

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN TURKEY: MIGRATION AND MOBILITY AS COMPETING FRAMEWORKS OF ANALYSIS

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Executive Summary

According to official figures, international university students in Turkey now number over 300,000, making Turkey the eighth most popular destination for international students globally according to UNESCO. International university students have become an increasingly significant percentage of foreigners living in the country. This analysis presents eye-opening figures regarding international students in Turkey, underlining some important trends. First, the number of international students studying in Turkey grew from just under 50,000 in 2013 to over 300,000 in 2023—a roughly sixfold increase over a decade. Second, Syria is the top country of origin for international students by a significant margin. Third, the number of international students from other top countries has also grown significantly over the past decade, with the number of international students from each of the top ten countries growing between 250% and 5,000% over the past decade. Although further research is required to shed light on the various country-specific factors attracting foreign students to (or pushing them away from) universities in Turkey, the preliminary findings indicate that domestic conditions in students’ home countries and these countries’ evolving relationships with Turkey are important factors influencing these trends. This analysis further explores how discussions of international students diverge under the competing frameworks of mobility and migration, underlining how these different framings draw our attention to different research questions and policy dimensions.



Introduction

There is growing alarm in Turkey at present over a large increase in the number of young people from prestigious high schools moving abroad for university education and the uptick in university graduates emigrating to Europe and North America under sundry skilled-labor schemes. Adding to this alarm are surveys indicating that a desire to leave Turkey is widely shared among young people of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.¹ Less discussed—until very recently—is the rapidly growing number of international students coming to Turkey, the various factors that draw them, and their experiences as students, workers, and foreigners in a country where both migration and transnational mobility are increasingly objects of public scrutiny. According to official figures, international university students now number over 300,000,² making Turkey the eighth most popular destination for international students globally and a leading destination in the Global South,³ and positioning university students as an increasingly significant percentage of foreigners living in the country.

In this analysis we aim to provide an overview of the situation of international students in Turkey and consider some ways their situation illuminates the multi-tiered structure of “global higher education” and the ways it mediates youth mobilities, influences migration regimes, and directs the transnational flows of young, educated labor. Inspired by recent scholarly efforts to better theorize the conceptual nexus between “migration” and “mobility,” we ask what these different framings reveal about the realities faced by the growing number of international youth studying and working in Turkey.

International students present an important case study. Global higher education both allows for

temporary periods of transnational mobility while also creating opportunities for more permanent forms of migration. An analysis on the growing number of international students in Turkey is therefore also useful from a policy perspective in that it raises questions about the interplay between contemporary regimes of mobility and migration, their connection to international higher education, and the ways that government policies shape Turkey’s position within the transnational flows of workers and students, as well as the country’s potential as an aspirational destination for foreign youth.

International Students in Turkey in Numbers

The presence of foreign students and professors in Turkey’s universities is as old as Turkish higher education itself and predates the foundation of the Republic of Turkey.⁴ However, the rapid growth in the numbers of international students in Turkey over the past decade, alongside the introduction of new state-supported initiatives targeting foreign students over this same period, has imbued their presence in Turkey with new meanings and increased economic and social significance. On the one hand, international higher education is promoted domestically as an increasingly lucrative Turkish export in the global knowledge economy, with international students presented as consumers of Turkish higher education and competition between universities to attract those students. International students are also presented as potentially important actors in the expansion of Turkish soft power in Africa, Central Asia, and the Arab world.⁵ The latter phenomenon is exemplified by the creation of the state-run Türkiye Scholarships Program (*Türkiye Bursları*) in 2012—a program that reportedly received 117,000



applications from 162 countries in 2023 and which now awards 5,000 undergraduate and graduate scholarships to international students annually. On the other hand, in the context of larger social controversy about foreign migration to Turkey, international students can also become the targets of anti-migrant rhetoric.

For most international students, Turkey is a temporary residence: a place to earn a degree and explore the world before returning to their countries, a way station onto Europe or North America, or an interim site of refuge from political or economic crises back home. However, for an increasing number of international students, Turkey is also becoming a site of long-term, post-graduate residence and, in some cases, permanent immigration. The path to immigration is complicated, however, by the ever-changing and frequently secretive nature of Turkish migration policy.⁶

The diversity of international students in terms of gender, country of origin, socioeconomic and educational background, Turkish fluency, individual educational and professional goals, racial, ethnic, or religious identity, etc., make broad generalizations difficult.⁷ However, some underlying trends can be observed.

The number of international students studying in Turkey grew from just under 50,000 in 2013 to over 300,000 in 2023—a roughly sixfold increase over a decade.

