The Turkish government scholarship program as a soft power tool

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The Turkish government scholarship program as a soft power tool

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ABSTRACT
Turkish policy makers assume a soft power dimension in foreign policy. A number of soft power tools and instruments have been adopted, including state-sponsored educational scholarship programs targeted at international students. This study examines the role of the Turkish government scholarship program (*Türkiye Bursları*) in generating and disseminating Turkey's soft power. Through the use of a mixed methods research approach, the study identifies both the importance of the program and the challenges confronting it. By the means of providing higher education scholarships, Turkish government made some progress in publicizing and diffusing its culture and making itself more attractive to international players. There is also the need for reforms to enhance the competitiveness of *Türkiye Bursları* in relation to other scholarship programs across the globe.

Introduction

Recently, higher education scholarships targeted at foreign students have become an integral tool for the projection of Turkish soft power. Attracting talented foreign students to Turkey is becoming a means of transmission of Turkish culture and language abroad. In other words, through higher education scholarship programs, Turkey aims to establish a pool of 'brand ambassadors' to promote its image abroad. The effectiveness of this program means that Turkey is afforded the opportunity to establish a network of trusted friends in other parts of the world so that it can facilitate relations with other societal and state actors. Taking a look into the academic literature on the subject, according to Nye, higher education scholarships are measured in terms of their relevance in 'building long-term relations [between states] and developing them.'[1]

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It is worth underscoring that studies on Turkish soft power are relatively new. There are some studies that have examined various elements of Turkish soft power,[2] including humanitarian diplomacy and development aid[3] and public diplomacy.[4] However, despite possible connections between these efforts and the education sector, a very limited number of studies have examined the role of the education sector in propelling Turkey's soft power.[5] Generally, these studies maintain that if given the needed attention and support, the education sector can be a significant driver of a country's foreign policy objectives, particularly its soft power dimension.

Despite this emerging contribution to the literature, past studies on the role of education in Turkish soft power have not addressed the specific issue of higher education scholarships targeted at international students as a component of Turkey's soft power. This study positions itself to bridge this gap by examining the role of the main Turkish government scholarship program (*Türkiye Bursları*) targeted at talented foreign students in projecting Turkey's soft power and, by extension, the larger foreign policy objectives of the country in achieving regional power status and hence a prominent seat in the global political arena. In this regard, this study seeks to answer the following questions: why do higher education scholarships matter to Turkey's public diplomacy toolkit?; what role does the higher education scholarship play in Turkey's larger foreign policy domain?; what are the problems confronting this soft power tool?; and does the number of years spent in Turkey for education by international students impact the level of satisfaction with the Turkish language of instruction?

In answering these questions, three hypotheses were constructed. The first hypothesis suggests that through the scholarship system, Turkey has been able to diffuse its image and culture in the sample of countries to which survey and interview respondents belong in this study. The second hypothesis claims that the level of satisfaction with the program (measured by the level of satisfaction with the Turkish education system) depends on the level of satisfaction with the language of instruction. The final hypothesis claims that the level of satisfaction with the language of instruction increases as beneficiaries spend more years in the country. Through the use of a mixed research method involving an online survey, in-depth interviews of a sample of beneficiaries of *Turkiye Burslari*, and an examination of speeches by Turkish officials influencing foreign policy, it was found that *Turkiye Burslari* is contributing to the diffusion of Turkish culture and improvement of credibility of Turkey in the eyes of students hosted in Turkish universities.

Soft power and its relevance and relationship with higher education

Joseph Nye introduced the term 'soft power' to academic discussion in his seminal study *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*[6]

and further developed the concept in his later book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.*[7] According to Nye, soft power represents 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.' This attraction is situated within ' … a country's culture, political ideals, and foreign and domestic policies.'[8] This concept suggests that it is within the power of a state to influence other states to behave and act in ways that favor its interest through ' … the ability to shape the preferences of others.'[9] Thus, the ability of a given state to influence external actors (states and institutions) to give recognition to and play by the means of its values, traditions, and customs speaks to the spirit of soft power at play. In other words, by means of soft power a given state is able to get 'other countries [to] admire its values, emulate its example, [and] aspire to its level of prosperity and openness … '[10]

Soft power is by no means a new concept. Historically, soft power has been expressed through states' engagements across different borders. The spread of the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, for example, used soft power as an integral part of its projection. In recent times, mention can be made of the British- and American-designed and executed concepts of democracy and capitalism.[11] In the current era, soft power is built on the abilities of countries to reach out to publics in other countries through numerous means of communication. Zaharna differentiates between mass communication and network communication and their effects on wielding and creating soft power, respectively.[12] According to Nye, 'understanding the relationship between soft-power and public diplomacy' is key to recognizing resources and outcomes in terms of convincing and attracting others.[13] Reputation and credibility matter in the current era, and public diplomacy is a toolkit of wielding and generating soft power for these two factors through mobilization of government institutions, NGOs, media, business organizations, and educational and scientific institutions, among others.

