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Choosing a Higher Education destination: Marketing of where, why and how?

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ABSTRACT
This study attempts to contribute to marketing services in higher education literature through the relationship between international students’ satisfaction with educational experiences and the necessary adjustments by institutions to augment their services. It also aims to make theoretical contributions by understanding the international students’ satisfaction criteria for university selection and enrolment. The findings of the study offer administrative implications for universities as well, regarding how they could appeal to international students by emphasizing components of institutional branding via online and offline marketing communication tools. Quantitative methodology was employed and data was collected through a survey. Sampling strategy was voluntary participation and 197 international students replied to the survey. Findings indicate that international students use personal contacts and social relations in finding international higher education institutions. Further, international students care about the campus culture (safe or not), the physical infrastructure of the university and library resources provided to students.

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International students; student recruitment; international higher education; satisfaction of international students; Turkey

Introduction
Higher education (HE) has been a big business since the 1990s. Since then, an increasing number of students travel globally to receive education in other countries at various degree levels. This development has led to the globalisation of the HE market and it is considered to be the biggest move for internationalization in HE after the Second World War (Shin & Teichler, 2014). The post-war period marked two significant changes in HE: 1) university education was not only for elites but for all, 2) student enrolment was diversified across many countries since the 1970s. These developments led to the emergence of four major issues in contemporary HE: the connection between education and the labour force, the importance of research, services to people and society, and the internalization of HE institutions. This last issue impacted not only the mobility of students, scholars, and programs, but also reputation and branding in HE in the form of global and regional rankings, which lead to a shift in institutional paradigm in HE from
cooperation to competition. International education has become an industry, a source of revenue and a means to gain enhanced reputations (Van der Wende, 2001).

The international student market plays a very important role in generating income, especially for developing countries. Due to the significant monetary value associated with student fees and living expenses, the international education sector might evolve into the largest services-export industry across the world. In recognition of this, the primary goal of HE in many countries has adopted a variety of strategies designed to attract and retain international students via the provision of high-quality education and services. In other words, converting international students into satisfied customers must serve as a primary goal of HE. Therefore, universities must develop a thorough understanding as to which of their services have the greatest impact on student satisfaction. Determining the factors that influence the university choice process can be seen as a necessary activity for university administrations. Analysis of this process helps to develop a comprehensive understanding of how and why the students select a HE institution and this helps institutions to improve their student recruitment strategies.

Turkey is one of the developing countries that want a piece of this action in the International Education market with its wide range of English medium universities, which attract international students from all around the world. Turkey has experienced an enormous expansion in HE in the recent decade with over 163,000 teaching staff serving 7,749,502 students at a total of 205 universities. Statistics show that the number of international students in this population was 154,505 in the 2018–2019 academic year (about 2% of total students in the HE system). This number was 7,661 in 1990, 16,000 in 2000, 43,000 in 2012, 55,000 in 2014 and reached 110,000 in 2017 (https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/). However, from a global standpoint, Turkish universities have only 1.7 per cent (by 2016, http://data.uis.unesco.org) of the international students across the globe. This means that Turkey has not yet reached the desired level in terms of internationalization. Turkey’s international students are predominantly from developing countries from adjacent regions such as 15,000 from Azerbaijan, 15,000 from Syria, 10,000 from Turkmenistan, 6,000 from Iran and 5,000 from Iraq.

As the university resources are constrained and government-funded marketing campaigns shrink, the financial contributions from international students have played an important role in maintaining the quality of the HE institutions in Turkey. This study aims to make theoretical contributions by understanding the international students’ satisfaction criteria for university selection and enrolment. The findings of the study offer somewhat administrative implications for Turkish universities as well regarding how they could appeal to prospective applicants around the world by emphasizing components of institutional branding via online (online advertising, social media, videos, etc.) and offline marketing communication tools (print publications, print advertising, direct mail, etc.). Consequently, institutions need to focus on the international student experiences to; a) positively improve the students’ experiences, b) ensure that others continue attending because of satisfying experiences, and c) attract more students since the experiences and levels of satisfaction of already recruited students are frequently shared with peers in their home country (Lee, 2008; Pimpa, 2003). All of these have led us to undertake this study to explore the experiences of international students at a leading private university in Turkey.
The importance of this study is that it attempts to contribute to filling the gap between marketing services and HE literature in a developing country through the relationship between international students’ satisfaction with educational experiences in their learning process and the necessary adjustments attempted by institutions to augment their services.

Available research also shows that the results of existing HE marketing literature do not support each other consistently since marketing services literature generally focuses on customer services. Consequently, international HE literature emphasizes mostly the academic and learning aspects of education and/or international students’ overall experiences (Elsharnouby, 2016; Ng & Forbes, 2009). Focusing on these two issues together makes this study unique. It is important to note that there has been a very limited number of studies regarding international students’ satisfaction in Turkey (Arslan & Akkas, 2014; Çelik et al., 2018; Kondakci, 2011; Uddin et al., 2017).

The study employed a quantitative design to gain insight into the sources of satisfaction on campus and reasons for international students choosing a university. Results will be scrutinized in terms of comparability with results gained through other research studies.

