

EVALUATING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS A SOURCE OF PRIVATE SOFT POWER: AN EXAMINATION IN THE TURKISH CONTEXT*

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Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Özel Yumuşak Güç Kaynağı Olarak Değerlendirilmesi: Türkiye Bağlamında Bir İnceleme

Özet

Küreselleşmenin hızlanmasıyla birlikte, devletler uluslararası alanda güçlerini ve nüfuzlarını artırmak için farklı stratejiler geliştirmeye başlamıştır. Bu stratejiler arasında yumuşak güç konsepti özel bir önem taşımaktadır. Üniversiteler ve eğitim kurumları, devletlerin yumuşak güç stratejilerinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu kurumlar, uluslararası değişim programları, burs imkânları ve ortak araştırma projeleri gibi çeşitli araçlar aracılığıyla öğrenci ve akademisyen hareketliliğini teşvik ederek farklı ülkelerden insanları bir araya getirmektedir. Devletler yumuşak güç açısından uluslararası öğrencileri olumlu imajı yansıtması, sempati kazandırması ile kültürlerine ilgi uyandırması açısından önemli bir kaynak görmektedir.

Bu çalışmada, uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye'de eğitim alma tercihlerini ve Türkiye'deki uluslararası öğrenci deneyimlerini etkileyen faktörleri araştırmak amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye'yi tercih etmelerinde eğitim kalitesi, uluslararası tanınırlık ve dini yakınlık gibi faktörlerin önemli rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Bu faktörler, uluslararası öğrencilerin akademik, sosyal ve politik gerekçeleriyle yakından ilişkilidir. Bunun yanında, uluslararası öğrencileri Türkiye'yi tercih etmesinde ekonomik faktörler de önemli bir etken olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu faktörler arasında hayat pahalılığının olmaması ve nispeten düşük eğitim maliyeti yer almaktadır. Bu bulguların bir sonucu, Türkiye'nin önemli bir çekim merkezi olarak ortaya çıkması eğitim kalitesi, dini yakınlık ve hayat pahalılığının olmamasına bağlıdır. Kısacası eğitim için tercih edilecek ülkenin seçimi konusunda öğrenciler, Yükseköğretim kurumları ve ülkenin sahip olduğu yumuşak gücüne itibar etmektedir. İstanbul'da öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrencilerin Türkiye'yi tercih etme eğilimlerini tespit edebilmek için araştırma sürecinde geliştirilen *Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Türkiye'ye ve İstanbul'daki Üniversitelere Bakışı Ölçeği'nin* güvenilirlik hesapları için yapılan analizler doğrultusunda, Cronbach's α kat sayısı 0.918 olarak tespit edilmiştir. Bu değer, ölçeğin güvenilirlik kat sayısının yüksek olduğunu göstermesi bakımından önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güç, Yumuşak Güç, Özel Yumuşak Güç, Uluslararası Öğrenci, Uluslararası Öğrenci Hareketliliği

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Evaluating International Students as a Source of Private Soft Power: An Examination in the Turkish Context

Abstract

With the acceleration of globalization, states have begun to develop different strategies to increase their power and influence in the international arena. Among these strategies, the concept of soft power is of particular importance. Universities and educational institutions play an important role in the soft power strategies of states. These institutions bring together people from different countries by encouraging student and academic mobility through various tools such as international exchange programs, scholarship opportunities, and joint research projects. In terms of soft power, states see international students as an important resource as they project a positive image, gain sympathy and generate interest in their culture.

This study aimed to investigate the preferences of international students to study in Türkiye and the factors affecting international student experiences in Türkiye. The research findings show that factors such as quality of education, international recognition, and religious affiliation play an important role in international students' preference for Türkiye. These factors are closely related to the academic, social and political reasons of international students. In addition, economic factors are also important factors in international students' preference for Türkiye. These factors include the absence of high cost of living and relatively low cost of education. One result of these findings is that Türkiye's emergence as an important center of attraction depends on the quality of education, religious affiliation and the absence of high cost of living. In short, students rely on the soft power of higher education institutions and the country in choosing the country to be preferred for education. In line with the analyses made for the reliability calculations of the International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale, which was developed in the research process to determine the tendency of international students studying in Istanbul to prefer Türkiye, Cronbach's α coefficient was determined as 0.918. This value is important in terms of showing that the reliability coefficient of the scale is high.

Keywords: Power, Soft Power, Private Soft Power, International Student, International Student Mobility

1. Soft Power

The Cambridge Dictionary defines power as “ability to control people and events.”¹ The concept of power in international relations has been a subject of careful consideration. Power is a multifaceted concept, one on which there is no clear consensus, and which often leads to disappointment.²

According to Joseph Nye, a Professor of Political Science at Harvard University, power is³ like the air, everyone depends on it, talks about it, but few understand it. At the same time, power is like love, easier to experience than to define or measure, but that does not make it less real. Nye's metaphors of “air and love” when describing power illustrate its complex and multifaceted nature. Power encompasses far more than mere physical strength; it influences people's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. While numerous definitions of power exist, in a general sense, it can be understood as the ability of an actor to achieve desired outcomes.⁴

Micheal Mann identifies four fundamental sources of social power. Ideological power, unlike individual searches for meaning, arises from the structured influence of ideas and values. It shapes shared belief systems, both religious and secular. Economic power operates by controlling the extraction, transformation, and distribution of natural resources. It increases profits through mobilized labor and circulating capital and profoundly shapes society through material control. Military power is essentially the social support of concentrated and exhaustive force, exercised under the threat of mortal

¹ dictionary.cambridge.org

² James March, “The Power of Power”, in D. Easton (ed.), *Varieties of Political Theory*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966, ss.39-70, s.39

