

Internationalization at the periphery: International university students in mid-and small size cities in Türkiye

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The internationalization of higher education has become a crucial tool used by countries in global competition since 1990s. Attracting young people for knowledge and human capital, along with economic, geopolitical, and cultural factors, has become a significant driving force for universities in terms of prestige and funding. The literature indicates that geographical location, history, economy, culture, and traditions influence and shape the different manifestations of internationalization in various regions of the world. Until the early 2000s, international student life was concentrated in certain Western countries, but today it is spread across very different geographical areas. The decision-making process for international students regarding which university to attend involves various "place"-based factors such as country and city image, institutional reputation, and program quality. Local and central governments, as well as various civil institutions and organizations, prioritize the internationalization of their cities in terms of student numbers within the context of global competition. The literature suggests that factors influencing international student flow are positively related to the quality of higher education, economic factors, and historical ties between countries, while geographical distance and linguistic proximity are discussed as potential hindrances of international student mobility. Higher education institutions, particularly whose locations are peripheral significantly differentiate their policies in many ways. In peripheral regions, in non-metropolitan contexts, universities have utilized a localized approach coupled with populist political discourse.

The geography of higher education in Türkiye has drastically changed with the spreading of higher education institutions from the center to periphery since 1990s. Large state investments for new public universities covering entire country has gone hand in hand with mushrooming private universities, especially in Istanbul. Today higher education in Türkiye is formed by a complex system of 208 universities with approximately 20,000 departments, accommodating more than 8.2 million university students (of which 4.6 million are undergraduate and half a million are graduate students). This dispersion of higher education institutions all over the country generates a vibrant yet obscure landscape. Coupled with attracting international students, this distinctive geography of higher education institutions in Türkiye produces urban relational systems that call for new analyses.

Since the last decade, Türkiye has emerged as a strong educational hub, particularly for students from Muslim-majority countries. Majority of international students come from Muslim-majority countries (80 %); 65 % are from Asia, including the Middle East, and 14 % are from Africa. Since universities have been largely endowed by the government's insistent internationalization policy in higher education, the number of international students in Türkiye has increased by 251

percent in the last decade. Reaching to 379,000 in the 2025-2026 academic year, this number represents 5.5 % of total higher education enrollments in the country. While the spatial distribution is uneven, gender and origin country agglomerations have shown large disproportions.

This paper aims at exploring this imbalanced spatiality of internationalization of higher education institutions and social characteristics of Turkish cities. Understanding these unique patterns and formulating new perspectives to analyze the complexity of this landscape have become an interesting research topic for us. A novel database is compiled for the research. Data covers the 2024- 2025 enrollments of all international students by universities, published yearly by the Higher Education Council and TurkStat 2024 census. The analysis is conducted on a provincial level in order to locate clusters of specializations, densities and agglomerations that describe the distinctive characteristics of the international higher education nodes and corresponding cities. Analyzing and representing placements of international students reveal unique spatial typologies in relation to different provincial structures. The paper adopts a relational mapping perspective, i.e. quantitative inquiry for identifying clusters of higher education institutions and social characteristics of cities. The paper indicates an alternative formation of urban regions and hierarchies in Turkey, based on higher education clusters, social capacities, and international students.