As a result, the experiences, needs and expectations of undergraduate and graduate international students at a private Turkish university were investigated. The more specific objectives of the research were as follows:

a) To identify the primary sources of information international students use when choosing universities for their future learning career,

b) To identify the primary reasons for international students’ use in choosing a university for their study and related views for their choice-making,

c) To investigate the satisfaction level of the international students at this particular university and their related views on this topic,

d) To investigate the international students’ experiences at this particular university and their related views on this topic.

**Review of literature**

Choosing a HE institution to enrol in is a complex and difficult process for international students. The factors that influence the decision making of international students to pursue HE show a multi-dimensional character. In this part of the report, we discussed the prior studies on sources of information that international students use in choosing a university, students’ primary reasons for studying abroad, their satisfaction and experiences during their learning process at this particular university.

**Primary sources of information students’ use in choosing a university**

Today’s higher-education environment has become increasingly competitive, and as a result, many public colleges and universities have adopted market-oriented strategies; student recruitment is an increasingly important topic for universities in this ever-increasing competition in the global market. For this purpose, to develop sophisticated
recruitment strategies, recruitment officers at universities need to have a clear understanding of how and why students choose universities. Similarly, universities need to know what messages they should convey by using various media channels, identification of time and target groups are important parameters to be noticed by students, and consequently convincing them to apply and enrol (Obermeit, 2012).

To develop effective strategies for student recruitment, universities need to understand the information sources that students use in their decision-making process (Areces et al., 2016). The internet is one of the main sources of information (Gai et al., 2016; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Obermeit, 2012). The university websites are often the first resource for potential students to learn about school and programs. (Gai et al., 2016). Publications from and about universities are also the most used and best-rated sources (Willich et al., 2011). The most commonly used publication materials include brochures and booklets that are mailed to prospective students or that are distributed through high school guidance counsellors at schools (Armstrong & Lumsden, 2000).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is person-to-person communication regarding brands, products, services, companies, and organizations that have an impact on consumers’ decisions to purchase (Jamal & Foxall, 2009). This type of communication is a more reliable form of marketing and can be an efficient tool. Someone’s direct recommendations possess power and have an impact on purchase decisions as well. WOM is also an effective promotional tool for the international education market. WOM has a significant influence on consumer behaviour and has a special influence on the choice of study abroad (Herold, 2015). As modern society becomes more and more communication-intense and engaged in content sharing, universities need to adapt the latest changes in communications strategies to differentiate themselves and to make their message memorable.

Social media is one of the new mediums that has been widely used in student recruitment (Galan et al., 2015; Shields & Peruta, 2019). Social media has become a key part of human interaction and communication that has a big influence on people’s behaviour and choices and is classified as electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) (Mangold & Smith, 2012).

**Primary reasons students use for studying abroad**

Universities need to know the factors that determine the decision rules the students use in choosing a HE institution to hone their recruitment strategies. The literature shows us that there are several primary reasons the students use for studying abroad: (1) the need to gain individual development, autonomy, confidence, and independence, (2) aspiration to be ‘multicultural’ as a result of living and studying in another culture and locale, (3) professional achievement and financial gain (Restaino et al., 2020; Wen & Hu, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, universities need to know which factors influence the decisions the students use to enrol at an institution to improve institutional recruitment strategies. The academic reputation of the institution is one of the reasons for students to select a university (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Shanka et al., 2006; Wilkins & Huism, 2011). The perceived quality of a university can be related to the services offered or the quality of teaching and research programs (Aydin, 2015). Many studies have shown that international students’ decision on university choice is influenced by various attributes the prospective
The institution has such as; staff quality, availability of desired programs, curriculum quality, quality of facilities such as libraries, computing facilities and social facilities, campus infra-structure, class sizes and extra-curricular factors such as sports, leisure or canteens (Aydın, 2015; Chen, 2008; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

Financial considerations such as the cost of tuition, financial aid, scholarships, accommodation and transportation costs and the availability of part-time work are of high importance for international students when choosing a university (Chen, 2008). Students also base their decisions on other costs at the university. Before making a choice, they estimate how much money they will have to spend on a decent education. It does not only mean university fees but may also include accommodation and transportation costs. Financial aid reduces costs; therefore, the impact of financial aid is another significant factor affecting students’ university choices (Aydın, 2015).

In literature, other factors influence international students’ choice of university, one of them is the location of the university, which refers to where the university is located geographically, as well as the distance from home, which is also of crucial importance for international students (Abubakar et al., 2010).

One of the crucial aspects of university choice is the prospects offered to students for a good career in the future. The international students’ career exploration and actual future career expectations also influence their university choices (Aydın, 2015).

The family was found to be a key influence on international students’ university choices. The financial position of international students’ families, their expectations, the level of information about the host country, the level of competitiveness within the family culture and their level of persuasiveness have a strong influence on the choices of international students (Pimpa, 2003).

Regarding universities in Turkey particularly, there are some studies investigating the main reasons why international students want to study in Turkey (Ilhan et al., 2012; Kondakci, 2011 Özoğlu et al., 2015). Several factors including comparable quality of education, affordability of living and education, scholarship opportunities, and recommendations by family or friends were found to influence their choice of Turkey. Apart from these factors, one more factor called ‘geographical proximity’ also influences international students’ choices.

To sum, relevant literature tells us that international students make their choices based on reasons such as reputation, financial considerations, location, curriculum, and advice of others and information sources such as the internet, friends, parents, publications, and social networks.

