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ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF TURKISH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Studying abroad is quite interesting for the students who wish to learn new cultures and languages. Some students prefer to go abroad for higher education so they can also get to experience different culture, people, languages and learn many other things about the host country. When students choose to go abroad for higher education, they are faced with many challenges in education. Every country has their own unique education style and it is quite challenging to adjust to different academic teaching style and new learning environment. This particular study examines the issues surrounding Turkish international students experience of higher education in Pakistan. Qualitative methodology was employed to penetrate into the topic under investigation. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 6 Turkish students. By using Thematic Analysis five themes emerged: (a) language barrier, (b) un-cooperative classfellows, (c) expectations from teachers, (d) different study methods, (e) inability to express in class. The findings both supports and contribute new aspects to the knowledge of this experience. A number of recommendations are made to enable those who come to Pakistan from Turkey to adapt and make the transition necessary in order to enhance their experience of pursuing education in a foreign country.

Keywords

Academic Challenges, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis, International Students

1. Introduction

Studying abroad has quite a charm for many students who are interested to learn new cultures and languages but many of the international students face a series of academic difficulties when they are abroad for their education. These challenges comes from many sources and all these factors negatively affect their academic studies (Sidhu et al., 2011). These challenges can be explained as adjusting to food, language barriers, unfamiliar education system and different teaching styles and assessment styles, unfamiliar living conditions, financial issues, unfamiliar local healthcare system, social and cultural isolation, and separation from family and friends (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016).

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found that an imperative challenge of international students was taking in the academic culture, incorporating how to connect with faculty and other students, and different styles of educating. A study on academic challenges found that; language difficulties is the most difficult issue for the majority of international students as Professors' expect that students will participate orally during class but they are unable to. Since an absence of English abilities is probably going to influence international students' academic execution, and academic challenges thus would influence their psychological adjustment (Lin & Yi, 1997). Language difference is upsetting for students who can't express their academic capacity in English well, especially when a significant number of them have had high academic accomplishment in their nations of origin (Pedersen, 1991). International students also have fear that their poor English language capability may build a negative impression on the minds of teachers, who may question students' capacity to see course content, compose assignments, take an interest in class talks, and make successful introductions. Lack of language proficiency affects students from fully engaging and establishing relationships. It can also lead to embarrassment and unpleasantness (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Mostly international students feel less knowledgeable as compared to local students because they are unfamiliar with the educational system and teaching style of the host country (Myles & Cheng, 2003). The objective and research question of this empirical study is to examine academic challenges Turkish international students face in Pakistan while pursuing higher education. And what support and resources are needed to overcome those challenges?

1.1 Research Significance & Issue

Though there are many researches done internationally on the academic challenges of foreign students both quantitative and qualitative, but when we try to find researches done in Pakistan in this area, we find little success in trying to get a grasp of it. One probable reason in difficulty finding literature related to Pakistan could be that, it is a recent trend in Pakistan to have foreign students. In order to fill this gap in literature, this study is conducted to produce culture specific scientific inquiry. This would be valuable for the university management, to use this information for corrective actions

and tailoring the teaching style, keeping in view the challenges of foreign students while making the academic experience less challenging and more interesting for Turkish international students. Hence, it will benefit academic institutions hosting international students, education planners, faculty members and university staff. Using this empirical study, higher authority can do a lot more in order to increase the number of international students because once these challenges are identified they can be dealt more effectively (Penner et al, 2017). Moreover, findings of this study will also help Turkish students to take well-informed decision before coming to Pakistan for their education by showing the prospective challenges to newcomers which are faced by graduated Turkish students in Pakistan.

2. Methodology

Since, the topic under investigation is exploratory in nature, it fits well with the paradigm of qualitative inquiry. To analyze the data, thematic analysis has been used. The purpose of using thematic analysis in this study was to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that provide an answer to the research question being addressed.

2.1 Sample

Due to time constraint and small scale nature of the project, the study investigated the opinion and experiences of 6 Turkish students from University of Central Punjab and University of Lahore, using non-probability purposive sampling.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data has been collected through semi-structured face to face interview with the help of an interview guide. Interviews were recorded and conducted with the interviewer's notes. Interviews started with general statements such as "talk about your experience as a Turkish international student in Pakistan". Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcription included the laugh, the stops, the rise and fall of the pitch and the accompanied emotion that the respondent wished to convey. The interviews were conducted in a private and quiet place according to their suitable time. Each interview lasted between 40 to 50 mins.

The analysis was conducted using thematic approach as it allows for rich, detailed and complex description of data. Patterns were identified through a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision.

2.3 Quality Control

A procedure called member checking was conducted. This method helps in checking how accurate is the analysis by going back to participants receiving feedback for emerged themes. The feedback was taken from two participants about the emerged themes. Both the participants validated the accuracy of the results.

