



Psychological distress among international students in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study examined predictors of psychological distress in a sample of 334 international students studying at different public universities in Turkey. The standard multiple regression analysis was used to clarify the contributions of individual characteristics, interaction with Turkish students, perceived discrimination, Turkish language proficiency, perceived cultural distance, integration to social life in Turkey, and life satisfaction to psychological distress of international students. The results revealed that life satisfaction, integration to social life in Turkey, Turkish language proficiency, and length of stay in the host country (Turkey) account for 32.8% of the variance in the international students' psychological distress levels. The study concludes that factors contributing to psychological distress of foreign students are related to some individual characteristics and personal factors. Hence, foreign students need to go through a preparation process/program in their home country. Then a guidance and orientation program needs to be provided in the host country.

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1. Introduction

Internationalization in higher education has increasingly been attracting the interest of the scholars. Various scholars have elaborated on the issue at system level (e.g., Deem, 2001; Enders, 2004; van der Wende, 2001), documented internationalization of higher education in different countries (e.g., Huang, 2006; Mizikaci, 2005), pointed out diverse rationales of internationalization (Knight, 1999), and stated the implications of the issue on managerial practices of individual higher education organizations (e.g., Kondakci & Van den Broeck, 2009; Poole, 2001; Stromquist, 2007). A particular concern in the internationalization literature is focused on the international student mobility. The literature on student mobility focuses on different dimensions of the phenomenon such as global movements of students (e.g., Chen & Barnett, 2000; OECD, 2009) and pull–push factors affecting students' country choice (e.g., Chen, 2006; Teichler, 2004; van der Wende, 1996). However, there are limited number of studies focusing on well-being of foreign students.

It is commonly argued that international students experience more adjustment problems than local students and have less resource to cope with these problems (e.g., Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Thimimi, 2004). Several authors argued that foreign students are disadvantaged (e.g., Devos, 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Ultsch & Rust, 2001) mainly because they have to learn different aspects of daily life. Therefore, it is expected that different factors may play role in emergence of psychological distress in a sojourn experience, such as the extent of life changes (Lin & Yi, 1997), life stressors (e.g., Nicassio, Solomon, Guest, & McCullough, 1986), cultural distance (Furukawa, 1997; Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007), and language problems (Zheng & Berry, 1991).

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To begin with, researchers maintained that host country language proficiency, because of its effects in international students' social and cultural adaptation in the host country. Different scholars documented the negative impact of limited proficiency of the host country language proficiency on acculturative stress (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008) and on students' contribution to the academic processes in the classrooms (Kondakci, Van den Broeck, & Yildirim, 2008). Cultural distance has also been noted by researchers as an important factor in sojourner adjustment (Zheng & Berry, 1991). Ledwith and Seymour (2001) reported cultural distance as a cause of low academic performance for international students. Other scholars reported that female students are even more disadvantaged in cultural adaptation and adjustment in the host country (Neto & Barros, 2007; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003).

Part of the literature reported that international students' positive adjustment has been found to be positively related to their length of sojourn in the foreign cultural context (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima 1998; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). The problems they confront in the period following their arrival tend to diminish as their length of stay increase (Scheyvens et al., 2003). Another important variable in sojourners' psychological adaptation is the intensity and/or quality of the interaction with host country people (Bochner, 2006; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). It is believed that social interaction with local people constitutes a source of social support for foreign students (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002) and a guide for practicalities (i.e., housing, food, shopping) in the host country (Kondakci et al., 2008). When the perceived social interactions are negative, such as discrimination against international students, international students tend to experience homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), educational dissatisfaction (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), and low psychological well-being (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007).

In sum, the way in which the aforementioned factors are experienced and dealt with will largely influence the quality of the sojourn experience of the international students. Life satisfaction is viewed as one of the indicators of a positive appraisal style and linked to adaptive emotional and behavioral coping responses (Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & Mcknight, 2004). Thus, it can be expected that higher levels of life satisfaction will be associated with less psychological distress among international students.

In the present study, the focus is on the international students in Turkey. Majority of the studies in the literature were conducted in economically developed, Anglophone countries with Anglo-Saxon educational systems. Countries like the USA, the UK, and Australia are traditional destinations of foreign students. Higher education organizations in these countries are institutionalized in terms of receiving foreign students. Therefore, one may argue that student mobility is a phenomenon peculiar to Anglophone and economically developed countries with Anglo-Saxon higher education systems. However, in the literature there are strong evidences that several developments made internationalization an issue for non-Anglophone countries as well (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Paige, 1990; Sam, 2001) because of inter-country or regional cooperation schemes (Denman, 2001), developments in technology and transportation (Kondakci et al., 2008), decline in attractiveness of traditional destinations (Lee & Rice, 2007), increasing demand for higher education (Li & Bray, 2007; Pokarier, 2006), and globalization (Altbach, 2004; van der Wende, 2003). Nevertheless, for economically developing and non-Anglophone countries the case could be more challenging for international students since these countries are relatively less experienced in receiving foreign students and offer less institutionalized social, academic, and managerial services to foreign students. Hence, foreign students may confront with problems in social interaction with local community; they are typically offered local curricula; linguistic problems may give rise to problems in academic performance and social interaction; their host institutions may fail to consider student diversity in developing and delivering student services. Therefore, the results of this study contribute the limited information about psychological distress of foreign students studying at economically developing and non-Anglophone countries.

Several characteristics of Turkey in relation to international student mobility make it a unique case to be investigated. First of all, although Turkey is characterized as a sending country in the global scheme of student mobility, the number of international students choosing Turkey for study abroad has been increasing steadily (OECD, 2009). In addition, the predominant dynamics pulling the students to Turkey are quite different to those of core destinations (e.g., USA, UK, Australia, and Canada). In these traditional destinations prestigious universities and programs, English language, the prospect of finding a job and staying in the host country, and scholarship possibilities are dominant pulling dynamics. More importantly, these countries possess formal strategies (e.g., organizing fairs) to attract more international students. However, in Turkey it is very difficult to identify a set of common rationales for international students originating from different countries. For example, student from Turkic republics and the Balkans are motivated by cultural and geographical proximity, low tuition fees and the prospect of staying in Turkey after the study while students from Western and developed countries are motivated by cultural exchange.

Drawing on this unique position of Turkey in the global international student mobility, the present study was designed to examine whether psychological distress of international students can be understood on the basis of individual characteristics (gender and length of stay in the host country-Turkey), interaction with Turkish students, perceived discrimination, Turkish language frequency, perceived cultural distance, life satisfaction, and integration to social life. Results obtained from this study could be helpful for institutions and program developers in developing different support systems for international students in settings where there is a relatively limited experience in hosting international students.

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