³ Joseph Nye. *Yumuşak Güç*, Elips Kitap, Ankara. 2005, p.11

⁴ Joseph Nye. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, New York: Public Affairs. 2004, p.1

death in resistance. This emphasizes its coercive and destructive nature. Finally, political power is the fundamental function of the state as the central authority for the organization of social life and territory, with the primary purpose of maintaining order.⁵

Hard power is defined as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through economic or military force, leveraging material resources and coercive capabilities. It operates by threatening others with economic superiority or military action. This concept contrasts with soft power, as it is fundamentally resource-based and relies on tangible assets to enforce an actor's will.⁶

Hard power comprises the components of military and economic strength. In this respect, the only way to achieve success in world politics is not to force other nations to change by threats or by using military or economic means, but also to win them over to one's side. This dimension of power, which involves getting others to want what one wants, is termed soft power.⁷ Soft power enables a nation to attain its power not through the coercive instrument of threat (the stick) inherent in hard power, but through the inducement (the carrot). It employs methods of attraction and persuasion to achieve desired outcomes. While hard power threatens, soft power entices. This appeal and incentive can stem from a nation's ideals, traditions, religion, arts, language, or a combination of these assets.

Conflict and war are battlegrounds where neither side can win. Therefore, preventing war or conflict is the most logical and difficult course of action.⁸ Preventing conflict requires both strength and soft power skills. In contrast to hard power, which employs economic and military instruments encompassing coercion, sanctions, and bribery to shape the behavior of another actor, soft power seeks to alter the behavior of a counterpart through a state's values, institutions, culture, and policies.

When examining the sources of soft power, Nye focuses on the factor of attraction: "It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced". Nye defines culture, a source of soft power, as "a set of values and practices that create meaning for a society." A state's governmental policies or activities, both domestic and foreign, constitute a source of soft power. Nye emphasizes that a country's political values can transform into soft power when they inspire admiration among other states. Actions taken by countries in foreign policy can also contribute to soft power. State-controlled foreign policy allows for rapid implementation of changes. Pursuing objectives within a framework of legitimacy, achieved through shared values, provides a country with soft power in foreign policy. The application of universal values domestically and their support in foreign policy are of paramount importance.⁹

Today, private soft power resources are emerging as an area that requires even more attention. According to Nye, "universities, foundations, churches, and other nongovernmental groups develop soft power of their own that may reinforce or be at odds with official foreign policy goals."¹⁰ The global information age requires a strategic focus on private soft power resources. Universities play an important role in the use of soft power. Students who study abroad can assume important positions when they return to their countries. These students who adopt the culture and values of the country they study in are an indication that the soft power strategy of that country is successful. Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell said in 2001, "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here" for international students as a source of private soft power.¹¹

Nye points out that international students educated in higher education institutions are a significant source of a state's soft power, stating, "America exports in the minds of more than half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities and then return to their home

⁵ Michael Mann. *The sources of social power: Volume 3, global empires and revolution, 1890-1945*. Vol. 3. Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.1-16

⁶ Matteo Pallaver, "Power and its Forms: Hard, Soft, Smart", Master of Philosophy, London School of Economics, 2011, p.81

⁷ Paul Viotti & Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, Harlow: Pearson Education. 2012, p.112

⁸ Sun Tzu, *Savaş Sanatı*, Çev. Adil Demir, Kastaş Yayinevi, 3. Baskı, İstanbul, 2008, s.5

⁹ Nye. *Yumuşak Güç*, p. 5, 72

¹⁰ Joseph Nye. "The Limits of Soft Power." In: *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition. China and Globalization*. Springer, Singapore. 2023, p. 19

¹¹ Nye. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, p. 44

countries, or in the minds of the Asian entrepreneurs who return home after succeeding in Silicon Valley, tend to reach elites with power.”¹²

2. International Student Mobility

In the globalized world, international students play a significant role in the soft power strategies of higher education institutions. Through them, these institutions can enhance their global visibility, foster international collaborations, and contribute to the soft power of their respective states.

According to UNESCO, an international student is defined as an individual who crosses national or regional borders for the purpose of education and is enrolled as a student in a country other than their country of origin.¹³ The OECD's term “international students” refers to students who have crossed borders for the purpose of education.¹⁴ For various reasons, international students have a significant impact on estimated graduation rates. These students are counted as first-time graduates, regardless of their prior education in other countries. The initial definition of an international student in Turkish legislation was provided in the, Regulation Regarding Foreign National Students Studying in Türkiye dated April 30, 1985. According to this regulation, a foreign national student is defined as “a person who does not hold Turkish citizenship and is studying in educational institutions of any level and field or attending Turkish language courses.”¹⁵

While nations ensure their citizens' access to higher education from a national perspective, they simultaneously strengthen the dimension of internationalization from an international standpoint. Internationalization is exceedingly important both for its economic returns and for the enhancement of educational quality. Countries seeking to attract international students, particularly talented postgraduate students, aim to strengthen their research capacities. Developed countries generally top the list of preferred destinations for international students. However, the students who go to these preferred countries are often citizens of developing nations. The primary reason for this is the desire to bridge the gap in qualified labor. Nevertheless, developing countries today have also begun to take steps to attract international students to their own territories. This is because international students positively contribute to a country's prestige in cultural, social, economic, and scientific spheres, in terms of their impact on a nation's soft power.¹⁶

The international student market is a rapidly expanding sector that makes a significant contribution to the global economy. Students participating in international mobility worldwide constitute a substantial share of the global economy, exceeding \$200 billion. These students invigorate the tourism sector, stimulate the accommodation and food and beverage industries, and increase demand for other educational services. They provide a considerable economic income to countries favored for language education, such as Malta and Cyprus. States seeking to attract the flow of international student mobility worldwide aim to gain a share of this market.¹⁷

2.1. USA

The ongoing growth in international students coming to the U.S. for higher education, according to a recent analysis by the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), revealed that the 1,094,792 international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$39 billion to the U.S. economy and supported more than 455,000 jobs in the 2017-2018 academic year. The U.S. alone captures nearly \$40 billion of the \$200 billion global market. California and New York alone