3. Results

The main purpose of this study is to show what sort of challenges Turkish international students face in academia, to those newcomers who are interested to study in Pakistan as a international student. It aims to make host country be more cooperative and understanding towards Turkish international students while overcoming identified challenges. Findings of the study revealed five themes as following:

Theme 1: Language Barrier

Language barrier may profoundly affect a person's capacity to learn and create, because of its key part in the transmission of knowledge and control of psychological procedures (Binder & Smith, 2013). Foreign students struggle with understanding lectures and interacting with professors and also with the basic skills such as taking notes. There are following three subthemes of language barrier.

a) Poor English

Language is viewed as one of the biggest hurdle in academic success, preventing smooth alteration for international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2009). Turkish people's native language is Turkish so speaking English is not their forte. Turkish international students felt uncomfortable for not having good level of English. This emotion was expressed by one participant as:

“When I am giving presentations I am not feeling comfortable like Pakistani students because they are learning English from their childhood and they are more confident than me and if they feel any difficulty they talk in Urdu but I can not do that if I will talk in Turkish then no one will understand. So when I face difficulty in expressing myself in English I m not able to say anything other than smiling”.

Recent study by Trenkic in 2018 revealed that International students who had poor English vocabulary read and handled large portion of data in English at a very slow speed, and were less able to summarise in composing what they had read. This point is expressed by one participant as:

“Sometimes teachers are giving handouts and asking us to read them. After 5 mins they are asking questions. It is really difficult for me to understand handout in 5 mins because I need to understand”.

Another participant commented:

“If Pakistani students are reading notes for 2 times to understand. I have to read that for 4-5 times, so I spend more time than local students”.

b) Lecture Delivery in Local Language

Turkish students come to Pakistan believing that medium of education is English. Whereas the reality is different. One of the participant revealed:

“I had a big challenge in class because of Urdu. When I came to Pakistan I was thinking that education will be full in English. But after I start my education I have seen teachers mostly talk in Urdu. It was so much difficult for me to learn and understand both languages at the same time”.

As some local students complain when instructors delivers lecture in English. So, often teachers switch the lecture from English to Urdu. Due to this, Turkish international students face a big hurdle to understand the lecture as well as participate in the class which eventually affect their CGPA.

“When teacher teach in English they are some students who do not understand and then teachers starting talking in Urdu and whole lecture is going in Urdu”.

c) Pronunciation

English is a foreign language for both Turkish and Pakistani people. Hence, it is a challenge to understand each other in English. A study related issues incorporates the trouble in understanding accents of classmates and instructors (Majid et al., 2017). A participant expressed that:

“Pakistani people English pronunciation is so different. When they are talking in English sometimes I can not understand what they are saying to me. Because they are not clear to me”.

A research by Maesidor and Sly (2016) found that; some international students abstain from partaking in class talks as they feel that instructors and local students will most likely ridicule their pronunciation. Turkish international students have different accent from Pakistani people when they talk in English. Because of this difference sometimes local teachers and class fellows can not understand clearly what Turkish international students are actually trying to say. This makes Turkish international students shy and shake their confidence. As one of the participant shared her experience:

“The biggest challenge for me is, to present in front of the class because I believe my pronunciation is different from my Pakistani friends. So when I speak I feel shy because in my previous presentations as well sometimes they do not understand my pronunciation, it makes me down”.

Theme 2: Uncooperative Classfellows

The findings show us that Turkish international students have problems with their class fellows as well. Interviews revealed classfellows were not cooperative to Turkish students. Poyrazi and Grahame (2007) found that students who feel at home, who are very much associated with fellow students and instructors will effectively move on from the college. It means that if Turkish international students find cooperative and helpful fellows in class it will have positive outcome on their academic life. Results revealed two subthemes:

a) Social Isolation

Although close associations with host national students may foresee better alteration (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985), international students have a tendency to remain solely in restricted gatherings of their fellow nationals. When we ask the participants about their class fellows one of the 6th semester student said that:

“I do not have any conversation with some people in my class till this time and for others whom I use to talk if I ask them for help then they are helping but if I do not ask then they are not asking to me”.

Students meeting Turkish international students for the first time are interested to talk and spend time with them. But with time that interest is gone. As one of the participant said:

“In starting they were coming to me because I was different from them but after that they realized I am not different from them anymore. So they do not come anymore”.

