INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Covıd-19 Pandemisi Sırasında Deneyimleri

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread rapidly across the globe and made visible current inequalities and injustices among international students. Sustaining the internationalization of higher education and international student mobility has become a challenge during this transitional period due to the challenges caused by COVID-19. Using data from 30 international college students in Turkey, this study argue that due to their language barriers, legal status, and national identities, these students are stereotyped as vectors of the disease and also face social,

psychological, educational and financial problems during the pandemic. Understanding the experiences of international college students, and the set of challenges that students face in pursuing their studies in Turkey, may allow us to focus on avenues to mitigate these problems to make international student mobility more sustainable and resilient in the future. By taking into account the experiences of international students, we can reshape economic, educational, and social policies for a more just system of internationalization of higher education.

Keywords: Sustainability, Experiences of International Students, COVID-19, Turkey

ÖZET

COVID-19 salgını hızlı bir şekilde dünyaya yayıldı ve uluslararası öğrenciler arasındaki mevcut eşitsizlikleri ve adaletsizlikleri görünür hale getirdi. COVID-19'un neden olduğu zorluklar, bu geçiş döneminde yüksek öğrenimin uluslararasılaşması ve uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliğinin sürdürülebilirliğini zorlaştırmaktadır. Türkiye'deki 30 uluslararası üniversite öğrencisinden alınan verileri kullanan bu çalışma, dil engelleri, yasal statüleri ve ulusal kimlikleri nedeniyle bu öğrencilerin hastalığın yayıcısı olarak kalıplaşmış olduklarını ve ayrıca pandemi sırasında sosyal, psikolojik, eğitimsel ve finansal sorunlarla karşılaştıklarını ileri sürmektedir. Uluslararası üniversite öğrencilerinin deneyimlerini ve öğrencilerin Türkiye'deki eğitimlerini sürdürürken karşılaştıkları zorlukları anlamak, uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliğini gelecekte daha sürdürülebilir ve dirençli hale getirmek için bu sorunları azaltmanın yollarına odaklanmamızı sağlayabilir. Yükseköğretimde daha adil bir uluslararasılaşma için, uluslararası öğrencilerin deneyimleri hesaba katılarak, ekonomik, eğitimsel ve sosyal politikalar yeniden şekillendirebilir. Yükseköğretim sisteminin adil bir şekilde uluslararasılaşabilmesi için uluslararası öğrencilerin deneyimleri hesaba katılarak, ekonomik, eğitimsel ve sosyal politikaların yeniden şekillendirilmesi gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sürdürülebilirlik, Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Deneyimleri, COVID-19, Türkiye

1. INTRODUCTION

The first quarter of 2020 was a difficult period for the global community due to COVID-19 that reached the level of a pandemic. To date (August 5th, 2020), more than 18,700,000 confirmed cases and 704,000 deaths attributable to this disease have been recorded. After this global health crisis, strict public health measures were fully adapted to diminish the possible risk of spreading COVID-19 infections (Rajkumar, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has an influence on people's lives in multiple ways, including economic, social, educational, and mental health problems. By late February, many countries had developed large-scale local outbreaks causing global concern. In response, from February 3rd to June 16th international and domestic travel bans were applied by the Turkish government. Like many countries in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the Turkish government also revised the academic calendar of all educational institutions and used online education as a solution to the decision to cancel some classes, examinations, and research (UNESCO, 2020).

As the pandemic worsened current inequalities and injustices among different racial, ethnic, and national groups have become visible. One of these groups is international students who suffer from social exclusion, stereotypes, financial and psychological difficulties during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, existing studies have focused on the experiences of international students from China who have encountered stressful situations and biases and contribute to the unsustainability of international Chinese student mobility (Khomera, 2020; Ma et. al., 2020; Wang, 2020). However, the experiences of other international students have been largely ignored in current studies. Additionally, some studies attempted to review challenges that the universities across the world experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic such as the transition from face-to-face to online classes, the sustainability of online education, assessment and evaluation, travel restrictions, mental health, and support services from the Universities (Altbach & Wit, 2020; Sahu, 2020). These studies also focus on universities in Western/developed countries that do little to clarify the situations and implications in the Eastern/developing countries.