¹² Nye. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, p. 13

¹³ UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, <http://uis.unesco.org/glossary>

¹⁴ OECD Indicators, “Education at a glance 2013”, OECD Publishing 2013, p. 58

¹⁵ Fahrettin Kerim Kadioğlu & Özgür Kadir Özer (Eds.), *Yükseköğretimin Uluslararasılaşması Çerçevesinde Türk Üniversitelerinin Uluslararası Öğrenciler İçin Çekim Merkezi Haline Getirilmesi: Araştırma Projesi*, Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2015, p. 18

¹⁶ DEİK, Eğitim Ekonomisi İş Konseyi Raporu, “Uluslararası Yüksek Öğretim ve Türkiye'nin Konumu”, March, 2013, İstanbul, p. 17

¹⁷ Yücel Oğurlu, “Yabancı uyruklu öğrenci potansiyelimizin farkında mıyız? -1”, 28.07.2018, <https://www.dirilispostasi.com/makale/yabanci-uyruklu-ogrenci-potansiyelimizin-farkinda-miyiz-1-5b5b6c3fe54d4476322645c2>.

generate \$11 billion in revenue from international students.¹⁸ Students both contribute to the U.S. economy and create new employment opportunities. NAFSA estimated that every seven international students enrolled in the 2016-17 academic year triggered three job creations.¹⁹

2.2. UK

The research report undertaken by London Economics in conjunction with the Higher Education Policy Institute and Kaplan International Pathways estimated that the economic benefits of international students to the UK economy averaged £20.3 billion in the 2015-16 academic year. Students residing in the EU generated £4.0 billion in revenue, while those residing outside the EU contributed £16.3 billion.²⁰ It is estimated that, on average, each EU student generates £68,000 per year, while each non-EU student generates £95,000 per year. In other words, it is stated that every 15 EU students and every 11 non-EU students create a net economic impact of €1 million for the UK economy over the course of their studies.²¹

2.3. Australia

International students in Australia contributed a record \$32.2 billion to the Australian economy, ranking after iron ore and coal as the country's largest exports.²² Acting Chief Executive of Universities Australia, Catriona Jackson, stated, "International students come to Australia because they know they will get a world-class education, global networks of graduates, a fantastic student experience, and lifelong friendships thanks to our country." It ranks as the second most preferred destination by Indian and Chinese students.²³

2.4. Canada

It is estimated that international students in Canada spent approximately \$12.8 billion and \$15.5 billion on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary spending in 2015 and 2016, respectively. The annual expenditures of international students directly and indirectly contributed \$2.3 billion to tax revenues in 2015. The total annual expenditure of international students translated to 140,010 jobs supported by the Canadian economy in 2015. The comparable figure for 2016 was 168,860 jobs supported.²⁴

2.5. France

International students studying in France contributed a net amount of €1.6 billion (US\$2 billion) to the country's economy last year, according to the report "Au-delà de l'influence: l'apport économique des étudiants étrangers en France" prepared by Campus France. With an 11% growth over the past five years, the report concludes that international students are "certainly a very profitable investment for France in the future." Furthermore, the report highlights that international students tend to develop a positive outlook towards the country, with 90% stating they would recommend France as a place to live,

¹⁸ NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool,

http://www.nafsa.org/Policy_and_Advocacy/Policy_Resources/Policy_Trends_and_Data/NAFSA_International_Student_Economic_Value_Tool/,

¹⁹ Youyou Zhou, "The impact of Chinese students in the US, charted and mapped", 2.10.2018, <https://qz.com/1410768/the-number-of-chinese-students-in-the-us-charted-and-mapped/>.

²⁰ Kaplan, "The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency", 11.01.2018, <https://londoneconomics.co.uk/blog/publication/costs-benefits-international-students-parliamentary-constituency/>.

²¹ Kerrie Kennedy, "UK: International students add £20bn to economy, study finds", 01.11.2018, <https://thepinews.com/data/uk-study-finds-benefits-international-students-10-times-greater-costs/>,

²² "The impact of international students in Australia", 7.05.2019., <https://www.studyabroad.net.ph/the-growing-impact-of-an-australian-education/>,

²³ Icef Monitor, "Australia's international education exports grew by 22% in 2017", 17.03.2019, <http://monitor.icef.com/2018/04/australias-international-education-exports-grew-22-2017/>,

²⁴ Roslyn Kunin & Associates, "Economic impact of international education in Canada", 01.12.2017, <https://www.tradecommissioner.gc.ca/education/publications/000004.aspx?lang=eng>,

visit, or work, positioning these students as “excellent ambassadors ready to promote France in all areas.”²⁵

3. Current Situation in International Student Mobility in Türkiye

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the nature of the cultural, religious, and historical affinity between Türkiye and the Turkic States has fostered international student mobility. In recent years, bilateral relations and cooperation in the fields of education and culture have resulted in a rapid increase in the number of international students in Türkiye. Türkiye has been actively working to attract international students since the 1990s with the introduction of the “Great Student Project.” Initiated in 1992, this project has continued since 2012 under the auspices of the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) as the “Türkiye Bursları” (Türkiye Scholarships). With a 75 percent increase in the number of international students enrolled in Turkish higher education over the last decade, reaching approximately 148,000 international students, including 25,000 scholarship recipients, Türkiye has secured a significant position in global rankings. Building upon this success, Türkiye is also striving to achieve its target of hosting 200,000 international students as part of its 2023 goals.²⁶