Tuch defined public diplomacy as 'a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies.'[14] The practices of public diplomacy as a source of wielding and creating soft power are manifold. These are, among others, international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, and international educational exchanges. Although it is impossible to ensure specific outcomes of public policy and diplomacy, there is still a high chance to make a difference in a country's soft power if good policies are publicized. The presumed difference would not be possible without the efficient coordination of public diplomacy.[15]

The renewed U.S. focus on the necessity of public diplomacy in the aftermath of September 11 brought the issues of publicity, coordination, credibility, and cultural resources to a new level of discussion with a particular

reference to elevating soft power attraction. The new multi-actor environment of policy making with state and non-state actors and new communication technologies further confuse the situation. In recognition of the new challenges, the attachment of an undersecretary for public diplomacy to the U.S. State Department was meant to 'turn around anti-American sentiment in the world'[16] by projecting a positive image of the United States in a bid to make itself attractive to states that view it in a negative light. Nye's response to the new situation concluded that: 'The effectiveness of public diplomacy is measured by minds changed (as shown in interviews or polls), not dollars spent or slick production packages.'[17]

In the aftermath of the Cold War, states have employed public diplomacy to enhance their competitiveness in the global system largely influenced by the aims to expand their influence through effective utilization of their soft power instruments. A significant practice of public diplomacy is the long-term development of enduring relations with strategic individuals by offering opportunities for scholarships and international educational exchanges.[18] Higher education scholarships have been developed as one such tool to further attractiveness and connections abroad. As Zewail asserted in the case of the United States, a country's investments in higher education, science, and technology have the potency to create lasting impressions on an international audience.[19] The Fulbright Program is the best-known U.S. public diplomacy initiative that is part of international exchange schemes. These initiatives contribute to enhancing a country's soft power position and are a key part of the new wave of states' policies and programs geared towards making their education sector attractive to talented foreign students.[20] In this sense, the internationalization of higher education facilitates creating soft power as 'positive experiences of student mobility and the development of intellectual, commercial and social relationships can build upon a nation's reputation, and enhance the ability of that nation to participate in and influence regional or global outcomes.'[21] Students who enter host countries' higher education institutions have a better grasp of the culture, society, and economy and acquire a new consciousness of the day-to-day realities of the host country. The success of the hosting program to a considerable extent depends on the participant's impact, desirably a multiplier effect, in their home country, for cross-cultural interaction, better understanding, and creating positive images.[22]

In recent era, the international education exchange implies a nonreciprocal participation of individuals from various countries to the educational programs of a host country. The U.S., for instance, has been an attractive place for foreign students to pursue higher education. However, this one-sided movement does not necessarily imply a passive receiver role of the visiting and influencer position of the host institution. Indeed, as Metzgar exemplified in the case of China-based international higher education programs, the participants, governments, and host institutions benefit from these experiences, in addition to the

programs' role as facilitator in creating soft power.[23] The governments' complicity in establishing international educational exchanges to serve its foreign policy agenda depends on its ability to manage the programs to produce results in this direction. In the U.S. case, again, education initiatives facilitate maneuvers for its regional and global agenda: e.g. the United States can count on the networks it had produced in other countries over the years.[24]

Currently, the number of countries around the world relying on the provision of higher education scholarships as a means of furthering national interest on the global stage is increasing. The once-closed circuit of the developed world is now witnessing the infiltration of emerging and even developing countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Brazil, and India, among others, onto the list of countries offering government-funded scholarships for foreign students. This expansion is a result of the impressive economic growth and development witnessed by these countries in the past two decades and the successful implementation of this strategy by the developed world. *Türkiye Burslari* is an educational exchange program in Turkey's public diplomacy toolkit to generate soft power by way of creating cultural affinity and building relationships. Turkey's initiative of international educational exchanges is analyzed against this backdrop in the case of the *Türkiye Burslari* program in the following sections.

Methodology

This study employs a survey approach that encapsulates the adoption of statistical tools to analyze quantitative data through methods such as face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and questionnaires, among others. In the context of this study, the survey method involves an online survey and face-to-face interviews with beneficiaries of *Türkiye Bursları*. Whereas the online survey provided a snapshot of the opinions and expectations of the respondents, the interviews enabled the researcher to obtain detailed information in relation to questions such as 'why' and 'how.' The logic behind this is that interviews are significant to provide a window towards understanding issues in society.[25] In other words, interviews are relevant to interpret events within the context that they occur. In-depth interviews were necessary to uncover the dynamics of *Türkiye Bursları* within the context of Turkish public diplomacy policy. The questionnaire for the online survey was structured along a similar questionnaire designed by Mixed Economy Group UK (MEG)[26] in a study on college experiences of international students in the UK.