The majority of international students in Turkey—more than 60%—come from one of ten countries. Over 80% of all international students in Turkey come from one of twenty countries (Table 1). Around 60% of international students studying in Turkey are male, and 40% are female. However, this gender disparity is not equally distributed between countries of origin: for example, around 80% of

students from Yemen, three-quarters of students from Afghanistan and Nigeria, and roughly two-thirds of students from Azerbaijan, Somalia, Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan are male. However, female students outnumber male students, or their ratios are more balanced among cohorts from countries like Germany (57% female), Iran (55% female), Kazakhstan (54% female), Bulgaria (53% female), and Turkmenistan (51% female).

Syria is the top country of origin for international students by a significant margin.

The current number of students from Syria, 58,213, represents a thirtyfold increase since 2013, with Syrians now accounting for roughly one in five international students in Turkey. However, these official numbers raise further questions: for instance, a notably large population of Syrians—close to a quarter million—have become citizens of Turkey since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. Since naturalized Turkish citizens can still apply for international student status, it is unclear how many Syrian-origin students from this population are counted in these figures.⁸ More significantly from both a policy and social scientific perspective is the question as to whether university students from among the population of nearly 4 million Syrians living in the country who are not citizens of Turkey—3.3 million under temporary projection, 300,000 under international protection,⁹ and 77,308 with residence permits according to Turkey’s Presidency of Migration Management¹⁰—ought to be considered “international students” at all when many have migrated to Turkey with their families years ago and have completed their primary and secondary education in Turkey.



Table 1. Top 20 Countries of Origin for International Students in Turkey as of 2022/23

	Country	2013/14	2018/19	2022/23	Male (2022/23)	Female (2022/23)
1	Syria	1,785	27,034	58,213	32,890	25,323
2	Azerbaijan	6,901	19,383	34,247	23,023	11,224
3	Iran	4,343	7,152	22,632	10,157	12,475
4	Turkmenistan	6,941	17,571	18,250	8,901	9,349
5	Iraq	1,581	7,608	16,172	9,948	6,224
6	Somalia	638	3,764	10,043	6,540	3,503
7	Egypt	199	2,910	9,597	6,304	3,293
8	Afghanistan	2,332	6,804	9,203	6,812	2,391
9	Kazakhstan	1,306	2,191	8,864	4,116	4,748
10	Yemen	327	3,076	8,198	6,599	1,599
11	Jordan	306	2,643	7,266	5,022	2,244
12	Palestine	674	2,483	5,705	4,004	1,701
13	Sudan	132	735	5,171	4,013	1,158
14	Bulgaria	843	3,010	5,120	2,414	2,706
15	Morocco	314	1,071	4,958	2,280	2,678
16	Uzbekistan	371	1,074	4,794	3,012	1,782
17	Indonesia	530	1,218	4,662	2,690	1,972
18	Germany	396	4,378	4,448	1,896	2,552
19	Pakistan	674	2,483	4,171	2,659	1,512
20	Nigeria	876	1,562	3,669	2,741	928
	Total (Countries Listed)	31,469*	118,150*	245,383	146,021	99,362
	Total (All Countries)	48,183	154,505	301,694	179,670	122,024

Source: Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi

*This list reflects the total number of students from the top 20 countries as of 2022/23. This list is not indicative of the top 20 countries in 2013/14 or 2018/19 but rather uses this data comparatively.



The number of international students from other top countries has also grown significantly over the past decade, albeit at different rates: the number of students from both Azerbaijan (second overall) and Iran (third) grew 500% between 2013 and 2023, for example.

Turkmenistan, the top country of origin for international students in Turkey a decade ago, slipped to fourth place in 2022/23, growing at just over half the rate compared to the number of students from other top countries over the same period. Over this same period, the population of international students from Iraq (fifth overall) grew tenfold, from Somalia (sixth) sixteenfold, and from Egypt (seventh) close to fiftyfold.

Domestic conditions in students' home countries and these countries' evolving relationships with Turkey—both in terms of official bilateral relations and informal economic and social networks—are important factors influencing these trends.

Although the exact nature of each country's domestic conditions requires further study and elaboration on a country-by-country or regional basis, the rapid growth in students from Egypt over the past decade, for instance, is at least partially explained by the period of state repression that followed the overthrow of the Morsi government in 2013 and the Turkish government's support for the Egyptian opposition. In another example, the growth in the number of students from Iraq and Somalia over this same period is potentially accounted for, at least partly, by the conflicts in both countries. The number of applications to Turkish universities from international students from Palestine—which grew over eightfold to 5,705 between 2013 and 2023—can also be expected to increase given Israel's destruction of the entire university system in Gaza and its

ongoing campaign of genocidal violence against Palestinians.