Table 1: Number of International Students in Türkiye by Nationality, 2017-2018²⁷

	TOPLAM ÖĞRENCİ SAYISI												TOPLAM ÖĞRENCİ SAYISI		
	ÖNLİSANS			LİSANS			YÜKSEK LİSANS			DOKTORA					
	E	K	T	E	K	T	E	K	T	E	K	T	E	K	T
TOPLAM	5212	3388	8600	58753	30628	89381	12307	6820	19127	5511	2519	8030	81783	43355	125138
SURİYE ARAP CUMHURİYETİ	1068	793	1861	10488	6456	16944	1094	398	1492	330	74	404	12980	7721	20701
AZERBAJCAN CUMHURİYETİ	736	226	962	10362	2861	13223	1537	932	2469	276	158	434	12911	4177	17088
TÜRKMENİSTAN	1126	749	1875	6365	3531	9896	303	131	434	30	12	42	7824	4423	12247
İRAN İSLAM CUMHURİYETİ	123	90	213	1476	1174	2650	941	794	1735	1127	693	1820	3667	2751	6418
AFGANİSTAN İSLAM CUM.	214	56	270	3656	703	4359	882	148	1030	159	8	167	4911	915	5826
IRAK CUMHURİYETİ	67	47	114	1550	678	2228	1623	487	2110	587	148	735	3827	1360	5187
ALMANYA FEDERAL CUM.	161	290	451	1242	1872	3114	128	234	362	41	44	85	1572	2440	4012
YUNANİSTAN CUMHURİYETİ	116	110	226	1024	1010	2034	104	136	240	21	25	46	1265	1281	2546
BULGARİSTAN CUMHURİYETİ	90	110	200	1040	1113	2153	50	65	115	19	23	42	1199	1311	2510
SOMALİ FEDERAL CUMHURİYETİ	89	105	194	1212	441	1653	324	71	395	65	3	68	1690	620	2310
ÇİN HALK CUMHURİYETİ	81	59	140	777	643	1420	206	228	434	44	46	90	1108	976	2084
KAZAKİSTAN CUMHURİYETİ	83	58	141	711	534	1245	142	270	412	115	152	267	1051	1014	2065

Table 1 lists the number of international students studying in Türkiye, based on countries with more than 2,000 students. As of 2017-2018, the number of international students in Türkiye was

²⁵ Beckie Smith, “International students contribute €1.6bn to French economy”, 5.01.2015, <https://thepienews.com/news/international-students-contribute-e1-6bn-french-economy/>,

²⁶ <https://www.ytb.gov.tr/uluslararası-ogrenciler/uluslararası-ogrenci-hareketliliği>,

²⁷ <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

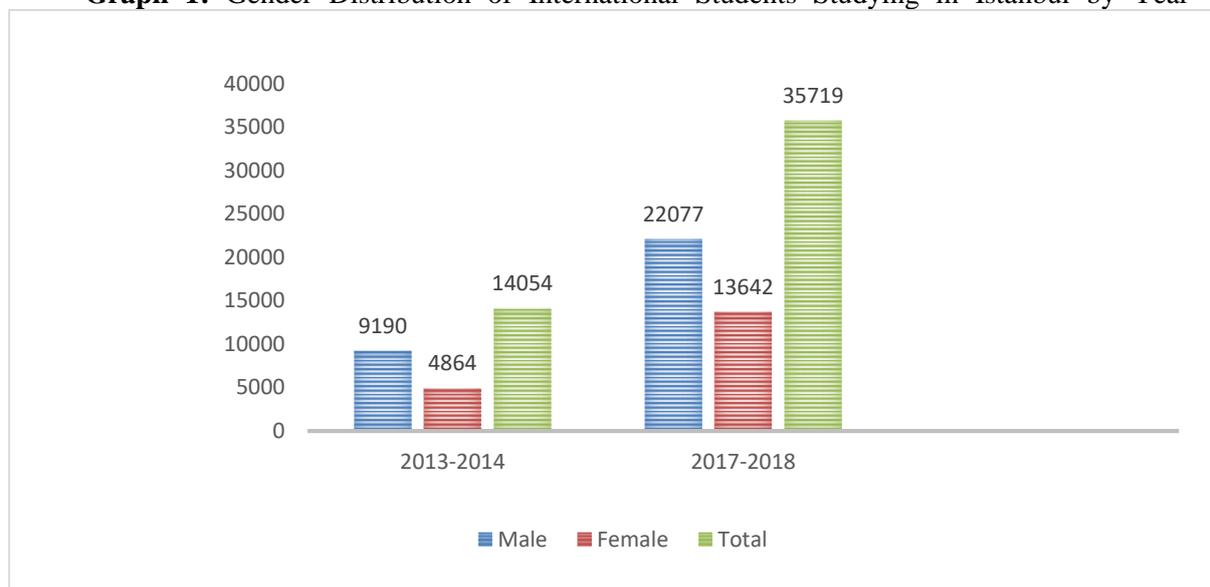
recorded as 125,138. The country with the highest number of students in Türkiye is the Syrian Arab Republic, with 20,701 students of Syrian nationality.

According to Table 2, the total number of students studying in Türkiye is nearly four times the number of students studying in Istanbul. Based on this ratio, approximately one out of every four students in Türkiye is receiving their education in Istanbul.

Table 2: Top 10 Cities Where Most International Students Study by Province ²⁸

	Province	Number of students		Province	Number of students
1	İstanbul	35.735	6	İzmir	3.349
2	Ankara	10.936	7	Gaziantep	3.344
3	Eskişehir	6.675	8	Karabük	3.329
4	Bursa	4.414	9	Samsun	3.162
5	Konya	3.565	10	Sakarya	3.151

Graph 1: Gender Distribution of International Students Studying in Istanbul by Year ²⁹



According to Graph 1, there were 48,183 international students in Türkiye in the 2013-2014 academic year, 14,752 of whom were women and 33,431 were men. As of the 2017-2018 academic year, this number reached 125,138, 43,355 of whom were women and 81,783 men. It's noteworthy that the number of male students is approximately twice the number of female students in both indicators.

Table 3 shows that the majority of international students coming from their hometowns to study in Istanbul come from Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries.