All participants in the survey were drawn from the population of *Turkiye Burslari* beneficiaries across Turkey using a convenience sampling method. This method was adopted owing to the difficulty encountered in accessing the complete list of beneficiaries. Even though the method (convenience

sampling method) adopted is non-probability, thereby affecting the attainment of a representative sample, efforts were made to survey as many beneficiaries as possible. We utilized social media group platforms such as Facebook and contacted beneficiaries of the scholarship across the provinces of Turkey. A sample of 195 respondents was drawn from the population of the beneficiaries. In addition, out of the 195 students who responded to the online survey, 30 students agreed to an in-depth interview.

As can be seen in Appendix II, the respondents hailed from 67 countries. The majority of the respondents were from Africa. Appendix III provides details about the demographic profile of respondents to the online survey. The study included students living in 16 different provinces of Turkey, from Adana to Trabzon. The majority of the participants studied in Istanbul (80), Ankara (30), Antalya (26), and Sakarya (17). The age breakdown of respondents shows that the plurality of the students were between 19–24 years of age. In terms of religion and level of education, the majority of the students (74 percent) were Muslims, and half were undergraduates. The language of instruction for the vast majority of the respondents (78 percent) was Turkish, while participants' average stay in Turkey is between 3–4 years.

This sample was deemed appropriate because a saturation point was reached after our interviews exceeded the 30th interviewee. The information adduced from this sample was for descriptive purposes and not to draw a generalizable conclusion. A snowballing technique was employed in accessing the interviewees, meaning we relied on the students who were beneficiaries of *Türkiye Bursları* to contact other beneficiaries for the purposes of the interview. This method enabled us to adduce significant findings relating to the place of *Türkiye Bursları* in Turkish soft power. These findings are presented in the next section of this article.

Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the results of the study based on the research design. It begins with a discussion of the importance of higher education scholarships in the larger framework of Turkish soft power. In addition, a detailed discussion involving the combination of results obtained from the online survey and the interviews is presented. The themes covering this section were obtained from the interview data and sections of the survey questionnaire. As indicated earlier, in a bid to protect the identity of respondents, pseudonyms were used in place of the original names of the interviewees.

Relevance of higher education scholarships in Turkish foreign policy

As indicated by a number of scholars,[27] Turkey's conservative, Western-oriented foreign policy outlook took a radical and ambitious turn upon the

assumption of power of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalk-ınma Partisi*, AKP). In addition to the already established contour of a 'peace-oriented' foreign policy directed toward its immediate neighbors, Turkish policy makers attempted to acquire a regional profile and gain greater influence in the international arena. By and large, the space was created for the involvement of actors who hitherto played a limited role or no role at all in Turkey's foreign policy domain. The net effect of this was the birth of Turkish soft power anchored on humanitarianism and public diplomacy harboring higher education scholarships as a critical component.

It is therefore not surprising to find the provision of higher education scholarships featured prominently in the addresses of key Turkish foreign policy drivers such as the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and officials of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, among others. In the wake of the humanitarian crises in Somalia, for example, the speech of then Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on his visit to Mogadishu on August 9, 2012, contained a promise of providing scholarships to over 1200 Somali students.[28] This promise has gradually been rolled out by Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Baş-kanlığı*, YTB), an institution established in 2011 and attached to the prime ministry with the responsibility, among others, to manage the *Türkiye Bursları* scholarship. The specific programs created for Syrian refugees in Turkey also paved the way for the YTB and the *Diyanet* (Directorate of Religious Affairs) to create a special scholarship package for Syrian nationals.

In an interview with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kudret Bülbül, then head of the YTB, the focus and objectives of the institution were underscored as follows:

> I think it will be better to explain why we are interested in international students. There are three fields of activity for the YTB. The first and foremost is to have a strong Turkish diaspora. The second is to cooperate closely with regions that we have historical and cultural ties with, while the third can be defined as to raise friends of Turkey.[29]

What this means is that the AKP's new Turkish foreign policy in post-2002 era, which rests largely on regional activism and international openings, includes higher education scholarships as an integral part of increasing its soft power capacity. As Bülbül underscored:

> It is important to state that the increased attention towards *Türkiye* [*Bursları*] is due to the increased attention towards Turkey in general. Turkey, with its advanced economy, matured democracy and improvements in human rights, has become a prominent country in the past 10–15 years. The success in these fields has contributed to Turkey's transformation into a center of attraction.[30]

Per the spirit and objective of *Türkiye Bursları*, there is a realization of the need 'to build a network of future leaders committed to strengthening

cooperation among countries and mutual understanding among societies.'[31] The data in this analysis affirms the general hypothesis of this study, which indicates that through the provision of higher education scholarships the Turkish government had made some progress to diffuse its culture and make itself attractive to future global leaders. This claim is further strengthened by the responses of beneficiaries of *Türkiye Bursları* regarding why they chose Turkey for higher education and their cultural experiences.

