxed in the new environment. Finally, when one has personal autonomy, it is said that s/he can

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function in the new community in their personal being, maintaining their personality and appreciating the cultural differences.

The early conceptualization of the experience of international students was strongly related to medical models of sojourner adjustment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001, p. 36). However, by the 1980s, the experience of international students had been viewed differently “as a learning experience rather than a medical nuisance” (Yuefang, Jindal-Snape Topping, & Todman 2008, p. 64). A more contemporary perspective to such experience has been encompassed in three theories, considering the different components of response- affect, behaviour and cognition (ABC)- when people are exposed to a new culture (Bochner, 2003; Yuefang et al., 2008). These theories are culture learning (Furnham and Bochner, 1986), stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and social identification (Phinney, 1990). In the light of this discussion, the research reported in this study benefited from the recent theories of cultural adaptation in examining the international experience of Erasmus students. The study aims to investigate the experience of Turkish ELT students of Erasmus programme with specific reference to how they manage to culturally adapt both at a macro and a micro level. At a macro level, the study looks into how the students function as individuals new to the foreign community and at a micro level, how they immerse themselves within the ELT community. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What potential problems do the Turkish ELT students of Erasmus programme encounter when adapting to a new culture at micro and macro levels?
- (2) What strategies do they develop to cope with these problems?
- (3) How do the Turkish ELT students of Erasmus programme perceive themselves when adapting to a new culture at micro and macro levels?

## **METHOD**

For triangulation purposes, data for the study were obtained from the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale by Ward & Kennedy (1999), the reports of former Erasmus students, and interviews with those students. The scale includes 29 items that measure sojourner adaptation concerning social skills acquisition across cultures, intercultural effectiveness and cultural learning (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). In order to reflect student experiences from different parts of Europe to the study, out of 86 total students who have participated in the Erasmus mobility so far, 55 were selected by purposeful random sampling to respond to the Scale.

In addition, the reports of the same students were analysed to bring more insight into the participants' experiences. Those reports are the documents that the students are required to write upon the completion of the exchange period abroad. In these reports they share what they have lived from the beginning to the end taking into consideration any aspect they want to share about their stay.

Thirty-nine volunteered to participate in the interviews upon the completion of the scales. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an emergent design. The questions in the interviews sought answers to the kind of problems that the students encountered both at macro (as a foreigner in the host country) and micro level (as a foreign student in the ELT community), what strategies they developed to cope with those problems and finally how they perceived themselves both in the foreign country and in the school community. The students also were asked to state their overall views about the exchange period.

Data acquired from the scales were analysed by means of descriptive statistics in the SPSS programme. Both the reports and interviews were subjected to content analysis. The themes emerged during the analysis were labelled and relabelled on the basis of students' problems, strategies to cope with these problems and finally perceptions of self until a final agreement was reached between the two researchers.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the findings acquired from the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale, the interviews and Erasmus reports of the students. The findings are presented on the basis of the research questions, namely, the students' problems, coping strategies that they have developed and finally, their perception of self.

The following figure illustrates the findings acquired from the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale administered to 55 ELT students participating in the mobility programme.

