

A European Perspective in Academic Mobility: A Case of Erasmus Program

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ABSTRACT

ERASMUS is a mobility program that provides its participants with experiences in their fields of study and work by presenting them global trends. It promotes the academic, professional and individual development of the participants while contributing to the extension of the worldwide work market. This study aims to explore the impact of the Erasmus Program from the perspectives of Turkish students. Twelve Erasmus students in different fields of study at three universities in Ankara were interviewed. Findings were analyzed into the themes of individual, professional and academic development, future of careers and global work market development. It is concluded that Erasmus has an impact on not only individuals but also on the worldwide labor market with its enlarging scope and comprehensive strategies as well as its challenges by rapid developments in the demands and needs of the new era.

Keywords: academic mobility, erasmus program, European higher education, global higher education, international students

INTRODUCTION

We saw what other people do in their workplaces not only in the country we visited but also from other international students who were present there. We learned that different approaches and

applications are possible in our profession. We learned new techniques, such as an original project idea for work development, a new thinking or perspectives. We caught these for change in a positive way. It was a great opportunity (Interview Participant #2).

A student who expressed herself with the above quotation can be the best example to think about the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) program. Experiences and meanings gained in a mobility program like Erasmus have implications beyond academic achievements. The Program aims to improve European cooperation in education and training through the sustainable development of partner countries in higher education. It also prospects to ensure that individuals' skills and qualifications can be more easily recognized and are better understood, within and across national borders, in all sub-systems of education and training as well as in the labor market. The global market is pushing new definitions for labor, and knowledge society is demanding new-generation skills from individuals. This demand includes an individual's in-depth knowledge and skills in a particular area as well as his/her transforming skills across disciplines.

Erasmus is the European Union's flagship 'mobility' program in education and training and one of the best-known EU-level actions. The Program started in 1987 and since then has enabled more than 2 million students from across Europe to pursue enriching learning experiences in other countries. The program is named after the philosopher, theologian and humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536), known as an opponent of dogmatism. Erasmus Program started with the participation of 11 countries aiming at improving student mobility. After achieving more than 3000 students in the first year, it went under reorganizations. Then it joined to Socrates program in 1995 and incorporated with other education programs in 2007 and finally in 2013 assembled with international education programs Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Edulink, Alfa and Bilateral programs as well as with the Youth in Action program under the theme of Lifelong Learning program (Cairns, 2017; Education and Culture-European Commission, 2015a, 2015b).

At present, the integrated Erasmus Program consists of three support modes of Learning Mobility for Individuals, Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices and Support for Policy Reform (Jansone & Dislere, 2016). Mainly, the program involves student mobility, teacher/staff mobility, joint curriculum development, and intensive teaching programs (Puigpelat, 1989). The Program's current capacity is €14.7 billion in grants and opportunities for over 4 million people reached at in more than 30

countries (“Erasmus+ The EU program for education, training, youth and sport (2014-2020),” n.d.). This investment in knowledge, skills, and competencies will benefit individuals, institutions, organizations and society as a whole by contributing to growth and ensuring equity, prosperity and social inclusion in Europe and beyond (“Erasmus+,” n.d.). During the programs, individuals encounter new situations that will provide their educational, academic and professional development (Education and Culture-European Commission, 2016).

Within time, the aims and scope of the program have complied with and expanded while partner countries enlarge in the range. The broader goals of cooperation and development in higher education and research have achieved on a large scale of nations. Within the years since its launch, Erasmus has become a prominent program with student mobility focus rather than other prospected aims. Reasons for this concentration may vary. Partnership in many areas of the union such as economic, social and political had to be supported by education and research: one way to achieve this was to provide mobility in these particular areas, as the development of higher education and research are extremely crucial for progress in science and technology globally. White Paper of the Union and other global development reports addressed this reality (European Commission, 2017).

This reality also links to the concept of academic mobility and its increasing role in global development. Academic mobility is a window for students and academics who travel for developing skills and knowledge, enlarging perspectives and vision and seeking for cooperative research possibilities. Changing demands and expectations from the global labor market and societies require new skills and knowledge from individuals. New dimensions of this rapid change are challenging, and require new thinking and strategies for institutions especially the significant scale programs such as Erasmus. To present an example here, T type person approach can be referred. This symbolic metaphor emerges from the demand of global labor market ideas attempting to fill a niche. In a T type person, the horizontal bar of the T symbolizes a breadth of general knowledge and soft skills, while the vertical stem of the T symbolizes the depth of hard technical skills. (Barile, Polese, Saviano & Caputo, 2015; Oskam, 2009). Mostly, a T-shaped individual is both a niche-topic specialist and a generalist with people skills as well as an extensive world knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Erasmus Program is not only an element of the global development objective but also it brings forward a European identity in this global arena.