**On-campus facts: satisfaction and learning experiences of international students**

Elliot and Healy (2001) defined student satisfaction in HE as ‘a short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of a student’s educational experience’. Several authors argued that (Elsharnouby, 2016; Parahoo et al., 2013) this experience involves not only interactions with faculty, courses, and the overall learning experience, but also other aspects of student life such as administrative services, staff interactions, the physical characteristics of academic facilities, the social environment and counselling support. Therefore, the HE services are usually grouped under the following topics: a) **core level services**, which is the
education itself, such as teaching and academic staff quality and the expertise and knowledge of administrative staff (Clemes et al., 2001), b) augmented services, which include physical environment quality, learning environment, social factors, and campus climate (Elsharnouby, 2016).

Earlier studies show that academic support makes a difference in the experiences of international students since some of them think that the academic experience in another country can be extremely stressful due to heavy academic demands (Zhai, 2002). Therefore, various authors have emphasized the importance of organized orientations such as counselling services and faculty support for the satisfaction and adjustment of international students (Curtin et al., 2013).

The idea behind the international student flow must be taken seriously by institutions since having students from different nationalities and cultures require an understanding of their varied needs, expectations and perceptions of the delivered services (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009). Hence, universities should develop and augment their a) academic support services, b) faculty engagement and support services c) social interaction support services and d) campus life and campus climate.

In this sense, the existing literature on factors shaping the students’ experiences has been mostly on international students’ strategies to cope with the realities of study abroad (Bianchi, 2013) or the impact of their international study on their employability or identity. However, there is still the need to understand the factors which play a role in the satisfaction of international students and their adjustments in the host country and institutions. Although countries compete with each other to attract more international students, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding the experiences of those students concerning their satisfaction with their choices and the satisfaction level during their studies in the host institution and country. Indeed, it is generally believed that institutions do not pay enough attention to the support students after they arrive in the host country and do not carefully monitor their positive/negative educational experiences (Lee, 2008). This would help the HE institutions to both recruit quality international students and meet their needs since the competition is growing due to the globally increasing numbers, diversity, and languages skills among international students.

As in any sector, the education market has its business owners, the educational institutions, and its consumers, the students (Elsharnouby, 2016). However, in contrast to other sectors, consumers in the education market have difficulty evaluating service quality before they purchase (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009) since they rely mainly on visible service augmentation elements, not ‘the domain of the core content of education’ (Elsharnouby, 2016, p. 68). Therefore, to add extra value to their core education services, educational institutions need to promote their augmentations such as campus life, academic and social support facilities, and financial support services (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009; Zhai, 2002). As for the evaluation of the quality of those services, there are key indicators before students’ enrolment such as alumni connections, others’ recommendations and/or brand reputation (Elsharnouby, 2016; Paswan et al., 2007).

As for the faculty engagement and support services, multiple studies have shown the effect of various factors as follows: a) faculty influence (Glass et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) on student achievement through teaching and mentoring (Lamport, 1993), b) interaction with faculty, in the classroom or during office hours, c) effective academic advisors (Curtin et al., 2013; Glass et al., 2017). International students frequently face
challenges related to language barriers, and different and unfamiliar academic structures (Curtin et al., 2013; Zhai, 2002). Therefore, faculty engagement and support such as the ‘helpful attitude of the professors’ (Lamport, 1993) are highly valued by international students. Social interaction and support services are also a crucial part of international student satisfaction and adjustment.

Although studying abroad is beneficial for the student’s future careers, the challenge and stress in the new academic cultural environment may create a negative impact on their academic experiences (Mossakowski & Zhang, 2014). Research studies emphasized the importance of various kinds of support services regarding the satisfaction of international students such as schools, academic programs, peer groups, mentors and social groups (Urban & Palmer, 2016).

Campus life for international students should also require other types of support mechanisms. These include the quality of administrative office services, instructional support resources, comfort and safety, availability of information for financial aid and scholarships and maintenance services (Paswan et al., 2007; Paswan & Ganesh, 2009).

All these ‘core products related’ services may not be enough since international students need other types of services and support. Most international students come with assistantships, scholarships or other funding, therefore are faced with visa and immigration issues. Moreover, campus climate, which provides an inclusive learning campus environment has the potential to create belongingness and decrease stress (Sümer et al., 2008) which in turn will contribute to brand loyalty.

Universities cannot survive in the twenty-first century by only focusing on students’ academic needs; they must also pay close attention to the factors which affect international students’ satisfaction with their experiences on campus and their adjustment to campus, local and national cultures (Sherry et al., 2010).

Methodology

Research context

This study examined international students at a prestigious, private university in Turkey. The institution is recognized and ranked internationally as one of the pioneers HE institutions in Turkey. The institution hosts around 13,000 students pursuing degrees in 34 undergraduate and 58 graduate programs. The medium of instruction at the institution is English, and its international community of scholars and students forms an essential component of the university’s academic and social life. Further, international faculty and instructors make up more than a quarter of all academic staff, representing 34 different countries. There is a growing body of full-time international students and exchange students coming from 73 countries. It has been given a good ranking in the 2017 Times Higher Education Asia University Rankings and named as one of Turkey’s highest-ranked universities in the latest Quacquarelli Symonds Graduate Employability Rankings for 2018. The university has student and faculty exchange programs with several universities in different countries including many European countries, the U.S., Australia, Japan, the UK and Canada. Around 64% of the student body benefit from a variety of scholarships.
The Office of International Students plays a significant role in the internationalization activities of the institution by promoting its programs and providing support for almost all international and academic issues and affairs. The Office provides assistance and guidance to both international degree-seeking students and incoming/outgoing exchange students through all phases of their academic and social conduct such as the application process, course selection and accommodation opportunities, via orientation programs and cultural trips.

