

The Problems in the Management of Mobility of Turkish Students Studying in Latvia

Problēmas Latvijā studējošo turku studentu mobilitātes vadībā

Sibel Burçer

University of Latvia
Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art
Doctoral student
Jūrmalas gatve 74, Rīga, LV-1083
Email: sibelburcer@gmail.com

The aim of this research is to study the most frequent obstacles occurring in the process of management of Turkish international mobile students, who have completed a study visit at a Latvian higher education institution. The purpose of the study is to suggest the future steps that should be taken in order to make Latvian universities more attractive for the outgoing mobile students from Turkey. The research was conducted by using semi-structured interviews of administrators of international relations departments at three Latvian higher education institutions. The results showed that the most common problem can be divided into two main categories: bureaucratic problems and cultural problems. Yet, these problems are not always due to the insufficient management practices of the Latvian universities, but are often the result of the general lack of preparedness on the hands of the students for engaging in study visits abroad.

Keywords: International student mobility, ERASMUS, international relations department, Latvian higher education institutions, Turkish mobile students.

Introduction

Latvia achieved an early membership in the international student mobility programmes within the European Union. In 1998, the country began its participation in the EU official programmes SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI, and YOUTH FOR EUROPE (Ozolins & Rumbule, 2003). Today, one of the leading state-run universities in the country, the University of Latvia, has a constantly growing number of exchange students, a fact that contributes to the international attractiveness of this university for foreign visiting students. Turkey represents a country with a vast network of higher education institutions, and consequently, a high number of students. Currently, there are 190 institutions that provide higher education courses in the country (The Council of Higher Education, 2014). As opposed to Latvia, Turkey is a more recent member of the ERASMUS programme, where it was accepted as a full participant in the academic year of 2004–2005. As a country with a large population of university students, Turkey is one of the major players in international

student mobility. Turkey is one of its fastest growing participants with regards to the number of outgoing students, who go to study at a foreign university (Arslan, 2013).

In order for the university to be more attractive for international students, its representatives must work more effectively to ensure high quality study courses. Furthermore, the university's attractiveness for international mobile students requires development of a genuinely international environment. Creating familiar settings will prevent the international mobile students from considering themselves as outsiders in comparison to the domestic students. Yet, the lack of experience of the international relations department's staff at the higher education institutions in managing student mobility might negatively reflect on the entire aspect of international student mobility. Furthermore, knowing that Turkey is a more recent member in programmes for international student mobility, the lack of preparedness of the Turkish students to adapt to the international settings at a foreign university might also negatively affect the process and produce further difficulties. Consequently, there is a need for an assessment of the management process of the mobility of exchange students from the perspective of the staff of the Latvian universities. The aim of this study is to point out the most frequent problems faced by the HEI's administration in the process of management of Turkish mobile students studying at Latvian universities. Furthermore, the study aims at determining the future steps that can be taken to make the universities more attractive for mobile students.

Approach to international mobile students at Latvian universities

In order to research and assess the experiences of the administration in the international relations offices at the universities in Latvia, it is of a great use to consider the general attitudes about broader subjects of the university's staff in the country. In this regard, at the University of Latvia, there are two dominant views of the mission of the university among the academic staff. The proponents of the first view are more conservative towards the function of the university and consider that the university should be focused on its traditional purposes, and it should be less flexible in the academic activities, as well as less prone to innovation (Kristovska, 2006). On the other hand, the proponents of the second view consider that the university should provide broader academic opportunities for the student population of the country, so that after completing their higher education, they can be more competitive on the job market within the country, as well as in the territory on the European Union (Kristovska, 2006).

The academic staff's perception of the students might differ depending on various factors. In some exceptional cases, the students can be perceived as customers or as individuals who should feel fortunate to receive a state scholarship, and thus, should not expect more than what they already receive (Kelo, 2007). With regard to international mobile students, at the University of Latvia, for example, many members of the academic staff consider that a larger number of international mobile students is not beneficial for the faculty, and instead represents a certain burden due to the fact that they require more attention in comparison to the domestic students (Ramiņa, Sloka & Gržibovska, 2010). Each higher education institution is responsible for developing and implementing its own strategy for attracting

international students (European Commission, 2012). Accordingly, the differences between the various approaches of the Latvian universities must be analysed and compared in order to find common problem areas.

