You Are Welcome Here: What Campus Resources Are Needed to Recruit, Retain, and Graduate International Students at Large Universities?

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Abstract

As globalization in education spreads, students will be more likely to study abroad; these international students are integral to institutional reputation and cultural enrichment. As such, educational institutions need to better understand what is necessary to recruit international students, provide them with a successful educational experience, and facilitate their path to graduation. In this study, an exploratory survey was distributed to international students at two large universities (>50,000 students) in the US and Turkey. The survey yielded n=182 responses. After analyzing the participant responses, their primary experiences fell into three themes: expectations, challenges, and needed improvements. Overall, the international students appeared satisfied with their educational experiences, but highlighted areas of improvement. Universities will need to create an action plan to help work with students during the recruiting process, during their time at the university, and during their final semesters when they prepare to graduate and look for a job.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has transformed the national boundaries of the educational territory across the world, especially within higher education institutions. In 2017, about 5.3 million students studied or pursued an international education experience compared to 2.1 million students in 2001 (Institute of International Education, 2017; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). Therefore, international students are one of the important issues that need to be emphasized. For this study, international students from a university in the US and a comparable university in Turkey were examined.

While the overall trend of globalization has been increased numbers, the past few years have shown a decrease in numbers of international students in the US. In 2018-2019, there were 1,095,299 international students, which was a 0.05% increase over the previous year although this was due to an increase in international students participating in Optional Practical Training; when examining only new international students, there was a -3.3% change in 2016/2017 compared to the previous year, a -6.6% change in 2017-2018, and a -0.9% change in 2018-2019 (Institute of International Education, 2019). In Turkey, however, the number of international students has been steadily increasing from 48,000 in 2013 to over 200,000 in 2020 (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi, 2021). The country's target is to have 250,000 by 2023.

An ongoing goal of both universities in this study is to increase the number of international students and international engagements given the current trends of increasing student mobility. This study examines the challenges facing current students and explores what campus resources are needed to help recruit, retain, and graduate these students. In order to obtain this information, an online survey was made available to all international students at a large university (>50,000 students) in the United States and in Turkey who had a large international student population (>5,000 international students). The results revealed the factors that influenced an international student's decision to attend a particular university and what was needed to recruit, retain, and graduate international students at large universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some of the literature also highlights the vulnerability of international students to exploitation and falling prey to phishing scams, fraudulent check scams, or phone scams. Phone scams have particularly been effective towards international students since the scammer will usually impersonate a government agency, such as the IRS, or law enforcement officer threatening to deport the student unless the scammer is paid.

When international students adjust to the country's life they study in, they deal with a period that may be difficult for them to overcome. This period has been called different names by various researchers. Some of these names are, transition shock (Bennet, 1998), culture shock (Zhai, 2002), and cultural differences (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Whatever the name is, it is the term used by the researchers to explain the problems that an individual faces when they encounter a culture different from their own culture, including difficulties in adapting to a different education system and differences in host culture (Olivas & Li, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; UKCISA, 2012; Zhai, 2002).

International students are confronted with many problems because they do not know the language of the country they are studying or the language of education. Due to language deficiency, students experience various problems such as social isolation, loneliness and depression (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The common difficulties experienced by international students based on various researchers are summarized in the Table 1. Table 1 lists the problem category (culture shock, homesickness and loneliness, emotional outcomes, community and support), then further breaks these categories down into sub-problems (e.g., academic and social differences, food differences, weather, etc.) and provides a brief explanation of the problem described.