²⁸ <https://www.drdatastats.com>

²⁹ <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

Table 3: Number of International Students in Istanbul by Nationality ³⁰

	Country	Male	Female	Total
1	Syrian Arab Republic	2843	1550	4393
2	Republic of Azerbaijan	1873	1060	2933
3	Islamic Republic of Iran	1427	1219	2646
4	Republic of Iraq	1316	529	1845
5	Turkmenistan	1008	663	1671

According to Table 3, Syria, which has the most students in Istanbul, ranks first with 4,393 students. Azerbaijan is second with 2,933 students, Iran is third with 2,646 students, Iraq is fourth with 1,845 students, and Turkmenistan is fifth on the list with 1,671 students.

3.1. International Students' Perspective on Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale

3.1.1. Purpose of the Research

Higher education institutions are in competition to attract international students. In this global competition, Türkiye can achieve success by understanding the current situation of international students, who constitute a unique soft power resource, and by finding swift solutions to their problems. This will be determined through a survey study focusing on the challenges faced by international students studying specifically in the province of Istanbul and the levels of our soft power related to universities, one of the special soft power resources.

3.1.2. Sample of the Study

For the research sample, it is necessary to reach a sample group that is 5 to 10 times the number of scale items.³¹ Within the scope of the research, the "International Students' Perspective on Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale" was administered to a sample group of 384 individuals. In this context, a sufficient number was reached for the scale, and reliability analyses were conducted.

3.1.3. Research Data Collection

Research data were collected through a survey created using Google Forms. The first section of the survey included socio-demographic information reflecting gender, nationality, marital status, education level, and academic year. The second section asked participants to choose from predetermined options regarding their reasons for choosing Türkiye, the areas in which NGOs provide the most assistance, their desired country of destination after graduation, and the challenges they faced in Türkiye. The third section contained the 'International Students' Perspectives on Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale,' which was developed during the research process. The final section consisted of open-ended questions exploring whether participants had encountered racist or discriminatory discourse, when they last visited their home countries, whether they received scholarships, whether they experienced cultural shock in Türkiye, and finally, what and who the factors are that make Türkiye attractive for international students.

3.1.4. Processing of Research Data

This section presents the analyses conducted to determine the tendencies of international students studying in Istanbul to choose Türkiye. In this context, the reliability analyses of the 'International

³⁰ <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

³¹ Şener Büyükoztürk, "Factor Analysis: Basic Concepts And Using To Development Scale." *Kuram ve Uygulamada Eğitim Yönetimi Dergisi*, no. 32 (2002): 470-483, p. 480.

Students' Perspectives on Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale,' developed during the research process, are included. During this examination, independent samples t-tests were used to analyze two-variable parameters, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed for parameters with three or more variables.

3.1.5. Limitation of the Research

The limitation of the research is that the sample of the survey was limited to 384 international students who were actively studying in higher education institutions in Istanbul between 2018-2019. A sample group was created from among the students who would represent the research universe using the convenience sampling method, which is a sampling technique that is not based on probability calculation. While Istanbul is a significant hub for international students, the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of international students in other Turkish cities (e.g., Ankara, Izmir, Antalya) might differ considerably due to variations in local culture, university environments, and socio-economic factors. Therefore, this limitation is specific to the Istanbul context and cannot be directly generalized to the international student population across Türkiye.

3.1.6. Literature Review

In his study, Köylü (2001) aimed to identify the thoughts and problems experienced by foreign national students studying at the Faculty of Theology at Ondokuz Mayıs University. The findings of the study indicated that a significant portion of the foreign national students experienced difficulties with language, bureaucracy, and financial issues, and also expressed homesickness.³²

In their study, Bayraktaroğlu and Mustafayeva (2010) conducted a survey to determine the reasons why foreign national students studying at Sakarya University chose Türkiye and to explore the development potential of their education in Türkiye. According to the research findings, foreign national students stated that the primary reason for their satisfaction was the sharing of common values such as culture and religion.³³

In their collaborative study, Kiroğlu et al. (2010) aimed to reveal the socio-cultural and economic problems of foreign national students studying in the education faculty of a university in Türkiye. The findings of the study concluded that these students did not experience exclusion or prejudice in Türkiye.³⁴

In their joint research, Paksoy and Özçalıcı (2012) aimed to determine the academic success of foreign national students studying at universities in the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) region. The study investigated whether the presence of close friends and acquaintances studying in Türkiye influenced the students' academic achievement levels. The findings of the research indicated that having acquaintances and friends in Türkiye was an effective factor in the high academic achievement of these students.³⁵

The aim of the research conducted by Aliyev and Öğülmüş (2016) on foreign national students was to investigate the acculturation levels of individuals from different cultures in educational environments. The findings of the study revealed that as foreign national students age, they are able to both preserve their own cultures and integrate into the newly entered cultural environment.³⁶

³² Mustafa Köylü, "OMÜ. İlahiyat Fakültesine Devam Eden Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Fakülte Hakkındaki Düşünce, Sorun ve Beklentileri", *Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, vol. 12, no. 12-13 (2001): 131-153.

³³ Birol Gülnar & Şükrü Balcı, "Television Viewing Motives And Acculturation: A Survey On Foreign University Students", *Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 28 (2010): 447-483.

³⁴ Kasım Kiroğlu et al., "Socio-Cultural and Economical Problems of Undergraduate International Students in Turkey", vol. 6, no. 2 (2010): 26-39.

³⁵ Mustafa Paksoy et al., "Social Problems of Foreign Higher Education Students in Turkey: A Case Study in the SAP Region Universities", *Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2012): 85-94.

³⁶ Ramın Aliyev & Selahiddin Öğülmüş, "An Investigation of International Students' Acculturation Levels", *Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2016): 89-123.