Its outcomes for nations are many, i.e., a vivid migration of young people, a bright economy in social life, increased corporation among higher education institutions, academic and research development in universities, a lively marketplace for jobs as well as an increased recognition of countries in higher education and research. Results of research and big scale surveys on the Erasmus Program have addressed the positive, as well as problematic areas of the program, and impact of the program at different dimensions.

Research on the experiences of Erasmus students shows the program provides a broad range of achievements for students. Students are being exposed into various learning experiences such as adaptation to different conditions, relations, and interaction with different cultures, new life experiences, and new opportunities through gaining attitude, knowledge, and skills (Mercer, 2011; Sigalas, 2010; Užpalienė & Vaičiūnienė, 2012). In a research work on the impacts and outcomes of academic mobility, Teichler (2001) found that mobility programs attributed to cultural enhancement, foreign language proficiency, and personality development and prepared students for professional life. Kehm (2005) also argued that international student mobility contributed to the human development and global understanding in higher education institutions. Similarly, Jacobone and Moro (2015) pointed out that student mobility promotes individual employability and the development of skills required by modern labor markets and encourages international understanding in higher education. In addition to these researchers' findings, several other research demonstrated the Erasmus Program contributed to the personal (Maiworm & Teichler, 1997), academic (Opper, Teichler & Carlson, 1990) and cultural (Cushner & Mahon, 2002) development of the participants.

Regarding the student perspectives, participants stated different reasons to be a part of the Erasmus Program. These can be summarized as having an experience of living abroad, meeting new people, learning or improving a foreign language and developing their soft skills (Cairns, 2017; Education and Culture-European Commission, 2016). Enhancing employability possibilities at the global level (wish to work overseas more than home) is also a compelling reason for Erasmus students. Erasmus increases employability: Across Europe, 93% of the surveyed employers confirmed that the traits gained through mobility programs were indeed crucial for the recruitment and professional development of their employees. Erasmus influences future careers and social lives of the attendees. In addition, employment rates are positively affected by mobility (Education and Culture-European Commission, 2016; Mitchell, 2012; Vossensteyn et. al., 2010).

Jansone & Dislere (2016) and Leun (2012) discussed the global mobility of students, scientists, researchers and other members of universities foster

academic excellence and career advancement. They claimed that the impact of practical experience gained through travel and field observations have added value to an expanded world vision for the individual while it contributes to the development of institutions. In a similar way, as knowledge economies become more connected globally, an increasing number of students and academics have reached beyond their home bases to tap into opportunities.

With its mission to promote a European identity, the Erasmus Program has become the center of discussions. As Mitchell (2012) pointed out the Program has not only provided mobility for students but also contributed to the development of European identity within the years of multi-level academic and learning movement. Similarly, Sigalas (2010) stated there is a direct contribution to the development of European Union ideal. In her study, she interviewed students before and after they participated in the Erasmus Program. Students expressed that they had experienced the advantage of being a European citizen; thus they grew positive attitude towards the European Union. On the other hand, students from non-European Union countries such as Turkey, Island, Norway, and Lichtenstein have their own sui-generic experiences (Sigalas, 2010). This result may indicate that European identity may be an added value for Europeans while a world-wide vision is an essential value for those who are not European.

Similarly, there is evidence that the Erasmus Program has reached a vast scale of regions in the world, however, sticking to a firm European perspective. Moreover, this has eventually created a national identity. Report findings showed that present students and alumni feel significantly more related to Europe than non-mobiles (“Erasmus+,” n.d.). This perception is especially keen in Southern and Eastern Europe, i.e., Bulgaria, Portugal, Italy but not in the United Kingdom, for example. With this aspect of creating a national identity, Erasmus Program may have to deal with a threat to its global targets since academic mobility affects positively individual development and their institution’s position in the global knowledge network and achievement. However, in several policy documents, the Erasmus Program claimed it has prioritized a worldwide knowledge development dimension. “The global world is not built on national identities or marginalized kinship but rather inclusive values and “no-border” strategies”. (Education and Culture-European Commission, 2015a, 2015b; “Erasmus+,” n.d.)