Participants
All international students (undergraduate, graduate, full-time, and exchange students) at this private university constituted the target population of the study. There were 923 international students at the time of the study, 864 of them were full time and 59 were exchange students. The Office of International Students sent e-mail invitations to all the international students, asking them to participate in the study. Students who volunteered completed an anonymous online survey. Out of 923 international students, 197 responded to the survey. The overall response rate was 21.3%. The sampling error for the 95% confidence interval was 6.13. The data collection took place over 5 months from April 2019 to September 2019.

The survey
The online survey included 52 questions and was made up of 5 sections: 1) demographic info asking the international students’ gender, country of origin, level of study, major, scholarship status, level of perceived English proficiency, 2) a section on how they heard about the university and their study major (subject, country, university), 3) a section (n = 18) asking about what influenced their choice of this specific university using a Likert Scale (where 1 = not important at all, 5 = extremely important), 4) a section (n = 23) asking them to evaluate their satisfaction with the learning experiences at the university, living experiences, academic performance, social interaction and adjustment at the university by a Likert Scale (1 = not satisfied at all, 5 = extremely satisfied), 5) finally, a section (n = 11) asking them if they would recommend this university to others if the program overall was good value for money, etc. again through a Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The items in the online survey were assessed for content validity. Content validity deals with whether the researchers have a sufficient and appropriate sample of items to adequately represent the construct of interest, in this case, the satisfaction and adjustment level of students. To ensure satisfying content validity, the researchers made detailed literature reviews of the constructs of satisfaction and adjustment. Content validity was also assessed by subject matter experts. The online survey was sent to two experts, one working in the fields of research methods and measurement, one in international education. The experts were asked to provide comments and suggestions for each online survey question. Subject experts reviewed the draft survey and made comments about the content validity of the survey. As a result, 3 draft items were eliminated and 13 items were rewritten.
The results of the reliability analysis for the overall online survey and each sub-scale are provided in the study. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the overall scale was .94. The Cronbach’s alpha values for each sub-scale were calculated as .78, .93 and .92, respectively.

**Data analysis**

The data analysis focused on examining international students’ use of different sources when searching for their university, reasons for choosing their university, their satisfaction level at the university, and their experiences. Several statistical methods were employed to achieve these objectives.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to describe international students’ experiences and demographic variables (gender, full-time/exchange status, undergraduate/graduate status, scholarship status and language proficiency).

An inferential statistical analysis (multiple regression) was conducted to determine the effects of demographic variables on the international students’ choice-making, satisfaction and experiences. Before conducting the main analyses, the assumptions of the multiple regression analysis (normality, outliers, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals) were examined and validated. Furthermore, the variables were dummy coded [Gender1 (gender), TypeStud (fulltime/exchange status), EducLevel1, Educlevel2 (undergraduate/graduate status) Schoolar1, Schoolar2 (scholarship status), Prof1, Prof2 and Prof3 (language proficiency)] before entering the model as predictor variables. All statistical analyses were conducted using a statistical package for the social sciences. The level of significance was set as α = .05.

**Results**

**Profiles of respondents**

The online survey was responded to by 197 respondents, of whom 35% were female and 65% were male. The participants of the study included both undergraduates (83.8%) and graduates (Master-12.7% and Ph. D-3.6%) full-time (84.8%) or exchange (15.2%). With regards to scholarships, 54.8% of the respondents had full scholarships, 31.5% had partial scholarships and 13.7% had no scholarships. Of the respondents who received scholarships, 90.2% received their scholarships from the host university, 4% from their governments and 5.8% from third parties. 71.1% of the respondents had advanced English proficiency, whereas 27.9% of respondents had intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency.

The largest group of respondents were Engineering majors (39.1%, n = 77), followed by Business and Management majors (13.7%, n = 27), Science and Technology majors (8.6%, n = 17) and Architecture and Economics majors (6.1% each, n = 12). These four majors amounted to 74.3% of the respondents. The remaining 25% were distributed among the other majors.

The respondents came from 43 countries of which the three top countries were Pakistan (36.5%), Azerbaijan (12.7%) and Iran (8.1%). Students from these three countries
made up 57.4% of all respondents. The remainder of the respondents came from over 40 other countries such as Turkmenistan, Albania, Jordan, Malaysia, Lebanon, Morocco, etc.

**Primary sources of information students’ use in choosing this university**

Respondents were asked to indicate the primary information sources they used in choosing this university. Among the sources, ‘friends’ was the most used source indicated by 38% (n = 73) of the respondents. Students seemed to resort less to the other sources: ‘internet/brochures/advertisement’ (20%), ‘school counsellor or teacher’ (13%) and ‘from family members who studied’ (13%). Exchange agreement also plays a significant role; noted by 11% of the respondents. Also, ‘study abroad recruiters’ was indicated as one of the used sources by 5% of the respondents.

These findings are interesting in the sense that the primary source of information in identifying this university for undergraduate or graduate study is by *word-of-mouth* (WOM). Even in the age of the internet and electronic information sources, international students use personal contacts and social relationships for finding an international HE institution. From a marketing point of view, this finding tells us that our satisfied customers today will be our primary aid in finding potential customers in the future.