In his study, Cevher (2016) aimed to identify the difficulties and challenges experienced by international students. The findings of the study concluded that the comfort of foreign national students with diverse cultural backgrounds depends on providing international students with the same opportunities offered to Turkish students.³⁷

Özkan and Güvendir (2015), on the other hand, addressed the academic, social, and living factors of international students studying at Trakya and Kırklareli Universities. The study concluded that while students generally expressed satisfaction with their university life, instructors, and friends, they did not receive the necessary assistance for transportation and accommodation.³⁸

Musaoğlu (2016) stated that the aim of their study was to describe how international students who come to Türkiye to study at university experience the process of living in another country and integrating into university life there. The research findings indicated that students most often sought solutions to their problems and regained motivation by spending time with friends from their home countries.³⁹

3.1.7. Findings of the Study

This part of the research includes analyses conducted to determine the tendency of foreign students studying in Istanbul to choose Türkiye. In this context, the reliability analyses of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul, developed during the research process, are included. In addition, the data obtained from this scale were examined for differentiation by considering the parameters of gender, marital status, level of education and class level. During this examination, 2-variable parameters were analyzed using the independent groups t-test, and 3-variable parameters and one-way analysis of variance (anova). In addition, the data regarding the demographic information of the sample group and their thoughts on Türkiye and NGOs were analyzed using frequency and percentage analyses. Each finding obtained as a result of the analyses was converted into tables and explained.

3.1.7.1 Analysis of Demographic Information of the Sample Group

Demographic information of the groups participating in the study was analyzed using frequency and percentage analysis, and the findings of the analysis are presented in Table 14.

In line with the findings in Table 4, the sample group was examined in terms of gender characteristics. Accordingly, 326 people constituting 84.9% of the participants were male and 58 people constituting 15.1% were female. When the marital status of the participants was examined, 360 people constituting 93.8% were single and 24 people constituting 6.3% were married.

When the education levels of the research sample were examined, 2 people constituting 0.5% had an associate degree, 228 people constituting 59.4% had an undergraduate degree, 96 people constituting 25% had a master's degree, and 58 people constituting 15.1% had a doctorate degree.

When the research sample is examined in terms of the countries of origin of international students, Yemen ranks first with 48 students constituting 12.5%, followed by Afghanistan and Sudan with 28 students constituting 7.3% each. The number of Syrian students constituting 4.7% is 18. The diversity of countries of origin of the international students participating in the research sample provides a multidimensional perspective to the research. In addition, when the grade levels of the participants are examined, 26 students constituting 6.8% are preparatory, 109 students constituting 28.4% are first-year, 146 students constituting 38% are second-year, 67 students constituting 14.4% are third-year, 32 students constituting 8.3% are fourth-year, 2 students constituting 0.5% are fifth-year, and 2 students constituting 0.5% are sixth-year students. In addition, when the places where the participants stay are examined, 14 people, constituting 3.6%, stay in state dormitories, 251 people, constituting 65.4%, stay

³⁷ Ezgi Cevher, "International Student Mobility And Satisfaction In Higher Education", *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 22 (2016): 337-349.

³⁸ Gökhan Özkan & Meltem Acar Güvendir, "Living Conditions of International Students: A Sample of Kırklareli and Trakya Universities", *Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2015): 174-190.

³⁹ Büşra Nur Musaoğlu, "The Integration Period Of International Students In Turkey", *Türk Dünyası Eğitim Araştırmaları Dergisi*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2016): 12-24.

in private dormitories, 81 people, constituting 21.1%, stay in student houses, and 38 people, constituting 9.9%, stay in other places.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage Analyses of Demographic Information of Participants

		f	%
Gender	Male	326	84,9
	Female	58	15,1
Marital Status	Single	360	93,8
	Maried	24	6,3
Education Level	Associate's Degree	2	,5
	Bachelor's Degree	228	59,4
	Master's Degree	96	25,0
	Doctorate	58	15,1
Class Level	Preparatory	26	6,8
	1st grade	109	28,4
	2nd grade	146	38,0
	3rd grade	67	14,4
	4th grade	32	8,3
	5th grade	2	,5
Place of Stay	6th grade	2	,5
	State Dormitory	14	3,6
	Private Dormitory	251	65,4
	Student House	81	21,1
	Other	38	9,9

3.1.7.2. Findings Regarding the Sample Group's Thoughts on Türkiye and NGOs

Within the scope of the research purpose, the data collected for the sample group's thoughts on the reasons for choosing Türkiye were analyzed with frequency and percentage analysis and the findings are presented in Table 5. According to Table 5, 74 people, constituting 19.3% of the participants, preferred Türkiye because of the quality of education, 45 people, constituting 11.7%, because of the level of international recognition, 15 people, constituting 3.9%, because of the language spoken, 83 people, constituting 21.6%, because of religious proximity, 38 people, constituting 9.9%, because of the low cost of living, 21 people, constituting 5.5%, because of geographical proximity, 20 people, constituting 5.2%, because of cultural proximity, 27 people, constituting 7%, because of the presence of relatives or friends, 7 people, constituting 1.8%, because of the scholarship opportunities provided by the countries within the framework of bilateral agreements, 33 people, constituting 8.6%, because Türkiye is a country that values people, and 21 people, constituting 5.5%, because of other reasons.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of Participants' Reasons for Choosing Türkiye

	f	%
Religious proximity	83	21,6
Quality of education	74	19,3
International recognition	45	11,7
Low cost of living	38	9,9
Türkiye being a country that values people	33	8,6
Having relatives or friends	27	7,0
Geographical proximity	21	5,5

Other	21	5,5
Cultural proximity	20	5,2
Language	15	3,9
Scholarship opportunities provided by countries within the framework of bilateral agreements	7	1,8

Within the scope of the research purpose, the findings of the sample group regarding the areas in which they received the most assistance from NGOs were investigated. In this context, according to Table 6, 68 people constituting 17.7% of the participants received assistance from NGOs in the field of guidance and counseling services, 66 people constituting 17.2% in the field of accommodation, 87 people constituting 22.7% in the field of scholarships, 86 people constituting 22.4% in the field of social activities, 61 people constituting 15.9% in the field of education, and 16 people constituting 4.2% in other areas.