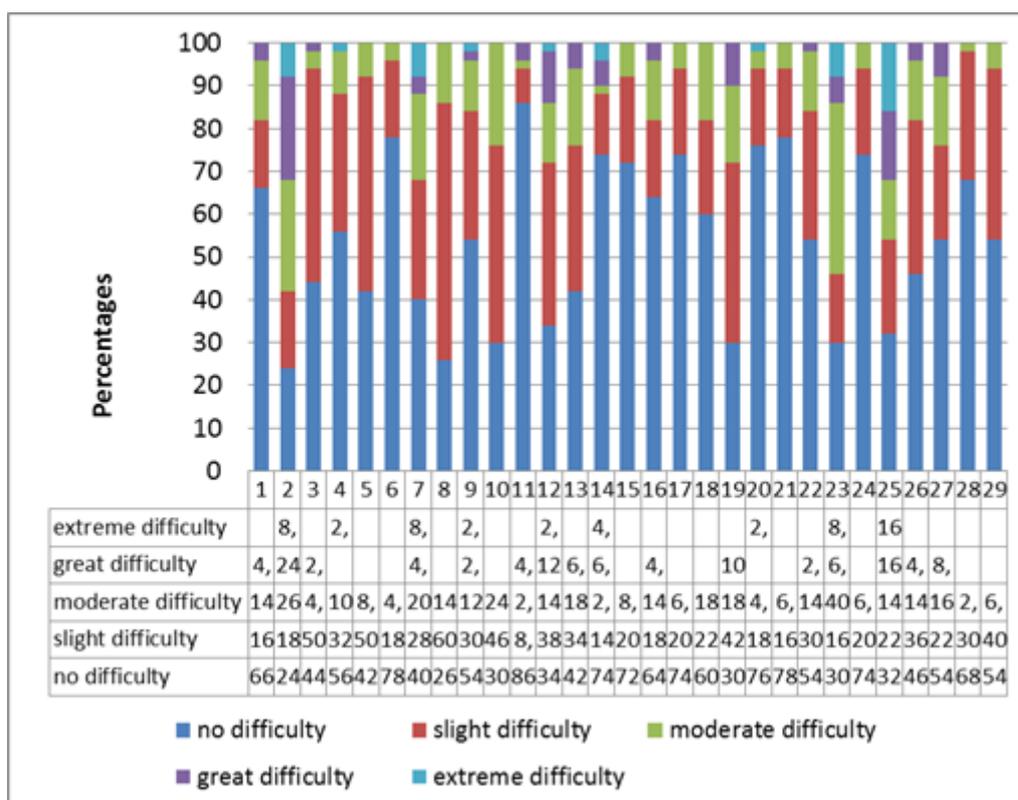


Figure 1. Students' level of difficulty in socio-cultural adaptation

When we look at the findings from the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale, we see that to the majority of the items, most students responded they experienced no difficulty. However, there were a few items which revealed different results. These items were related with food (item 2), rules and regulations (item 3), host country's perspective (item 5) host national's point of view (item 10), climate in the host country (item 25) and host country's political system (item 23). For instance, the majority of the students stated that they experienced great to moderate difficulty in finding food that they enjoy. On the other hand, while half of the students claimed that they experienced slight difficulty in following the rules and the regulations, another half expressed that they also experienced slight difficulty in taking the host country's perspective on the culture. To the item which aimed to clarify the extent to which students experienced difficulty in seeing things from the host country's point of view, a vast majority responded as slight difficulty. Another area of difficulty in students' adaptation to the new culture concerns the climate. Depending on the country where they spend their exchange period, almost half of the participating students claimed that they experienced extreme (16%), great (16%) or moderate difficulty (14%) in

adapting themselves to the different climate of the new country. And finally, most of the students stated that they experienced moderate difficulty in understanding the host country's political system.

The quantitative data obtained from the Scale were triangulated by means of the qualitative data acquired from the interviews and document analysis. Thus, the following is the qualitative findings as to the cultural adaptation of students. The analysis was done bearing in mind the theories of cultural adaptation: culture learning (behavioural component); the problems that the students encountered in the course of adaptation, stress and coping (affective component); the strategies that they followed to handle those problems, and social identification (cognitive component); and their perceptions of themselves in the new culture (Bochner 2003; Yuefang 2008; Furnham and Bochner 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Phinney 1990).

The problems encountered both at macro and micro levels are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Problems encountered at macro and micro levels

<b>MACRO</b>		<i>f</i>	<b>MICRO</b>		<i>f</i>
<b>Adaptation to a new culture</b>		<b>45</b>	<b>Bias towards the students' home country</b>		<b>26</b>
Eating habits		13	Incorrect knowledge about the home culture		18
People in the host country too distant		11	Threat by the lecturers		4
Climate (very cold)		4	Isolation		4
Sanitary problems		4	<b>Guidance from the host country</b>		<b>20</b>
Values		3	Indifferent coordinator		12
Entertainment		2	No support for selecting courses		2
Table manners		2	No support for materials		1
Traffic rules		2	No support for health problems		1
Family life		2	No peer student		1
Sense of humour		2	Poor website		1
			Indifferent classmates		1
			Inadequate organisation		1
<b>Accommodation</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>Educational system</b>		<b>15</b>
Low standard		8	New education system		9
Too many Turks together		7	Dissatisfaction with the education in the host country		5
Insecure location		2	Distant student-teacher relationship		1
Distant location		1	<b>Language related problems</b>		<b>9</b>
Hard transportation		1	Low quality intensive language course in the host country		4
No social activities		1	Lack of proficiency in English		2
No internet connection		1	Use of host countries' language as the medium of instruction		2
No hostel at all		1	Humiliation due to weak English		1
<b>Language related problems</b>		<b>11</b>			
Lack of proficiency in the language of the host country		11			

As displayed in the table, the most frequently cited problem at macro level (45 times) concerns students' adaptation to a new culture. Eating habits (13) and people's being too distant (11) in the host country are found the most common problems in this category. There are other problems cited such as the climate (4),

sanitary problems (4), values (3), entertainment (2), table manners (2), traffic rules (2), family life (2) and sense of humor (2).