In addition, as it was pointed out on the webpage of the Program the Program has to cope with the consequences of the economic and financial crisis, which has had a profound impact on society. Unemployment has reached unacceptably high levels in many parts of the EU, particularly among Europe's youth. There are also regional issues at relational and diplomatic

levels in addition to economic and socio-cultural ones. Thus, any discussion on the Erasmus Program and its ends then will eventually address the challenges as well as opportunities (“Erasmus+,” n.d.).

As a result, cross-border higher education develops into an essential mode of globalizing higher education as it involves providers, programs course materials, teachers or students moving beyond national boundaries (Varghese, 2008). All these developments require a new thinking and operational perspectives for not only higher education institutions but also countries. First, knowledge, skills and values in travel are universal and need to be redefined in their national context. Curriculum alignments become crucial for international needs and expectations in a global market, most of the time to appeal more students competitively. This is crucial especially for the countries participated in the Program relatively recently. For example in Turkey, even though there have been study abroad programs for tertiary education, the Erasmus Program is attributed to an overall mission and impact because of the candidate membership to the EU. The national Erasmus Office describes the Program as "the flagship program". Turkey became a participant country in 2003. Since then the effort for increasing participation rates at institutional and national levels has been one of the main missions of Turkey's Erasmus Office and in about 200 higher education institutions in the country. The average number of outgoing students in a year is 55 thousand from Turkey (“Erasmus+ Programme,” n.d.). Some considerable achievement was gained in numbers; however, qualitative research on the impact of the program has been limited. Especially the Program’s impact on the individual and thus its larger reflections to institutional, national and global development has essentially remained unworked. The need for particular qualitative research on the Program has been addressed: “it is necessary to go beyond describing trends in incoming and outgoing Erasmus mobility and consider the factors that shape inclusion.” (Cairns, 2017, p. 729).

Within this context, this qualitative study focuses on the changes and challenges the European Union large-scale academic mobility program Erasmus face in the global arena regarding the individual, institutional and career-wise. The aim is to explore the impact of Erasmus Program as perceived by the students who participated in the program. Research questions were as follows:

1. What are the conceptions of Erasmus Program students about the program’s contribution to their individual, professional and academic development?
2. What are the Erasmus Program’s contribution to future careers and development of global work market as perceived by the students?

METHOD

This is a qualitative research which focuses on the lived experiences of participants for gaining an in-depth understanding of the Program (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For this aim, an in-depth interviewing method was used to gather information about experiences and meanings occurred as a consequence of Erasmus participation. Twelve students from public and private universities in Ankara, who attended the Erasmus Program between 2015 and 2017, were interviewed (Table 1.). Table 1 summarizes interviewees' study programs, the type of Erasmus Program they attended and duration of stay. At the time of interviews, seven of the participants were undergraduate Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation students, two were Nutrition and Dietetics, two were Aviation Management and one was a Philosophy student. As for the type of Erasmus Program, six participants attended Last Year Undergraduate Internship program; five attended Undergraduate Academic Mobility Program and one participated at a Project. Convenience sampling strategy was used, and participants were randomly and purposively selected by the criterion that they participated in different Erasmus Programs (academic mobility, internship, and projects) (Patton, 2005).

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview developed by the researchers. The questionnaire contained questions about students' academic, personal, and professional experiences and their opinions about the program's contribution to the global labor market. Some of the interviews were conducted via e-mails due to the time consideration while some of them were conducted face to face. Face to face interviews took 40-50 minutes each and were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. After data were transcribed content analysis was used to reach important themes (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2001). Interviews and transcription processes were completed in six months. Transcribed data were content analyzed using codes in line with the interview questions. The content analysis provided five themes on individual, professional and academic gains from the program and the program's impact on future career opportunities and global work market. Thus, the themes reached in the end of the content analysis were individual development, professional development, academic development, future professional career, and global work market. Each subtitle presents these thematic categories in the findings section below. To make the reading fluent and hide interviewees' names, codes such as Interview Participant #1, Interview Participant #2, etc. were used to identify quotations.