Further research is required to shed light on the various country-specific factors attracting foreign students to (or pushing them away from) universities in Turkey.

For policymakers seeking to understand and address these factors, attention to how these factors are evaluated through competing frameworks of migration and mobility is helpful in developing analytical clarity and focus.

International Students as “Mobile” Youth or Future “Migrants?” Competing Frames of Migration and Mobility

Migration and mobility are based on two distinct scholarships with contrasting perspectives on human movement. Migration is based on the perspective of place, and mobility is based on the perspective of flows, which have different meanings for policy.¹¹ The migration-mobility nexus (in reference to a recent article by Piccoli et al.¹²) is a helpful starting point for the discussion of the situation of international students in Turkey. It illuminates how two competing framings of international students—as “mobile” youth or current or future “migrants”—shape both everyday as well as academic and policy discourses on international education. These two competing frames of “migration” and “mobility” make possible different kinds of ideological comparisons and related evaluations about international students in Turkey.

Notably, these competing frames are differently implicated in larger social “problem-spaces”¹³ where they become linked to distinct sets of social and political questions. In the case of migration,



these are linked to questions around cultural assimilation and social inclusion, as well as to corresponding questions around the distribution of social goods and the granting of citizenship rights and obligations. In the case of mobility, these are linked to questions around individual autonomy, freedom of movement, and regional and transnational market integration, as exemplified in EU discourse on mobility and higher education in the context of the ERASMUS+ program.¹⁴ Our goal in what follows is to describe to how these frames are deployed in discourses on international students in Turkey by different actors to different social effects as well as to clarify how these frames inform the kinds of phenomena we study and the questions we ask as academics or policymakers.

The rapid expansion of international higher education and the corresponding growth in the number of international students globally presents compelling questions for the frameworks of migration and mobility. Debates about global higher education bring the salient analytical contrasts within these frameworks into stark relief while also showing the contingent relationship between them. On the one hand, university students, like youth more generally, are widely perceived to possess a “liminal” status between childhood and adulthood.¹⁵ In the same way that domestic students are considered an interim population within university towns—seasonal and self-replacing—international students are often imagined as temporary residents of the countries where they study. This ideological conjecture is not only reflected in public and scholarly discourse but in legal migration regimes: for example, although not true in every case, time spent in a country on an education visa—in contrast to a work or family visa—is often not counted toward residency requirements when applying for citizenship, as

is the current case in Turkey. On the other hand, foreign university education is commonly linked to subsequent opportunities for continued employment abroad or permanent immigration, and this, too, is commonly codified in migration law, e.g., international students matriculating in or graduating from foreign universities can receive greater preference or special access to post-graduate work or immigration visas—although, notably, this is not the case in Turkey at present.

The importance of these two frames and the different narrative tropes they invoke, the values they emphasize, and the legal and policy regimes they buttress are unmistakable in contemporary debates about international higher education in Turkey. For example, the aforementioned public controversy around the growing number of Turkey’s top high school graduates electing to study at universities abroad is not explained by a national aversion to foreign education—transnational mobility is an aspiration of many of Turkey’s young people—but rather by changing perceptions of its social outcomes, i.e., from a route to achieve expertise and prestige in Turkey to a route for emigration out of the country. Since the late Ottoman period, a small number of students from Turkey, primarily from elite backgrounds, have both studied in “foreign” schools in Turkey, or in lesser numbers, pursued higher education abroad. Graduates from foreign universities played an important role in building and expanding Turkey’s institutions of higher education over the 20th century.¹⁶ The number of young people from Turkey studying abroad has continued to grow in recent decades, bolstered by both Turkey’s integration into the global economy, as well as by the rapid expansion of Turkey’s system of higher education and the corresponding growth in the number of university graduates in the country over the same period. Foreign university education remains prestigious, and it has become an increas-



ingly popular option for those with economic means or access to public or private scholarships. Today, however, concerns about students from Turkey pursuing higher education abroad are derived from changing public perceptions in Turkey about the outcomes of foreign university education. This is typified by a widely shared belief, partially supported by research, that many of Turkey's youth have come to view university education abroad less as an opportunity for temporary mobility or for social and educational experiences not found in Turkey and more as an increasingly well-worn path to permanent emigration. If foreign education was once perceived as a win-win for both Turkey and its students—since it was imagined to function both as a source of mobility and prestige for the graduate in Turkish society as well as a source of human capital for the country—it is now increasingly seen as among the primary routes through which Turkey is losing many of its most promising and best-educated young people to countries in the Global North.

