

International Students' Satisfaction Level Executive Overview

2nd Phase of the Study Qualitative Study

**By
Associate Prof. Ayse Collins
Faculty of Applied Sciences
Bilkent University**

This study was conducted to investigate the views of international students at Bilkent University focusing on the different stages of their study abroad experience from pre-arrival through to graduation. Both Quantitative (on-line survey) and Qualitative (focus group discussions) research methods were used to gain a broader and richer perspective of the student's opinions of their overall experience at Bilkent University.

1st Phase: Quantitative Study (Executive overview was presented in 2019 KIDR)

There were 923 international students, of which 864 were fulltime students and 59 were exchange students. Of the 923 international students at Bilkent University during the Spring 2018/19 semester, some 21.3% (n=197) responded to the on-line survey, representing 43 nationalities. 19.3% (n=167) of the full time students and 56% (n=30/59) of the exchange students responded to the survey. 21 students participated in the "focus group interviews".

The survey was made up of 5 sections: 1) demography: asking the international students' gender, country of origin, level of study, major, scholarship or not, level of perceived English proficiency, 2) a section on how they heard about the university and the main priority which determined their choice (subject, country, university) 3) a section asking the importance level of the items (n=18) which influenced their choice of this specific university through a Likert Scale (1=not important at all, 5=extremely important), 4) a section with 23 items asking them to evaluate the satisfaction level of their learning experience, living experience, academic performance, social interaction and adjustment to the university using a Likert Scale (1=not satisfied at all, 5=extremely satisfied), 5) a section with 11 items asking them if they would recommend the university, if the overall program was good value for money, etc. through a Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

The overall satisfaction level of the international students experience at Bilkent University was very high. However, the results also highlighted a number of areas that the university should consider to further enhance the students overall experience. Not only would the implementation of these recommendations make the students' stay at Bilkent University more productive, it could also increase Bilkent's recognition and reputation internationally and result in an increase in the number of students seeking to study at the university.

2st Phase: Qualitative Study (Executive Overview for 2020 KIDR)

A qualitative approach was employed for this research and focus groups were selected as an appropriate method for developing an understanding of international students' satisfaction on the quality of the university and the factors which influence their satisfaction. Focus group interview was a valuable data collection method for this study, providing a rich and detailed set of data about the satisfaction of international students. Two types of qualitative data were collected from these focus groups, interviewer field notes and transcripts of group interviews.

An interview schedule form was prepared by the researchers including 6 open-ended questions to provide more in-depth responses:

1. The experience they were most satisfied with and the reason.
2. The experience they were most dissatisfied with and the reason.
3. Their worries about studying in a different country.
4. How the marketing/feedback compared with their experiences after arriving.
5. Their suggestions about pre-marketing improvements that could be made to assist international students.
6. Their suggestions for improving their studies/life in Turkey right now.

The university enrollment population was approximately 13.000 students, of which 923 were international students. In selecting participants for the study, maximum variation sampling method was used to allow for maximum variation in international students' countries (Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Iran, Finland and South Korea), language, religion, and culture. 27 international students volunteered to be interviewed out of the sample. The time and location of the focus groups were decided considering convenience for the participants. The focus group interviews were held in English and conducted within one hour. All the focus group discussions were recorded and the interviewer also took notes.

The process of data analysis began immediately after all the focus group sessions had ended. Deductive analysis was used for data analysis. In this analysis approach, the data obtained is summarized and interpreted according to the previously determined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). First of all, a framework for data analysis was created by using focus group interview questions. In this framework, it was decided to organize and present the data under the themes of '*The experiences of international students were most satisfying*', '*The experiences of international students were most unsatisfying*', '*worries about studying in a different country*', '*How the marketing/feedback compared with international students' experiences after arriving*' and '*International students' suggestions about pre-marketing improvements that could be made to assist international students*' and '*International students' suggestions for improving their studies/life in Turkey right now*'. The data obtained from the focus group interviews was read and arranged according to this framework. In order to strengthen the reliability of the qualitative analysis results, the data was coded by the researchers separately and then compared.

Results (Detailed results and quotations can be reached from the full paper)

Focus group interviews revealed a variety of different opinions from the international students, in that while some items were evaluated “satisfactory” by some students the same items were seen as “dissatisfactory” by others. The following are some examples mentioned by the respondents.

Satisfaction

The international students mentioned these as being satisfactory:

- a) teachers/teaching,
- b) atmosphere,
- c) admission process,
- d) facilities,
- e) language,
- f) orientation,
- g) peer help and
- h) free transport

Dis-satisfaction:

There was also a wide range of factors that the international students were dissatisfied with including

- a) faculty (teachers/teaching, guidance),
- b) language barrier (some courses/clubs are only in Turkish),
- c) facilities (lack of lifts in the dorms, lack of cafes near the dorms, insufficiency of in-campus transportation),
- d) lack of available work/internships,
- e) university policies regarding departments (some departments are given priority),
- f) payments (Turkish students can pay in installments but international students cannot),
- g) tests/exams schedules.

