

Perspectives of the Turkish Participants on Erasmus Exchange Programme

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Abstract

This study conducted to examine the effects of Erasmus programme on the university students who participated in Erasmus exchange programme, utilized a qualitative research methodology. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 students attending Sakarya University who participated in exchange programme. The subjects of the study were selected via criterion-sampling. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews were analyzed by using descriptive analysis technique. The findings of the study were classified into four main themes which were “contributions of Erasmus programme to offer an abroad experience”, “contributions of Erasmus programme to get to know oneself, one’s own culture, the other cultures and to realize cultural and vocational exchange”, “contributions of Erasmus programme to self-development” and “contributions of Erasmus programme to the changes within the notion of European Union and multiculturalism”. At the end of the study, it was suggested that extending the research to the other universities at home and abroad which participate in Erasmus exchange programme would be a good future research avenue.

Keywords: Erasmus exchange programme, qualitative research, university students

Nowadays, approaching of countries to each other in social and technological areas has reinforced the cooperation among them and brought forward the obligation to take action together. Acting together with other countries and behaving in accordance with the trends in the world has emerged as a result of globalization process (Dağlı, 2007). These days when change occurs too fast with the effect of globalization, the need of individuals for education has gradually increased to be able to keep up with any kind of change. The occurring rate of scientific and technological innovations has increased and this change has made itself evident in a very short time in production and service areas (González, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011; Papatsiba, 2005). It has also become evident in political, cultural and economic areas. Almost all societies have been affected by these rapid change and transformation. It is a fact that this rapid change has positive and negative effects. Some regional formations have emerged in order to cooperate and to take action together both in positive and negative aspects (Beerkens & Vossensteyn, 2011; Gedikoğlu, 2005; Genç, 2005).

Incorporation law of European Union stipulates a Europe which is founded on the fact of cooperation and taking action together in every area as well as multiculturalism and multilingualism (Sebkova, 2002). The main aim of this is to increase the similar points in union. For different points in terms of union are more than similar points. Therefore, all countries in the union, naturally all European Union citizens should be brought together in such a way that it should be complete and different languages and cultures should be protected and developed and it should be ensured that citizens should get to know each other more. In this point, European Union education policy has become a very important action area and expectations from European Union education policy have been increasing in every process (Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2007; Tucker, 2004).

Erasmus programme has been created to increase the quality in higher education and to develop the Europe dimension. It is stated that the change will occur with the opening of universities to the outer world, reinforcing their relationships with other universities, providing the mobility of students and academics. It is stated that Erasmus programme is the first greatest European program in this area with the aims it sets in higher education (National Agency, 2008). Erasmus programme is the mutual exchange of students and academicians done in accordance with certain agreements determining the main content of the programme. One of the countries of exchange should definitely be a European Union country. Higher education institutes' producing partner projects and realizing them provides unpaid financial support (grant) to be able to make short-term student and personnel exchange. In addition, it is

also encouraged to increase the relationships and cooperation between higher education institutes and business environments in order to develop higher education system according to the requirements of the business worlds and to increase the employment of university graduates (Topçu, 2011).

Turkey has been participating in EU education programmes such as Socrates, Erasmus, Youth and Leonardo da Vinci as a full member since 2004. Erasmus programme supports the personnel and student mobility via transnational projects and thereby reinforces the European dimension in education. Turkey also wants to benefit from the programme which promotes the transnational cooperation and which allows for the participant countries to recognize the good applications in other countries and it was stated in the national report prepared on application of Bologna process that this mobility constitutes a great importance for Turkish universities (Dağlı, 2007).

Our country which has the 7th greatest budget among 31 countries in Lifelong Learning Programme participated in Erasmus student exchange programme with a pilot application in 2003 and became an official member of these programmes in 2004. Turkey universities' rate of benefiting from Erasmus student exchange programmes between 2004-2007 increased from 1142 students to 4438 students by about 400%. Sakarya University where the research was conducted placed among the first ranks in exchange applications among Turkey universities with 550 students in 2010-2011 education years (National Agency, 2010).