Table 1. *The difficulties experienced by international students*

Main Problem	Sub-problem	Content
Culture shock	Academic and social differences	In some cultures, academic achievement is perceived as a social pressure. Success and failure bring disgust and shame not only to the international student but also to the family in the country. In this way, international students experience even more difficulties (Hannassab & Tidwell, 2002). Additionally, teaching and learning styles can significantly differ between countries. For instance, some international students are accustomed to being lectured by the professor and not having a class discussion where the students share their own opinions (Kung, 2017).
	Food differences	Some students have difficulty adjusting to the food and cuisine of the host country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).
	Weather differences	Some students struggle with the weather differences in the host country (He-Chen, 2009; Hess & Linderman, 2002; McLachlan & Justice, 2009)
Homesickness and Loneliness	Distressed by loneliness	The inability to speak enough English, which is a major challenge for international students, has a significant impact on the ability to communicate effectively and establish friendships with their faculty and classmates. This situation leads them to lonely, isolated, and alienated (Haydon, 2003; Kung, 2017; Trice, 2003).
	Pressured to perform	For an international student, there are ideals and concerns about the future, such as having a good occupation or status. This complicates efforts to adapt to a new academic and social environment. In fact, sometimes with the accumulation of problems seen as simple, can lead to the emergence of increasingly effective serious problems (UKCISA, 2012).
	Isolated by language	International students who are not confident in English speaking have a serious disadvantage in adapting to the host country. This leads them to a serious process that can lead them to hate the host country (Brown, 2008). In addition, although some international students have mastered the English language and succeeded in the exams, they have difficulty in communication because they do not have knowledge about the historical, cultural values of the host country, and they do not understand what the meaning lies behind even though they know the words in the class jokes (Yue, 2009).
Emotional Outcomes	Overwhelmed by high expectations	International students receiving scholarships are overwhelmed by academic workloads and expectations due to fear of losing scholarship (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003).
	Reluctance to seek help	The vast majority of international students are particularly reluctant to receive help with mental health counseling (Arthur, 1997; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).
Community and support	Mentors	It is seen that the students who meet a new social environment or a family with the help of the experts in the faculty, staff, or other students experience problems less often; however, the international students that do not receive support from faculty experts experience more problems (Kung, 2017; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).
	Fast friendships	International students are more likely to establish friendships with students from their own countries who speak the same language to make friends quickly. This extends their social integration process (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).
	Local friends	International students think that establishing friendships with the students of the host country is slow, and sometimes frustrating (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Navigating academic culture in a foreign country is another area that presents an obstacle for international students. Some advisors are inexperienced when working with international students, although studies have revealed that having a strong relationship with an advisor can lead to a variety of benefits such as timelier graduation, increased research collaboration, improved sense of belonging, and decreased stress and attrition (Marijanovic, Teague, & Means, 2021). The matching of an international student with an advisor is more complex than many assume and can lead to significant changes in an international student's progress. With the correct, experienced advisor, an international student can have an engaging and effective learning experience. However, a mismatched advisor creates a toxic relationship that can cause the international student to feel more stressed and to develop increased anxiety, disengagement, and depression (Marijanovic, Teague, & Means, 2021). For instance, international students have reported occurrences of racism, stereotyping, and hostility with their advisor (Glass et al., 2015).

As a result of the studies conducted to find solutions to the problems experienced by international students, some results have been reached. In some universities in the US, two different and innovative programs have been implemented for international students that have led to positive results:

a) Speaking partner: International students are matched with faculty, staff, or students to increase the language competence of international students and to assist in the cultural adaptation process (Zhai, 2002).

b) Cultural sharing model: International students are matched with American students as friends (Shigaki & Smith, 1997).

International students tend to have difficulties adjusting particularly from a social perspective. Many international students report being unsatisfied or partly satisfied with the quality of friendships in the US, with students from East Asia having few to no American friends (Glass et al., 2015). Thanks to these two models, some international students have the opportunity to interact with American hosts and to receive coaching on cultural rules and social skills. Thus, those international students experience less culture shock in America (Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

As a result of the fact that international students do not always adequately understand the language of education or the spoken language of the country where they are studying, they confront many problems. For instance, in Japan, the ability of international students to learn Japanese is considered within the national policy framework and is considered among the country's priorities. Language learning centers have been professionalized so that the Japanese language can be learned correctly and quickly (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Another example is the national advisory body called the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), which serves international students and the benefits of those who care about them. The purpose of this board is: to increase the support given to international students; to raise awareness in the society about the benefits of international education to the country; to contribute to the professional development of the staff working in the relevant units; and to identify and eliminate the factors that negatively affect the international student flow. In addition, this committee closely follows the policies of the government relating to the international students and tries to direct these policies in line with the benefits of the students through the publications and lobbying carried out by them (Özoğlu, Gür, & Coşkun, 2012).

In the UK, a central application system (UCAS) has been developed to facilitate the application of international students to universities and to reduce the workload for universities. Through this system, students can apply to as many universities as they want via a single web page and track the results of the application.

