International student recruitment in policy and practice: A research from Turkey

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Abstract

Internationalization has become a major theme in higher education and international education sector has remarkably widened in recent years. The best known form of internationalisation is the increasing mobility of students studying abroad. There has been a significant increase in the worlds total number of foreign students since the early stages. 4.5 million of foreign students were recorded in 2012 comparing to 0.8 million in 1975. Additionally, it was predicted that by the end of 2020, the total foreign student population would raise to 7 million. Indeed, travelling students is very old phenomenon and certain regions of the world have a long experience with it such as North America and Europe. Yet, today apart from these traditional receiving regions, universities in many other countries have made various efforts to recruit international students. These countries develop new policies and regulations to become attractive centers for international students. This study aims at presenting a projection on such efforts through a research in Turkey, which is also one of these countries attempting to increase international recruitment. The focus of the study is on international student office managers, who are both policy makers and practitioners and thus have distinctive opinions on international recruitment. In this context, findings of a survey held with these managers in 2014 are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: International Students, Internationalization in Higher Education, Internationalization Policy, Student Mobility, Turkish Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Universities have always been charactarised by strong international elements due to their idea of universality. Yet, international dimension of higher education has been transforming into a much more complex and strategic phenomenon in recent years due to the sweeping transformations of the 21st century. Accordingly, in many countries mission of higher education has been redefined and shifted from “social, cultural, national” domain to “economic and international” domain. Internationalization has been put on the top of the agenda of both governments and universities. The best known form of internationalisation is the mobility of students studying abroad and travelling students are of course a very old phenomenon and certain regions of the world have a long experience with it. Particularly, European countries have received many students from their former colonies. Similarly, large numbers of Latin American students seek to obtain postgraduate degrees in Northern American universities. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries developed international study schemes for educating students from ideologically associated nations. In the same years, educational exchange between the US and Western Europe was also developed for developing the Atlantic community (Van Damme 2001). Thus, international mobility was always supported for both political and academic considerations. Yet, international student mobility has been witnessing sweeping changes in terms of both quantity and nature in recent times. Internationalization has become the core issue and international education has dramatically expanded in volume, scope and complexity.

There has been a significant increase in the world’s total number of foreign students since the early stages. 4.5 million of foreign students were recorded in 2012 comparing to 0.8 million in 1975. International or cross-border student mobility is likely to encompass 7.2 million students annually by 2025 (OECD 2014). According to OECD statistics, in the year 2012, 16.4% of international students studied in the USA, 6.4% in Germany, 6% in...
France and 5.5% in Australia. International education has also created an important financial resource for receiving countries. The contribution of international students to the UK economy was recorded as 10 billion dollars in the year 2015. It is predicted that the global international student sector produces a 400 billion dollars revenue annually. Again, in the USA the annual revenue from international students was estimated as 21 billion USD which exceeded the annual budget of the NASA (Turkish Ministry of Development 2015).

Traditionally universities in the North America and Europe have shared the biggest proportion of international students, yet in recent years countries like Singapore, China, Malaysia, Japan, Jordan and Korea have also expanded the number of international students. Knowing that people with higher levels of education are more likely to migrate and contribute to the economy of receiving country, governments around the world are introducing policies to attract “the most talented migrants”. Internationalization, once seen simply as a marginal issue and a matter of cultural exchange, is now a necessary mechanism to increase the number of international students, especially graduate research students (Stensaker et al. 2008). Universities aim at recruiting more international students both as a means of generating income and of adding diversity to the student body.

Beside traditional receiving countries, universities in other countries have made various efforts to recruit more international students both as a means of generating income and as a means of adding diversity to the student body (Altbach and Knight 2007). Turkey is one of these countries attempting to increase international recruitment and to improve conditions of international students. As for the academic year 2014-2015, international students are more than 70,000 in Turkey, an increased but insufficient number when potential of the country is taken into account. Turkmenistan has the largest number of students in Turkey, followed by Azerbaijan and Iran, according to the data from Turkey’s Council of Higher Education. Africa’s share has also increased in the last years due to Turkey’s policy toward the continent, which involves outreach and financial aid. 80 percent of international students in Turkey attend state universities, while 20 percent of them enrolled in foundation (private) universities in the 2013-2014 academic year (Turkish Ministry of Development 2015).