The second most frequently referred to problem is accommodation (22 times). While eight times the students complained about the low standard accommodation, seven times they viewed living with too many students from their home country around as a problem. Insecure location (2), distant location (1), transportation (1), lack of social activities (1), lack of internet connection (1), and lack of hostel (1) are the other problems stated. The final problem at the macro level is related with the lack of the language of the host country (11).

When we look at the problems at the micro level, the problems experienced in the academic community, bias toward the students' home country bears the priority with 26 citations. The students rationalize these problems as emerging from the incorrect knowledge about their home culture (18) which results in two other problems namely, threat by the lecturers (4) and isolation (4). The following remark from the interviews illustrates the situation clearly:

At the beginning, the attitudes of some friends towards us as Turks disappointed us. They had the incorrect belief that Turkey is a country where people only worship, fast, never take alcohol; all women are covered, and are stoned to death in case of sexual intercourse with the opposite sex other than their husbands.

One of the participants elaborated on how he handled the situation in his Erasmus report:

I had no intention to waste my limited time in the host country by exaggerating the problems. I was always patient and constructive in sorting the problems out. As an educated person, I tried my best to change the bias and prejudices towards the people of my country.

Another commonly cited problem is guidance from the host country (20 times). As the students have claimed they had indifferent coordinators (12), no support for selecting courses (2), no support for materials (1), no support for health problems (1), no peer students (1), a poor website (1), indifferent classmates (1), and inadequate organization (1). The students also had difficulties with the education system (15). Among these, new education system (9), dissatisfaction with the quality of education in the host country (5), and distant student teacher relationship (1) can be counted. Similar to what they experienced at the macro level, the students stated they had language related problems (9) in their academic environment as well. Beside low quality intensive language course in the host country (4), lack of proficiency in English (2), use of host country's language as the medium of instruction (2) and humiliation due to weak English (1) are stated as encountered problems.

In the study, the participating Erasmus students elaborated on the strategies they developed to cope with the problems they encountered at both macro and micro levels. In terms of macro level, as seen in Table 2, the students experienced problems specifically deriving from the fact they did not know the language of the host country (9 times). In order to cope with this problem, the students utilized some strategies such as getting support from their peers (2), getting help from the students in their classes (1), making use of gestures and mimes to communicate (1), and benefiting from other foreign languages (1). Finally, one of the students chose a more challenging way to handle this problem and tried to learn the language of the host country.

Eating habits in the host country constituted the second most frequent complaint (5 times). One of the students tried to overcome this problem by eating at the restaurants that serve the food of their home country. Eating vegetables only was a solution to food problems for one of the participants. One of them learnt the food related vocabulary and checked the ingredients of the food.

The students also struggled with bias toward their home country as they claimed (4 times). One used isolation of self as a coping strategy, and another student had no contact outside the school. Patience was another coping strategy utilized by one of the students and one of the Erasmus students used a more radical strategy: trying to change the wrong image of his/her country.

**Table 2.** Coping strategies developed by students for problems at the macro level

<b>Problem</b>	<b><i>f</i></b>	<b>Coping Strategy</b>	<b><i>f</i></b>
		Peer student support.	2
		Assistance from students in the classroom.	1
Lack of proficiency in the language of the host country	9	Use of gestures and mimes to communicate.	1
		Use of other foreign languages.	1
		Learn the language of the host country.	1
Eating habits	5	Eating at Turkish restaurants and cooking at hostel.	1
		Eating vegetables.	1
		Learning food related vocabulary and checking the ingredients.	1
		Isolation of self.	1
Bias towards the students' home country	4	No contact outside school.	1
		Patience.	1
		Put effort to change the wrong image.	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13</b>

The strategies the students employed for coping with problems emerged at the micro level are presented in Table 3. As seen in the table, eight students complained about the bias coming from lecturers in the host country. Various strategies as putting effort to constitute a good model for the home country (5 times), selecting lecturers after observing the classes (1), and preparing oral presentations about home country and people there (1) were used by the students to overcome these problems. One student found the solution to this problem by working harder to be accepted in the new ELT community. Beside these, the new education system in the host country constituted a burden for one of the students. In order to come to an understanding of and immerse him/herself within this new system, this student worked harder and regularly. In the school where the lecturer used the language of the host country as the medium of instruction, getting support from peers (1) and changing the course (1) were the coping strategies allocated. Other than these, peer support helped one Erasmus student to complete their ECTS and one student received help from his/her coordinator in the home country.