GLOBALIZATION TRENDS

General globalization and internationalization of education have pushed students to study abroad (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Gürüz, 2011). The decision to select a destination country or institution is generally influenced by a number of factors that drive international students to leave their home countries to pursue an education abroad (Banjong & Olson, 2016). When participants decide to go abroad for education, the prestige of a foreign diploma, finding a job easily in their home country, finding better educational opportunities, learning a foreign language, and the instrumentalization of higher education to go abroad are among the pulling factors at work, whereas personal development, personal and professional interests and the role of peer social capital constitute the pushing factors (Boyacı & Oz, 2019). Additionally, cost of living; health, and safety; quality of education; scholarship and post-graduation employment opportunities are other factors affecting international students' decision (Ammigan, 2019).

There has been an unprecedented growth of international students in recent times, and the numbers are forecasted to increase (Chaney, 2013; Bordia et al., 2018). The number of international students has risen from 800,000 in the mid-1970s to over 3.5 million in 2009 (British Council, 2012) and it was more than 5 million in 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2018a). This number is expected to exceed 8 million by 2025 (UNESCO, 2015). The global education industry is not only one of the largest sectors worldwide but also one of the fastest developing (Euromonitor International, 2017). Boyacı & Oz (2019) stated that the volume of the global education sector would reach $568 billion dollars in 2025.

When the country preferences of international students are examined, the USA is the most preferred country by international students (OECD, 2018). The United States hosts about 22% of all international students, and this figure points to more than twice the number of international students in the U.K., which is the second most popular destination (Institute of International Education, 2018a). The number of international students in the U.S. grew from 723,277 in 2010 to 1,078,822 in 2016, indicating an increase of 49% in enrollment over just 6 years (Ammigan, 2019), and in the 2018-2019 academic year, it was stated that the number of international students studying in the USA was 1,095,299 (Institute of International Education, 2019).

When the regions where international students come from are examined, it is stated that the highest number of students come to U.S.A. from the Asian continent (n=758,076) and China (n=363,341) takes the lead by country (Institute of International Education, 2018b). China is followed by India (n=196,271) and South Korea (n=54,555) (Institute of International Education, 2018b). The Institute of International Education's (IIE) report also contains information on students who are American citizens and international students in other countries. In the 2016-2017 academic year, 332,757 American students were enrolled outside the U.S as an international student, with 65% of these students with short-term student mobility in the countries they travel to, and only 2% of the students have a long period of time, such as one academic year or more.

BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students are extremely vital to US higher education for both academic prestige and financial benefits (Altbach & Knight, 2007). When the 2017 and 2018 reports of the IIE are analyzed (Open Doors), more than 65% of international students are provided with educational funds from outside the United States and these funds were recorded as input to the American economy. International students contributed about US$45 billion to the local economy in 2018 and they played a major role in innovation (Institute of International Education, 2019; NAFSA, 2019). In the case of Turkey, over 170,000 international students at 206 universities contribute about $1 billion to the economy, according to the International Education Fairs of Turkey (Daily Sabah, 2019).

For decades, universities around the world have been intellectually, culturally, and educationally enriched by the enrollment of international students, who bring a plethora of experiences, perspectives, and skills to host country institutions (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2019). International students have impacted universities and colleges positively by contributing to research efforts, bringing diverse perspectives to the classroom, and providing opportunities for domestic students to develop cross-cultural competence, especially for those who have not had the opportunity to study abroad (Urban & Palmer, 2014). They contribute to the diversity and internationalization of their classrooms, campuses, and communities (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015). International students offer different and diverse views; they have better academic performances; they bring global perspectives to class discussions and assignments; and they contribute to campus multilingualism (Jin & Schneider, 2019). Namely, these students bring new divergent ways of thinking and catalyze academic competition (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015).

International students are of great benefit not only to their host country but also to their own country. It is known that the contributions of different perspectives to their countries as well as the innovations made in their own countries are great. For example, in 2013, China became the country that sent the largest number of international students worldwide and at the same time, they held about one third of the 2.6 million patents received in the same year (UNESCO, 2015). Parallelism between the number of international students and the number of patents obtained by China is remarkable; while other factors may need to be considered, it appears that for China, the high number of students sent abroad has resulted in greater prestige and benefits for the host country.