Method

The research in which qualitative research method was used is a descriptive study in scanning model. The participants of this research consist of higher education students from Sakarya University who participated in Erasmus exchange programme in 2009-2012 education year fall and spring term. In determination of university and participants to conduct the research, criterion sampling which is one of purposeful sampling methods was used. The main mentality in this sampling method was to study on all conditions which meet a set of previously determined criteria. The mentioned criterion or criteria may be formed by the researcher or a previously prepared criterion may be used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The basic criterion determined by the researcher in determination of participants is that the participant should be an Erasmus exchange programme student in at least one term with Erasmus exchange programme. The reason why the research was conducted in Sakarya

University is that it is one of the universities preferred most by the exchange students. The distribution of the participants joining the research according to destination countries is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of the participants joining the research according to destination countries

Country	f
Denmark	4
Italy	3
Sweden	2
Belgium	1
Portugal	1
Latvia	1
Germany	1
Spain	1
Czech Republic	1

The distribution of the participants joining the research according to destination universities is given in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of the participants joining the research according to destination universities

University	f
University College Lillebaelt (Education)	4
Universita Degli Studi di Genova (Education & Teacher Education)	3
Högskolan Kristianstad - Teacher Education	2
Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg	1
Instituto Politecnico de Coimbra	1
Liepaja University	1
Universität Duisburg-Essen - Teaching Education	1
Universidade de Valldolid – Education	1
University of Hradec Kralove - Education, Teacher Training	1

In the study which was conducted with 8 female and 7 male students and 4 of the participants went to Denmark, 3 to Italy, 2 to Sweden and other students to Portugal, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia and Spain from Sakarya University. When examined in terms of distribution according to universities, it is seen that most students participated from University Collage Lillebaelt.

Collection, analysis and interpretation of the data: Data of the research was collected with "semi-structured interview" technique. To this end, an interview form consisting of 4

questions was prepared by the researchers and submitted for the opinion of 5 experts in the field. Field experts were asked to check the question in the interview form in terms of clarity and including the addressed subject. In accordance with the views of the field experts, the form was finalized and made ready for application. All interviews made during the interview were performed with a recorder by the researcher.

Descriptive analysis was used in analysis of the obtained data in the research. In this context, analysis of the research data was performed in two stages in accordance with research problems and conceptual frame of the research. In analysis of the research data, firstly a framework was formed according to research problems and conceptual dimension of the research, and it was determined under what themes the data would be organized and presented in accordance with this framework. After choosing and collecting the data in a meaningful and logical way for describing in the study, the organized data were described and presented by being supported with the direct quotations from required places (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Findings

The data obtained in the research were collected under four themes which are "contribution of Erasmus programme to offering abroad experience opportunity", "contribution of Erasmus programme to recognizing themselves, their culture, other cultures and to cultural and professional exchange" "contribution of Erasmus programme to personal development" and "contribution of Erasmus programme to the change in the opinion in European Union and multiculturalism idea" in accordance with research questions.

General opinions of Erasmus students on Erasmus Programme's offering abroad experience opportunity

Erasmus students were first asked "Would you do internship abroad if you did not have an opportunity like Erasmus?". When the answers given to these questions were studied, all of the students participating in the research stated that Erasmus programme was a really important opportunity for them, in addition they would not have got the opportunity to do internship abroad but for Erasmus programme and they never imagined doing internship abroad before starting university.

5th student presenting opinion on Erasmus programme's offering abroad experience opportunity expresses opinion by saying "We were not aware of a programme like Erasmus

before starting university and we learnt it when we started university. We applied with the advice of our friends who went before us and we succeeded in exam. I would like to benefit from this opportunity after License education". 15th student said " I grew up in a small town but my dreams and aims were not as small as that town. My wish to go abroad and study there was always there, but it was a dream for that period, Erasmus exchange programme was a very important opportunity for me". 3. 3rd students said "If I had not gone abroad with Erasmus programme, I would not have tempted to study and do internship abroad. This programme helped me to have confidence in myself about going abroad, gave me courage".

General opinions of Erasmus students on contribution of Erasmus Programme to recognizing themselves, their culture, other cultures and to cultural and professional exchange

In the second phase, general opinions of participants on contribution of Erasmus programme to recognizing themselves, their culture, other cultures and to cultural and professional exchange were examined; 3 students stated that they had the opportunity to transfer their own culture to Europeans thanks to Erasmus experience, 4 students stated that they breathed in a multicultural structure as a result of interaction with a different culture, 3 students stated that their level of respect and tolerance towards people increased thanks to Erasmus experience, 3 students stated that they expressed themselves better than before with Erasmus experience and 1 student stated that their belief on campaign against racism and discrimination increased with Erasmus experience. 6th student expressing opinion of Erasmus students on contribution of Erasmus programme to recognizing themselves, their culture, other cultures and to cultural and professional exchange said that "It was like we went to learn the culture of the destination country rather than studying. We went to many churches and many museums, we learnt their cuisines and we also learnt the local dance styles. I learnt the culture of the country I went to very well." 7th student said "They were curious about us (Turks). I got the opportunity to tell about my culture. They wanted us to read Turkish National Anthem. They were really curious about Ottoman period. They asked about Janissary anthem". 11th student said "I got the opportunity to come together with students from different countries. I got friends from countries such as Italy, Belgium, Portugal, Norway, Czech Republic, etc. We got along better with students from Mediterranean countries". 1st student stated "They think wrong about us (Turks) and they think that we Turks are strange and when they got to know us I think we ensured that they realized we are a part of Europe". 9th student stated that "I think Turkish students should participate in this programme more. We have to change the misunderstood Turkish image in Europe."