Table 6: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of the Areas Where Participants Receive Assistance from NGOs

	f	%
Scholarship	87	22,7
Social activity	86	22,4
Guidance and Counseling Services	68	17,7
Housing	66	17,2
Education	61	15,9
Other	16	4,2

Within the scope of the research purpose, the data collected for the sample group's thoughts on the countries they want to go to after graduation, according to Table 7, 144 people, which constitute 37.5% of the participants, want to stay in Türkiye after graduation.

Table 7: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of Countries Participants Want to Go to After Graduation

	f	%
I want to stay in Türkiye	144	37,5
I want to go to a European country	93	24,2
I want to go to America	69	18,0
Other	39	10,2
I want to go to an Asian country	15	3,9
I want to go to an African country	15	3,9
I want to go to another country that is neighboring my country	9	2,3

Within the scope of the research purpose, the difficulties encountered by the sample group in Türkiye were investigated. In this context, according to Table 8, it was concluded that 46 people, constituting 12% of the participants, encountered problems arising from cultural differences in Türkiye, 90 people, constituting 23.4%, encountered language-related problems, 59 people, constituting 15.4%, encountered problems arising from accommodation, 71 people, constituting 18.5%, encountered health problems, and 118 people, constituting 30.7%, encountered financial problems.

Table 8: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of the Problems Faced by Participants in Türkiye

	f	%
Financial problems	118	30,7
Language-related problems	90	23,4
Health insurance	71	18,5
Problems arising from accommodation	59	15,4

3.1.7.3. Findings Regarding the Reliability Analysis of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul

Within the scope of the research, the International Students' Perspectives on Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale was developed to determine the participants' perspectives on universities in Istanbul and Türkiye. This scale is a 5-point Likert-type scale consisting of 12 items. Participants indicate their level of agreement by rating each item from 1 to 5 and selecting one of the options “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Undecided”, “Agree” and “Strongly Agree”. In addition, the highest score that can be obtained from the scale is 60, and the lowest score is 12. The score a person receives from the scale consists of the sum of the scores they receive from the items on the scale.

Before performing reliability analysis in scale studies, it is necessary to reach a sample group of 5-10 times the number of scale items. Within the scope of the research, the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul was applied to a sample group of 384 people. In this context, a sufficient number was reached for the scale and reliability analyses were performed.

According to the analyses conducted for the reliability calculations of the scale, Cronbach's α coefficient was determined as 0.918. This value is important in terms of showing that the reliability coefficient of the scale is high.

The arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of the statements in the scale are presented in Table 9. According to Table 9, “I find Turkish culture very good.” is the item with the highest arithmetic mean ($\bar{x}=3.92$). In addition, “I would like to study at another university abroad.” is the item with the lowest arithmetic mean ($\bar{x}=3.45$).

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics on the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul

	N	min	max	\bar{x}	ss
I find Turkish culture very good.	384	1	5	3.92	1.11
I had problems between Turkish culture and my own culture.	384	1	5	3.46	1.28
I would like to study at another university abroad.	384	1	5	3.45	1.26
Turkish movies and series have a big share in my choosing Türkiye for education.	384	1	5	3.69	1.20
I would like to live in Türkiye.	384	1	5	3.70	1.16
I received the necessary help for the problems I experienced in Türkiye.	384	1	5	3.68	1.09
The university administration's attitude towards us is very good.	384	1	5	3.72	1.07
I benefit from the university's social facilities.	384	1	5	3.60	1.14
I am happy to study in Türkiye.	384	1	5	3.80	1.09
I find the services offered to international students outside the university better.	384	1	5	3.67	1.27
NGOs in Türkiye help us.	384	1	5	3.76	1.10
I see the Republic of Türkiye as the continuation of the Ottoman Empire.	384	1	5	3.64	1.23

3.1.7.4. Findings Regarding the Differentiation of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul in Terms of Demographic Variables

Within the scope of the research purpose, the scores of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul were compared based on gender. In this context, the data

collected from the scale were analyzed with the independent groups t-test and the findings are presented in Table 9.

When the findings in Table 10 are examined, it is determined that the mean score of female participants ($\bar{x}=4.04$, $sd=.70$) is higher than the mean score of male participants ($\bar{x}=3.60$, $sd=.85$). According to the independent groups t test results, this difference is statistically significant [$t_{382}=-1.78$, $p=.000$].

Table 10: Independent Groups t Test Results for Perspective Scale Scores of Male and Female Students

Groups	n	\bar{x}	ss	t	sd	p
Male	326	3.60	.85	-3.64	.382	.000
Female	58	4.04	.70			

Within the scope of the research purpose, the scores of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul were compared based on marital status. In this context, the data collected from the scale were analyzed with the independent groups t-test and the findings are presented in Table 11.

When the findings in Table 11 are examined, it is determined that the average score of married participants ($\bar{x}=3.97$, $sd=.51$) is higher than the average score of single participants ($\bar{x}=3.65$, $sd=.86$). According to the independent groups t test results, this difference is not statistically significant [$t_{382}=-1.78$, $p=.08$].

Table 11: Independent Groups t Test Results for Single and Married Students' Perspective Scale Scores

Groups	n	\bar{x}	ss	t	sd	p
Single	360	3.65	.86	-1.78	.382	.08
Married	24	3.97	.51			

Within the scope of the research purpose, the scores of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul were compared based on their education levels. In this context, the data obtained from the scale were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (anova). The descriptive statistics resulting from the analyses are presented in Table 12 and the one-way analysis of variance (anova) results are presented in Table 13.

When the findings in Table 12 are examined, it is determined that students received different scores from the International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale according to their level of education. In order to determine the significance level of the difference in mean scores between the groups, the one-way variance analysis (anova) results in Table 13 were examined.