Competing frames of “mobility” and “migration” similarly influence how universities, state institutions, mass media, and these students themselves understand and describe the situation of international students studying in Turkey. This remains true even as public discourse around these two phenomena—i.e., students from Turkey studying abroad, on the one hand, and international students studying in Turkey, on the other—have remained largely disconnected from one another given the obvious analogies between them.

In government and state discourse more generally, support for the expansion of international education is generally sold as support for transnational mobility: a way to build economic and social bridges between Turkey and its international partners, as well as a reliable source of foreign currency, since the education of international

students is increasingly viewed in macroeconomic terms as a kind of “service export.”¹⁷ International students are thus presented both (initially, like Syrian refugees) as “visitors” or “guests” who benefit from a generous regime of state-afforded mobility to temporarily live and study in Turkey and (like tourists) foreign consumers supplying revenue that can be redirected through university expansion projects into local processes of capital accumulation across the country.¹⁸ In the context of Turkey's domestic workforce, international students also constitute a growing and mobile source of reserve labor, as they are allowed to apply for work permits after completing their first year of undergraduate studies and, if granted, may work part- or full-time while studying.¹⁹

Conclusions and Further Questions

In order to have a thorough discussion, it is important to be mindful of the agency of international students in Turkey and to remember that the “student” category—like all social categories—is complex and heterogeneous. In this analysis, we aimed to underline how frameworks of migration and mobility shape how we understand and address current issues shaping international higher education. These frameworks also draw our attention to the normative dimensions of policy research as they facilitate further questions. Should Turkey's relationship with its international students be entirely transactional as if with consumers? Does Turkey owe foreign graduates a feasible path to migration or, at the very least, one with transparent and consistently enforced guidelines? Should higher education be the only feasible migration path for youth from the Global South wanting to live or work in Turkey, especially as some low-quality, private universities seem to be increasingly profiting from their facilitation of student residency?



Notes

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- 2 | These are official statistics provided by Yüksek Öğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi (YÖKSİS). See Table 1.
- 3 | According to the number of Total Inbound Internationally Mobile Students. See UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.
- 4 | Fuat Boyacıoğlu, “The Situation of French and German Teaching as a Foreign Language in Ottoman Empire,” *Acta Universitatis Danubius. Relationes Internationales* 1 (2015): 131–144; Evrim Şencan Gürtunca, “The Role of Foreign and Turkish Schools in Changing Late Ottoman Educational Policy: Robert College and Mekteb-i Sultani,” *Journal of Modern Turkish History Studies* 17, no. 35 (2017): 5–21.
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- 6 | Sibel Karadağ and Doruk Tatar, “Powered by Secrecy: Contesting Imaginaries of Migration Governance in Turkey,” *Geopolitics* (2024): 1–22.
- 7 | For a longer discussion, see Murat Özoğlu, Bekir S. Gür, and İpek Coşkun, “Factors influencing international students’ choice to study in Turkey and challenges they experience in Turkey,” *Research in Comparative and International Education* 10, no. 2 (2015): 223–237.
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- 10 | “İkamet İzin,” Republic of Türkiye Presidency of Migration Management, last updated May 9, 2024, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/ikamet-izineri>.
- 11 | Paula Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, “Perspectives of flow and place: rethinking notions of migration and mobility in policy-making,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50, no. 6 (2024): 1299–1316.
- 12 | Lorenzo Piccoli et al., “What Is the Nexus Between Migration and Mobility? A Framework to Understand the Interplay Between Different Ideal Types of Human Movement,” *Sociology* (2024).
- 13 | David Scott, *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).
- 14 | According to the ERASMUS Türkiye Factsheet, 33,978 international students from across Europe came to Turkey via ERASMUS exchange programs in 2022; however, international exchange students do not appear to be included in the figures of international students provided by YÖK, meaning that the number of European-origin international students in Turkish universities is potentially larger than official figures presented above would



suggest. See Ruhi Can Alkın, “Uluslararası Öğrenci Hareketliliği: Mevcut Durum ve Öneriler,” *Ilke and Todam, Politika Notlari* 58 (May 2024): 8–9, https://ilke.org.tr/images/yayin/uluslararasi_ogrenci_hareketliliği.pdf; “Erasmus+ in Türkiye in 2022,” European Commission, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/factsheets/2022/t%C3%BCrkiye>.

- 15 | Vanessa Rutherford and Ian Pickup, “Negotiating liminality in higher education: Formal and informal dimensions of the student experience as facilitators of quality,” in *The European higher education area: Between critical reflections and future policies*, edited by A. Curaj et al. (New York: Springer, 2015).
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