The International Relations Department at the University of Latvia provides administrative services such as support in application procedure, provision of answers for the visiting students at the University of Latvia, and it is responsible for organizing language courses, instruction meetings, as well as provision of assistance to arrange other formal procedures in the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (Ramiņa, Sloka & Gržibovska, 2010). In view of this, the current study reveals shared administrative and cultural problems that the international department administration encountered in relation to Turkish mobile students in Latvia. In general, the results of the study contribute to the debate on how to make the environment at the Latvian universities more international and welcoming not only for Turkish students, but also for all the future international mobile students, who would spend a study period in this country.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to assess the attitudes of the administration at international departments of the Latvian higher education institutions towards a specific group of international mobile students. The chosen group consists of 25 Turkish mobile students, who have been studying at three major higher education institutions in Latvia in the academic year 2015/2016. For this purpose, the author conducted a qualitative study in order to reveal the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of the employees at the international relations departments at the Latvian universities. The interviewees included Aline Grzhibovska, director at the University of Latvia International Relations Department, Inga Labsvīra, the international coordinator at Riga Technical University's International Department, and Vija Kasakovska, the head of the Foreign Relations Department at the Maritime Academy of Latvia. The interviews were conducted during the period between February and March, 2016, in Riga.

The study was focused on the assessment of the types of experiential difficulties faced by the international departments' administration in the process of management of this particular group of mobile students. The main data collection tool for this study is the interview. This data collection tool was selected by the researcher due to the fact that it can provide more complex data on the respondents' beliefs, experiences, and knowledge. More precisely, the author used the tool of semi-structured interviews. When conducting semi-structured interviews, the author can make changes in the order of the question, and some questions can be excluded or the word order can be changed depending on the situation during the interview (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2010). The approach of narrative analysis was used in analyzing the obtained data from the interviews. In accordance with the problem, the author created a framework for determining the categories for the organization and presentation of obtained data. After the data were organized, they were presented in the following five categories, supported by direct quotations of the interviewees in the results and discussion section of the paper.

Results and discussion

International environment

The first aspect of analysis in this research is focused on the more general administrative problems encountered by the international relation departments at the Latvian universities. These problems are also largely reflected upon the management of the Turkish mobile students in the country. The interviewees were asked to assess the level of the international environment that currently exists at their institution. In general, the interviewees assessed the international environment as being moderately to very positive, with one stating that there was still a space for improvement. In the late 1990s, Latvian universities faced numerous administrative problems regarding the implementation of programmes for international student mobility. One of the major problems was the lack of sufficient number of study courses offered in English language. As A. Grzhibovska from the University of Latvia responded, "... in 1998, there were not a lot of incoming students. We did not have courses in English, everything was taught in Latvian, and we had no idea, how to deal with international students". At the Maritime Academy of Latvia, even today, this problem has not yet been completely resolved. As noted by V. Kasakovska, "... there are some courses that we cannot provide in English, which is why it is not easy. We cannot provide the entire syllabus in English". Furthermore, another reported problem related to international environment was the lack of socialisation between the Latvian students and the foreign ones. As stated by A. Grzhibovska, "... sometimes international students live a little bit apart from the locals, and they do not frequently mix or cooperate even within the lectures, nor do they meet up much even within academic activities". However, this occurrence is not due to the lack of events organized by the international relations offices, in which visiting students and local students have opportunities to socialize. As stated by all of the interviewees, it was due to the Latvian mentality, which is not very open to foreigners.

Arising problems with bureaucracy

One of the main obstacles in the process of international students' management reported by all the interviewees was the increasing number of bureaucratic tasks that have to be performed by the administration before, during, and after the study period of the mobile students. In case of Turkish mobile students, this represents an even greater problem due to the larger number of documents to be prepared. It was reported that in comparison to the Socrates programme, the number of documents filed by the administration for ERASMUS+ international students has tremendously increased. To further affirm this, A. Grzhibovska responded, "... if we take all the papers that need to be prepared before the arrival, after the arrival, and during their studies, it is certainly not so easy to just forecast, what type of different papers and referent regulations should be observed". This, in effect, has reflected upon the difficulties in the time management of the international relations departments' administration, especially at the Maritime Academy of Latvia. According to V. Kasakovska, time management is a common problem due to the fact that the Academy is not as large an institution as the other Latvian HEIs.

