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Intercultural Adjustment, Belonging, and Career Perceptions in International Higher Education Mobility: Evidence from Türkiye

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Abstract

International education mobility is more than enrolment in an academic programme. It is a relational experience shaped by language, social contact, belonging, and the imagination of a professional future. This study examines how international students and mobility participants make sense of intercultural adjustment, belonging, active participation, personal development, and career perception in Turkish higher education. Two complementary qualitative sources were used: 67 open-ended written responses from participants with current or previous experience in Turkish higher education, and 15 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with international students at a state university in Türkiye. The data were examined through reflexive thematic analysis, with Young Yun Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation serving as a sensitising framework. Mobility did not automatically produce adjustment, belonging, or career development. Instead, participants' experiences were shaped by language competence, academic expectations, faculty support, peer networks, campus participation, and the responsiveness of the local community. The analysis identifies a cultural proximity paradox: Türkiye may be perceived as culturally familiar, safe, or religiously recognisable, yet students still encountered linguistic, academic, and everyday differences after arrival. A sense of belonging developed through sustained social and academic relationships, and career perceptions were reinterpreted as students linked their future professional roles to communication skills, social networks, diplomacy, civic engagement, and social contribution. This work contributes to higher education research from a non-Western but regionally significant host context by expanding the mobility-career debate beyond employability to include professional meaning-making and cross-cultural identity development.

Keywords: International students, Intercultural adjustment, Belonging, Career perception, Turkish higher education

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Introduction

Pursuing higher education abroad is rarely a purely academic decision. It is a multidimensional experience that reshapes students' social relationships, intercultural encounters, personal development, and imagined professional futures. For much of the recent past, international student mobility has been associated with established Western destinations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Over the last decade, however, Türkiye has become an increasingly visible destination for international students, making it a productive setting for examining the academic, social, cultural, and professional dimensions of mobility (Kondakci, 2011; Özoğlu et al., 2015).

What distinguishes the Turkish case is the coexistence of perceived cultural proximity and actual intercultural difference. Some students may be drawn to Türkiye because they perceive it as culturally familiar, religiously recognisable, economically accessible, or comparatively safe. After arrival, however, they may encounter unfamiliar language expectations, academic conventions, campus practices, and forms of everyday interaction with local society. This simultaneity of familiarity and difference makes Turkish higher education analytically useful for understanding how mobility acquires meaning over time. The present study therefore treats Türkiye not merely as the geographical setting of international education but as a theoretically meaningful case in which perceived familiarity may coexist with practical difficulties of adaptation. Drawing on this tension, the study develops the notion of a cultural proximity paradox: perceived cultural or religious familiarity may encourage the selection of a host country, but it does not necessarily ensure successful adjustment or a sustained sense of belonging after arrival. These outcomes remain dependent on the relational practices and everyday interactions that develop within the host environment.

Mobility is not a linear process, and similar academic environments do not produce similar outcomes. Some students develop a strong sense of belonging, confidence, and professional direction, whereas others experience language difficulties, limited social contact, or alienation. Being physically present in another country does not, in other words, automatically generate learning, belonging, or career development. These outcomes are shaped by the relational conditions through which students communicate with others, participate in academic and social life, and interpret their experiences within the host environment.

To analyse these processes, the study draws on Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which explains adjustment through host communication competence, social contact, environmental receptivity, the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic, functional fitness, and intercultural transformation. These concepts help clarify how international students navigate new academic and social environments, cultivate a sense of belonging, and connect mobility to future professional roles. The framework is particularly relevant to the Turkish context because it enables perceived cultural familiarity to be examined alongside the communicative, relational, and institutional conditions that shape participants' actual experiences after arrival.

The study addresses one overarching question: How does international education experience in Türkiye shape participants' intercultural adjustment, sense of belonging, active participation, personal development, and career perceptions? In answering this question, the article makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises mobility as a higher education experience that becomes meaningful through relationships with the host academic and social environment. Second, it applies Kim's theory to a non-Western yet regionally significant host context. Third, it extends the mobility–career discussion beyond employability by treating career perception as a form of professional meaning-making and intercultural identity development.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Research on internationalization has long associated study abroad with intercultural learning, language development, global awareness, personal transformation, and employability. Knight (2004) frames internationalization as a strategic process embedded in the academic and institutional functions of higher education, while Altbach and Knight (2007) connect it to global competition, institutional visibility, and international collaboration. Brooks and Waters (2011) extend this perspective by showing that mobility is bound up with educational choice, longer-term life trajectories, and social positioning. These approaches established the institutional and developmental significance of international mobility, but they frequently treated its expected benefits as broadly attainable outcomes. Consequently, less attention was initially paid to the social conditions through which mobility is translated or fails to be translated into intercultural learning, belonging, and professional development.

Empirical research has increasingly challenged the assumption that physical mobility automatically produces integration or personal transformation. Loneliness and social isolation can become defining features of the international student experience, often alongside language and academic adjustment difficulties (Sawir et al.,

2008). More recent work reinforces this argument by showing that adjustment is shaped by support from friends and host institutions, as well as the quality and cultural diversity of students' social networks (Shu et al., 2020).

Although these studies differ in their geographical settings and analytical emphases, they converge in showing that international enrolment and physical presence do not, by themselves, ensure meaningful participation in the host community. However, much of this literature continues to conceptualise adjustment primarily through the difficulties experienced by students. This emphasis may inadvertently position international students as recipients of institutional support instead of recognising them as active participants in intercultural encounters. A complementary strand addresses this limitation by emphasising student agency. Internationally mobile students actively shape their trajectories, identities, and social relationships instead of merely adjusting to established host-country norms (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018). From this perspective, adjustment is not a one-directional process in which students progressively conform to the host environment. It involves continuing negotiation among previous identities, new institutional expectations, available relationships, and imagined futures. Bringing structural and agency-centred accounts together allows mobility to be understood as a relational process whose outcomes are co-produced by students, peers, university personnel, and the wider social environment.