Finally, when asked how they prioritized their choice, 42.6% (n = 84) replied that their choice was based on the ‘subject’, 39.1% (n = 77) said they chose the ‘university’, and 18.3% (n = 36) said they chose the ‘country’. It is interesting to state that ‘subject’ and ‘university’ are the most important factors for choosing a HE institution.

**Primary reasons students use for studying aboard**

The second objective of this research was to identify the primary reasons underpinning international students’ decisions on the university. The following primary reasons were highlighted by the sampled students: scholarship, university (academic reputation, tuition fees, teaching), country (safe, geographical proximity, affordable cost of living, culture) and personal influences (friends and family).

The results showed that ‘the university offers scholarships’ had the highest mean ($M = 4.49, SD = 1.01$) followed by the items, ‘the university offers high-quality teaching’ ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.90$) and ‘the university is well-ranked’ ($M = 4.16, SD = 0.94$). These results are important since they tell us the primary reasons for students’ preferring this university. Furthermore, almost half of the students are from three countries: Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Iran. Since these are not very developed countries, it is quite reasonable for students to seek scholarships. Because of this, the scholarship opportunities provided by the university becomes one of the primary attractors for students seeking study abroad opportunities. We may say that universities need to offer various types of scholarships to increase the number of international applicants.

Following scholarship opportunities, students care more about the international reputation/ranking of the university. The findings showed that ‘the university offers high-quality teaching’ and ‘the university is well-ranked’ were the most important reasons for choosing this HE institution. Notably, when the results of the previous section were analysed together with this section, ‘academic reputation’ emerged as the most important factor (81.7%), followed by ‘country’ (18.3%). This is consistent with the high
percentage of students who chose the university as their first choice. These findings constitute an important indicator of the university’s reputation since there are other HE institutions in the region.

The results also showed that the relative importance of living expenses ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.96$), safety ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.01$) and geographic proximity of the host country ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.38$) helped to determine choices of international students. Thus, we can conclude that geographic proximity was less important than living expenses and the safety of the host country for the international students at this university. The influence of others identified in the literature is an additional reason to choose a university (Briggs & Wilson, 2007). This research showed that personal influences (family and friends) had a modest mean ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.32$) which meant that it was not seen as an important reason for the respondents. This is not in line with the findings reported in the previous section, in particular, ‘friends’ was the most used information source for international students. Finally, other primary reasons were ‘high graduate employment rate’ ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.13$) and ‘a good careers services and links with employers’ ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.17$). It can be said that assistance provided by the university with future careers seemed to be an important reason for international students. In line with the other results, it can be inferred that the future retention of international students is influenced by the quality of the educational experiences and technical assistance currently delivered to these students.

In this study, the first Multiple Regression Analysis was carried out to examine whether the five variables (gender, full-time/exchange status, undergraduate/graduate status, scholarship status, and language proficiency) successfully predict the reasons that international students use for choosing this university. As shown in Table 1, 20% of the variance in primary reasons international students use for choosing this university was significantly explained by these two variables: gender and full-time/exchange status. The gender and full-time/exchange status separately explained respectively 4% and 8% of the variance in the primary reasons for international students to choose this university.

Standardized coefficient values showed that the full-time/exchange status was the strongest predictor of reasons why students chose this university ($β = .33$, $p < .05$). There was also a significant positive association between gender and the primary reasons for the international students choosing this university ($β = .17$, $p < .05$).

**Table 1.** Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analysis Results for the Variables Predicting Reasons International Students Give for Choosing This University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>$β$</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Correlations</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Zero order</td>
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<td>Model 1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
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<td>3.601</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.178</td>
<td>2.608</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.108</td>
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<tr>
<td>TypeStud</td>
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<td>.334</td>
<td>3.967</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.232</td>
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<td>Educlevel1</td>
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<td>.020</td>
<td>.173</td>
<td>.862</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educlevel2</td>
<td>.247</td>
<td>1.611</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>.878</td>
<td>-.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar1</td>
<td>4.304</td>
<td>2.332</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>1.846</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar2</td>
<td>2.946</td>
<td>1.177</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>2.503</td>
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<td>.139</td>
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<td>Prof.1</td>
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<td>-.137</td>
<td>-.205</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>-.158</td>
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<td>.910</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>4.110</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.  
* $p < .05$
As regards the demographic information presented before, it indicates that 65% of students who participated in the study were males, about 85% were full time and about 55% were on full scholarship. Therefore, the student composition of the study was predominantly male, full-time and fully financed by the university. It only stands to reason that the sub-problem of ‘primary reasons the students use for choosing this university’ would indicate international students who are male, on full-time status and fully financed by the university.

On-campus facts: satisfaction and learning experiences of international students

The third goal of this research was to determine the satisfaction level of the students at this university. The satisfaction of international students was described by the assessment of services provided by the university, which includes the quality of teaching and academic services, support facilities, physical infrastructure, and the social climate on campus.

The findings of the study revealed that the item ‘… safety and security on the campus’ had the highest mean ($M = 4.66, SD = 0.70$) followed by the items ‘… library services’ ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.81$) and ‘… the campus environment and infrastructure’ ($M = 4.66, SD = 0.70$). It seems that the students care more about the campus culture (safe or not), the physical infrastructure of the university and library resources provided to students. Interestingly, some quality-related items are not seen in the first three satisfaction-related elements. It may be because the students take those ‘quality-related’ issues for granted as part of the university. The case university is indeed within the highest-ranked universities in Turkey in terms of the quality of academic staff, teaching and research.