Turkey's ruling party considers *Türkiye Bursları* as a soft power tool to facilitate an active presence in various geographies. In his trip to India, Erdoğan invited Indian students to study in Turkey noting that: 'We embrace students from all over the world coming to Turkey.'[32] Despite this universal call, most of the scholarships go to students from the Middle East, Africa and Asia in line with Turkey's foreign policy priorities and projected openings in Africa and Asia. It is not a coincidence that majority of our survey respondents and interviewees are from Muslim countries in these geographies and this data overlaps with the importance attached to cultural affinity in foreign policy of ruling AKP (See Appendixes II-IV). *Turkiye Burslari* is employed in foreign policy discourse as an ideological and practical tool of it. In this sense, according to Erdoğan, *Turkiye Burslari* is also an important instrument at the hand of government to put an end to educational activities of Gülenist network, which had established schools in numerous countrirs, particularly in the Balkans, Central Asia, and Africa, and was declared a terrorist organization by the Turkish courts in 2014.[33]

Why Turkey for higher education?

Per the online survey data, the most significant variables or factors that influenced the choice of respondents to study in Turkey were the desire to study in a world-class university and the belief that obtaining a higher education certificate abroad enhances the future employment prospects of the individual. It is striking to note that according to the survey results the cost of education in Turkey measured in terms of the scholarship offered by the Turkish government did not feature among the factors that influenced respondents' choice. This, however, becomes more interesting when the results of the online survey are juxtaposed against the interview data. Although the two previously mentioned variables were given importance by some interviewees, almost all the interviewees indicated that their choice of Turkey for higher education was largely influenced by the scholarship factor. For example, Peter indicated, 'I came here [to Turkey] actually because of the scholarship package. It was the best option compared to the others we had. There was an issue with politics and education in my country, so schools delayed in opening …'

Others made the case that their coming to Turkey was due to the absence of better scholarship options at home. Evelyn, a 26-year-old undergraduate

student, said, 'I came to Turkey because I secured a scholarship. Prior to that, I had a Brazilian scholarship, but it was a partial tuition waiver. So, based on that, Turkey came as a better option for me.' A similar claim was made by Halil, 'I came to Turkey because I won a scholarship. It is for free, and so I came. I came because I wanted to enjoy free education.'

In addition, there were persons, whose coming to Turkey can be attributed to mere coincidence. Thus, their coming was not occasioned by deliberate decisions on their part to that effect but due to factors outside their reach. Malik, a 25-year-old undergraduate student in Istanbul, is one such example:

> Well, I did not choose Turkey. I had wanted to study abroad all my life. I had since high school wanted to study in Russia, Brazil, India, the EU, and others …
> I came to Turkey based on a bilateral agreement in education existing between Turkey and my country. I made an application to the scholarship secretariat in my country, and I was given Turkey. It was not a deliberate decision.

Similarly, Awal, a master's student, relates his coming to Turkey for higher education as follows: 'In the high school exams in my country, I was one of the students who obtained the highest score … I did not choose Turkey myself. The ministry of education in my country did after I passed the entrance exams.'

The strength of this variable (cost effectiveness) is even made stronger considering the fact that the majority of the interviewees had no or little prior knowledge about Turkey. Even though some students, like Mavis, simply had little information about Turkey, others, like Ali, knew nothing about the country, and the little information they claimed to have about the country was false. Mavis pointed out her knowledge of Turkey prior to her arrival, 'I knew something about Turkey from our history class … for example, I knew something about Atatürk, and thanks to World Cup 2012, I knew Hakan Shukur, who scored the fastest goal in the World Cup.' In the case of Ali, he proclaimed, '[I knew] the capital city of Turkey was Istanbul.'

What the preceding indicates is that the factors that underpin a country's competitiveness in the arena of attracting the best talent are not just the availability of scholarships but the perception of quality education and impact of that on future employment prospects. In the absence of these two variables, the impact of the scholarship will be minimal. In other words, in order for Turkey to make its scholarship program competitive enough to attract talented students from across the world, attention has to be given not just to the mere provision of education scholarships but the quality of the education system in general. Thus, comprehensive education reform meant to uplift standards of higher institutions of learning is the pivot for the successful implementation of a robust and a competitive scholarship program. Having dealt with the general expectations of students prior to and factors that

underpinned their arrival in Turkey, the study examines the specific expectations and the post-arrival experiences of international students in the next discussion.

Experiences of international students in Turkey

Per the objectives of this study, the experiences of international students were two-fold, namely, academic experiences and cultural experiences. In discussing these experiences, particularly the academic experiences, we paid attention to the prior expectation of international students before arriving in Turkey and whether such expectations have been met. The study also looked at the relationship that exists between the Turkish scholarship secretariat (YTB) and the students. The highlights of this analysis were predominantly not gathered from the online survey but from the interviews, which were undertaken subsequently to provide the details needed to obtain a clearer picture of the discourse.

Turkey's education system

In the online survey—with the exception of the variables of language of instruction and the competitiveness of the style of teaching in Turkey relative to the system available in the respondent's home country—all respondents gave positive responses to all other variables aligned with academic issues. These variables are the increasing employment prospect, correlation between what is taught in the classroom to the real world, and satisfaction with the number of modules available for their programs, among others. However, mindful of the fact that the online survey only gave a snapshot of the real issue, there was the need to institute an interview process that addresses the questions of 'why' and 'how' the education system was rated so positively.