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainability of internationalization of higher education is recognized as one of the important forces towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Students who have done their education abroad acquire broader knowledge and developing professional skills and contribute and improve social, economic institutions, community services, and the new perspectives in their host and home countries (Wulz & Rainer, 2015). Thus, collaborating directly and indirectly between intellectuals, universities, ministries, and governments to raise awareness of and respond to world problems and promote the professional development of students globally (Shields, 2019) is a crucial tool to achieve continued effective student mobility and the internationalization of higher education. However, the first quarter of 2020 has been a difficult period for the global community and international student mobility due to COVID-19. If measures and policies are adopted by the government of host countries according to international students' experiences and needs in the pandemic era, international student mobility and the internationalization of higher education might be sustainable in the future. This paper aims to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the experiences of international college students and the set of challenges that students see in pursuing their studies in Turkey.

2. EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND COVID-19

Social institutions and the environment that do not meet the unique needs of international students can make these students feel disappointed, dissatisfied, or even exploited. Marginson (2012) stresses that international students are often more vulnerable to social and economic abuse. Social institutions are the roots of society, put in place to hold the whole society together, and function to support one another (Better, 2008: 113). But this does not mean that institutions function in a fair and balanced manner for all members of society. If a society has an institution with unequal policies, that institution's policies can influence and support the policies of other institutions (Better, 2008: 113). Social institutions in Turkey such as schools, governments, the criminal justice system, the housing market, as well as the workplace, can all work to support and reinforce one another, which can be devastating for non-native members if their policies are unequal. These institutions are all creations of the dominant class in society. And in a society run by capitalism where there is a constant drive for more profits and privatized wealth, inequalities express the normal functioning of the market system.

Racial capitalism is the root cause of racial and socioeconomic inequalities within the COVID-19 epidemic. Nancy Leong (2013) uses the term racial capitalism to understand how social institutions give priority to diversity over equality by commodifying race and diversity. The crisis context of COVID-19 produces countless reflections and reassessments, and it is now almost impossible to track the pace of change in which the virus is shaping access to all areas of cultural, economic, political, and social fields. The virus has monitored and intensified current inequalities and injustices among different racial, ethnic, and national groups. One of these groups is international students who face social exclusion, stereotypes, financial and psychological difficulties during the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

As the number of students traveling from the Global East to study in the Global West continues to grow, it is important to broaden our conceptual approaches to experiences of international students during the pandemic for the future sustainability of internationalization in higher education. International students are considered a key consumer of education by the government since the introduction of student tuition fees (Cheng, 2013). However, many international students in Turkey and other countries are not wealthy and need to work while pursuing their education. These students are only able to work certain jobs that pay less

and are arguably less prestigious, such as being a waiter in a small business. Their jobs also put them more at risk of catching COVID-19 due to poor conditions in their workplaces. During the lockdown, many workplaces were forced to close, and that caused many students who worked part-time/ full time to experience unemployment, part of the social and economic consequences that reduce the attractiveness of sustaining international mobility.

International students are also stereotyped as vectors of the disease which causes social exclusion and puts them more at risk of being firing from their places of employment. International students are affected by these situations, particularly, in low-income and unfavorable social conditions, which indicate a reflection of the markers that cause social inequalities. Considering these scenarios and the reality concerning inequalities in Turkey, this article attempts to examine international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey and how these experiences influence the sustainability of international student mobility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social inequalities continue to rise and capital is still at the center of everything and this makes the experiences of international students hard. By examining the unequal and diverse effects of Covid-19 on international students in Turkey, this study attempts to provide a contribution to the sustainability of international student mobility and positively affect the educational experience for the students and staff.

3. METHOD

This study analyzes how COVID-19 affects the experiences of international college students on a western campus in Turkey. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were chosen with a purposive sample based on a range of intersecting identities (e.g., had diverse family ethnic, and national origins). A total of 30 participants are included in the study (3 Afghans, 2 Azerbaijani, 1 Iranian, 8 Somalis, 7 Syrians, 2 Turkmen, 7 Yemenis; 7 women and 23 men).