METHOD

The researchers in this paper are both employed at large universities and interact with international students regularly. They chose to employ a survey with open ended questions to answer three research questions: (RQ1) What is needed to recruit, retain, and graduate international students at large universities?; (RQ2) What are common challenges international students face?; and (RQ3) How can the university address these concerns? The target population of the study were international students (undergraduate and graduate) who were attending the target universities and had studied there for more than one semester. This study was held at two large universities (>50,000 students), one in the United States and one in Turkey. The survey questions and study were approved by the university institutional review board, and participants were provided with an informed consent before completing the survey.

DATA COLLECTION

Survey questions to learn about the international students' experiences were created based on existing literature of common international student challenges as well as personal interactions with international students by the researchers. As an exploratory study, the researchers decided to create a short survey with 11 questions in order to attract more participants, as the survey could be completed in 2-3 minutes. The survey was first created in English and a version of the survey was translated into Turkish by a translator fluent in both English and Turkish. The only difference between the survey questions was the reference to the university. The survey was distributed using the online survey software Qualtrics. Participants in the American university received the English version, and participants in the Turkish university received the Turkish version of the survey.

The survey was open for three weeks, during which time the survey was advertised through social media, email list-servs, and posters hung at locations where international students tended to congregate. After the survey was closed, basic statistical analyses were performed on the quantitative portions of the survey to produce a summary of the results. Qualitative analysis was conducted by reading all the results and performing a word frequency count and thematic analysis by both researchers. Thematic analysis followed the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006) including: (1)

familiarizing yourself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers acknowledge that the data may not be entirely generalizable since they focused only on two universities and the participants may not be fully representative of the entire international population. However, based on the number of countries represented by the student responses (50 countries), the data would serve as a good starting point. Many international students go through the same experiences, regardless of country of origin, as demonstrated by the student responses.

FINDINGS

In all, the survey yielded 182 responses total with n=133 from the US university and n=49 from the Turkish university (Table 2). The participants came from 50 different countries, with the most respondents from India (n=36), China (n=27), and Turkmenistan (n=17). Of the participants, n=75 were female and n=107 were male. Regarding academic program, 123 were graduate students, 52 were undergraduate, 6 were other, and 1 did not reply. When asked how many years they had been at their respective institutions, 14 had been there less than a year, 24 had been there one year, 42 had been there for between 1 and up to and including 2 years, 37 had been there between 2 and up to and including 3 years, 40 had been there between 3 and up to and including 4 years, and 25 had been there over 4 years. Finally, of the participants, when asked how they first heard about their university, 10 students heard from an education fair or campus recruiter, 77 heard from friends or family, 36 heard from school/university advisors, 16 hear from social media or an advertisement, and 43 heard from another source. Finally, about 71% (n=130) of respondents were satisfied with the support they received from their university's international center, while 27% (n=49) were unsatisfied; three participants did not answer this question.

Table 2. *Participant Demographics and Survey Results*

Question	n	Question	n
Location of Student		Number of Years at Institution	
USA	133	x < 1 year	14
Turkey	49	1 year	24
Home Country		$1 < x \leq 2$	42
India	36	$2 < x \leq 3$ years	37
China	27	$3 < x \leq 4$ years	40
Turkmenistan	17	x > 4 years	25
Other	49		
Gender		Hearing about university source	
Male	107	Friends / family	77
Female	75	School / university advisors	36
		Social media / ad	16
Current Academic Program Level		Another source	43
Graduate	123	International center satisfaction	
Undergraduate	52	Satisfied	130
Other	6	Unsatisfied	49

N=182; question replies voluntary

Based on the survey results, international students tended to select their university mostly based on rank, quality academics/faculty, potential research opportunities, tuition and attractive scholarships or assistantships, and pleasant location and living conditions. Some additional unique

reasons included having friends currently attending, following their professor from another university, having family members previously attending, having an easier application process, and being the only university with the desired major. After analyzing the participant responses, their primary experiences fell into three themes: expectations, challenges, and needed improvements.