Despite the expansion of Turkish higher education and the country’s steady path toward its enrolment targets, there are some challenges that need to be addressed. Studying abroad involves various processes from application to graduation, even after graduation. Application procedures, visa requirements, accommodation, language, study programs, staff and students in host institution, campus environment and city are among the factors that all shape study abroad experience. Thus, there is a growing need for the development of innovative and well-conceptualized programs for promotion, management, and guidance of international students. In this regard, there are many studies carried out with the international students to obtain feedback on their study abroad experiences in Turkey (Kondakci 2011; Mahmut 2012; Ozoglu, Gur, and Coskun 2012; Snoubar and Celik 2013; Turkish Ministry of Development 2015; UAK 2016; YOK 2014; Ozyurek and Uluturk 2016). Yet, there is a second group of people who also experience international student recruitment in practice, that is to say, the staff working in international student offices. International office staff play a three-dimensional role regarding international student recruitment. They put the national policies into practice, they shape institutional strategies and they deal with international students in many aspects. Thus, evaluations and recommendations of international office staff are important and should be taken into consideration in policy processes. This study aims at providing a contribution for both researchers and policy makers through a survey held with international student office managers in Turkish universities.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data for this study were collected between December 2014 and February 2016 from the International Office Directors of Turkish universities. At the time that survey was held, the number of universities was 176 and to ensure the quality of the research, 100% sampling was taken in questionnaire and the link to the questionnaire was sent to international office directors of all Turkish universities. Survey questions were formed in the light of literature, international student reports and the issues discussed in related national/ international meetings that the researcher participated in. In addition, survey was previewed by Suleyman Demirel University international student office managers. Questionnaires were administered using the Survey Monkey web-based software package. An information e-mail was sent to all directors in Turkish universities which contained information about
researcher, the goal and content of the survey. After a two-week monitoring, a second reminder e-mail was sent to coordinators. At the end of two-month duration, 64 international office directors completed the survey. The limited participation of directors is one of the limitations of the study. Besides, survey was designed as a short one with limited number of questions for the sake of simplicity for respondents who have a heavy workload. This has limited the possibility of a deeper analysis and to decrease this limitation, open-ended questions were put at the end of the survey.

FINDINGS

The survey questions could be divided into three general categories; institutional features, international student strategy and difficulties of study abroad. Accordingly, findings are presented in this order in the following sections.

Institutional Features

Among the directors who participated in the survey, 58% work in state universities, while the other 42% work in foundation universities. 19 participant universities were established before the year 2000, and remaining 45 universities after that year. Thus majority of the universities explored in the study were new universities. Nearly 65% of the universities have less than 10,000 students. As regards to international student offices, approximately 80% of them were established after the year 2010. Among the directors who participated in the study, 24 directors had more than 3-year experience in the Office and remaining ones had less. Thus, an overview of institutional features revealed that international student offices were relatively newly established and directors were also new at their posts. Next few questions focused on the statute and conditions of the offices. Results were given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>A unit of International Office</th>
<th>A unit of Registrar’s Office</th>
<th>An independent International Student Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>51.43%</td>
<td>25.71%</td>
<td>22.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>63.16%</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.2. What should be the statute of your Office?</td>
<td>A unit of International Office</td>
<td>A unit of Registrar’s Office</td>
<td>An independent International Student Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>%33.33</td>
<td>%18.18</td>
<td>%51.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%40.00</td>
<td>%4.00</td>
<td>%56.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.3. Do you think that the number of staff in your Office is adequate?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>%16.67</td>
<td>%83.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%24.00</td>
<td>%76.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.4. Do you think that the infrastructure (building, computers, other materials etc.) are adequate?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>%60.00</td>
<td>%40.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%73.08</td>
<td>%26.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both in state and in foundation universities, international student offices were established as a unit working under the international office. Yet, more than half of the directors agree that international student offices should be organized as autonomous offices. Approximately 70% of respondents recorded that the infrastructure of their offices were adequate. On the other hand, the numbers of the staff were regarded as insufficient by both state and foundation universities. Directors at state universities were more dissatisfied with the infrastructure and human resources in the Office.

