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ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME IN TURKEY THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS VISITING TURKISH HEI'S

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the implementation of the ERASMUS programme in Turkey from the perspective of the foreign exchange students. The author conducted a survey which included 112 respondents from 8 Turkish universities. In the survey, the respondents assessed the level of language competence, the existence or the lack of sufficient international atmosphere, the efficacy of the administration, and the possibility of experiencing some type of cultural bias at the Turkish universities. The largest problem faced by the respondents was the lack of preparedness on the behalf of the Turkish teaching staff and the administration to communicate in English language. A lack of the international atmosphere within the Turkish higher education institutions as well as administration problems were among the major problems faced by ERASMUS students in Turkey.

Keywords: ERASMUS, international student mobility, Turkish higher education

Introduction

It has been more than a decade since Turkey became an equal partner in the ERASMUS programme. It was exactly in 2004 when the country joined the EU Community programme and when its higher education institutions largely began to participate in ERASMUS exchanges. The following years witnessed an even broader participation of the Turkish massive higher education sector in international student mobility. After the Lifelong Learning Programme was initiated in 2007, 129 Turkish HEI's have been granted the Erasmus University Charter, according to which they were all enabled to take part in the ERASMUS activities. During the period of six academic years between 2004 and 2010, the Turkish HEI's have sent abroad about 30,000 outgoing students and 6,500 members of the teaching staff, and have managed to attract approximately 9,000 incoming students and 4,300 foreign teaching staff members (The Centre for EU Education and Youth Programme, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, in the academic year of 2012/2013 alone, Turkish HEI's were able to send 14,412 outgoing students and receive 6,145 incoming ones through the ERASMUS programme (European Commission, 2014). These massive numbers of incoming and outgoing students, as well as teaching staff members, show that Turkey has taken an active role in using the possibilities that the ERASMUS programme offers.

Regardless of the large quantity of ERASMUS mobile students and staff who have visited Turkey through ERASMUS, the country has faced many problems related to the programme. Corruption is one of the major problems. In 2014, the European Commission launched an investigation over the assertions about illegal activities concerning the EU Ministry's National Agency that resulted with Turkey

being under the threat of losing the funds for the ERASMUS+ programme (Today's Zaman, 2014). Due to the perception of Turkey as a closed and corrupted society that lacks transparency, it is hard to convince foreign students to choose it as a destination country for international student mobility (Oğuz, 2014, p. 119). Researchers have pointed out some of the frequent issues related to the implementation of the programme in this country. In general, the most frequent problems that ERASMUS students experienced during their study stay at a foreign university were problems related to accommodation, finances, and bureaucracy (Vossensteyn, 2010, p. 33). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that a common problem faced by ERASMUS exchange students was the lack of sufficient foreign language skills (Tekin & Gencer, 2013; Souto-Otero et al, 2013; Zhelyazkova, 2013).

In the context of Turkey, the deficit of foreign language competence among the teaching staff has had a negative impact on the incoming students. As pointed out in the report made by the European Stability Initiative (2014), incoming students who have enrolled in programmes that are taught in a foreign language have often faced the situation in which the Turkish professors, instead of teaching in English, have taught the classes in Turkish language, due to the realization that the Turkish students in their class were not able to follow the lectures in English language. Furthermore, the report states that incoming students were also advised that it is not necessary to follow the lectures and that they only need to submit their papers at the end of the semester (European Stability Initiative, 2014, p. 13). In another study that researched the problems faced by ERASMUS students who were studying in Turkey, 50% of the respondents answered that they have faced serious lack of English language knowledge even among the students (Keles, 2013, p. 1521).

In terms of bureaucratic issues, visa requirements might also play a significant role in attracting or deterring foreign ERASMUS students to the host universities. Turkey is not part of the European Union, and thus, most of the students from the European countries are required to apply for visa at a Turkish consulate in order to be able to realize their study stay in the country. More precisely, the incoming students are required to obtain a visa, costing 60 Euros, as well as to pay a fee for a student's residence permit costing about 65 Euros. To make this procedure easier, the Turkish government introduced new regulations that apply to visiting students from 2 of the participating countries in the ERASMUS+ programme, according to which they can enter the country without a short-stay visa, and later apply for a residence permit in Turkey. Regardless of the above stated, problems were faced by incoming students in relation to the application for a residence permit. For example, ERASMUS students who were studying at universities in Istanbul had to wait for several months after making the application for the residence permit, during which they were not allowed to leave the country (European Stability Initiative, 2014, p. 21).