It is painful for Turkish international students when they ask for something and they get the answer, ‘it is your problem we do not care’. Some local students assume that Turkish international students are treated good and favored by teachers, so teachers will give important parts of exams to Turkish international students. So, local class fellows come to Turkish international students only to get to know about the important parts of the exam for their benefit. As one of the participant mentioned:

“My class fellows are selfish because whenever we have exam they are coming to me and they are saying you are a foreign student, you go to teacher and ask which things are more important then tell us as well, so we all can study. They are only thinking about themselves and they are using me actually”.

b) Exclusion from Group Work

The data showed us that Turkish international students face difficulty to have group projects or presentations. Pakistani students prefer their friends circle and they do not want to take Turkish internationals in their group work. The most probable reason could be poor English of Turkish international students. Hence, Turkish international students are left alone and have to try hard, to fit in a group to do project. A participant commented:

“When they are making presentation group, no one is asking me to come in their group”.

Being a Turkish international student in Pakistan myself, I faced the same challenge. Turkish students have to request themselves to take them in a group presentation. Mostly Turkish international students have to be alone in a presentation, as I have been many times because no local student was interested to work with me. This was expressed by one participant:

“I have to ask them for group works. If I will not ask, they will never see me. Even when they know I am alone and I have no one to make group”.

Another participant added:

“My class fellows are making groups for presentations and they are not taking me. It is really hurting me”.

Turkish international students are already hurt for being excluded from the presentation groups but when teachers come in this situation, knowing no local student is taking Turkish international student in their group, it hurts more because it makes Turkish international students feel, as if they did something wrong or are not good enough that is why they are so unwanted by the local students. This scenario gives Turkish international students unfair guilt trip because teachers then request or force the local students to include Turkish international students in their groups. This has a bad effect on Turkish international students in terms of their morale. As one participant added:

“I am always alone in group works. Mostly teachers are putting me in some group. No one is thinking about me as a foreign friend who needs support, no one thinks she has difficulties. They do not care about me”.

Theme 3: Expectations from Teachers

Turkish international students come here for higher education but due to unfamiliar educational system, they face difficulties and sometimes fail as well. So, they expect from their local teachers to be more empathetic while assessing them. Turkish international students expects from the local teacher that they should understand their limitations being a foreign student. One participant expressed this as:

“Some teachers are telling me that this is your problem you should understand by yourself or ask your friends. You came here, we did not come to Turkey, so you have to manage with us”.

Same participant also added:

“Already as a teacher she explained everything in Urdu and still she is expecting higher marks from me. I m not getting this if you teach in Urdu what are you expecting from international student”.

Theme 4: Difference in Study Methods

For some international students, examination period is especially unpleasant due to distinctive appraisal techniques utilized as contrasted to their home nations (Mesidor & Sly; 2016). Pakistani exam style is very different from Turkish exams style. According to the data we found that, students in Pakistan cram all the notes before the exams and they write lengthy pages in exams. This unfamiliar exams style makes Turkish international students get less marks as compare to local students. Two subthemes which emerged as:

a) Rote Memorization

Education system in Pakistan is based on rote memorization. Because of this Turkish international students are facing difficulty preparing for their exams as in their country they do not memorize notes. Moreover, notes are in English which makes it become even more difficult to memorize. As one of the participants said:

“Education here is based on memorizing. In Turkey we do not memorize our education. It is based on thinking about a question, you have to put your own ideas and knowledge for answering but here you have to memorize all written materials for your exams. I face difficulty because I am not used to it”.

Another participant added:

“In Pakistan you should memorize everything. Even people use to memorize math subject. It is something which you need to practice but they are memorizing questions and all”.

b) Long Answers

Another challenge for Turkish international students is to write long answers during their exams. When the majority of the Pakistani students write lengthy answers to exam questions then teachers are not accepting Turkish students writing because they do not find it enough as compared to local students. Related to that, one participant added her experience:

“In Turkey when teachers are asking something in exams they consider answer even if it is two or three lines. But in Pakistan you have to write more and more pages”.

Some local teachers are used to of this educational style and they are directly checking how much students have written. Turkish international students expressed, this style of exam is affecting their academic result. As same participant said:

“Here teachers are only checking how much we have written in exam. If we write so much we get good marks if less, we get less marks. I do not know why they are not seeing my concepts. They should check that I am right or wrong other than my less writing”.

Theme 5: Inability to Express in Class

Research found that, international students also have fear that their poor English language capability may build up a negative impression on the minds of the teachers, who may question students' capacity to see course content, compose assignments, take an interest in class talks, and make successful introductions (Al-Sahafi & Seong-Chul, 2017). One participant expressed this as:

“When I was in my first semester my English level was not good and I was not able to explain myself to my class fellows. They saw my worst times. That is why I am feeling shy to talk in front of them and I am not able to express myself to them”.

The second participant added:

“In beginning I was not able to make correct sentences and I was just trying to speak with people and they were laughing on me. Because of that first impression on people I have confidence issue and I m not able to express myself well”.