Students who are high in educational satisfaction not only enjoy being students, but they also experience satisfaction with communication when interacting with their classmates and instructors (Wadsworth et al., 2008). This study found that the perceived educational satisfaction of international students was quite high at this particular HE institution.

The item ‘… the support and guidance provided by this university that helps my involvement in social activities and student organizations’ had the lowest mean ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.32$). To support students’ all-around development, students need to be encouraged in active engagement in student communities and in making sensible choices among opportunities for exploring new ideas and new roles in the communities. From this result, it can be concluded that the university should monitor more closely how the student culture influences students’ social participation and intellectual and personal growth.

In this study, multiple regression analysis was carried out to examine whether the five variables (gender, full-time/exchange status, undergraduate/graduate status, scholarship status, and language proficiency) successfully predicted the satisfaction level of the students at this university. Results showed that (Table 2) the variables were not found to be significantly related in the predicted directions ($R^2 = .072, F (8,188) = 1.838, p = .05$). As a result, it can be concluded that these five variables did not successfully predict the satisfaction level of the students at this university.
These results mean that none of the five variables significantly deviate from other variables in assessing the satisfaction level. International students studying at this university share a common ground in that they all consider this university satisfactory in many respects. No doubt, this is a rather good finding and provides feedback for the university’s performance.

Overall experiences of students at this university

The fourth goal of this research was to explore the experiences of international students attending this university by focusing on their adjustment and experiences. The means and standard deviations of each item in the online survey related to the experiences of students as follows: The item ‘I feel that I am capable of dealing with future challenges at this university’ had the highest mean (M = 3.83, SD = 1.22) value, followed by the items ‘I will recommend this university to others’ (M = 3.81, SD = 1.28), and ‘I feel the program overall was good value for money’ (M = 3.79, SD = 1.19). According to the descriptive statistics related to each item, the sample of international students reported good experiences at this university. ‘I feel that I am capable of dealing with future challenges at this university’ (M = 3.83, SD = 1.22) seem to tell us that the university, in terms of its status, academic ideals, campus culture, etc. give students the confidence that they need to feel capable of dealing with future challenges successfully. They say that they would recommend the university to others in the future. This finding is also quite consistent with another finding regarding the importance of WOM presented earlier: ‘word-of-mouth’ being the primary source of information for students in choosing this university.

The results given in Table 3 show that one of the variables (education level) was found to be significantly related to the predicted directions. These results reveal that 28.2% of the variance in experiences of international students was significantly explained by one variable, namely the education level. Accordingly, the education level variance explained 8% of the variance in experiences of international students.

There was a significant negative association between education level and evaluation of experiences of international students. This result is important in the sense that the majority of international students at this Turkish private university are undergraduate students. About 82% of the international student body is made up of undergraduate students.

**Note.** p = .05

### Table 2. Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analysis Results for the Variables Predicting Satisfaction Levels of Students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>ß</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Zero order</th>
<th>Partial</th>
<th>Part</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>94.887</td>
<td>6.778</td>
<td>13.999</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>94.887</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender1</td>
<td>2.894</td>
<td>2.601</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>1.112</td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>2.894</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TypeStud−1</td>
<td>−4.670</td>
<td>4.267</td>
<td>−.099</td>
<td>−1.094</td>
<td>.275</td>
<td>−.113</td>
<td>−.080</td>
<td>−.077</td>
<td>−4.670</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educlevel1−4</td>
<td>−10.486</td>
<td>5.322</td>
<td>−.239</td>
<td>−1.970</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>−.158</td>
<td>−.142</td>
<td>−.138</td>
<td>−10.486</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educlevel2−4</td>
<td>−3.098</td>
<td>3.033</td>
<td>−.122</td>
<td>−1.021</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>−.074</td>
<td>−.072</td>
<td>−3.098</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar1</td>
<td>4.137</td>
<td>4.389</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>.943</td>
<td>.347</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>4.137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar2</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>2.215</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>.759</td>
<td>−.100</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof.1−1</td>
<td>−17.412</td>
<td>12.122</td>
<td>−.103</td>
<td>−1.436</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>−.134</td>
<td>−.104</td>
<td>−.101</td>
<td>−17.412</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof.3−1</td>
<td>1.472</td>
<td>1.712</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.860</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>1.472</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. p = .05
students, about 13% are Master’s students and only about 3.5% are PhD students. This negative association must be because being an undergraduate or graduate student makes a difference in a student’s evaluation of expectations. Undergraduate students evaluate their experiences more positively than graduate students. This should not be surprising since these two groups of students do have different needs and expectations. It is quite normal that graduate students would be more demanding than undergraduate students based on the difference in age and maturity level. For us, this finding seems highly important: Institutions must be aware of the differences in the needs and expectations of graduate and undergraduate students, with the former being more demanding in their expectations from a university.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of international students at a prestigious private university in Turkey. We specifically looked at finding out the primary sources of information the already recruited students had used in choosing this university, the primary reasons why they chose this university, their satisfaction level with various aspects of the university as well as their level of satisfaction with their learning experiences.