Regarding expectations, about one-third of the respondents said they had no expectations coming in, one-third said their expectations were met, and one-third said their expectations were not met. Students who said their expectations had been met mentioned common themes such as receiving a good education and academic support (excellent instructors, lab facilities and school facilities - gyms, friendly people) and enjoying the campus (beautiful campus, good social environment, nice weather). Students whose expectations were not met mentioned themes such as not having enough funding, not being able to find internships/jobs, and not being provided with necessary support/resources for international students when facing a problem. Student expectations are a good indicator of what is needed to recruit, retain, and graduate them (RQ1). Even if universities fail to meet expectations, they can become aware of what is important for international students and focus their efforts on providing ways to meet the expectations. Students who had their expectations met enjoyed their educational experiences more and were more likely to want to choose to stay with their current university

When it came to challenges (RQ2), the participants described difficulties adjusting to culture shock (such as language and food), teaching style/assessment student, not receiving enough academic and cultural support, transportation, discrimination and feeling unwelcome, loneliness, and limited jobs available for international students. These were expected based on previous literature and experiences working with international students. One interesting observation was that the respondents in the US tended to focus more on finding jobs and less about language when compared to participants from Turkey. This may be due to different end goals, as well as difference language admission requirements. When an international student pursues a degree at a foreign university, it is natural to face multiple challenges. What seems to make a difference for the international student is how much support they receive when facing these challenges. If a university is able to acknowledge that international students face additional challenges than when compared to domestic students, the international students feel more welcome and are more likely to succeed and continue with their studies as well as go on to become recruiters for other potential international students.

Finally, one of the best ways for universities to maintain and even grow their international students is to ensure that their international center is well-trained to assist the students. The participants provide many useful suggestions on how to improve an international center (RQ3). The majority of the suggestions mentioned improving the number of advisors/staff to make it easier to reach someone and to get quicker responses, improving the attitude of the staff (such as hiring international staff or having staff members participate in a study abroad experience), and increasing international student appreciation by hosting more cultural appreciation and awareness events. Communication is a major challenge for international students, and when the international center does not reply in a timely manner, they often feel discouraged. Similarly, if the international students receive rude replies or do not feel welcome, they will not enjoy their educational experience and be more likely to transfer or to discourage other potential students from applying to that university. One way to make the international students feel more welcome is to offer more cultural appreciation and awareness events. For example, many commemorative months and events already exist in the US (e.g., Asian Pacific Heritage Month in May, International Education Week in November, etc.), and these times are ideal opportunities to make the international students feel welcome.

To sum up the international students' experiences, the final survey question asked whether the participants would still attend the same university, given everything they have experienced and now know about it. This question was designed to find out what would be necessary to for universities to do, as well as what to avoid, to try to recruit, maintain, and graduate their international students (RQ1, RQ3). The students who would choose to come back described their current university as having a

good academic program that met their needs, as being in a good location, having good friends and professors, and as imparting a strong sense of belonging. Students who would not choose to come back to the same university described problems with limited funding, being located away from a major city (which meant less nearby job opportunities as well as cultural activities), and unfairness/unhelpfulness towards international students.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the responses, most of the international students appeared satisfied with their educational experiences, but there is room for improvement. In order to better recruit, retain, and graduate international students (RQ1), universities need to come up with an action plan to help work with students during the recruiting process, during their time at the university, and during their final semesters when they prepare to graduate and look for a job. For instance, the participants mentioned choosing a specific university since they have friends and family affiliations; if universities were to expand their recruitment strategies to improve relationships with alumni, this could lead to an increase in new students (RQ3). Local recruiting by current students or alumni are an ideal way to find more students as hearing about the experiences first-hand is often more convincing for potential students. During their time at the university, several students reported not being able to get the assistance they needed from the department and international center (RQ2). Universities should try to improve international student staff support, such as providing better training of staff members, increasing the number of available staff, improving the response time, and teaching the staff to be more empathetic towards the international students (RQ3). Funding (RQ2) is also a critical issue for students, especially international students, and if universities are able to provide more tuition support or even support for finding and filling out scholarships, they might be able to retain more students (RQ1, RQ3). Finally, the main reason many international students want to have an international educational experience is to help provide them with a better career. Many universities have a career resource and connection center but having a dedicated team to work just with international students would be helpful, since international students have different needs (RQ3).

Globalization is occurring more and more, especially in higher education institutions. If universities would like to continue to successfully attract, maintain, and graduate their international students, they must be aware of the international student needs.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

First author has made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data. The second author has been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content and have given final approval of the version to be published.

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