The aim of this paper is to study the assessment of certain aspects of the implementation of the ERASMUS programme in the country from the perspective of the foreign ERASMUS students who are studying in Turkey. These aspects include the level of language competence, the existence or the lack of sufficient international atmosphere, the efficacy of the administration, and the possibility of experiencing some type of cultural bias. The research of the experiences of the

foreign mobile students in Turkey can be considered as an indicator for the major obstacles that the Turkish HEI's face in the process of the implementation of the programme.

Methodology

For the purpose of studying the implementation of the ERASMUS programme in Turkey through the experiences of foreign students visiting Turkish HEI's, the researcher implemented a qualitative research strategy. The author conducted a one-shot survey consisted of open-ended questions among a sample of foreign exchange students that are currently studying at different Turkish higher education institutions through the ERASMUS programme. For this purpose, the author selected a random sample of 112 respondents from 8 Turkish universities. The universities ranged from large higher education institutions such as Istanbul or Marmara universities, to small ones such as Afyon Kocatepe University. The only exclusion criterion was the condition according to which the respondents had to be studying in the country for at least two months. This criterion was set to assure that the respondents have acquired a minimum level of experience of how the ERASMUS programme is implemented in Turkey, and are able to form an informed opinion according to their own personal experiences. Excluding the more general ones, the questions in the survey were divided in four thematic categories. The first one addressed the issues related to language, such as experiences that involved insufficient levels of English language competence of the teaching staff and the university administration. The questions in this category also addressed the relation of this issue to the academic achievements of the incoming students. The second category of the questions involved experiences about the presence or the lack of international atmosphere at the host university in Turkey, including the issue of socialisation with the domestic students. The third category of questions was focused on the possible experiences of administrative problems such as acquiring the permit of residence, as well as suitable accommodation. The last category was addressing the possible experiences of cultural differences in the practices of teaching or administration staff at the Turkish host universities.

Results and discussion

The lack of sufficient level of English language competence of the teaching and the administration staff might represent a serious setback in the implementation of the ERASMUS programme in any national higher education system. The answers of the participants in the survey revealed serious problems considering this issue. More than half of the respondents, more precisely 68, responded that they have experienced serious problems related to insufficient English language competence of the teaching staff at the Turkish universities. The answers of the respondents indicated that while some members of the teaching staff had a moderate level of English language command, others were not able to communicate even at a basic level. As stated by one of the respondents from the Afyon Kocatepe University:

I have to admit that most of the teaching staff does not speak English well or does not speak English at all. It is totally unacceptable for exchange students who cannot speak Turkish themselves.

In effect, this problem reflected on the quality of the lectures and, in minor cases, on the achievements of the incoming students. As one of the respondents answered:

I could not choose a subject that I wanted from my department because of the English competence of teachers, so I had to choose subjects not so related to my field.

The same problem was noticed in some segments of the administration staff. 36 of the respondents stated that they have faced communication problems with the administration staff due to their lack of English language competence. As one of the respondents said:

For several times I had to ask my Turkish student friend to accompany me when I had some errands to attend to with the administration at my university, since the employees were not able to answer my questions in understandable English language.

On the other hand, the international relations office staff was generally positively assessed by the respondents in terms of their English language competence. Only 6 respondents have said that they have faced language barriers in this segment. These were mostly minor problems caused by misunderstandings between the staff and the foreign students.

In general, English language incompetence was noticed by the respondents in other areas of the university. As stated by a respondent:

On the whole, it is not easy to communicate in English outside the international office staff. English knowledge is not common in Turkey.

Creating a suitable international atmosphere at the universities which are part of the ERASMUS network represents another important asset for the successful implementation of the programme. The answers of the respondents in this section of the survey were substantially divided. 50 of the respondents answered that they consider that they have not experienced high levels of international atmosphere at their host university. On the other hand, out of the 62 respondents who answered positively on this question, 34 said that there was a high level of international atmosphere. One of the reasons for the polarised opinions of the respondents might be due to the size of their host university. After a closer analysis of the retrieved data, it was revealed that the positive assessments came from the ERASMUS students who were studying at larger universities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Marmara, where there is a large number of incoming students and already stable infrastructure for international student mobility. The negative assessment in this section came from the students visiting smaller universities. As one respondent answered:

In my opinion, the main reason why I find that there is a lack of international atmosphere at Afyon Kocatepe University is that the city and the university are small.