General opinions of Erasmus students on contribution of Erasmus Programme to personal development

When the opinions of participants on contribution of Erasmus programme to personal development were analyzed; 3 students stated that their foreign language skills improved thanks to Erasmus experience, 4 students stated that they took a useful step for their future thanks to Erasmus experience, 3 students stated that finding a job in the future would be easier thanks to Erasmus experience.

9th student presenting opinion on contribution of Erasmus programme to personal development stated that "I realized that my colloquial language improved, I even had adaptation problem when I came back to my country. I still feel I have to speak English. 13th student stated that "I realized that my language skill for my future profession improved as a result of internship studies. I think that it will have positive effects on my future professional career". 4th student stated that "I got this opportunity in different departments as a result of my internship studies and I also got the opportunity to closely see the European education system. I found the chance to personally observe the qualities of schools and education system and how they educate students." 2nd student said "it helped me to get to know people unprejudiced and to be more comfortable with them, to perceive them more easily and to interiorize more easily in an introduction environment and accept them more easily". 8th student said "I was more impatient towards people before, I wanted everything to happen at once. When I got there, I started to be more patient. My perspective also improved as I got to know different people and cultures, my tolerance for other cultures also improved. Mentality of racism and discrimination was removed when I approached people with the same distance.

General Opinions of Erasmus Students on Contribution of Programme to the change in the European Union and Multiculturalism idea

Finally, the opinions of participants on contribution of Erasmus programme to the change in European Union and multiculturalism were examined; 5 students stated that Erasmus experience changed their opinion on European Union, 3 students stated that we do not need European Union actually and other students stated they considered European Union positively.

1st student presenting opinion on Program's contribution to change in European Union and multiculturalism idea stated that "I realized that we actually overestimated European

Union. To be truthful, I realized that we are in a better position than some European Union countries". 12th student said "I knew the value of my country during the period I was in Europe. "Everything is so close to us in the globalizing world that it helped me to realize that the world is a small village". 13th student stated that "They actually see us as European. They consider Turkey as European country but the procedures are a problem. You will get a visa, but it is really offending when they treat you like a spy or terrorist when you go to get a visa. If these will get better when we enter EU, then I think Turkey should be a member of EU".

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of this study which was performed to determine the opinions of higher education students in Erasmus exchange programme on "contribution of Erasmus programme to offering abroad experience opportunity", "contribution of Erasmus programme to recognizing themselves, their culture, other cultures and to cultural and professional exchange", "contribution of Erasmus programme to personal development" and "contribution of Erasmus programme to the change in the opinion in European Union and multiculturalism idea" were discussed by putting forth the opinions on efficiency of Erasmus programme in accordance with the findings.

Firstly, the opinions of Erasmus students on the of Erasmus programme with respect to the abroad experience were taken. It was observed in their perspective the Erasmus programme has an important place in terms of personal acquisitions, gains and experiences and they generally reported that they would not get the chance to do internship abroad but with an opportunity like Erasmus programme.

Secondly, the opinions of the participants on contribution of Erasmus programme to recognizing themselves, their own cultures, other cultures and the cultural and professional exchange were examined, it was concluded that the levels of respect and tolerance towards people increased as a result of experiencing a multicultural structure with interaction with other cultures and consequently their belief for campaign against racism and discrimination increased.

When the opinions of participants on contribution of Erasmus programme to personal development are examined, it was concluded that their foreign language skills improved, they took a useful step for their future and thereby, finding a job in the future would be easier thanks to this.

When the opinions of participants on the contribution of Erasmus programme to the change in European Union and multiculturalism idea were examined, it was concluded that most of the participants had positive opinions about this.

According to the results of the research, Erasmus programme has many positive aspects. The benefits for the students are mainly in foreign language improvement, cultural processes and education. Erasmus programme has an important place in the lives of students in terms of personal acquisitions, gains and experiences. Students who cannot go to different countries with their own means get this experience with Erasmus. Participating students socialize with other cultures, stay away from outdated concepts such as "racism" and get the opportunity to learn that cultural differences are not a choice of people, but a process they learn from the societies they live in by experiencing it. Erasmus programme has an important position in terms of negative image of Turkey in Europe. It can be said both outgoing and incoming Erasmus programme exchange students and academicians have effective roles in introducing the modern face of Turkey.

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