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perspective Scale According to Their Education Levels

	n	\bar{x}	ss
Associate's Degree	2	1.25	.00
Bachelor's Degree	228	3.74	.79
Master's Degree	96	3.56	.83
Doctorate	58	3.68	.92

When the findings in Table 13 are examined, a statistically significant difference was found in the scores of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul according to the students' level of education. According to the Tukey test results, the direction of this difference is against the associate degree students who have lower averages than the others. The scores of

undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students were found to be statistically significantly higher than the scores of associate degree students [$F(3,380)=6.96, p=.000$].

Table 12: Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance (Anova) of the Perspective Scale According to the Education Levels of the Students

	Average of Squares	df	Average of Squares	F	p
Intergroup	14.09	3	4.70		
Intragroup	256.43	380	.68	6.96	.000
Total	270.52	383			

Within the scope of the research purpose, the scores of the Scale of International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul were compared based on their class levels. In this context, the data obtained from the scale were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (anova). The descriptive statistics resulting from the analyses are presented in Table 14 and the one-way analysis of variance (anova) results are presented in Table 15.

When the findings in Table 14 are examined, it is determined that students received different scores from the International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale according to their grade levels. In order to determine the significance level of the difference in mean scores between the groups, the one-way variance analysis (anova) results in Table 15 were examined.

Table 13: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perspective Scale According to Their Grade Levels

	n	\bar{x}	ss
Preparatory	26	2.72	1.11
1st grade	109	3.76	.62
2nd grade	146	3.80	.76
3rd grade	67	3.53	1.04
4th grade	32	3.89	.64
5th grade	2	3.08	.00
6th grade	2	4.00	.00

When the findings in Table 15 are examined, a statistically significant difference was found in the scores of the International Students' Views of Türkiye and Universities in Istanbul Scale according to the students' grade levels. According to the Tukey test results, the direction of this difference is against the preparatory students who have lower averages than the others. The scores of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students were found to be statistically significantly higher than the scores of the preparatory students [$F(6,377)=7.84, p=.000$].

Table 14: Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance (Anova) on the Perspective Scale of Students According to Their Grade Levels

	Average of Squares	df	Average of Squares	F	p
Intergroup	30.01	6	5.00		
Intragroup	240.51	377	.64	7.84	.000
Total	270.52	383			

In the final sections of the survey, students were asked optional open-ended questions. Some of the students who responded to the question “Have you encountered any racist or discriminatory discourse?” responded as follows:

“I have not encountered it personally, but I have witnessed some of my Arab friends sometimes encounter discriminatory discourse.”,

“I used to encounter it a few years ago, but not anymore, we are all brothers.”,

“They make jokes, it is hurtful.”,

“They say things like Arabs stab in the back, they are traitors.”,

“They call us Arabs and blacks because we are black.”,

The answers given to the question “Did you experience a cultural shock in Türkiye?” are as follows;

“Yes, when I first arrived, I experienced a shock due to cultural differences.”,

“For example, I cannot adapt to some things and I could not understand why either.”,

“Cultures are different, but our past and history are the same.”,

“Horse meat makes me sick to my eyes.”,

“Yes, but we are Muslims, we will get used to it.”

The answers of some students to the question “Who/what makes Türkiye attractive to you?” are as many as the numbers in parentheses, and the answers given are as follows;

The answers given were; the friendliness of the Turkish people (27), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (22), Religious proximity (20), Istanbul city (15), Culture (15), Quality of education (10), Being a democratic and free country (11), Ethnic proximity (9), Geographical proximity (8) and NGOs (2). When we look at the other answers given, we see that “Scholars”, “Teachers and Scholars”, “My Family”, “My Father”, “Our ancestors are connected to this place, in other words, our past is the same”, “Nature”, “Mosque and architecture”, “Lifestyle”, “Ambience”, “Ottoman Legacies”, “Living Standards”, “Historical structures and having a sea like in Azerbaijan”, “The ties of our ancestors as the Ottoman and Indian states”, “Islam is the hope of the ummah, the shelter of Palestine”, “The opportunities it offers us”, “There is no war, there is peace”, “There is no pressure and coercion”, “There is no war”, “History and architecture”, “We have common points, Turkistan”, “My home”, “Movies and series”, “It is in a better condition than African countries”, “Amir from Çorum”, “It is a cheap country”, “A different country”, “Historical “places” were the answers.

Conclusion

The findings obtained in the study show that the majority of international students want to stay in Türkiye after graduation and live in Türkiye after their education. According to the findings, the main factor that makes Türkiye attractive to international students is the friendly and warm-hearted nature of the Turkish people. Right after that, the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, comes as a value that creates meaning for students and makes Türkiye attractive to international students. In addition, religious closeness and the city of Istanbul are other important answers that make Türkiye attractive to international students. Through higher education institutions, countries convey their own cultural, social, educational and political values abroad. These convey not only their global visibility and influence, but also their goal of winning the hearts and minds of people around the world. Based on personal experiences, the sympathetic feelings of international students towards Türkiye are of vital importance in shaping pro-Türkiye attitudes and behaviors. Seeing international students as “voluntary ambassadors” will depend on the high degree of interaction between international students and host countries.

Türkiye should analyze well that accepting international students for education actually means that the future leaders of the world will have the chance to live the spirit of Türkiye. International students are automatically seen as soft power because they have significant effects in terms of foreign policy and diplomatic relations for the sending or hosting country. International students are a source of private soft power due to their contribution to the international prestige of the countries. Türkiye should develop its existing soft power resources and transform them into tools of influence and use these tools of influence to realize its interests and goals in the world.

ÖZEK, M. (2025), Evaluating International Students as a Source of Private Soft Power: An Examination in the Turkish Context, *AUSBD*, 2025,8/2: 93-110 .

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