Choosing which HE institution to apply to is a high-risk decision for international students given its long-term implications on the future lives of students as well as their future careers (Simões & Soares, 2010). Briggs and Wilson (2007) state that students’ decisions are based on a combination of information available; word of mouth, perceptions about and reputation of the university. Our results show that international students tend to use close, personal links in acquiring initial information about the university. Their primary sources of information about the university are friends, relatives and countrymen who had attended the institution before. Results from other previous studies showed that friends are a source of the necessary information about universities for prospective students to apply. Furthermore, advice from other relatives and high school teachers were proved to encourage or impede students from applying to a university (Perna, 2006). Further, Elsharnouby (2016) and Paswan et al. (2007) indicated, alumni connections

Table 3. Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analysis Results for the Variables Predicting Evaluation of Experiences of International Students.

| Variable | B   | SE  | ß   | t   | p    | Zero order | Partial | Part | R²   | Adjusted R² |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------------|---------|------|------|------|-------------|
| Model 1  |     |     |     |     |      | .282*      |         |      |      | .079 |
| (Constant)| 47.127 | 4.086 | 11.534 | .000 |      |            |         |      |      |      |
| Gender1  | 2.959 | 1.568 | .138 | 1.887 | .061 | .160       | .136    | .132 |
| TypeStud | −1.898 | 2.572 | −.067 | −.738 | .462 | −.129      | −.054   | −.052 |
| Educlevel1 | −6.821 | 3.208 | −.257 | −2.126 | .035 | −.197      | −.153   | −.149 |
| Educlevel2 | −1.139 | 1.828 | −.074 | −.623 | .534 | .135       | −.045   | −.044 |
| Scholar1  | −.625 | 2.646 | −.030 | −.236 | .814 | −.008      | −.017   | −.017 |
| Scholar2  | −.354 | 1.335 | −.032 | −.265 | .791 | −.059      | −.019   | −.019 |
| Prof.1    | −5.054 | 7.308 | −.049 | −.692 | .490 | −.071      | −.050   | −.048 |
| Prof.3    | .477  | 1.032 | .037 | .462  | .645 | .068       | .034    | .032 |

Note. *p < .05
and others’ recommendations are important information sources for students who seek an educational opportunity in another country. Our results validate all these findings.

The results of the study also show the importance of the internet and printed materials as a source of information for international students. This result is partially in line with Veloutsou et al. (2004) who concluded that students rely principally on information sources especially produced by the university. Previous studies have reported the growing importance of websites as an information source for university applicants (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). However, our findings suggest that the internet and printed materials are secondary or indirect sources of the international students in our case. The results of the study showed that parents were also one of the primary sources of information for international students.

Compared to domestic students, foreign students generate more income for the universities that host them, thus universities need to become more active in the international education market (Akar, 2010). Therefore, one of the ways to become more active in the international education market is to be aware of sources that influence international students in finding a university. From a marketing management point of view, implications from this research may contribute to the design of more effective marketing communication campaigns for universities. As mentioned before, one of the primary findings of the study clarified that the primary source of information in choosing a university’s undergraduate or graduate program is by ‘word of mouth.’ Therefore, reinforcing the connection between the university and former students through alumni associations and/or other instruments may prove beneficial to increase the number of incoming international students.

Regarding the rationale the students used in choosing this university, it seems that the scholarships offered by the university, the quality of teaching and the overall ranking of the university by recognized benchmarks were the reasons mentioned by the students. Paswan and Ganesh (2009), Zhai (2002) and Mahmoud et al. (2019) argued that to add extra value to their core education services, educational institutions need to promote their augmentations such as campus life, academic and social support, and financial support services to potential students. It is a validated finding that financial support and scholarship opportunities are important attractors for international students in their choice of universities. On the other hand, our findings contradict with Elsharnouby (2016) who argues that, when choosing a university, international students rely mostly on visible service augmentation elements rather than ‘the domain of the core content of education’ (that is, the quality of education). ‘Reputation’ seems to be a very important quality matter that affects students’ choices (Elsharnouby, 2016; Paswan et al., 2007). Notably, reputation is a social identity and it is a significant and intangible resource that could remarkably contribute to the performance of the organization (Shahijan et al., 2016). The perceived reputation and prestige of a university have a significant impact on students’ decisions to apply; interestingly; this impact can be indirectly brought to students by their peers. Furthermore, when the students are satisfied with the university’s services, they could encourage the university to upgrade and improve its credibility and prestige (Navarro et al., 2005).

From all these, it can be concluded that international students have a good feeling about their university, admire and respect their university. Some of the findings of studies conducted by Özoğlu et al. (2015), Ilhan et al. (2012) Kondakci (2011) were
consistent with our research showing that international students decided to study at the university they chose; because of perceived ‘high quality of teaching’ and ‘opportunity of applying for a job’ by using the university’s prestigious name. Also, the perceived reputation of the institution is brought to the attention of students by their peers, because the findings of the research showed that the primary sources of the students choosing a university are their friends.