The majority of those interviewed had the expectation of studying in a world-class university as part of their academic experience in Turkey. As indicated by Moses and shared by Lawrence and Jamila, among others, ' … [the] expectation was that the universities in Turkey were world-class, particularly looking at the facilities of the institutions online' (Moses). These expectations were not met, however, because the system is not designed to meet the needs of foreigners. As Lawrence stated,

> I think the education system [in Turkey] is good for the Turkish [students] and not foreigners like me. The first time I did multiple choice questions for exams was in Turkey … . exam questions in my country ask about the students' understanding and not what he memorized from the lectures … .

Mubarak expressed a similar sentiment: 'There is a problem with the Turkish education system. Here, it is all about memorizing and not interaction. This

does not allow the student to be innovative and think outside the box.' Amira said of the Turkish education system,

> It is a kind of an [interesting] system. My idea of a university education, which includes a higher layer of research, was not met. It is just a lecture and exam thing. Even the exams do not include issues and questions which make the student think outside the box.

In sum, this category of students views the Turkish education system as, in the words of Jamila, ' … an [interesting] system because the structure of teaching and learning does not involve students.' Simply put, 'it is exam-based.' It is therefore not surprising that, in comparison with higher education institutions in their home countries, the students do not see the teaching style in Turkey as better. In fact, students such as Moses and Jamila see the teaching and learning style inferior compared to those that exist in their country or elsewhere. To be sure, these students are from underdeveloped countries with education systems ranking among the middle to the bottom on a continent where few universities make it to the international rankings. Their verdict is therefore a serious one, which needs to be given maximum attention.

These claims notwithstanding, there are other students, mostly in private universities, whose verdict of the Turkish education system and teaching style stands in a positive light. Ali is one of such students, and he narrates his situation as follows:

> In my opinion, it [the Turkish education system] is a good system. I think for my school … the only problem I have is that the system lays more emphasis on attendance to lectures. It is like a high school system. But I think, as a university, students must be treated like adults.

Similarly, Enoch makes a positive comparison in favor of the Turkish education system:

> The system is better compared to my country. You have everything in your possession, cheap internet, library, among others. Generally, the facilities are good compared to my country. I am in a private university. The professors are good and I like them. My friends, particularly those in the public universities, complain about their professors and their system … but I do not see this in my university.

From a different perspective, Emmanuel indicates, 'taking my school into consideration, and some of the extra curriculum activities, I think the system is good. The opportunities exist, and courses are available if you want to take advantage of them.' Putting together the narratives of the two categories of students in relation to the Turkish education system, one thing stands out: there are issues that need to be addressed in Turkey's education system in the eyes of the recipients of *Turkiye Burslari.*

Language of instruction

From the results of both the online survey and interviews, the language of instruction was as the biggest challenge to international students. In fact, 109 students out of the 195 students who responded to the survey expressed dissatisfaction with the language of instruction of their respective programs. To be sure, the survey data shows that the majority of the students (78 percent) had their language of instruction in Turkish, leaving about 22 percent of the students studying in other languages. Emmanuel summarized this problem as follows:

> The major challenge or issue facing us in our education is the language of instruction, especially in the early years of education. You know, we were given less than one year to study the language, and this is not even from the technical aspect … this is stressful and depressing. Those who had courses in the language that they are familiar with will generally be less stressed … I think the language has effects on my future education prospects … I think from individual to individual, if you take the advantage and make the appropriate grades, you have an advantage going forward.

In a more frustrating tone, Amira expresses her frustration about the language of instruction:

> My main challenge in Turkey is the language. I find it difficult communicating and expressing myself well in the language. This makes it difficult for me to position myself well in the achievement of my future academic goals. I think I am not fully equipped to face others. I think my spirit of competition has been lowered as a result of studying in the Turkish language.

In his recommendation for an improvement in the Turkish education system, Marymart dedicated all her suggestions to the language issue:

> I think the Turkish education system should include other languages of instruction such as English. Since some students are highly ranked before coming, opportunities should be given to them to complete their studies early and with better grades by studying in a field and language that they are comfortable with.

From the sentiments expressed by the students regarding their language of instruction, it is not surprising that the majority of the students—110 to be exact, a number close to those who expressed dissatisfaction with the language of instruction—indicated that they needed extra support in order to adjust to Turkish as a language of instruction.

Situating this finding within the scope of the second hypothesis, it is confirmed that satisfaction with the language of instruction of one's program of study has an impact on the level of satisfaction with the education system. The correlation analysis carried out affirmed this position, too: meaning that if the language of instruction is challenging to the student, his

or her satisfaction with the education system would be affected (see Appendix I). The Pearson correlation coefficient for satisfaction with language of instruction and satisfaction with the Turkish education system is 0.388, which is significant at $p < .001$ for a two-tailed test. Per this analysis, a positive linear relationship exists between the two variables. In addition, as indicated by the data from the interviews and online survey, this hypothesis is clearly affirmed. However, the third hypothesis, which sought to measure whether a relationship exists between the number of years spent in Turkey and the satisfaction with language of instruction, was not affirmed by the correlation analysis.[34]

Relationship with YTB

As indicated earlier, this study also examined the relationship between the students and YTB since it is adduced that a good relationship between the two would ensure a proper functioning and a mutually beneficial system. The responses obtained from the survey and interviews in this case—just like the responses on the education system—were interesting.