**International Student Strategy**

Following questions were asked to explore international student strategy of participant universities. Findings are as following:

| Q.1. Do you think that your university allocates sufficient resources for promotion abroad? |
|---|---|---|
| Type of Institution | Yes | No |
| State | %13.51 | %86.49 |
| Foundation | %40.74 | %59.26 |

| Q.2. Are there any special international student recruitment policies in your university? |
|---|---|
| Type of Institution | Yes | No |
| State | %51.35 | %48.65 |
| Foundation | %59.26 | %40.74 |

| Q.3. Which level of study takes the first place in your international student strategy? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Type of Institution | Associate | Bachelor’s | Master’s | Doctorate |
| State | %13.51 | %78.38 | %40.54 | %13.51 |
| Foundation | %11.11 | %85.19 | %33.33 | %3.70 |

| Q.4. What are the main countries of origin of the international students in your university? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of Institution | Eastern Europe | Middle East | Turkic Rep- publics | EU coun- tries | Asia | The USA | Africa | Latin America |
| State | %54.29 | %68.57 | %85.71 | %31.43 | %22.86 | %0.00 | %37.14 | %0.00 |
| Foundation | %53.85 | %76.92 | %69.23 | %42.31 | %15.38 | %11.54 | %34.62 | %0.00 |

| Q.5. Which regions take the first ranks in your international student strategy? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of Institution | Eastern Europe | Middle East | Turkic Rep- publics | EU coun- tries | Asia | The USA | Africa | Latin America |
| State | %56.25 | %50.00 | %90.63 | %75.00 | %15.63 | %3.13 | %12.50 | %3.13 |
| Foundation | %58.33 | %70.83 | %66.67 | %62.50 | %16.67 | %8.33 | %16.67 | %0.00 |

As for the international student strategy, more than 50% of the respondents recorded that there was no particular strategy for international students in their universities. Similarly, majority of the respondents believed that their institutions did not allocate sufficient resources for promotion abroad. This ratio was approximately 60% for foundation universities, whereas it increased to a very high degree (86%) for state universities. Thus, it could be said that both state and foundation universities lack a strong international student strategy supported by financial resources for promotion abroad. When the target regions for international student recruitment was explored, Middle East and Turkic Republics were recorded as the main target for universities and majority of international students came from those countries. As for the level of study, universities focused on bachelor’s and master’s
degree students as their primary target. The next section of the survey focused on the difficulties regarding international student recruitment processes for both international offices and international students. Main findings have been analyzed in the following section.

Difficulties Confronted During Study Abroad Period

In this section, first three questions were asked for exploring difficulties confronted by international student offices.

Table 3: Difficulties confronted by the international student office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems regarding application and admission</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems regarding application and admission</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%37.14</td>
<td>%48.57</td>
<td>%5.71</td>
<td>%8.57</td>
<td>%56.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%48.15</td>
<td>%33.33</td>
<td>%14.81</td>
<td>%3.70</td>
<td>%43.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems regarding registration</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%42.86</td>
<td>%45.71</td>
<td>%5.71</td>
<td>%5.71</td>
<td>%56.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%33.33</td>
<td>%37.04</td>
<td>%22.22</td>
<td>%7.41</td>
<td>%43.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems regarding academic issues</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%22.86</td>
<td>%25.71</td>
<td>%45.71</td>
<td>%5.71</td>
<td>%56.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%22.22</td>
<td>%37.04</td>
<td>%37.04</td>
<td>%3.70</td>
<td>%43.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Difficulties confronted by the international students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems regarding application and registration</th>
<th>Type of the University</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems regarding application and registration</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%38.24</td>
<td>%50.00</td>
<td>%2.94</td>
<td>%8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial problems</td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%38.46</td>
<td>%34.62</td>
<td>%26.92</td>
<td>%0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial problems</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%8.57</td>
<td>%37.14</td>
<td>%48.57</td>
<td>%5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial problems</td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%12.00</td>
<td>%52.00</td>
<td>%24.00</td>
<td>%12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomodation</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>%0.00</td>
<td>%45.71</td>
<td>%51.43</td>
<td>%2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomodation</td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>%28.00</td>
<td>%32.00</td>
<td>%36.00</td>
<td>%4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, directors agreed that the difficulties related to admission and registration processes were at lower levels. Yet, issues regarding academic success of students were more problematic according to the directors. 45% of state university directors perceived academic issues as problematic. Thus, it could be inferred that international student offices are more convenient with the issues directly managed by them, yet they find difficult to deal with academic problems of international students which necessitate cooperation with other units of the university. Last questions were devoted to understand difficulties that international students face during their study period. Findings are given in Table 4.