Türkiye provides a particularly relevant setting in which to examine these relationships. Its attractiveness as an international study destination has been explained through geographical proximity, cultural familiarity, regional ties, religious affinity, scholarships, affordability, and perceptions of safety (Kondakci, 2011; Özoğlu et al., 2015). Aydın (2021) shows that the decision to study in Türkiye is shaped by both push factors in students' home countries and pull factors such as affordability, strategic location, and cultural familiarity. Alnajjar and Alacapınar (2024) similarly identify educational quality, historical and cultural heritage, ease of living, and religious or ethnic ties as important motivations. These studies explain why Türkiye may be selected as an educational destination, but destination choice and post-arrival adjustment should not be treated as equivalent processes. Characteristics that make Türkiye appear accessible before mobility, particularly perceived cultural, religious, or geographical proximity, may not provide the linguistic competence, social access, or institutional familiarity required after arrival.

Studies of international students in Türkiye indicate that language proficiency, interaction with local students, communication with university staff, scholarship status, country of origin, and everyday support shape adaptation (Alnajjar & Alacapınar, 2024; Arslan & Polat, 2023; Aydın, 2020, 2021). In an earlier study published in this journal, Mrekajova (2017) similarly found that international students in Türkiye often favoured co-national friendships and had limited contact with Turkish peers, with Turkish-language proficiency and cultural distance operating as barriers.

The literature on Türkiye therefore reveals a tension that has not been fully conceptualised. Cultural familiarity may facilitate destination choice and reduce anticipated distance, yet it does not necessarily produce sustained interaction or social inclusion after arrival. Most existing studies identify factors associated with adaptation but devote less attention to how students interpret the discrepancy between expected familiarity and experienced distance. The present study conceptualises this discrepancy as a cultural proximity paradox: the expectation that cultural or regional similarity will facilitate adjustment may coexist with experiences of linguistic difficulty, limited contact, and uncertain belonging.

This dynamic resonates with a related paradox identified in the international business and expatriate-adjustment literature. O'Grady and Lane (1996) describe a *psychic distance paradox*, whereby entering a context perceived as culturally close can produce unexpected difficulty, because assumed similarity discourages preparation for the differences that are subsequently encountered. Subsequent work on expatriate adjustment has documented a comparable *presumed cultural similarity* effect, in which sojourners moving to ostensibly familiar destinations underestimate the adaptation required and consequently struggle more than those who anticipate greater cultural distance (Selmer, 2002, 2007). The present study extends this logic from corporate and expatriate mobility to international higher education, and from a general notion of cultural closeness to the more specific forms of proximity that shape students' pre-arrival expectations of Türkiye. Unlike the largely quantitative, performance-oriented tradition in which the psychic distance paradox has been examined, the present analysis draws on qualitative accounts to show how the discrepancy between anticipated and experienced proximity is interpreted and negotiated by students themselves, rather than only measured as an adjustment outcome.

This formulation both overlaps with and extends previous research. It supports studies identifying language and interaction with host-country students as central to adjustment, while departing from explanations that treat cultural distance as a relatively fixed characteristic of national groups. Attention is instead directed towards perceived

proximity and how its meaning is reassessed through everyday encounters. Belonging can consequently be understood as a relational outcome shaped by communication and participation, rather than as a predictable consequence of formal enrolment or presumed cultural similarity.

Collectively, studies move beyond an understanding of belonging as an individual feeling detached from its social context. Nevertheless, belonging is sometimes operationalised primarily as an outcome to be measured, leaving the everyday processes through which it is established, weakened, or renegotiated less visible. The present study responds to this limitation by approaching belonging as an ongoing relational practice produced through communication, recognition, participation, and access to meaningful social relationships.
This approach also avoids equating belonging with complete assimilation into the host society. International students may simultaneously maintain strong transnational and co-national ties while seeking participation in the host university environment (Cena et al., 2021).

Co-national relationships should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of unsuccessful integration, as they may provide essential emotional and practical support. The relevant analytical issue is whether students have meaningful opportunities to develop relationships across different groups and whether institutional environments facilitate such interaction without requiring students to abandon their existing identities.

The wider literature on acculturation and culture shock indicates that adaptation is simultaneously psychological and sociocultural. Berry (2005) stresses that individuals negotiate multiple cultural orientations, while Ward et al. (2001) distinguish psychological adjustment from sociocultural competence. These distinctions matter in higher education because international students are not simply acquiring academic content. They are also learning how to communicate, participate, seek support, and interpret everyday expectations within an unfamiliar institutional and social environment.

Acculturation perspectives provide a useful vocabulary for differentiating emotional wellbeing from the practical capacity to function in a new environment. However, their emphasis on the adapting individual can understate the responsibilities of institutions and host communities. Difficulties in participation may reflect limited institutional accessibility or insufficient opportunities for meaningful contact, rather than deficiencies in students' motivation or competence.

Research on cultural intelligence and global citizenship suggests that higher education environments can help students learn to communicate and function effectively in multicultural settings (Biay & Tenorio, 2024). The relevant analytical question is therefore not simply whether students adapt, but how universities distribute opportunities for interaction, recognition, and support, and which students remain excluded from these opportunities.

Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation provides a framework for interpreting these processes. It describes how individuals entering a new cultural environment develop host communication competence, build social contact, draw on environmental receptivity, cope with stress, and gradually attain functional fitness, with intercultural transformation as a longer-term horizon (Kim, 2015). The theory is particularly useful because it connects individual communication capacity with characteristics of the receiving environment. At the same time, its developmental orientation may suggest a relatively progressive movement towards adaptation and functional fitness, whereas students' experiences may be uneven, reversible, and context dependent.

Kim's theory is therefore used not as a rigid coding template but as a sensitising framework for interpreting how language, social contact, institutional support, and everyday interaction shape adjustment, belonging, and career perception. This flexible application enables the analysis to retain experiences that do not follow a linear adaptation trajectory, including continuing isolation, situational belonging, and simultaneous feelings of cultural familiarity and social distance.

The relationship between mobility and career development warrants broader treatment than a narrow employability lens allows. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argue that employability is shaped by both individual resources and the social conditions governing access to labour markets. Tomlinson (2017) conceptualises graduate employability through human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological capital. More recent studies show that communication competencies, graduate capital, and host-country language learning can strengthen international students' career competencies (Kim et al., 2024; Pham, 2022; Sonnenschein & Wiik, 2025).
These studies usefully challenge the idea that academic credentials alone determine graduate outcomes. Nevertheless, employability research commonly evaluates mobility in terms of skills, capital accumulation, and labour-market advantage. Such approaches reveal what students may gain from mobility but provide a less

complete account of how intercultural experiences change what students believe professional success, responsibility, and contribution should mean.

The present study addresses the limited connection between the adjustment and career literatures. Intercultural adjustment is frequently examined as a social, psychological, or academic process, whereas career outcomes are usually discussed through employability, competency development, or labour-market advantage. As a result, the possible relationship between everyday intercultural experiences and the formation of future professional identities remains underexplored, particularly in the Turkish higher education context.

Here, career perception is treated as professional meaning-making: how students imagine the professionals they wish to become, how they connect education with social contribution, and how they interpret intercultural communication as a form of professional capital. This approach extends employability-based explanations by examining how acquired skills and intercultural experiences are incorporated into students' narratives about their future professional selves. It also allows adjustment, belonging, and career perception to be analysed as interconnected processes instead of separate outcomes of international mobility.

The reviewed literature produces three broad conclusions. First, international mobility creates opportunities for intercultural and professional development, but these benefits are conditional and cannot be assumed to arise automatically. Second, adjustment and belonging emerge through interactions among student agency, language, peer relationships, and institutional receptivity. Third, career development involves the acquisition of employability resources as well as the interpretation of intercultural experiences in relation to future professional identity.

Despite these advances, three limitations remain. Research on Türkiye has primarily identified motivations for destination choice and factors affecting adjustment without fully theorising the tension between expected cultural familiarity and experienced social distance. Belonging research has demonstrated the importance of social relationships but has given comparatively less attention to how belonging is negotiated through everyday communication. Finally, adjustment and career development have largely developed as separate areas of inquiry. The present study brings these strands together by examining how international students in Turkish higher education interpret intercultural adjustment, construct a sense of belonging, and connect these experiences to their imagined professional futures. Its contribution lies in conceptualising the cultural proximity paradox and extending career perception beyond labour-market preparedness towards professional meaning-making. Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory provides the sensitising framework through which the relationships among communication, environmental receptivity, belonging, and perceived professional development are examined.

Method

The study was designed as a qualitative inquiry into international students' educational experiences in Türkiye as narrated by the participants themselves. For this study, international education experience was defined as current or previous participation in undergraduate or postgraduate education, research mobility, exchange programmes, or academic activities conducted through Turkish higher education institutions. Although some participants had also studied or undertaken academic mobility in other countries, the present analysis was restricted to accounts that could be explicitly associated with their educational and social experiences in Türkiye. Experiences relating exclusively to other national contexts were not included, since cross-national comparison was outside the scope of the study. The aim was to identify recurring patterns of intercultural adjustment, social contact, belonging, active participation, personal development, and career perception within the Turkish higher education context.

The dataset draws on two complementary qualitative sources. The first comprises 67 open-ended online form responses from participants with current or previous experience in Turkish higher education. The form was not a quantitative survey instrument; it functioned as a qualitative narrative tool through which participants described their experiences in writing. Open-ended online responses were appropriate because they provided access to participants from different countries and academic contexts (Meho, 2006). For the present analysis, only response segments concerning education, cultural adaptation, social interaction, or personal and professional development in Türkiye were retained. The second source consists of 15 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with international students enrolled at a state university in Türkiye. These interviewees were not drawn from the 67 form respondents; they constituted a separate interview group. The inclusion criterion was being an international student who had studied at the university for at least two academic years, since students with sustained experience

were more likely to have encountered the host academic environment, the local community, campus life, Turkish language practices, and everyday social relations in Türkiye.

The two modes of data collection were used to examine complementary dimensions of the same research phenomenon. The open-ended form enabled concise written reflections to be obtained from a broader and more diverse group, particularly in relation to cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, personal development, and perceived career outcomes. The semi-structured interviews provided greater contextual depth and allowed motivations, language-related experiences, everyday interactions, campus participation, belonging, and professional meaning-making to be explored in greater detail. The use of two data-collection modes was therefore intended to generate complementary forms of qualitative evidence within the same national context rather than to establish two separate studies.

Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling combined with maximum variation, an approach suited to capturing both shared patterns and the diversity of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). For the open-ended form, the principal criterion was current or previous experience within Turkish higher education; participants were reached through international partner institutions, Erasmus agreements, bilateral protocols, memoranda of understanding, and accessible academic networks. For the interviews, the criterion was current enrolment as an international student at the host university together with at least two years of study in Türkiye. The diversity of participants was intended not to secure statistical representation but to capture recurring patterns across countries, languages, disciplines, and mobility experiences.

Turkish quotations were translated by the researcher with attention to preserving participants' meaning, tone, and experiential emphasis. English-language responses were lightly edited only where necessary for readability. Names and identifying details were removed. Interview participants are represented by codes P01–P15; quotations from the separate form dataset are labelled 'Open-ended response' so that the two sources of evidence remain distinguishable without implying a one-to-one correspondence between the datasets.

The 67 written responses and the 15 interview records were treated as complementary. Both datasets concerned participants' experiences within Turkish higher education, but they differed in their mode of production, breadth, and level of detail. The open-ended responses were used to identify broader recurring patterns, particularly those concerning cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, flexibility, networking, personal development, and career perception. The interviews were used to develop context-specific interpretations and provide detailed illustrative accounts of motivations, language-related difficulties, everyday interactions, campus participation, belonging, and professional aspirations. The source of evidence was identified throughout the findings so that patterns derived from the written responses could be distinguished from those developed primarily through the interviews.

Table 1. Data Sources

Data source	N. of part.	Function in the analysis
Open-ended online form responses	67	To identify broad recurring patterns related to intercultural adjustment, personal development, and career perception in Türkiye
Face-to-face semi-structured interviews	15	To deepen themes, contextualise experiences of studying in Türkiye, and provide illustrative quotations

Table 2. Composition of the Open-Ended Form Respondents (N = 67)

Variable	**Category**	**n**
Gender	Male	37
	Female	30
Duration of study in Türkiye	Less than 6 months	17
	6–12 months	16
	1–2 years	7
	More than 2 years	27
Status	Employed full-time	33
	Employed part-time	3
	Unemployed	3
	Student	28
Country of origin	China (Uyghur)	2
	South Korea	5
	Algeria	4
	Ukraine	7

Variable	Category	n
	Pakistan	4
	Egypt	2
	Iran	11
	Nigeria	3
	Afghanistan	4
	Iraq	3
	Oman	2
	Uzbekistan	7
	Kazakhstan	5
	Somalia	6
	Sudan	2

Table 2 reports only the composition characteristics that were systematically available for all 67 respondents. The group was relatively balanced by gender and included participants with substantially different lengths of international study experience.

Table 3. Profile of Interview Participants (N = 15)

Code	Age	Gender	Department	Country of origin
P01	22	Male	International Relations	Azerbaijan
P02	26	Male	Civil Engineering	Afghanistan
P03	20	Male	Dentistry	Afghanistan
P04	23	Male	Economics	Lebanon
P05	20	Female	Biology	Kazakhstan
P06	25	Male	Medicine	Niger
P07	22	Male	Medicine	Ghana
P08	28	Female	Landscape Architecture	Lebanon
P09	20	Male	Computer Engineering	Rwanda
P10	19	Female	Biology	Kazakhstan
P11	25	Male	English Lang. and Lit.	Turkmenistan
P12	22	Male	International Relations	Indonesia
P13	25	Male	Medicine	Central African Republic
P14	23	Male	International Relations	Indonesia
P15	26	Male	International Relations	Iraq

Table 3 presents the available demographic and academic characteristics of the 15 interview participants. The interview group spanned a range of countries and disciplines. This breadth was analytically useful because the study sought to understand how intercultural adjustment and career perception were interpreted across professional orientations. Health-related participants, for instance, frequently linked mobility to patient care and clinical competence, whereas international relations students more often connected it to diplomacy, civil society, and intercultural communication.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow participants to respond to common themes while retaining the flexibility to explain their experiences in their own terms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide addressed pre-mobility expectations, linguistic and cultural experiences, relationships with the host academic and social environment, participation in campus life, support mechanisms, sense of belonging, personal development, and career perception. The open-ended form invited participants to provide written reflections on cultural adaptation and its perceived influence on their personal, academic, and professional development.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. The written responses and interview records were initially read and coded separately to preserve the distinctive characteristics of written and interview-generated accounts. Before coding, the written responses were screened for contextual relevance, and material referring exclusively to educational experiences outside Türkiye was excluded. Analysis began with repeated readings of both datasets and preliminary notes on recurring patterns. Initial codes were generated inductively and included mobility motivation, cultural expectation, language barrier, academic support, social contact, campus participation, belonging, personal development, professional preparation, and career aspiration. Related codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters and reviewed against the research question and the full dataset. Codes generated from the two datasets were subsequently compared during theme development. Convergent patterns were integrated under shared themes, while dataset-specific patterns were retained when they contributed a relevant and analytically distinct dimension to the research question. A theme was not required to be represented equally in both datasets; each source contributed according to the relevance and depth of the evidence

it contained. The study's epistemological position is interpretivist: themes were understood as interpretive patterns constructed through the engagement among researcher, data, research question, and conceptual framework. Kim's theory functioned as a sensitising lens rather than a fixed coding scheme. The data were not initially coded according to Kim's categories; rather, once themes had been generated, concepts such as host communication competence, environmental receptivity, the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic, and intercultural transformation were used to interpret the relational and communicative dimensions of the findings. To strengthen trustworthiness, reflexive notes, coding records, and theme-development memos were maintained throughout, and an independent researcher provided feedback on the clarity and coherence of the theme-development process (Nowell et al., 2017). This feedback was used as a reflexive contribution to theme refinement rather than as a test of intercoder agreement, consistent with the interpretive orientation of reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings

The analysis indicates that international education mobility was not experienced merely as enrolment in an academic programme. Participants described entering a new linguistic environment, building social relationships, adjusting to academic and cultural expectations, developing or struggling to develop belonging, gaining personal strength, and reconsidering their professional futures. These experiences were neither uniformly positive nor linear. Some participants described Türkiye as safe, culturally meaningful, and professionally useful, while others recounted language difficulties, mismatches between expectation and everyday reality, limited social contact, and a belonging that emerged only gradually.