Foremost, the results from the survey show that the respondents overwhelmingly accepted the responsiveness of YTB in the provision of their needs, ranging from the payment of a monthly stipend to health needs, among others. In the interviews, they painted a gloomier picture when it comes to other relationships with the scholarship institution. The flow of communication between the student body and YTB is largely non-existent. Aaron maintains that he is even scared of the institution to the extent that he gets frightened whenever he receives a message from them:

> I am really scared of YTB. I have many friends who had issues with YTB and are living more than six months without monthly stipend. Some of them just uploaded their documents late and that was enough to cut their stipend. I do not really have any relationship with them [YTB]. I pray every day not to have any issue with them. If I get a message from them, I panic before I even open it.

A similar sentiment was shared by Mohammed, who described his relationship with the institution as a master-servant relationship:

> My relationship with them [YTB] is hard to describe. We have been remotely controlled. We do not even know who brought us here, [it's a] very [poor] relationship. They do not want you to express your problems to them, they just want you to follow them … Everybody is scared of the institution. I think this fear should be taken out of the students.

Taking the process employed by the institution into account, Moses makes the following case:

> The YTB's process is wrong. It is an institution that is supposed to manage students, but it functions like a robot. According to them, if your monthly stipend

is suspended, you will become smarter. They only think about the money. That money is the only motivator for studying. People who work there should come from an experienced background such as those in academia who have had connections with international students before. Those people understand the students … If they see anything affecting the student such as *devamsizliktan kaldi* (failure due to absenteeism), they do not ask why … They take action without even explaining anything to the student involved.

Despite the responsiveness of the institution in relation to the provision of the students' needs, some reservations still exist. Hassan suggests, 'they [YTB] should not be too rigid in their already planned system. They should allow room for some level of flexibility to take account of the realities on the ground which would enable them to understand the situation of the students better.' This would ensure that a better communication network between YTB and the students built on mutual trust and respect is developed and nurtured.

Cultural experiences

The cultural experience of international students is examined in terms of the level of interaction between international students and their Turkish counterparts, interactions between international students from the same country, and interactions between international students from different countries. In this regard, the findings of the online survey in this domain are very instructive. The same trend follows when these findings are juxtaposed against the findings of the interviews, albeit with more details regarding why. The cultural experiences of international students can be summed up in the words of Yunus:

> The Turkish culture is an interesting one. It reflects different cultures, very diverse. You can see a mixture of Arab, Persian, and European cultures. If you look at the countries in the Middle East, Turkey and maybe Syria before the war are secular. This gives you an idea of how a predominantly Islamic country of secular nature is.

From the perspective of interaction with the Turkish people, Abdul Muaz said that, 'The Turkish culture is a good one. The people are generally not racist. The food and the religious aspects are good. I am happy about the people.' In the same vein, Mary described the Turkish students and the Turkish people in general as 'hospitable and helpful.'

Despite these positive assessments, there are others who had some reservations to share about the Turkish culture. Capturing some of these reservations, Islam states,

> The Turkish culture is beautiful, but it is conservative for me as a foreign student. If you come from Africa particularly, they think you are hungry and that you do not even have any school in your country. You only have an opportunity to work with a Turkish company only if they have a project to execute in your country.

Similarly, Issah described the Turkish way of life as 'lacking sincerity … they do not practice what they preach.'

Be that as it may, even the critics are not oblivious to the positive aspects of the Turkish culture and the people. For people like Moree, the Turkish culture is 'beautiful, mixed, and diverse and [I would welcome] the opportunity to learn more about it.' Indeed, this seems to be the position of the majority of the respondents as indicated by the data from the survey. An overwhelming majority of about 138 students, representing 72 percent of the surveyed group, expressed a desire to learn more about the Turkish culture if granted the opportunity. This can be said to be one of the achievements of the *Türkiye Bursları*. Thus, it has contributed in diffusing the Turkish culture by bringing it closer to the doorstep of persons who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to engage with it.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the establishment of a higher education scholarship is a step towards improving the desirability of Turkey's higher education institutions and by extension enhancing its soft power capacity. Educational exchange plays a significant role in diffusing the state's cultural values and developing a pool of intellectuals who the state can, to some extent, rely on as it moves to build and strengthen relationships with governments across the globe. As the international community becomes acquainted with the quality of the system available, an attractive environment for investment in education is created. Furthermore, as the literature has indicated, higher education scholarship is one of the tools governments employ to create and project their soft power on a global scale. Higher education scholarships do not exist independently of other soft power tools but rather serve to complement them.