Data collection fell within the beginning of April 2020 and one month later just after the COVID-19 disease started to appear in Turkey. Students were recruited through the university international students' office at the host university to reach a diverse sample of international students. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted by Skype in English and Turkish because there were curfew and other restrictions such as closing college campus and university dorms related to the COVID-19 after the study received its approval from the Ethics Committee of the host University. The interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. All interviews were tape-recorded, anonymized, and transcribed. At the beginning of the interview, all participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they took part in the study. Then, the participants were asked demographic questions about age, education level, race/ethnicity, primary language, marital status, and citizenship. Demographic questions were followed by several open-ended questions on their feelings and experiences during the COVID-19 era. Intersecting identities of the interviewer who is a light-skinned, non-hijabi, Muslim, Turkish woman, and who also lived in the U.S.A seven years as an international student, enabled her to position herself as both insider and outsider.

The use of open-coding (inductive) of interviews, field notes, and a focused coding approach with an analysis of life in the COVID-19 pandemic provided a method for collecting detailed information about the challenges of international students in Turkey during COVID -19. Similar patterns were grouped to reflect themes that emerged from the data. The three rounds of coding yielded four main themes on experiences of international students in the COVID-19 era: financial problems, feeling alone and desperate, the role of online education, and, as being perceived as just a stereotype specifically a spreader of COVID-19 to others.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Financial Problems

The economy is the most affected sector from restrictions and isolation due to COVID-19 in Turkey, like many other countries. Many international students hold part-time jobs inside and outside the campus when they are studying in Turkey (Ozduzen et. al., 2020). Most workplaces, from face-to-face to professional, shut down and all international students who work as part-time workers in order to pay their tuition and living accommodation, etc., were dismissed from their jobs or were not paid. Assad, who is a Somali man, said that "Due to Covid-19, I lost my job because the coffee shop that I worked was closed and I have financial problems now. I need to pay the rent and bill. My family in Somalia is poor so I do not know what I do in here" (May 7, 2020). In this university, the majority of international students come from Middle

Eastern and African countries and are of low/middle-class families. When these students lost their jobs, most of them cannot receive financial support from their parents. Even though international students are considered a key consumer of education due to the school tuition they pay, they are not wealthy and they need to work for their basic needs such as accommodation, nutrition, education, and social activities.

Some students quit their jobs over workplace safety concerns because of COVID-19. They believe that their jobs were putting them at unnecessary risk. Faireh, who is a Syrian man, said:

> I worked in the hospital as a translator before the COVID-19 emerged. I left myself willingly because of the virus because I had to work face to face with people who get sick from COVID-19. I live with my family here and if I get sick, I cannot afford my education expenses and my family's needs. This virus is more dangerous for older people and I am also worried about my parents' health. That is why I left my job. (April 2, 2020)

International students who live with their parents or grandparents are more concerned because they know that more COVID-19 infections among young adults could mean more risk to their parents and grandparents, Faireh also explained that being Syrian is hard but being Syrian during Covid-19, makes it more difficult. In Turkey, there are many stereotypes about Middle Eastern countries and one of these stereotypes is that the majority of Middle Eastern people are ignorant and do not follow the rules. He mentioned that when people hear his accent, they go two steps backward.

Some international students also sell goods on the internet or do other online work. The work-life balancing act can be made more difficult by working from home, especially for women who have children. Jamal, who is a Syrian woman and mom for two children, states:

> I sell something on the internet but after coronavirus, my work is not going so well. I have two children and schools are closed. My children at home with me all day. I need to care for my children, follow homeschooling their children, and my online courses. I do not have time and energy to make money on the internet. My husband is doing a small business and he has to work outside. So he can't help me at home. (April 5, 2020)

Jamal's experiences show that being a woman and having children make harder her life during the COVID-19 pandemic. For women, beyond struggling to sustain the family's physical and mental health and the need to follow children's coursework during the lockdown, there is also the struggle to continue work and make money. She said that she could not do any job except online because she experiences discrimination from Turkish employers who prefer not to hire her because of her national identity. Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrians typically work certain jobs, less prestigious, and are paid less. Due to the stereotypes about their nationality and her lack of good Turkish skills, these students have had a hard time find a (good or prestigious) job. To build the sustainability of international student mobility, these students should be supported financially by receiving access to funding and giving them opportunities to work inside or outside of campuses.