The broader thematic patterns presented below were developed through the complementary analysis of two distinct datasets concerning Turkish higher education. The 67 open-ended form responses were analysed as concise written reflections on participants' current or previous educational experience in Türkiye, whereas the 15 interviews provided more detailed accounts of adjustment, participation, belonging, and future aspirations. Because the form question focused specifically on how cultural adaptation affected career development, its evidence is used most directly in the themes concerning host communication, social and academic relationships, personal development, and career perception.

Table 4. Thematic Structure

Theme	Focus
Mobility motivations and pre-mobility expectations	Academic, cultural, safety-related, and professional expectations
Host communication competence and intercultural adjustment	Language, academic norms, everyday life, and cultural difference
Social contact, campus participation, and belonging	Friendships, faculty support, campus activities, and local community responsiveness
Active participation, adjustment strategies, and personal development	Transformation of difficulty and uncertainty into confidence, flexibility, and intercultural learning
From intercultural adjustment to career perception	Professional preparation, social contribution, and international orientation

Mobility motivations and pre-mobility expectations

No single motivation accounts for participants' reasons for mobility. Across the two datasets, participants linked mobility to educational quality, scholarships, safety, cultural exploration, religious familiarity, independence, and professional development; for some, it also meant leaving behind insecurity or limited opportunity at home. One participant captured the blend of cultural curiosity and personal growth that ran through many accounts:

"I wanted to explore the world, learn about Turkish culture, experience what it is like to study in a Muslim country, improve my self-confidence and intellectual development, become independent and make new friends." (P09)
For others, the starting point was the search for safety and stability rather than exploration:
"I left because of safety issues." (P08)

Mobility decisions were often evaluated in mixed terms. The same participant observed that the academic level fell short of expectation even as the international student environment proved unexpectedly meaningful:

"The education level was under my expectations, but mostly being among international students was exceptional." (P08)

Such accounts reveal that mobility can yield uneven outcomes, with academic expectations only partially met while social and intercultural experiences become highly significant. For still other participants, Türkiye's perceived cultural and religious familiarity was decisive:

"I decided to study in Türkiye because I was keen to learn a new culture. I wanted to experience food, see different types of buildings, and learn new study methods at the university. The fact that Türkiye is a Muslim and safe country was also important for me." (P14)

Pre-mobility expectations, then, are not external to adjustment. They become the reference points against which students later evaluate the host environment.

Host communication competence and intercultural adjustment

Language use, academic norms, everyday practices, contact with local people, and communication with faculty all shaped intercultural adjustment. Across both datasets, language recurred as one of the most decisive thresholds, affecting classroom participation, social confidence, and access to support. Expectations rooted in religious familiarity were sometimes unsettled by everyday encounters:

"Before coming to Türkiye, because I thought Turkish people were Muslim, I expected clothing to be more closed. But I was very surprised; Turkish people are quite open in their clothing style, like Western countries." (P14)

This account illustrates the cultural proximity paradox in miniature. Religious familiarity shaped the participant's expectations, yet daily life revealed a more plural cultural reality; proximity did not erase difference so much as render it more surprising. Language difficulty, meanwhile, conditioned attendance, communication with faculty, and friendship formation:

The written responses confirmed that host-language learning was experienced as more than a practical requirement. One respondent explicitly connected learning Turkish in Türkiye with communication, teamwork, adaptability, and preparation for culturally diverse workplaces:

"Learning Turkish while studying in Türkiye taught me to connect with people from different backgrounds. These experiences made me more adaptable and prepared for diverse work environments."

Another written account linked communication with local people to the possibility of continuing a career abroad: "If you want to continue working abroad, it is very important to communicate effectively with local people and respect their culture." Together, these accounts show that host communication competence was interpreted simultaneously as a means of adjustment in Türkiye and as a transferable professional capacity.

"I struggled with the language barrier during the first two years." (P06)

One participant tied this difficulty directly to relations with local students:

"It's a challenge between me and the language and the local students."(P04)

Host communication competence, in other words, is not only an individual skill but a relational condition that governs how visible and confident international students can become. The temporal and social weight of studying abroad was also apparent:

"Being a student is hard, and being a student in a foreign country is even harder, but over time you get used to it." (P13)

This adds a temporal dimension to Kim's stress-adaptation-growth dynamic: adjustment is gradual and accrues through repeated encounters with academic, linguistic, and social demands. The host environment, moreover, was not experienced as uniformly welcoming:

"People are friendly, they smile, they like to help people. But there are other people who never like foreigners; they behave so badly towards us." (P13)

Such ambivalence complicates the notion of environmental receptivity. Participants encountered both hospitality and hostility, and adjustment was negotiated within these uneven everyday relationships.