Despite the many challenges that international students pointed out as characteristic of their academic and cultural experiences in Turkey, on the whole, the majority of the students (115 students out of the 195 surveyed) indicated that their experience studying in Turkey is either good or very good. From the survey, 65 percent of the students also indicated that they would recommend studying in Turkey to others. These findings support the first hypothesis: that Turkey has been able to diffuse its image and culture abroad. Despite this positive affirmation of Turkey's image, 110 students expressed dissatisfaction with the language of instruction. This result confirms the second hypothesis: that there is a relation between satisfaction with the language of instruction and the level of satisfaction with the education system. The results did not affirm the third hypothesis: that a relationship exists between the number of years spent in Turkey and the satisfaction with the language of instruction.

Based on the findings of this study, for *Türkiye Bursları* to be competitive and, by extension, satisfy the objectives set within the broader Turkish foreign policy arena, the education system must be realigned to meet the expectations that drive international students to the country. It is in this light that the challenges facing *Türkiye Bursları* as identified by its beneficiaries should be given the needed attention if the Turkish government wants to reap the full returns of the investment made in this sector. In addressing these general concerns, one specific area that requires serious attention is the language of instruction. The Turkish education system should involve more international languages, particularly English and French. The language of instruction of the programs should not be imposed on students. The Turkish system can take examples from the Norwegian system, where studies in the Norwegian language are reserved for students who have demonstrated excellence in the usage of the language in an academic setting. In order to accomplish such transformations, the management of *Türkiye Bursları* should also be reformed—policy and institution wise—as to take into account the concerns of the scholarship recipients.

There is belief among Turkish policy makers that *Turkiye Burslari* is a tool of public diplomacy. It is only a matter of time to see to what extent this aspiration will correspond with the goals of Turkey's foreign policy. Findings suggest that the students in the *Turkiye Burslari* program, despite some difficulties, are receptive to Turkish culture and values and likely to promote Turkey in their home countries. Beside government efforts, it is necessary to empower non-governmental actors and to address the problems of internationalized higher education for enabling policy maker's search for more effective soft power tools and influence in international relations. The rest will be achieved through more organized and articulate leadership in public diplomacy.

The content of this study has revealed certain gaps in the literature on scholarships and soft power, which subsequent studies can aspire to fill. In particular, this study has identified a gap in the literature measuring the economic value of such programs in detail. Clearly, this is a critical area for public policy experts and practitioners. A comparative study can be done pitching the *Türkiye Bursları* against other scholarship programs such as that of the Russian government scholarship or the European Union's Erasmus Mundus program in order to unearth the nuances, dynamics, and system of operation, among others. Finally, as this study relied solely on analyzing the *Türkiye Bursları* scholarship because of the large number of students and the attention that it has received from political circles, other government scholarship programs such as of the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK), the *Diyanet* scholarship, and the likes can be studied together with *Türkiye Bursları* as a way of examining a holistic picture of the role of higher education scholarships in Turkish foreign policy.

Notes

1. Nye, *Soft Power*, 83.
2. Kirişçi, *Turkey and the West*, 151–181, and Oğuzlu, "Soft Power."
3. Haşimi, "Turkey's Humanitarian Diplomacy", and Özkan and Akgün, "Turkey's Opening to Africa".
4. Kalin, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy", and Özkan and Orakcı, "Turkey as a "Political" Actor".
5. Amirbek and Ydyrys, "Education and Soft Power", and Özkan, "Strategic Practices".
6. Nye, *Bound to Lead*.
7. Nye, *Soft Power*.
8. Nye, "Soft Power and Higher Education," 11.
9. Ibid, 12.
10. Nye, *Soft Power*, 5.
11. Nye, *The Future of Power*.
12. Zaharna, "The Soft Power Differential," 221.
13. Nye, "Public Diplomacy," 95.
14. Tuch, "Communicating with the World," 3.
15. Cull, "Public Diplomacy," 36.
16. "Propaganda Czar-To-Be Say She's 'Eager to Listen" *PRWATCH*, July 22, 2005. http://www.prwatch.org/spin/2005/07/3862/propaganda-czar-be-say-shes-eager-listen.
17. Nye, "Public Diplomacy," 101.
18. Cull, "Public Diplomacy".
19. Zewail, "The Soft Power of Science".
20. Cowan and Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue".
21. Byrne and Hall, "Realising Australia's," 419.
22. Lima, "The Role of International Educational Exchanges".
23. Metzgar, "Institutions of Higher Education".
24. Cooper, "Hard Power, Soft Power," 168.
25. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*.
26. *MEG*. http://www.mixedeconomygroup.co.uk.
27. For example, see Aras and Fidan, "Turkey and Eurasia"; Bayer and Keyman, "Turkey: An Emerging Hub"; Akpinar, "Turkey's Peacebuilding"; and Çevik, "Turkish Soap Opera."
28. "Türkiye Afrikayı Sallıyor," *Sabah*, February 21, 2013. https://www.sabah.com.tr/dunya/2013/02/21/turkiye-afrikayi-salliyor.
29. "Turkey has Become the Center of International Attraction for Education," *Daily Sabah*, June 21, 2015. https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/06/21/turkey-has-become-the-center-of-international-attraction-for-education.
30. Ibid.
31. *Turkiye Burslari*. https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/en/english-home/
32. "Scholarships for Turkey Popular with Indian Students," *Daily Sabah*, May 1, 2017. https://www.dailysabah.com/education/2017/05/01/scholarships-for-turkey-popular-with-indian-students
33. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan UDEF 11. Uluslararası Öğrenci Buluşmalarının Final Programı'nda konuştu," *Takvim*, May 12, 2018. https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2018/05/12/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-udef-11-uluslararasi-ogrenci-bulusmalarinin-final-programinda-konustu.
34. See Appendix III for results on the correlation analysis.