**Table 3.** Coping strategies developed by students for problems at the micro level

<b>Problem</b>	<b><i>f</i></b>	<b>Coping Strategy</b>	<b><i>f</i></b>
Bias towards Turkish students by the lecturers.	8	Efforts to constitute a good model of Turkey.	5
		Observed classes and then select the lecturers.	1
		Oral presentation about Turkey and Turkish people.	1
		Working hard to be accepted.	1
New education system.	1	Hard and regular work.	1
Use of host country's language as the medium of instruction.	1	Peer support.	1
		Change the course.	1
Selecting courses.	1	Peer support.	1
Completing ECTS.	1	Peer support.	1
Different examination system.	1	Getting help from the coordinator in the home country.	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>

Apart from the problems mentioned so far, the students faced financial and personal problems as well as problems related with formalities they had to deal with. Regarding financial problems, the number of citations is noteworthy (19 times). The students remarked that the amount of the grant was insufficient (11) and that they received the grant very late (8). As for the personal problems, loneliness and homesickness were both cited three times. Preparing the required documents (3), and getting the visa (3) were mentioned within the category of formalities. To conclude, students also complained about the difficulty they encountered in terms of using their cell-phones, the boring environment, and finally insufficient exchange time once each.

In line with Bochner (2003) and Yuefang's (2008) ABC (affect, behaviour and cognition) description, in order to refine on how participating students perceived themselves at both macro and micro levels, interviews were held. Table 4 displays the 16 themes which emerged from the students' remarks concerning how they viewed themselves in the new country.

**Table 4.** Perception of self at the macro level

	<b>Someone who...</b>	<i>f</i>
1	is eager to change the wrong image of home country.	8
2	is well-aware of the bias towards the citizens of home country.	1
3	tries to take all the courses which she he/she cannot in his/her home country.	1
4	cooks Turkish food for all Erasmus students.	1
5	introduces traditions and folk dances and Turkish cuisine.	1
6	is physically different from others.	1
7	easily adapts himself to situations and places.	1
8	wants to travel all around Europe.	1
9	has good relationships with foreign friends.	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>16</b>

At the macro level, as displayed in Table 4, the most frequently cited perception of self appears to be someone who is eager to change the wrong image of home country (8 times). Following this, we see that students used remarks as someone who is well-aware of the bias toward the citizens of home country, who tries to take all the courses s/he cannot take in home country, who cooks Turkish food for all Erasmus students, who introduces traditions, folk dances and Turkish cuisine, who is physically different from others, who easily adapts him/herself to situations and places, who wants to travel all around Europe, and finally who has good relationships with foreign friends.. All these remarks were cited once each.

When we examine the students' perception of self at the micro level, in other words, within the academic community as shown in Table 5, we detect confidence, ambition and motivation.

**Table 5.** Perception of self at the micro level

	<b>Someone who is...</b>	<i>f</i>
1	modern.	2
2	flexible.	1
3	respectful to others' views.	1
4	determined.	1
5	stuck to own values.	1
6	responsible.	1
7	ambitious.	1
8	energetic.	1
9	ready to struggle with bias and humiliation.	1
10	successful.	1
11	well-equipped and knowledgeable.	1
12	as good as and even much better than other students.	1
13	open to new ideas.	1
14	ready to learn about a new culture.	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>15</b>

As for their perceptions of self, twice, the students found themselves modern, other remarks such as flexible, respectful to others' views, determined, stuck to own values, responsible, ambitious, energetic, ready to struggle with bias and humiliation, successful, well-equipped and knowledgeable, as good even better than other students, open to new ideas, and ready to learn about a new culture were cited once.

## **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

The findings concerning how the students in the Erasmus mobility programme culturally adapt themselves to a new country at the macro level and to a new academic context at the micro level are discussed on the basis of the three aspects of cultural adaptation: affective, behavioural, and cognitive.