Table 1: Participants of the Study

Codes of the participants interviewed	Study programs of the participants	Type of Erasmus Program	Duration of stay
Interview Participant #1	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	2 months
Interview Participant #2	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	2 months
Interview Participant #3	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Academic mobility-undergraduate program	3 months
Interview Participant #4	Nutrition and Dietetics	Academic mobility-undergraduate program	3 months
Interview Participant #5	Nutrition and Dietetics	Academic mobility-undergraduate program	3 months
Interview Participant #6	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	2 months
Interview Participant #7	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	3 months
Interview Participant #8	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	2 months
Interview Participant #9	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	Internship-last year of undergraduate program	2 months
Interview Participant #10	Aviation Management	Academic mobility-undergraduate program	4 months
Interview Participant #11	Philosophy	Project	2 weeks
Interview Participant #12	Aviation Management	Academic mobility-undergraduate program	4 months

RESULTS

Considering the opinions expressed by the students during the interviews, the experience gained during Erasmus has been shown as "contributions" provided by the program. According to this, students' skills in Erasmus Program were analyzed into contributions to individual development, professional development, academic development and global development.

Individual Development

The students interviewed in this research frequently emphasized the contributions of the Erasmus Program to the personal development. The contribution of the Erasmus Program to an individual was the development of self-esteem, development of adaptation skills, social development, and leadership skills. Students stated that the Erasmus Program was a valuable opportunity for them to live in a different country and to overcome the difficulties they faced there. In Turkey, where the protective family structure is dominant, students said that although they were studying at universities in different cities far from their parents, they receive the support of their families any time they encountered any problems. However, with the Erasmus Program, these students expressed that they progressed in adapting to new situations and solving the problems they encounter on their own. Furthermore, these students said that they started making social relations with people more efficiently and improved their self-esteem. Previous research findings supported these findings (Aydın, 2012; Craig & Trapp, 2008; Demir & Demir, 2009; Sigalas, 2010; Şahin, 2007).

It was stated that the self-confidence of the students coping with new situations developed during the Erasmus experience. Regarding this, Interview Participant #8 said; "I worked in a completely different environment being an Erasmus student and this improved my self-confidence." Interview Participant #10 said; "Throughout the program, both the activities that the school did and the activities we did with people I met there made me more socialized." This was about the social development aspect of the program. Besides, students pointed out that when they were back, they involved in various initiatives sharing their experiences with other students who would participate in the Erasmus Program in the future. They even formed a group of Erasmus students where they initiated social and professional communication sharing experiences and ideas. At this point, Interview Participant #3 who founded the university's Erasmus Student Network (ESN) about which he/she gave information said; "I decided to deal with this so that students who won Erasmus could better benefit this

opportunity. ... I wholeheartedly supported the formation of this group, and I wanted to learn what could be done to make it better in Turkey". These words indicated that the Erasmus Program developed students' leadership skills also.

Other aspects that students identified as contributing to their individual development during Erasmus experience involved learning about different cultures and respecting differences/diversity. Students participated in the Erasmus Program were interacting with individuals from diverse cultures both at the events organized by ESNs and at university/work environments. During this interaction, students had the opportunity to understand the customs of both the host country and of the other Erasmus participant countries. In addition, in the environments in which individuals from different cultures studied and worked together, the awareness and respect of the students to differences were also increasing. Interview Participant #10 expressed his thoughts about this as follows:

The activities I attended every day and the environments I entered provided me opportunities to meet new people, to talk with them on various topics and to exchange ideas. These dialogues have helped me to recognize different cultures, to introduce my own culture appropriately, to look at cases in a broader sense and to learn to respect different ideas.

Another contribution of the Erasmus Program to the individual development of students was the foreign language acquisition and speaking skills. Through the Erasmus Program, students emphasized that their English language skills developed and they learned basic sentences in the language of the host country where they were to be used when needed. On the first hand, it allowed students to speak better English, a global language; on the other hand, it developed a real understanding of foreign language learning by being exposed to a second foreign language. Aydın (2012), Sigalas (2010), Teichler and Janson (2007), and Užpalienė and Vaičiūnienė (2012) have similarly concluded that the Erasmus Program is linguistically valuable in their research. Interview Participant #1 expressed the contribution of the program to the development of language skills as follows:

Some people did not speak English in your work environment. For example, my partner only knew Spanish. I could not speak Spanish, he could not speak English, but after a while, I learned frequently used Spanish sentences, and we started to talk. I even

learned daily used Spanish expressions so now I believe I could learn another foreign language quickly.