Social contact, campus participation, and belonging

Belonging emerged as a relational accomplishment rather than a status conferred by enrolment. Across the responses, it was associated with friendship, peer support, faculty communication, participation in campus life, and local community support, and it was distributed unevenly: some students built strong local attachments, while others relied more heavily on international peer networks. One participant described belonging produced through ordinary, repeated interaction:

"I have many Turkish and international friends. When I see them, we talk and plan activities to spend time together." (P11)

The form responses added a related academic dimension. One respondent stated, "My interactions with local academics helped me evaluate and understand the issues I had begun to explore in my academic studies." Another described cultural adaptation as creating "a friendly environment with my new friends from different countries, as well as local friends," which supported wellbeing, learning, and sustained effort. These concise accounts indicate that relationships with local academics and peers could provide both emotional support and access to academic development.

Relationships with Turkish students signalled host social communication, while ties among international students offered solidarity grounded in shared experience. The temporal quality of belonging was equally clear:

"At first, the language barrier made it challenging, but my teachers, new friends, and the hospitable people of [the host city] helped me adjust quickly. After three years, I can now feel like part of the community." (P06)

The phrase "after three years" matters, because it shows that belonging is not immediate but accrues through language learning, support, and accumulated contact. Belonging was also linked to international peer networks and to Turkish language ability:

"The number of international students during my past education years felt like being at home. Also being a social person with good Turkish language skills helped me to adapt and get used to the university very fast." (P08)

Some participants argued that universities should create more structured opportunities for local and international students to meet:

"I think programmes should be organised for local and foreign students to mix, such as football tournaments and international student promotion activities." (P13)

The recommendation reinforces the argument that belonging is a relational practice requiring institutional spaces for sustained interaction rather than administrative orientation alone. At the same time, belonging did not necessarily dissolve difference:

"It means that you are different, but you must get used to the culture of that university."(P12)

Understood this way, belonging is better described as negotiated participation than as complete assimilation: students can participate fully while remaining aware of their foreignness.

Active participation, adjustment strategies, and personal development

Participants did not present themselves as passive recipients of adjustment. They described actively building relationships, participating in campus life, managing language difficulties, and seeking academic and social support.

"Studying here broadened my academic knowledge and supported my personal development. Through courses, leadership opportunities and extracurricular activities, I developed critical thinking, effective communication, and cultural competence." (P15)

In health-related fields, professional preparation was similarly braided together with broader personal growth: *"Studying here not only provides the knowledge and skills necessary for my professional development; it also supports my personal development. Challenging courses, clinical training and interaction with different students improve my critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills."* (P03)

Some participants framed international studenthood itself as a source of confidence and responsibility: *"It provides you with confidence in many aspects."* (P11)

"It comes with some responsibilities; as an ambassador of your country of origin, you have to do your best socially and academically to show a good image of your country." (P06)

Although the data do not permit systematic comparisons between groups, participation and adjustment appeared to vary according to disciplinary setting, linguistic and cultural background, and length of mobility. Some participants emphasised practice-based learning, while others highlighted discussion and intercultural communication. Linguistic or cultural proximity did not necessarily remove adjustment difficulties, whereas longer exposure appeared to provide greater opportunities for developing communication skills and social networks. These differences support the view that adjustment emerges through the interaction of individual resources, host communication, and institutional opportunities rather than cultural background alone (Kim, 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

The written responses likewise described adaptation as active and gradual. Participants referred to becoming open to change, learning to express themselves, understanding what others expected, gaining trust, and focusing more effectively on their studies. As one respondent put it, "Adjusting to a new culture takes time, but my outgoing personality helped me adapt more easily and affected my career development positively." (Open-ended response) This account highlights the interaction between personal agency and the opportunities offered by the host environment.

Personal development, on these accounts, is produced through both opportunity and demand. Students gain confidence while also managing responsibility, visibility, and the expectation that they represent themselves and their countries in the host environment. Not all accounts indicated successful adjustment, secure belonging, or a clearly developed career orientation. Some participants continued to report linguistic difficulty, restricted interaction with local students, ambivalent belonging, or uncertainty about whether mobility would translate into future professional opportunities. These divergent accounts were retained because they showed that adjustment and professional meaning-making were uneven and remained incomplete for some participants.

From intercultural adjustment to career perception

Participants' career narratives show that mobility generated professional meaning-making well beyond the acquisition of skills. Across the two datasets, participants associated mobility with communication skills, international experience, self-confidence, professional networking, and future opportunities. The interview accounts further showed how these broader associations were interpreted within disciplinary and professional contexts, though career perception was not equally defined for everyone: for some, mobility consolidated an existing goal, while for others it opened possibilities that remained exploratory.

The written responses reinforced this movement from adjustment to professional meaning-making. Participants linked their experience in Türkiye to clearer communication, teamwork, professional networking, research collaboration, workplace productivity, and the ability to operate across cultural boundaries. One respondent explained: "Cultural adaptation has enhanced my professional growth by improving my communication skills, fostering inclusivity, and enabling me to collaborate effectively with diverse teams, enriching my problem-solving and decision-making abilities."

For some respondents, these capacities were translated into specific academic or occupational possibilities. One wrote that adaptation had "favourably impacted my research and fostered relationships with colleagues," while another stated that it had "enhanced my communication skills, provided me broader perspectives and helped me to create networks." (Open-ended responses) A participant in international relations connected the Turkish setting even more explicitly to professional orientation: "My participation in the Erasmus+ academic mobility programme at Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University exposed me to the nuances of Turkish culture, language, and politics… This

experience deepened my interest in international collaboration and prepared me to navigate complex cultural contexts effectively." (Open-ended response)

The effect was not uniform, however. Some respondents gave no substantive answer, while others stated, "Not related to my job" or "I don't think it has had any impact on my career." These negative cases qualify any assumption that mobility automatically produces career development. They suggest that cultural adaptation becomes professionally meaningful only when participants can connect the experience to identifiable skills, relationships, opportunities, or future roles.