Organising events aimed at the socialisation between the foreign and the domestic students might also contribute to increasing the level of international atmosphere at the host university. 10 respondents answered that they have encountered a lack of such events at their host institution. Some of them were not at

all able to take part in such activities at their host universities. As stated by one respondent:

I think there should be organised events for exchange students and Turkish students to become acquainted with each other, in my university there were not any.

Another respondent stated that that “university students’ organisations for different free time activities were not open for Erasmus students”.

Most of the reported problems in this area were related to the language barriers on the hand of the domestic students. About 27 of these respondents said that the lack of socialisation with the Turkish students was due to their low level of knowledge of English language. As noted by one of the respondents:

A lot of students did not know proper English and were afraid to make a contact.

Administrative problems, such as difficulties in acquiring documents needed for the application process, can also be considered as occurrences that reflect negatively on the normal functioning of the ERASMUS programme in the Turkish higher education system. In this regard, a minority of 10 respondents answered that they have faced problems in acquiring a residence permit. The problem faced by these respondents was similar to the one mentioned in the introduction. Namely, they were forced to wait for more than two months after the application for the residence permit to be processed by the Turkish authorities, during which they were not allowed to leave the country. One respondent stated that it took three months for him to acquire the residence permit. More experienced participants in the programme said that the situation has worsened in the last couple of years. As stated by one such respondent:

In 2012, there were no such big problems as there are now when I must have quite more paperwork to do and money to spend in order to get a permit. Rules are changed, and it is now harder to become a student in Turkey.

Other problems that were reported by the respondents derived from the inertness of the administration of the Turkish universities in supplying information about the necessary documentation for the application processes. As stated by one respondent:

I had to wait for an entire week for an answer from one of the universities in Turkey where I wanted to apply for my ERASMUS exchange. This was very stressful since the deadline for the application was getting nearer. I was afraid that I will not be able to send my application in time.

Furthermore, receiving information and documents during the studies was also negatively assessed by 15 respondents. As stated by one of the participants:

Receiving necessary information and documents from the academic staff takes a long time, and the overall bureaucracy is very time consuming.

Problems with receiving a suitable accommodation during the studies were reported by 22 respondents, while the rest were generally satisfied with the accommodation they were presented with. The respondents who answered negatively, however, were able to find alternative accommodation in private apartments, since the grant money that they received from their national agencies

was sufficient for making such an arrangement. The most cited disadvantage of the provided accommodation was the over-crowdedness, the lack of sufficient numbers of available reading rooms, as well as the problems with transportation from the dormitory to the university. Nevertheless, several respondents stated that these issues were a consequence of the differences in living standards that exist between Turkey and the more developed European countries.

Finally, regarding cultural differences and bias toward the exchange students, no major problems were reported by the respondents. Minor problems such as differences in the starting dates of the semester, as well as the exam dates, were reported as an issue by the respondents. The general attitudes of both the teaching staff and the administration were positively assessed by the vast majority of the respondents. Only one female respondent answered that in some cases she found the attention of male staff towards herself inconvenient.

Conclusion and recommendations

As presented in the results section, the largest problem in the implementation of the ERASMUS programme at the Turkish HEI's is the lack of preparedness of the teaching staff and the administration to communicate and give lectures in English language. Both the teaching staff and the administration have displayed lack of sufficient levels of English language knowledge, which represents a serious obstacle in the implementation of the ERASMUS programme at Turkish HEI's. In this regard, it is recommended that the Turkish national agency should pay a special attention to the language level of the teaching staff and the administration, as well as provide English language courses in order for their language level to be improved. It can be concluded that the lack of international atmosphere at some of the Turkish universities is yet another problem that reflects negatively on the experiences of the incoming students. This is not, however, the case at larger Turkish universities which have been able to create a suitable atmosphere for international students. It is recommended that the international relations offices engage in organising a larger number of cultural events in which the incoming students will be able to socialise with both other foreign students and the domestic ones. As far as administrative issues are concerned, there should be further reforms in making the administrative process easier for the incoming students. Furthermore, the administration should be more agile in the communication with the potential nominees who are aiming to study at Turkish HEI's.

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