Worries

When asked about their **worries** while choosing the country and university, the students also revealed a wide range of factors which worried them, including

- a) language barrier,
- b) potential financial problems,
- c) cultural differences,
- d) differences in university schedules,
- e) grades,
- f) being able to graduate
- g) teachers/teaching.

Marketing

When asked how the marketing/feedback compared with their experiences after arriving, the students had a variety of views ranging from the need for more promotion, especially through

social media and/or the engagement of agencies, to the need to mention potential problems that students may be faced with and/or provide more information. The responses of the students reflected contradictory views. However, most of the students felt that the marketing and reality matched almost perfectly or that reality exceeded their expectations based on marketing,

Areas suggested for further attention

The suggestions are grouped into: 1) administration and teaching 2) social activities of the university, 3) facilities available on campus. The following are some of those suggestions:

1. Most of the suggestions were related to “**administration and teaching**”
 - a) using ice-breakers in class in order to have international students’ involvement more,
 - b) providing more exercise notes,
 - c) eliminating useless courses,
 - d) not permitting the use of Turkish in courses or
 - e) providing separate courses for international students including Turkish language courses,
 - f) the need to care about the students and provide more useful information,
 - g) providing department specific marketing.
2. Suggestions for “**social activities**”
 - a) the need for more trips/tours/activities to be arranged and announced effectively so that all students including international students learn about them,
 - b) buddy groups which may contribute to the socialization and assistance of international students,
 - c) moving the activity times of the clubs to earlier hours so that students who live in the city can participate.
3. Suggestions for **Campus facilities**
 - a) establishment of co-ed dorms
 - b) improvement of services in the university cafeteria, such as widening the periods in which the meals are available and allowing students to get refills.

Conclusions

The results indicate that generally the international students are satisfied with the service quality provided by the university. It can be concluded that the university has successfully implemented its strategic improvement of service quality. However, it is important to build a positive market perception of Turkish universities. It will influence customers’ intention and brand awareness of the quality of Turkish universities to attract international students. On the other hand, students express their dissatisfaction regarding faculty, language, facilities, lack of available work. All these results show that the satisfaction of international students is a complex phenomenon consisting of several factors. Differences in satisfaction levels of international students are likely determined by a range of factors, including faculty, staff, cultural barriers, linguistic problems and financial struggles. Understanding these differences or factors at one’s specific institution is vital for international students. Of course, institutions cannot address all the challenges that international students face, but they can take steps to

ease the impact of key challenges such as cost (WES, 2016). As mentioned by the participants of this study, the Turkish government already provides scholarships for international students; however, institutions may also develop funding opportunities for qualified students through scholarships. Furthermore, universities may provide part-time jobs for international students.

According to the results of the study, it may be recommended that universities provide opportunities for international students to attend some extra-curricular activities (sports, arts, interest groups, volunteer work, etc.). Extra-curricular activities based on language practice may lead to developing the communication skills of international students in the Turkish Language. These activities may enable students to develop better communication skills and this in turn may improve their integration with local students and make the whole transition process much easier. In order to recruit through positive word-of-mouth endorsements, universities need to deliver a high-quality social experience together with a high quality educational experience.

The Ministry of Trade in Turkey provides half of all the transportation, accommodation and advertising expenses universities incur in their marketing efforts abroad (Özoglu, Gür and Coskun, 2015). All these efforts allow higher education institutions to attend international education fairs and exhibitions outside Turkey and engage in marketing activities. Of course, these types of activities assist Turkey's higher education institutions in attracting more international students. Furthermore, almost every higher education institution in Turkey often uses webpages and multiple social media platforms in the attempt to further market their brand, to increase applications and engagement with their applicants. As producers and deliverers of services, universities should provide accurate information about their service quality for international students, furthermore, they should improve the educational processes such as cultivating service quality and understand the patterns that underlie the students' attitudes and meanings to receive their services. This will allow universities to anticipate their students' needs and respond to them efficiently (Wajtrakul, 2014).

It is critical to implement strategies to maximize visibility and increase engagement for universities on social media. By choosing the right content topics for posts, universities can achieve higher visibility and engagement on social media. According to literature there are content categories in social media that, when used, increase engagement of the students: athletics, news related, school spirit, admissions, and promotions (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Of course, it is challenging for the social media managers of universities to create content that satisfies all the needs of an international student. Choosing the right content topics (useful and accurate information) for posts, along with strong visual media to accompany the posts in order to provide them with content that they need when choosing a university seems to be very important for international students. Furthermore, their satisfaction with information about the accuracy of academic and social life is very important for a sustainable increase in international students.

For future research, it is important to repeat the study with a more diverse and larger population which represents international students from other countries or with other universities in Turkey, attended by international students. Future research may also be conducted to explore the satisfaction of international students using quantitative data collection methods. This data would provide useful information for the administrators of universities in Turkey who are interested in hosting international students and policy makers who are influential in the administration of scholarships, or the overall international student policies of Turkey.

References

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