"My career goal is to become the director of an engineering company that will provide jobs for engineers in Türkiye. Since I know many foreign languages, I want to develop business cooperation initiatives between different countries and strengthen Türkiye's position in the international business world." (P09)

Among international relations students, career perception was often articulated through diplomacy or civil society: *"My career goal is to work in international diplomacy, to contribute to promoting peace, developing cooperation and solving global problems."* (P15)

"My career aspiration is working in the non-profit organisation; that is why I joined some organisations." (P12)

The same participant added that he did not yet feel he had achieved this aspiration, introducing an element of career uncertainty: mobility may nourish career imagination without delivering a completed professional trajectory. Health-related narratives, by contrast, defined career success through patient care, service, and professional identity:

"My main goal has always been to help people have a better life and make them healthier. A smile or a thank you from a patient I treated is enough for me to feel that I have achieved success." (P06)

"As I am almost at the end of my studies, I think I have reached my goal of becoming a doctor. My professional dream is to become a great general surgeon." (P13)

Another medical participant likewise described a desire to help people through the knowledge and skills gained during his education. Within the interview accounts presented here, professional aspiration was commonly framed as social contribution rather than status alone. Intercultural adjustment thus appears to function not as a direct cause of career success but as a relational mechanism that can shape confidence, professional meaning-making, and future orientation.

Discussion

This study shows that international education mobility does not generate uniform outcomes. Participants interpreted mobility as a multidimensional process encompassing language learning, social contact, academic adjustment, everyday negotiation, belonging, personal development, and professional meaning-making. Its value was not produced automatically by physical movement across borders but by the quality of students' relationships with the host academic and social environment in Türkiye.

The open-ended responses broadened this interpretation within Turkish higher education: participants associated their experiences with improved communication, greater flexibility, increased cultural awareness, stronger professional networks, and an enhanced capacity to work with people from different backgrounds. However, some responses indicated little or no perceived career effect. Mobility should therefore be understood as an enabling context whose outcomes depend on opportunities for interaction, reflection, participation, and professional application.

These findings contribute to the international student mobility literature by showing that intercultural adjustment is neither linear nor uniformly positive. Language barriers, unfamiliar academic expectations, limited social contact, and uncertainty can slow adjustment. By contrast, faculty support, peer networks, campus participation, and local community responsiveness can facilitate it. This pattern is consistent with earlier research on loneliness, friendship networks, and campus engagement (Glass et al., 2014). The present study adds evidence from a non-Western host context.

The written accounts from participants with diverse national and disciplinary backgrounds indicate that adjustment within Turkish higher education remained relational and context-dependent. Language use, unfamiliar

communication conventions, changing expectations, and the negotiation of cultural differences recurred across participants' experiences in Türkiye. However, these processes varied according to participants' linguistic, academic, and social circumstances.

A key contribution of this study is the identification of the cultural proximity paradox. Several participants perceived Türkiye as culturally familiar, religiously recognisable, safe, or regionally meaningful. These perceptions shaped pre-mobility expectations and made the country attractive. Perceived proximity, however, did not remove intercultural difference. After arrival, students encountered differences in language, academic norms, campus culture, everyday communication, and social expectations. As a result, Türkiye was experienced as neither fully familiar nor entirely foreign. For some participants, perceived familiarity with Türkiye reduced expectations of difficulty before arrival; their subsequent experiences nevertheless revealed continuing linguistic, academic, and communicative adjustment needs. The paradox therefore concerns the relationship between expectation and experience: anticipated familiarity may attract students and initially reduce uncertainty, but it may also conceal the adjustments that remain necessary.

Kim's integrative theory helps explain this dynamic. Host communication competence emerged as a central mechanism. Language gave students access to faculty, friendships, campus participation, and visibility in everyday social life. Host social communication appeared in relationships with local students, faculty, and the wider community, while international student networks provided solidarity. Environmental receptivity mattered but was uneven: hospitality and support coexisted with experiences of foreignness, curiosity, or exclusion. From the perspective of Kim's (2015) framework, these encounters can be understood as early stages in a longer process of intercultural transformation rather than as isolated adjustment outcomes.

The written responses reinforce this interpretation by indicating that language learning was valued for more than immediate academic participation. It was also connected to confidence, teamwork, relationship-building, and the ability to operate across cultural and professional settings. Language competence thus functioned simultaneously as an adjustment resource, a means of social participation, and a transferable professional capacity. This finding extends Kim's communicative emphasis by showing how host communication competence may acquire meaning beyond the period of study and become part of participants' developing professional identities.

The findings show that belonging is a relational practice. Formal registration did not by itself create inclusion. Belonging developed through repeated interaction, friendship, faculty communication, student organisations, peer support, and contact with the local community. This extends Strayhorn's (2012) account by demonstrating how belonging is produced in practice through everyday educational and social encounters.

The open-ended responses place this argument within a broader mobility trajectory. They suggest that social and academic networks may remain valuable even when they do not produce a permanent sense of attachment to the host institution or country. Participants associated intercultural contact with expanded perspectives, academic connections, collaborative capacity, and access to future opportunities. Belonging and networking should therefore be treated as related but analytically distinct outcomes: students may develop professionally valuable relationships without fully experiencing social inclusion, while a sense of belonging may arise through ordinary interactions that have no immediate career purpose.