Reasons such as ‘the country have an affordable cost of living’ and ‘the country is a safe and welcoming place for international students’ were admitted as the factors related to the host country. These factors seem consistent with the findings of Kondakci (2011) and Ilhan et al. (2012) that, ‘geographical proximity,’ ‘the country having a similar culture with the home country’ and ‘having friends or family who has attended to this university before’ were not considered as important factors that influenced the choice of international students at this university. Although international students think that the most important sources of information about the university were their friends, they did not specifically mention their friends as an important factor in deciding in favour of this university. Findings of some other studies indicated that international students are highly considerate of the image of the country in which the university in question is located in selecting their universities (Peng et al., 2000; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). In other words, international students tend to give priority to the country first, then the institution. The results of this study contradicted these findings. The results showed that the perceived reputation and prestige of a university together have significant impacts on students’ decisions. In other words, students tend to first choose the institution before the country.

It was also the purpose of this study to find out the predictors of the reason’s students for choosing this university and their experiences at this university. Multiple regression analysis results approved that gender was a significant predictor of the reasons for international students for choosing this university. A review of studies of university choice factors indicates that gender differences have been reported as a significant determinant factor (Paulsen, 1990; McDonough, 1997). Our results validate all these findings. Based upon the findings of the effect of gender on the reasons international students preferring a university, female support services or centres at an institution might be especially effective in setting social contact with female students. The results of this study also showed the impact of being full-time or in exchange for choosing the university. The reasons used by the exchange students preferring a university are different from the reasons the regular full-time students use for choosing a university.

Satisfaction is an important factor in the international HE sector because when the students are satisfied with the university’s services, they could then encourage the university to upgrade and improve its credibility and prestige, which could in turn raise the number of incoming students (Shahijan et al., 2016). Moreover, satisfaction has a role as an outcome of the educational process because student satisfaction has been associated with later professional attitudes, career commitment, and retention on the part of students. The ‘satisfaction of students’ at this university, three items stand out among others: safety and security on the campus, library services, campus environment and infrastructure. It seems that the students care about the campus culture (safe or not), the physical infrastructure of the university and library resources provided to students. Studies by
Paswan et al. (2007), Paswan and Ganesh (2009) and Padlee and Reimers (2015) had similar findings.

Integrating international students in the classroom through quality education practices and teaching expertise has become a priority at many institutions (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). Results of this study showed that, in terms of satisfaction with the quality of the education and services provided, international students consistently rated aspects of teaching more positively. It was evident that aspects of teaching such as the quality of lectures, accessibility of staff, availability of resources and staff were the sources of their satisfaction.

Based on our findings, we suggest that the HE institutions should specifically address actions that can enhance the academic adjustment of international students. This can, for example, be done by providing more information about the academic culture of the institution before international students move to the host university through the information sources that international students use more. The findings lead to the recommendations that universities could improve the experience of international students by providing clear information about courses, creating a flexible and enjoyable classroom environment, and ensuring that student support services are adequately resourced. To provide positive experiences for international students, institutions can provide partners for international students to facilitate the transition in academic and social life such as a mix of social activities, utilizing other academic and non-academic support.

Several studies reported that English skills are related to overall satisfaction with experience in the host country (Fletcher & Stren, 1989). Further, students’ financial situations (whether they are on scholarship or not) are also correlated with international students’ level of satisfaction (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). There are also research studies that referred to the importance of the differences between students’ gender on their satisfaction (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2020; O’Driscoll, 2012; Sheard, 2009). Our findings regarding some variables on the satisfaction of international students contradict what the literature argues.

The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that none of the independent variables (gender, full-time/exchange status, undergraduate/graduate status, scholarship status, and language proficiency) was significant predictors of the satisfaction level of international students at this university.

The literature contains much discussion on the range of problems about the experiences of international students in an unfamiliar culture in a foreign country, such as lack of meaningful relationships with host nationals, discrimination, language difficulties, unfamiliar academic approaches and financial problems (Lee, 2008; Sherry et al., 2010). Our findings related to international students’ experiences at this university contradicts what the literature argues. Here at this university, international students were generally pleased with being here, in other words, they reported good experiences with this university.

Several studies report that female international students have more difficulty than males in making adaptations to the social and academic demands of the environment (Fletcher & Stren, 1989; Manese et al., 1988). In our study, however, gender was not found to be significantly related to the experiences of international students. On the other hand, the results of the multiple regression analysis confirmed that the experiences of international students at this university were significantly predicted negatively by
being graduate or undergraduate students. Perrucci and Hu (1995) reported that the positive experiences of international graduate students are influenced by several factors and social resources such as academic achievement, language skills, marital status, perceived discrimination, and contact with others. These resources can be strengthened by specific programs available through the university, and thereby contribute to a more satisfactory academic and social experience of its international students. We conclude that our results validate all these findings.

The available literature tells us that fulfilling the rationales of internationalization of a university depends not only on the adaptability of international students to local conditions, but also on the priorities, choices and level of commitment of local students, administrative staff, and faculty members (Kondakci et al., 2008). The results of this study showed that international students had very positive perceptions of native students, administrative and teaching staff, therefore internalization of the university can be considered to be in a good state.

International students can contribute to the HE environment in other ways, culturally in terms of facilitating the development of intercultural competencies among all students and positively impacting the institution’s internationalization efforts. In addition to the cultural contributions, they also help create jobs and add invaluable scientific innovation and technological improvements to the local community. Therefore, universities must know the development of services to students from different countries, and this should be part of their long-term organizational strategies. The success of this approach will depend on the intercultural understanding of all employees of the university. Therefore, training sessions and seminars on intercultural awareness, effective teaching methods for students from different cultures and strategic initiatives in addressing student diversity might help to enhance this understanding.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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