Professional Development

Students indicated that the Erasmus Program contributed to professional development as much as individual development. In particular, the students who participated in the internship mobility program were of the opinion that the experience they have gained by working in the institutions related to their professions significantly influences their professional development. Regarding the contribution of the Erasmus Program to the professional development, the primary emphasis of the students was to transfer the theory to practice. Students identified that they had the opportunity to transfer their theoretical knowledge to practice during the program. In this way, they could learn to use their academic knowledge and skills and develop new perspectives to solve problems related to their profession. Interview Participant #7 pointed out the experiences contributing to his/her professional development during internship mobility program as follows:

During the Erasmus Program, I had the opportunity to practice the theoretical knowledge which I learned in my college. It was important to me because I understood what I knew and did not know. ... Besides, when I started practice in the hospital, my opinions to patients completely changed, I saw that everything was not like what we had read in the books, that different problems could require various solutions and I had to learn this.

According to the students, another contribution of the Erasmus Program to professional development was to learn new and different techniques/practices of their study fields. Students pointed out that both the teaching methods used in the courses and the practices they saw during their internships were different from the ones used in their home countries. This finding regarding the use of different techniques in students' opinions overlapped with the research results of Aktan and Sari (2010) that they also found experience gained within the Program had important implications for future professional lives. As an explanation for the differences in practice, Interview Participant #2 stated; "I made comparisons about the techniques we learned in our university. There were many approaches and techniques different from approaches and techniques we had learned in Turkey." and Interview Participant #8 confirmed; "During my internship clinic, I learned the treatment methods I had never seen in Turkey." Students evaluated these

different techniques and practices positively so that they specified that they gained a bright view of their study program after learning these differences, and they could transfer this new knowledge into their future professional life. Interview Participant #3 expressed this view with the following words:

After returning from my internship (Erasmus), hospitals that learned about this well-known institution I went as an intern contacted me and asked; "Do you want to work with us?". They asked if I would want to work for them. Of course, I did not know how long this offer would continue if they still wanted to work with me after graduation, but they came up with a proposal; "You can come and work with us."... I thought this was about the techniques and practices that the institution acclaimed for.

Concerning students' opinions, other aspects of the program for students' professional development were the observations of practice sessions of other disciplines. This caused reviewing their career plans in the light of this new experience. In particular, students who participated in the internship mobility program explained that they observed an interdisciplinary approach in working environments and this made radical changes in their career plans. Regarding this change in career plans, he/she made during the internship mobility, Interview Participant #4 said; "I observed the working conditions of the dietitians from different departments in the university hospital. During the practice, I thought it was a great opportunity to observe many different practices. ... I would use these observations in my field preference.". Interview Participant #2 explained how Erasmus affected his/her career plans with the following words:

It was my first clinical experience, and I did not feel confident in clinical experience. I had had plans to become an academic. At the end of this experience, I can say that I would like to continue a clinical career. Then maybe I could think to be an academician, but now I have changed my plans to make a career in clinical studies. My experience with Erasmus changed my career plans, I can say this.

Academic Development

Students developed different traits in the extent of the opportunities provided by the Erasmus Program. Although the students prioritized individual and professional development, one of the primary development

areas of the program was academic development. Students stated acquiring new knowledge and skills, learning the research processes and gaining related study skills were the contributions to their academic knowledge and skills. Particularly during the academic mobility, they encountered new concepts (that they did not know before) and teaching practices in the courses, said that they acquired new knowledge and skills in their field. Students also expressed that they learned the scientific research processes throughout the studies they participated in the Erasmus Program and gained regular study habits. Interview Participant #7 explained the program's contribution to his/her academic development with the following words; "Erasmus taught me to balance study and rest in life... I thought I was a successful student before I had gone there, where I realized that I could be more successful if I study more systematically and in an organized way."

Students thought that another contribution of the Erasmus Program to the academic development was the development of English language skills in their field of study. They took part in academic reading, writing and speaking activities related to their field of study. The participants studying in universities where English is used as a medium of instruction also thought that they started to use the academic language more efficiently after attending the Erasmus Program. As an explanation to contributions of Erasmus to academic language skills, Interview Participant #10 expressed; "I tried to practice English which I had already learned in preparatory school by attending courses as much as possible during the program. I also learned English aviation terminology better." Taking these views into consideration, it is possible to say that the Program had a significant role in learning academic English as well as its contribution to the development of everyday English language skills.