The largest bureaucratic obstacle that was faced by administration in relation to Turkish exchange students was the visa requirements for Turkish students. Since Turkish students had to stay in Latvia for a period exceeding 90 days, they had to apply for the permit of residence, which represents “a lot of paperwork”. This problem has been partly resolved because from 2014, the Turkish students do not have to apply for the permit for residence but instead for the multi-entry visa.

Receiving the required documents from the sending universities is also one of the recurring problems in the management of Turkish student’s mobility. As reported by V. Kasakovska, “sometimes, during the inter-preparatory phase, when you ask information of a certain student, you do not receive reply for a longer period”. This suggests that Turkish universities are more inert in preparing and sending the required documentation on behalf of their exchange nominees. Nevertheless, this is not a problem that could be solved by Latvian administration, and the problem has to be addressed by administration of the Turkish higher education institutions.

Language barriers

The lack of sufficient command of English language by the Turkish mobile students was reported as a major barrier by all of the interviewed administrators of the international relations departments of Latvian HEI’s. A great concern for the interviewees was the fact that Turkish students do not always arrive with a good command of English language. A. Grzhibovska indicated that when the students apply for a visa at the Latvian Embassy, the administration at the Embassy is surprised that the students cannot easily communicate in English, and they are worried how the students would be able to continue with the studies. I. Labsvīra from the Riga Technical University said that even though they receive the students’ C1 English level certificates from the administration of the Turkish universities, there were cases, when students could barely speak English upon their arrival to Latvia, and are unable to follow the lessons. This represents a serious obstacle not only for the administration and the teaching staff, but also for the Turkish students themselves. The worst outcome of such situation was that the students finished their study visit without passing any of the subjects at their host university. On the other hand, there are also problems with the English language level of the teaching staff at Latvian HEI’s. As reported by V. Kasakovska, there had been cases, when the Turkish students complained about a teacher from the Maritime Academy of Latvia, who was not very well able to teach in English.

Different studying habits

Cultural norms and habits in the approach to acquiring new knowledge and skills can also contribute to the academic success of Erasmus exchange students. In this regard, another problem reported by the interviewees that was reflected upon the ability of the Turkish mobile students to successfully finish their studies in Latvia was the different cultural approach to studying at a university level. Lack of individual initiative in the process of studying, as well as unwillingness to engage in team work were reported as two of the negative cultural traits of Turkish mobile students studying at the University of Latvia. The approach to studying at a university level of the Turkish students was compared to the one usually found at

high school level, where the students are given information and they are not asked to analyze the materials, make additional readings, and prepare reports by themselves. Furthermore, as reported by V. Kasakovska, "... the Turkish students do not ask questions, even if they do not understand what the teachers have said, and they later file complaints to the head of the Maritime Academy of Latvia Foreign Relations Department at the". It could be said that this issue should be tackled by the Turkish education authorities in order for Turkish students to be more adaptable to different studying environments.

Cultural obstacles

When students make experience studying abroad, they feel more related to other Europeans and adopt a European identity (Van Mol, 2013). In this regard, the entire process of studying outside of Turkey is understood by the Turkish students as an experience of genuine freedom that they could not experience in their home country. As one of the interviewees, who wished to answer off the record, reported "... when Turkish students come here, they feel like they are free to do whatever they want to do, so they want to try everything". This negatively reflected upon their lecture attendance, since they used their time abroad for leisure activities instead of academic ones. It was also reported that Turkish students used most of their free time to travel not only within Latvia but also to other countries in the EU, instead of dedicating more time and effort to their academic obligations.

There were two extreme cases, in which Turkish students faced major problems outside the university. In one case, a Turkish student was robbed during the late hours in Riga. In another case, the interviewee reported that Turkish mobile students were involved in a violent incident with the local population. In this incident, one student was seriously injured and was taken to the hospital.

The Turkish culture is known as more traditional and conservative in comparison to many European countries. In this regard, the administrators expressed complaints about the traditional attitudes of the male Turkish students towards gender roles. The problem was related to lack of maintaining the hygiene in the dormitory rooms of Turkish male students. When they were approached on this issue by the administrator, they did not want to legitimize her authority because she was female. As stated by one of the interviewees, "... they didn't accept me as a woman who was trying not to order them, but to instruct them on how to clean the room, to instruct them on anything".