In order to find out the most significant problems of international students, their answers on the level of difficulties were put in order by summing up the ratios for “high+very high” and the following results were found: The most challenging matter for international students is the language barrier. Approximately 63% of respondents rated language problem as high and very high. Second problematic area is financial problems which 55% of
respondents rated at high and very high degree. Another challenging issue arises from the accommodation problems. Accommodation was rated nearly as important as the financial problems and language barrier. International students have opportunity to stay in the dormitories, yet problems related to the capacity and conditions of state dormitories have been a concern for local students as well. On the other hand, in many Anatolian cities’ apartment rents are very high and difficult to afford for particularly students coming from low income countries.

Academic success was depicted as another important problem by approximately 44% of respondents. This is in conformity with the findings recorded in the previous question which revealed that international student offices had difficulty in dealing with academic matters of the students. Inclusion of students in town and campus life is another important issue regarding international students. Participants did not report discrimination and negative attitudes toward international students. Yet, adaptation to social life was regarded as a medium-level problematic issue by 63% of the respondents.

CONCLUSION

Main findings of the survey reveal that international student offices in Turkish universities are newly established units and suffer from lack of autonomy and insufficient human resources, at most. Besides, directors agreed that universities do not allocate sufficient resources for promotion abroad. Similarly, an important portion of universities has no international student strategy. Thus, it could be said that there is need for reviewing and re-organizing international student policy at both national and institutional level. International student offices should be organized as autonomous units and supported both by financial and human resources. It was also stated in open-ended questions that there is no clear definition regarding responsibilities of these offices which in turn results in overlapping duties with other units of the university. Thus, responsibilities and authorities of international student offices must be well-defined in order to develop a more institutionalized structure.

As for the problems of international students, the most important ones are language, finance, accommodation, academic success and inclusion in social life. Students who come from relatively low income countries perceive Turkey as an affordable alternative for studying abroad compared to traditional receiving countries, but they still suffer from lack of financial resources.

Financial problems mainly stem from insufficient financial resources, limited opportunities for scholarships and lack of part-time jobs. Accommodation is also another important problem, as rents are very high and dormitories are insufficient. Indeed financial matters and accommodation facilities are usually out of the reach of universities and necessitate more complex policies at governmental level. Yet, universities should develop cooperation with the NGOs and private sector to increase scholarships and job opportunities for international students in their region.

In this regard, scholarships from both state and private institutions should be increased for local and international students. Anatolian cities should become more attractive for international students. There should be cooperation mechanisms and planning among universities, local governments and NGOs to improve these cities as attraction centers for international students with their living standards and opportunities.

Findings reveal that international students have difficulties in integrating to academic life and major barrier for academic success is language. This is one of the most important reasons for academic failure and has to be taken seriously. Indeed, findings revealed that students assessed Turkish courses as inadequate. Thus, for contributing to academic success of incoming students, Turkish language training has to be improved and designed in line with the academic needs of international students.

Above mentioned findings reveal that although Turkish universities have recorded an important success in attracting more international students, there are still some challenges that need to be carefully addressed. There is a growing need for the development of innovative and well-conceptualized programs for promotion, management, and guidance of international students and for creating a multicultural campus environment. For Turkey to better use its potential in the region, research on international students should be increased and regulations should be adjusted accordingly.
REFERENCES