Students also explained other contributions of the program to academic development by relating them to individual and professional development. They agreed that they realized the importance of graduate education and that taking this training abroad would provide advantages for academic and professional career making. Regarding this, Interview Participant #12 stated; "My post-graduation priorities changed. I wanted to do a post-graduate study here or abroad. I thought that the Master's degree would both improve me in the field of aviation and increase my job opportunities." This finding was consistent with Mitchell (2012)'s and Vossensteynet. al. (2010)'s research findings that showed Erasmus students were more motivated to study abroad for especially further academic career and professional development.

The students also stated their demands for repeating the mobility. They indicated that they would try to go again, for example, for graduate education during their academic career. Therefore, while Erasmus Program created

significant changes in the plans of the students, at the same time they encouraged students to re-participate in the programs. Interview Participant #1 expressed his/her wish to rejoin the Erasmus Program in the following words:

If I started my graduate studies here (in Turkey), I would like to apply once again for the Erasmus program. I also learned that I could ask for an internship or study mobility during for a master's degree. Even if my study took a year longer, I would like to attend the program during my master degree. I also wished to learn some other things there.

Future Professional Career

The Erasmus Program has an essential role to develop multiple perspectives in student's future professional decisions. In the minds of the students, professional career maybe a projection limited to national or local scope until they meet other prospects. Erasmus Program provides the context to meet these possibilities for a future career. In the interviews, students stated that both the multicultural classes and the work environments in which new techniques applied provided them with some opportunities to become qualified candidates in the business world. The students found their experiences beneficial to meet the needs of the business world's expectations. The academic and professional development opportunities provided during the practice work ensured that students were better equipped and this made them more advantageous in the business world. Therefore, students expected to find better jobs in Turkey or abroad appropriate to their experience with the Erasmus Program. They believed that they could produce more innovative ideas and techniques with the skills they learned during the Erasmus Program. In addition, professional language skills may open opportunity windows in the global business world.

Interview Participant #11 expressed his/her thoughts on this; "By means of English practice and close interaction with another cultural context that I entered, I could say this experience helped me both to find a job easily and to attend foreign projects in my work life." Considering this view of Interview Participant #11, it could be said that the students who participated in the Program showed a significant improvement in self-confidence in their professional skills. Similarly, Arevalo, Pelkonen and Tahvanainen (2008), Aydın (2012), and Bryła (2015) found that students who participated in the Erasmus Program believed that they could find jobs quickly in their home country or abroad.

Some of the students interviewed agreed that they had an opportunity to discover different approaches to the work life and to work with people from different countries cooperatively. In their opinion, this was a great opportunity provided by the Erasmus Program. Students pointed out that while they developed professionally, they acquired competencies needed in present-day's business world. Interview Participant #9 expressed his/her views with the following words:

With the development of technology and the facilitation of transportation, the environments in which people from different cultures coexisted and opportunities for working together increased. If we took into account the fact that we would work with people from different countries in the future in our business life, contributions of this program to the participants should not be ignored.

Global Work Market

The last theme generated from the data analysis was the contribution to the global work market by way of individual development. As the Erasmus was a program conducted not only within the European Union but also in a broader geographical region, there were significant contributions to the worldwide development by providing opportunities and creating transformation in students' life. First of these grants was the development of English language skills that overlapped with other themes. The students expressed their English language skills developed and some of them wanted to continue using English widely back in Turkey too. Interview Participant #4 stated, "I could say that we should have better English language education in Turkey. ... Even in all universities, the instruction language should be English so that it could be used in daily life." These views showed that the Erasmus Program had a significant influence on the adoption of English as a global language.

According to the views of the students, other contributions of the Erasmus to global development could be counted as providing them with a comparative perspective on domestic and abroad employment opportunities and providing contact and network for study abroad. Students said that after returning from Erasmus they started checking for study and work possibilities in different countries. As a result of their experience, they gained self-confidence that made them want to work abroad. Furthermore, students stated that they could think of working in countries different from where they went to for the Erasmus. They thought they gained this vision because of individual and

academic improvement provided by the Program. Interview Participant #6 expressed this ideal in the following words:

My experience provided me to focus my thinking entirely abroad. So at first, I wanted to find a job in Istanbul, but during the Erasmus program, I found out what work opportunities could be there, and I changed my plans, and now I wanted to work abroad, even in the USA. Therefore, I have to make plans in this direction.