Conclusions and recommendations

The study has revealed that there are common problems that are faced by administration of the international relations departments at Latvian higher education institutions. The most frequently experienced problems can be divided into two main categories: bureaucratic problems and cultural problems. It has to be noted that the first category does not exclusively relate only to the Turkish mobile students in Latvia. However, this group is largely affected by it, since the extent of the documentation required for Turkish students is larger due to other political factors, such as the effects of Turkey not being part of the EU. The University of Latvia

invested substantial efforts in creating a sufficiently international environment for mobile students. In contrast to former times, today a large number of study courses is offered in English language. Most of the problems related to international environment are said to derive from the mentality of the local students, who are not very open to foreigners. Some of the problems, such as a requirement for residence permit, have been mitigated by introducing new regulations for Turkish students in particular.

With regard to the cultural obstacles, the lack of English language competence of the Turkish mobile students represents a major problem during their study period in Latvia. Some Turkish students have difficulties to adapt to the different culture of studying at a university. In this sense, more preparatory activities are needed in order for the Turkish students to overcome these cultural barriers. It is recommended for the Turkish universities to be more selective in the process of candidate nomination for outgoing students in terms of their English language competence. The future nominees must have a sufficient knowledge of English language to be able to follow the lectures. Furthermore, the international relations departments at the Turkish universities should be more efficient in sending the required documents in time, to prevent any delays in the application process. The administration should also make sure that the outgoing students are fully aware of their academic obligations at their host institutions, and the academic nature of their study visit. In general, bureaucratic procedures should be simplified in order for the administration to be faster in processing the applications. Latvian universities should offer a greater number of courses in English language, which would make them more attractive not only for Turkish mobile students, but also for all the other students from abroad. In this regard, the Latvian universities should also offer more English language courses to improve the language level of the teaching staff.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arslan, S. (2013). Perspectives of the Turkish Participants on Erasmus Exchange Programme. *The Online Journal of Counseling and Education*, 2(2), pp. 9–18.
- European Commission (2012). *Immigration of International Students to the EU European Migration Network Study 2012*. Available at: http://www.emn.lv/wp-content/uploads/Immigration_of_International_Students_to_the_EU_SR_11April2013_FINAL.pdf [Accessed January 26, 2015].
- Kelo, M. (2007). Approaches to Services for International Students. In Jones, E. & Brown, S. (eds.). *Internationalising Higher Education*. Oxon, UK & New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 171–181.
- Kristovska, I. (2006). Adults in the Latvia Higher Education. In Mark, R., Pouget, M. & Thomas, E. (eds.). *Adults in Higher Education: Learning from Experience in New Europe*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, pp. 241–259.
- Lodico, A. G., Spaulding, D. N. & Voegtler, K. H. (2010). *Methods in Educational Research from Theory to Practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ozolins, D. & Rumbule, I. (2003). Latvia and the European Union. Negotiations on Entering the European Union, Development of Education and Recognition of Qualifications in

- the Field of Regulated Professions. In Peck, B. T. (ed.). *Education, the Baltic States and the EU*. Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, pp. 15–25.
- Ramiņa, B., Sloka, B. & Gržibovska, A. (2010). Challenges for Foreign Students at University of Latvia: Survey Results of Foreign Students. *New Socio-Economic Challenges of Development in Europe*. University of Latvia, pp. 159–172.
- The Council of Higher Education (2014). *Higher Education System in Turkey*. Ankara, Turkey: The Council of Higher Education.
- Val Mol, C. (2013). ERASMUS Student Mobility and the Discovery of New European Horizons. In Feyen, B. & Krzaklewska, E. (eds.). *The ERASMUS Phenomenon –Symbol of a New European Generation?*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang Edition, pp. 163–175.

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā analizētas visbiežāk sastopamās problēmas Latvijas augstskolās studējošo turku studentu mobilitātes vadībā, kā arī izstrādāti ieteikumi, kādi pasākumi būtu jāveic, lai studentiem no Turcijas padarītu pievilcīgākas Latvijas augstskolas. Ar daļēji strukturētām intervijām raksta autore aptaujājusi triju Latvijas augstskolu ārējo sakaru nodaļu vadītājas. Intervijās tika noskaidrots, ka visizplatītākā problēma ir turku studentu nepietiekamās angļu valodas zināšanas, studentu nespēja adaptēties citādā mācību vidē, kā arī kultūras barjeras.

Raksturvārdi: starptautisko studentu mobilitāte, Erasmus, ārējo sakaru nodaļa, Latvijas augstākās izglītības iestādes, Turcijas studenti.