4.2. Feeling Alone and Desperate

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed where and how people live, work, study, and communicate. People have started to spend more time at home and less time in the workplace, schools, and other social places. During the lockdown, college students journeyed back to their parents' home but the majority of international students found themselves stuck in Turkey, facing economic and social uncertainty due to coronavirus travel restrictions and the border shutdown. The majority of international students experienced loneliness during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Hassan who is a Black, Somali man stated,

> During Covid-19, I feel so alone because I can't see my friend or even my girlfriend. My family is so worried about me and I am so worried about the health of my family. I can't work because of the COVID-19 and I have financial problems. Now I can pay my rent and bill, but I think I can't afford it in a few months. I hope that coronavirus disappears soon. (May 7, 2020)

International students are concerned about how to disclose their situation in the hospital if they get sick in Turkey since the majority of students feel uneasy and lack confidence when speaking Turkish, and there are no translators in many hospitals. For example, Idris who is a Yemeni man said that **"**Everything is surreal in this period. My Turkish also is not good and I afraid of not explaining my problem in social institutions such as a hospital. It is really hard to live in a country than in your home country." (April 2,

2020) Loneliness, health, and social isolation concerns of international students become obstacles for the sustainability of international student mobility.

The majority of international students come from Muslim countries and all international students that I interviewed are Muslims. They claimed that their belief is one of the ways to deal with the feeling of being alone and desperate. Bahlul who is an Afghan man stated that "during the coronavirus, I feel quite alone but I pray and read the Quran for most of my time. I believe that God is with me and that makes me feel less alone" (May 15, 2020). During interviews, many students explain how they have suffered from loneliness, feel psychologically weak, and they try to cope with this by "praying" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3. Online Education

All schools from primary to universities have shut down their doors and they have started online education as a solution to this crisis. In Turkey, many students have experienced problems connected to online education due to a lack of/low internet connection, computer, smartphone, etc. Some international students use computers in the university library to complete their homework during their education, but after the COVID-19, the schools were closed and they couldn't use libraries. Many of these students just tried to use their smartphones to do their homework but it was not an efficient way. Faduma who is a Somali woman said "my family is not rich. I have to work here to complete my education and to pay for my tuition and living expenses. For online education, now I have to pay a higher monthly rate to upgrade my internet package." Some students also said that online education is not the education for which they paid. These students pay more than domestic students and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they cannot benefit from campus facilities and other social activities.

Other international students were happy with their online learning. For example, Jahan who is a Turkmen woman said,

> Being an international student is hard for me. I am good at speaking and writing in Turkish but sometimes I have had a hard time understanding people due to my language limitation. Therefore, I am pretty quiet in classes and this affects my self-confidence. I always get a high grade in my classes and sometimes, my Turkish friends say that "I don't believe how did you get a higher grade from me because you are quite in classes." The comments like that make me so sad. I am working hard to be successful here. During COVID-19, we are doing all classes online and I am really happy because I have a chance to listen to my classes twice or more. And I do not have to communicate with people who have biased about me. (May 15, 2020)

Due to language limitations and social exclusion from their peers, international students prefer to stay silent in their classrooms. The silence of students affects their class participation grades, their work in group projects, and their self-confidence in online classes because they do not have to be interactive during the classes. Some international students are experiencing problems during the pandemic due to lack of internet but also like online classes because it is a way to mitigate the bias they experience before and during COVID-19.