Overall, the Erasmus Program contributed to the participants' academic and personal lives regarding opportunities for working abroad and new visions about the understanding of different cultures as well as the development of self-esteem, social traits, language skills, and professional knowledge and skills. It was also obvious that the students who stated an increase in their self-esteem during the Erasmus experience could reflect this gain in their career preferences and those students thought that they could easily find jobs in different countries because of their competences acquired (Demir & Demir, 2009). Therefore, students who enriched their learning experiences with Erasmus were also building their plans in a global context (Sigalas, 2010). Besides, with the Erasmus Program, students improved their English language skills and adopted English as an academic and universal language. For this reason, the Program is more than a university program that provides the mobility of students; Erasmus is a program that contributes to the global development and responds to business world expectations through the development of individuals.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that the Erasmus Program in Turkey provides significant contributions to individual, academic and institutional development. These contributions gained through the Program will direct the concluding ideas in this section. Some of the sui generis conditions in Turkey play consequential roles in the participant students' appreciation of the Program. All twelve students stated the Program has considerable contributions to their individual, academic and professional development.

Participants of this study held in high regard their Erasmus experience for several particular reasons generic to Turkey. First, as the country is still a candidate member of the EU, visa issues create barriers to travel abroad. Strict visa regimen between Turkey and the EU countries, which require extensive documentation procedures and proof of financial status, is a challenge to

Turkish students. There is record of non-issued and/or late-issued visa cases for Turkish Erasmus students (Ozler, 2012). Second, financial situation of students may be another obstacle especially with regard to the currency rates i.e. devaluation of Turkish currency against Euro. Monthly payment for an Erasmus student is 300-600 euro (depends on the visited country), and because of this limited payment, students may be in need of private or family subsidy. Furthermore considering Euro-TL currency rate in the second half of 2018, for example, one Euro= about seven and fifty Turkish lira, Turkish students may have to deal with the financial challenge more than a European country member does. In consequence, students from lower income families have rare chance to apply for the Erasmus Program. Under these conditions, the participants of this study who could overcome visa application procedures and then afford the study may not be representing a lower socio-economic class student. Therefore, the long-term benefits expectation from the Program for a Turkish student may be higher. This situation also relates to the individual and social return of the Program not only for Turkey but also to the communities of Europe.

Third, the results showed that improving English language skills was a valued contribution of the Program. As English is not a widely spoken language in education and in the country in general, interacting in English (or another European language) in the visited country has a particular importance for these students. They, further, thought competency in academic English is a key skill to their future academic study and work abroad opportunity. Competency in a European language is likewise important for the fulfillment of progressivist ideals of the country too i.e. reading and writing in own study/scientific fields. Fourth, as the Western progressivism has always been a strong drive for the nation's individuals and for the institutions in Turkey (scientific positivism, Western rationalism, progressivism, and modernism are founding principles of the Turkish Republic), any type of cooperation with the European institutions is an opportunity window for development. Students interviewed in this study were aware that once this opportunity window opened for them they would appreciate this at the utmost level. That explains why individual meanings attributed to Erasmus experience were positive and (stated) benefit was unreserved. Fifth, higher education institutions in Turkey are in the process of integrating the European Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area and other cooperation projects and programs. Erasmus Program is a part of this overall developmental strategic plan. All these education and research integration efforts are part of Turkey's motivation to be a full member of the EU. When participant students made plans for a job abroad or for further academic study, they were aware that they made use of the opportunity in the right direction. Thus, the image of Erasmus does not

only have academic but also social and national connotations for a Turkish student.

Challenges can create extra difficulties for the institutions and the citizens of Turkey. However, based on the interview analysis we can say that the students gained the utmost benefit from their short experiences (the longest visit was four months). Findings also showed that while some of the above-mentioned issues created challenges, other aspects functioned as driving force for the development of the Program in Turkey.

From this perspective, the EU policies for cross-border enlargement and cooperation with larger geographical areas may create different roles in these outreach areas of the Program. The Erasmus Program in Turkey plays an important role both in individual students' future academic and professional career creating global opportunities and for the internationalization of higher education institutions.

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