The behaviour component of cultural adaptation manifests itself in the culture learning theory which focuses primarily on behavioural aspects of intercultural contact and regarding social interaction as a skilled and mutually organised performance (Argyle, 1969). While the findings acquired from the Social Adaptation Scale show that the exchange students in this study do not seem to experience substantial problems in the course of learning about the new culture, those obtained from the interviews and document analysis of students' reports reveal the opposite. It was revealed that the problems at the macro and micro level constitute variables that negatively influence the process of the students' adaptation. Of these variables suggested in the relevant literature, general knowledge about a new culture (Ward & Searle, 1991) (e.g. eating habits, climate, values), language or communication competence (Furnham, 1993) (e.g. lack of proficiency in the language of the host country, lack of proficiency in English), quantity and quality of contact with host nationals (Bochner, 1982) (e.g. too many students from home country around, indifferent coordinator in the host country), cultural distance (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, b) (e.g. host country's people's being too distant), and cultural identity (Ward & Searle, 1991) (bias towards the students' home culture) seem to apply to what difficulties that the students in this study experience.

Regarding the affective aspect of cultural adaptation, Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman (2008, p. 65) state that it focuses more on psychological well-being and that people engaging in cross-cultural encounters need to be resilient, adapt and develop coping strategies and tactics. The students in this study developed some strategies to cope with the new ways of life in the new community. These strategies used for the problems both at macro and micro levels ranged from benefiting from the peer support system in the exchange framework, to resorting to native food, to hard and regular work. However, it appears that putting effort to change the wrong image of their home country both in the country as a whole and in the academic environment specifically so that they can receive more social support from the members of the new culture was the strategy they very frequently used. To put it differently, the students' "psychological well-being" seems to be threatened by the negative impact of a continuous struggle against the bias toward their home culture. This seems to correlate with Sodowsky & Plake's (1992) findings. They state that many international students perceive prejudice and discrimination during their interaction with host nationals. Though very few in number, there are also those who claimed to isolate themselves from the new community members, the strategy put forward clearly by Berry (1994; 1997) saying that one of the acculturation strategies is separation which implies that the people in a new community perceive themselves as high in home culture identification but low in host culture identification.

Social identification theory and the cognitive component of cultural adaptation suggest that identity is a fundamental issue for the cross-cultural travellers. Within this component, there exist cognitive variables such as knowledge of the host culture, mutual attitude between hosts and sojourners, cultural similarity and cultural identity (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 66). In the study, the students' perceptions of their identity seem to have a direct connection with how they are viewed by the people in the host country or what the host attitudes toward sojourners are like (Gudykunst 1983). With the awareness of the wrong image of their home culture, their perceptions of themselves both at the macro and micro level revolve around the concepts of eagerness, ambition and motivation to change this image and thus to become accepted as the legitimate members of the new community.

The research reported here offers only a snapshot of a huge and complex mobility phenomenon. It is confined to 55 students, so we realize that the results might be peculiar to our situation and we should be

careful in drawing our conclusions. However, the study has shown that there is a need for appropriate positive action to make provision for preparation and orientation, and the acquisition of skills relevant to the new culture (Bochner, 1982).

First, Erasmus exchange programme students should be provided with more guidance and orientation through which they are enabled to enhance an awareness of the host country and develop culturally relevant social skills to thrive and survive in their new setting. Second, the students should be provided with the chance to take courses for learning the native language of the host country prior to their study and the intensity of the language courses in the host country should be increased so that they can function outside the school effectively. Third, in order to increase the students' ability to develop coping strategies with different problems in the new setting, necessary care should be taken to expose them to stress-management skills training. Last but not least, quality of social support provided by the coordinators of the programme should be enhanced in order not to cause any feelings of isolation on the part of the students due to their cultural identity (as experienced by the students in this study).

Bias towards the students' home culture should be addressed by creating a process of "culture synergy" i.e., "asking for mutual efforts from both host teachers and exchange students to understand one another's culture (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 72) or getting people of the host country to imagine themselves in the role or identity of the exchange students-'walk a mile in their shoes' (p. 68). Beside elimination of bias, there should be room in the programme to create mutual understanding between students' home and host cultures. This could be done by organizing social gatherings in which exchange students introduce their culture and learn about the culture of the host country as well as that of the other exchange students. Requiring students to make presentations of their home country and academic environment in the classrooms could also help them gain integration into and approval by the host culture.

Erasmus has been and remains a key factor in the internalization and Europeanization of higher education (European Commission, 2007, p. 1). Turkey has taken the steps needed to provide students with learning opportunities embedded with the concepts of globalization and integration with Europe as a direct or indirect response to the changing pattern of the world. Thus, initiating further research such as the one reported in this paper could shed more light into the function of Erasmus exchange programme in realizing the country's aim of Europeanization.

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