4.4. Stereotype: "*We are Seen* at *Risk of Spreading* the COVID-19 to Others"

The rebels against the Syrian government began in early 2011 as a part of the wider social movements called the Arab Spring. During this period, protests and violence were spread across the Middle East. In 2014, ISIS emerged as a terrorist group applying all practices of violence against people who come from different ethnic and religious groups. This period also led to drastic changes in the region's demography. Millions of people had to migrate to nearby countries, especially to Lebanon and Turkey. Syrians make up nearly one-third of all refugees in the world and Turkey hosts almost 64% of them. According to some researchers, Turkish people think that Middle Eastern people, especially Syrians, are disrupting the harmony and peace of society and they should be sent back to their home country. Some local people think that Syrians are stealing their jobs, abusing the "Turkish" system through, for instance, establishing tax-free businesses, getting free education, and lowering wages (Koca, 2016). Thus, they are seen as a "threat" to the security and health of Turkey. Jamal who is a Syrian woman said,

> Due to our accent, and external appearance, people understand easily that we are foreign Syrian, refugees, and others. In Turkey, some people (not all) have biased about the risks of infectious COVID-19 among Syrian refugees. The reason for this stereotype might be that you know that end of February, Turkey opens borders to Europe for refugees and many refugees attempted to go to Europe and live and sit in borders. Additionally, I think that Turkish people have biased that people who are from Middle Eastern are ignorant, don't follow rules, and are not careful about health and cleaning. Some Syrian friends said to me that local people think that refugees pose a health risk to Turks. (April 5, 2020)

Syrians are discriminated against in Turkey due to racialized discourses about Syrians and the Middle East because they are considered a threat to Turkey's values, safety, health, and economy (Koca, 2016; Ozduzen et. al., 2020). Middle Eastern people in Turkey are racialized in similar practices but the implications for these racialization practices differ based on their other intersecting identities, such as gender, branch of Islam that they belong to, language, and nationality in Turkey (Koca, 2016; Ozduzen et. al., 2020).

Some international students also said that COVID-19 is not the first thing that local people believe that Middle Eastern/foreign people are spreading. A few international students said that a year ago some local people believed that "hand, foot and mouth disease" was spread by coming into contact with Syrian refugees. Idris who is a Yemeni man said,

> The COVID-19 is not the first thing they see us as a threat to their health as well as the security and economic crisis. During the COVID-19, scientists say that "completely avoiding contact with other people" and I think that this is not hard for me as an international student here because I generally avoiding contact with other people except people who come from Yemen. (April 2, 2020)

The majority of international students feel double pressure on themselves in the COVID-19 era because they are stigmatized as a threat to the health risk of the country due to their nationality.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explores an important and ignored issue in the current pandemic crisis. This study has demonstrated that international students in Turkey have had financial problems, felt alone and desperate, had a problem with online education, have faced new stereotypes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this study argues that researchers need to understand and solve international students' problems during the COVID-19 not only mitigate these problems but to build the sustainability of international student mobility into future recovery.

The findings presented above on international students' experiences during the COVID-19 might be useful to reshape existing policies in Turkey. International student mobility will depend on avoiding new forms of COVID-19-related stereotypes facing international students and providing for students' economic, social, and psychological needs such as housing, funding, job opportunities, psychological counseling, coronavirus-specific information guidelines, Additionally, during online education, managers must be aware of international students' concerns that their studies will be interrupted due to unsafe conditions in their home country (such as war), lack of materials (computer, book, etc.), and high-speed Internet connection. In their home country or Turkey, these students need appropriate advice to protect themselves and others from the COVID-19 and live in self-isolation until the situation is back to normal. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand international students' experiences to not only solve their academic, financial, social, and psychological problems for the coming academic session, but also to provide the sustainability of international student mobility and to ameliorate economic, educational, and social policies in Turkey.

This research analyzes the experiences of 30 international students who come from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Somali, Syria, Turkmenistan, Yemen to make international student mobility and higher education more sustainable and resilient in the future. The limitation of the study is the sampled respondents could not represent the broader international student bodies in Turkey but it represents beneficial ideas about their experiences to ameliorate their situation and to improve the internalization of higher education. Additionally, this study should be conducted at other universities in Turkey in order to examine the overall situation.

Regarding the suggestions for further research, a study focusing on international students who have different religious identities may enhance our understanding of international students' experiences. Experiences of international students who are Christian or Jewish during their stay in Turkey are important for the sustainability of international student mobility in the future.

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