The implications for higher education institutions extend beyond international student recruitment, administrative orientation, and formal exchange agreements. International offices, academic advisors, student organisations, peer-mentoring and local–international student programmes, language support units, and career centres collectively provide the social infrastructure needed to foster belonging.

Structured activities such as joint projects, clubs, sporting events, and social responsibility programmes can help transform international students from formally enrolled individuals into active members of the campus community. Because the written responses connect mobility with communication, teamwork, networking, flexibility, and cultural awareness, such activities should also be recognised as part of students' professional development. Their value lies not simply in increasing social contact but in creating settings in which intercultural capacities can be practised and subsequently articulated in academic and employment contexts.

However, the experiences and support needs of international students may vary across institutional and regional contexts in Türkiye, reflecting differences in campus resources, local social environments, and opportunities for

interaction. Accordingly, institutional support should be tailored to the characteristics of each university and its surrounding context.

The study conceptualises career perception as professional meaning-making: how students imagine themselves as future professionals, what social meanings they attach to their work, and how they connect intercultural experience to professional identity. Participants linked their futures to diplomacy, peace, patient care, entrepreneurship, civil society, international cooperation, and social contribution. Career perception was therefore shaped not only by employment expectations but also by responsibility, communicative capacity, ethical orientation, and an imagined contribution to society.

The responses extend this finding by showing several mechanisms through which mobility entered career narratives. Participants connected their experiences to communicating with international colleagues, adapting to different workplace expectations, building cross-border academic and professional networks, developing regional knowledge, and becoming more confident in multicultural environments. In this sense, the career value of mobility was often expressed through perceived capacity and future orientation rather than immediate employment outcomes.

Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital approach is instructive here: language learning, social networks, intercultural confidence, campus participation, and faculty support contributed to human, social, cultural, psychological, and identity-related capital. These resources were interpreted differently across fields. Entrepreneurship and international cooperation were prominent in engineering, diplomacy and civil society in international relations, and patient care and clinical expertise in the health sciences. Intercultural adjustment, in other words, does not yield a single career outcome but shapes field-specific professional meanings.

The broader written accounts also suggest that the same mobility experience may contribute to several forms of graduate capital simultaneously. Language development may contribute to human capital, while relationships formed abroad may provide social capital. Familiarity with different institutional and workplace conventions may strengthen cultural capital, whereas increased confidence may enhance psychological and identity capital.

Nevertheless, these resources do not accumulate automatically or equally. The responses reporting no discernible career effect are important because they indicate that international experience becomes professionally meaningful only when participants can recognise, apply, or communicate what they have gained.

This reading aligns with accounts of mobility as student self-formation and agency, in which students actively fashion future identities rather than simply adapting to host-country norms (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018). The findings add that participants interpreted self-formation within Turkish higher education through their developing professional biographies. They connected linguistic resources, cultural knowledge, academic and social networks, and changing understandings of work to accounts of who they might become professionally. The analytical significance of the written responses therefore lies in showing how participants from diverse backgrounds made their Türkiye-based educational experience part of a coherent future orientation.

Career centres can build on these findings by helping international students translate mobility into career narratives. Standard employment preparation is likely to fall short if it neglects language confidence, intercultural communication, professional networking, and host-country expectations. Coordinating career support with academic advising, mentoring, student organisations, and international offices would help students understand mobility not only as a degree pathway but as a resource for professional identity formation. Reflection workshops, intercultural competency portfolios, alumni mentoring, and discipline-specific career guidance could help students identify and articulate capacities that might otherwise remain implicit. Such support may be especially important for students who do not initially recognise a relationship between their international experience and their future careers.

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study does not seek statistical generalisation. It examines international students' perceived adjustment and post-graduation career orientations. Because the participants came from diverse countries, academic disciplines, and mobility backgrounds, the study does not offer systematic comparisons across national, disciplinary, or mobility groups. Instead, it identifies recurring relational and interpretive patterns across participants' experiences of Turkish higher education. The findings should therefore be understood as context-sensitive insights into how international students interpret their educational experiences, social relationships, and future career possibilities.

Future research could focus on specific disciplinary groups, countries or regions of origin, and mobility categories among international students in Türkiye. Longitudinal studies could trace how adjustment develops over time and how students navigate the transition from higher education to employment or further study after graduation. Comparative research across host countries could also examine whether perceived cultural proximity influences pre-mobility expectations and subsequent adjustment in different ways. In addition, longitudinal research could clarify when and under what conditions the capacities developed through international mobility are translated into educational, personal, or professional outcomes.

Overall, studying in Türkiye created opportunities for personal and professional transformation. However, the educational and career significance of these experiences depended on participants' ability to engage meaningfully with their academic and social environments, establish supportive relationships, interpret cultural differences, and translate their experiences into personally and professionally relevant capacities.

Conclusion

This study has argued that international student mobility in Turkish higher education is best understood as a relational and interpretive experience. Mobility became meaningful through language learning, social contact, institutional support, campus participation, and everyday encounters with the local community. Türkiye's perceived cultural proximity may draw students in, but adjustment and belonging require sustained communicative and social engagement after arrival.

The study also shows that career perception is shaped through professional meaning-making. Students connected their future roles not only to employment or status but to communication skills, social contribution, patient care, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. These findings suggest that universities should support international students through integrated policies that combine language support, peer interaction, mentoring, student clubs, and career guidance, thereby helping students convert mobility into belonging, personal development, and a more coherent professional orientation.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval (Decision No: 2024/100, Approval Date: 10 July 2024) was obtained from the Recep Tayyip Erdogan University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee for this research.

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