As we see from the findings Turkish international students are shy in front of the people because of their previous experiences. They have flashbacks of their first impression which hampers their current behavior even after improving linguistic skills.

4. Discussion

The results of this study supports some of the previous findings that focus on challenges of Turkish international students. A research by Sato and Hodge (2015) depicts that poor English cause challenges in oral correspondence which may influence students' academic performance. We can see in the results that Turkish international students do not feel comfortable with their English skills and they feel shy to talk in front of the class as well as with their teachers. Moreover, when asked Turkish international students that whether they were better students in Pakistan as compare to Turkey. All participants had a consensus that they were better students in Turkey. By saying better students, what we mean in this study is, that they were better in taking grades, in class participation, learned more in class and were more comfortable with their classfellows. Many of them have had high academic achievement in their home countries, it was pretty upsetting for Turkish international students that they were not able to express their academic capacity in English well and this one challenge alone was the main culprit why they were not so good academically (Pedersen, 1991).

Language boundaries hinder students' academic learning and social understanding. English is the biggest hurdle for the Turkish international students in their academic life but the most important is, it also effects social life of Turkish students. Because language barriers often hinder international students from socially interacting with their peers (Hayes & Lin, 1994). The investigation uncovers that international students suffers bias and segregation by local students. Findings of the study indicates that Turkish international student faced segregation by their class fellows. Because of this segregation, Turkish international students were left alone in projects or presentations. They complaint that their class fellows are not cooperative towards them and they do not understand their challenges. Being avoided by class fellows is not just an academic challenge but also an emotional pain because when they have group presentations they were left out by local students.

Pronunciation is a another language related issue that posses problems in understanding of classfellows and also their teachers. Many international students abstain from partaking in class talks as they expect that instructors and local students will most likely be unable to comprehend them or even ridicule their pronunciation (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This current study supports this finding because this study has discovered that Turkish internaitonal students had trouble in understanding

accents of classmates and instructor. As a result, language is a biggest challenge for those who are abroad for their studies.

A recent report by Mesidor (2016) called attention to the fact that examinations are especially upsetting for international students because of distinctive appraisal gauges when contrasted with their home nations. Education in Pakistan is in English but teachers mostly use their national language in delivering lectures, this was our subtheme under the language barriers. Turkish international students already has difficulty to make themselves understand lectures in different accents and in English but delivery of lectures in local language makes it even more difficult for them to absorb class lectures. So, most of the time they study by themselves without understanding anything from class lectures. Moreover, when they face different exam appraisal system, they are unable to score good because education system in Pakistan is based on rote learning and providing long answers in exams. This style of education is not used in Turkey, hence Turkish international students are not used of cramming and writing long answers. Some local teachers do not accept answers of Turkish international students if their writing style is not same as the local students.

5. Limitations and Recommendations

Since Pakistan and Turkey has fraternal ties on religious grounds, Turkish international students did not want to say anything bad about host country, Pakistan. Moreover, researcher was not able to ensure truthfulness of challenges faced by Turkish international students because they were blaming others as well as education system of Pakistan, not themselves. Last but not the least, the study was conducted by a Turkish student herself, this may have biased the analysis.

As language is the biggest challenge for the Turkish international students. Pakistan should provide one or two semesters of English language course to the Turkish international students before they start their studies. Many foreign countries have such programs for international students so why not Pakistan?

Peer tutoring by senior Turkish students can prove useful support mechanism for Turkish new comers. Turkish international students can gain more structured strategies to tackle academic obstacles, proven effective by senior students. Such mentors can offer advice on aspects of study skills and possible approaches to assessment.

In almost all the universities, there is a course of foreign language for undergraduate students. Unfortunately, in both the universities from where the sample has been taken, Turkish language was not offered as a foreign language course. Pakistan has quite a number of Turkish international students. So, why not offer Turkish language so local students can better mingle with Turkish international students.

Faculty should be trained on how to approach international students. Like avoiding delivering lectures in local language.

University management should arrange a group of local students, who voluntarily help international students. University can create a club or society who specifically cater the needs of international students like picking foreign students from airport for the first time, guiding them about food and accomadation etc.

6. Conclusion

The finding of this study also showed that Turkish internationals students are not speaking in their classrooms for their rights, such as asking instructors to teach in English and classfellows to talk in English with them. Local students and instuctors talk in Urdu because of their ease but being a Turkish international student, they should ask them to speak in English.

During the interviews of this study researcher also noticed that Turkish international students also have positive things to say about Pakistan, such as learning English and Urdu in a Muslim country without being judged for being a Muslim. On the other hand, Pakistan is quite an economical country as compare to other countries where education is based in English. Also, they were welcomed by the local people of Pakistan for being Turkish as a brother country.

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