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Disclosure statement

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Appendices

Appendix I: Results of correlation analysis.

		Number of years in Turkey	I am satisfied with the Turkish education system.	I am satisfied with the language of instruction for my program.
Number of years in Turkey	Pearson Correlation	1	.012	.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.871	.335
	N	193	185	188
I am satisfied with the Turkish education system.	Pearson Correlation	.012	1	.388**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.871		.000
	N	185	187	186
I am satisfied with the language of instruction for my program.	Pearson Correlation	.071	.388**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.335	.000	
	N	188	186	190

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 (2-tailed).

Appendix II: Nationalities of the respondents.

Number of respondents	Nationality
36	Ghana
10	Cameroon
8	Uganda
7	Somalia, The Gambia
5	Benin, Kosovo, Mozambique
4	Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi
3	Afghanistan, Albania, Burundi, Bosnia Herzegovina, Cote D'Ivoire, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Zambia
2	Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Guinea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon Lesotho, Macedonia, Morocco, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand
1	Algeria, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Botswana, Chile, Congo, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Haiti, India, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Mali, Mauritius, Moldovia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, UAE, USA, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam
8	No response

Appendix III: Demographic Information of Respondents.

Gender		%
Male	117	60
Female	78	40
Total	195	100
Age		%
15–18	3	1
19–24	89	46
25–30	80	41
31-above	23	12
Total	195	100
Level of study		%
Undergraduate	98	50
Masters	72	37
Doctorate	24	12
No response	1	1
Total	195	100

Years in Turkey		%
1 year	17	9
2 years	41	21
3 years	67	34
4 years	50	26
5 years above	18	9
No response	2	1
Total	195	100
Language		%
English	40	21
French	2	1
Turkish	153	78
Total	195	100
Religion		%
Islam	145	74
Christianity	35	18
Other	14	7
No response	1	1
Total	195	100

Appendix IV: Demographic Information of Interviewees.

Country	Demographic description
Afghanistan	2 male Muslim undergraduate students, aged 15–24, and studying in English and Turkish respectively.
Benin	A male and a female Muslim undergraduate and master's student, aged 15–24 and 25–30 years respectively studying in Turkish
Cameroon	A Muslim and a Christian male master's student aged 25–30 years, undertaking programs in Turkish.
Central Africa Republic	A male and female undergraduate students, aged between 15–24 and 25–30 respectively. Both Muslims and studying in Turkish
Djibouti	2 Muslim undergraduate students aged between 15–30, studying in Turkish
Ghana	2 male and 2 Female students interviewed. 2 undergraduate, masters and a Ph.D. student. 2 Muslims and 2 Christians. 1 student studying in English and the remaining in Turkish.
Indonesia	2 male Muslim and religiously undisclosed Ph.D. students, aged 31 years and above, studying in Turkish and English respectively.
Kosovo	2 male Muslim undergraduate and master's students aged 15–24 and 25–30 years respectively, studying in Turkish.
Somalia	2 male and a female Muslim student. 2 undergraduate and a master's student. 2 aged 15–24 and 1 student aged 25–30 years. All 3 students study in Turkish.
Sudan	2 female Muslim undergraduate and a master's student. Aged between 15–24 and 25–30 years respectively studying in Turkish and English respectively.
The Gambia	2 Male Muslim undergraduate and master's student, aged between 15–24 and 25–30 years respectively, studying in English and Turkish respectively.
Uganda	3 respondents, 2 Muslims and a Christian. 2 females and a male studying at undergraduate and master's level respectively.
Yemen	A male Muslim masters student, aged between 25–30 years and studying in Turkish
Zambia	A female Christian undergraduate student, aged 15–24 and studying in Turkish
Total	In all, 30 students were interviewed, 20 male and 10 female students representing 67% and 37% respectively. 14 (47%), 13 (43%) 2 (7%) represented ages 25–30, 14–17 and 31 above respectively. 17 (57%), 10 (33%) and 3 (10%) students were studying at undergraduate, masters and Ph.D. levels respectively. 24 students representing 80% were Muslims, while 5 (17%) and 1 (3%) Christians and other respectively. 24 (80%) were studying in Turkish and the remaining 6 (20%) in English.