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Motivational Factors Shaping Muslim Students' Decisions to Study Abroad: A Case Study of Northern Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivational factors influencing Muslim students' decisions to pursue higher education in Northern Cyprus, focusing on the interplay of cultural, religious, and academic considerations. Drawing on data from two leading institutions from North Cyprus, we explore students' academic, social, and cultural experiences within the context of educational tourism. Key drivers identified include the perceived quality of education, economic affordability, and the culturally safe environment offered by Northern Cyprus. While participants reported personal and professional growth, challenges such as limited cultural integration and restricted employment opportunities were highlighted. The findings provide actionable insights for universities and policymakers to enhance recruitment strategies and tailor support services to better meet Muslim international students' needs.

Keywords: academic institutions, educational experiences, educational tourism, Muslim students, Northern Cyprus, traveling for study

Educational tourism involves individuals traveling to other regions or countries to pursue educational experiences or academic growth. This type of tourism encompasses a range of activities, such as attending foreign language courses, participating in university or school programs, engaging in cultural and artistic events, undertaking internships, or receiving vocational training (Abubakar et al., 2014). Regard as issue of 'Globalization', it has greatly enhanced the mobility of international students, creating distinct challenges as they navigate and adapt to unfamiliar cultural and educational settings (Carrica-Ochoa & Brow, 2024). Therefore, one of the primary benefits of educational

tourism is the opportunity it provides for students to immerse themselves in diverse cultures and lifestyles, thereby broadening their perspectives. The spending of international students on accommodation, meals, and transportation contributes to local economies, while creating employment opportunities for educational institutions and the tourism industry (Mehrabadi, 2021). In essence, educational tourism serves as a pathway for individuals to explore new cultures, enrich their education, and gain valuable life experiences, all while benefiting host communities economically and culturally (Sachau et al., 2010). The main motivations for internationalization in higher education can be categorized into four key areas: academic reasons (scientific advancement and development), economic reasons (skilled human resources, financial gains), political reasons (promotion of global peace and stability), and sociocultural reasons (Oktem, 2024).

With the spread of mass tourism, educational tourism has also gained great importance. The growth and developments in the tourism sector in the 1980s contributed to the popularization of educational tourism (Ritchie, 2003). This situation has enabled the formation of a new market in the tourism sector and the development of educational tourism. Educational tourism is closely related to mass tourism as it includes students' travels for educational purposes. The intensive arrival of foreign students to a certain region or country has had a great economic impact on the tourism sector (Oppermann, 1993). Educational tourism also offers significant benefits for host countries (Suciu, et al., 2022). As a result, educational tourism has gained great importance in the tourism sector since 1985 and has become closely related to mass tourism. The educational travel of students provides many economic and social benefits to the tourism sector. In recent years, international students have become a central focus of university policies, as countries and higher education institutions compete to attract them through incentive strategies, driven by the significant economic, political, social, and cultural contributions of international education (Oktem, 2024). In 2020, 1.46 million international students were enrolled in higher education programs within the EU countries (Eurostat, 2023).

Cyprus is the third-largest island in the Mediterranean Sea in Europe, and it is currently experiencing political turmoil because of the inability to resolve the Cyprus problem. (Yıldırımürk, 2019). The northern part of island (North Cyprus) has its own republic and its home for Turkish speaking and Muslim Cypriots (Yıldırımürk, 2019). Universities in North Cyprus host a significant student population including 108,185 from 110 different countries with 23 active higher education institutions (Rezapouraghdam et al., 2022) out of current population size 306 908 in line with the 2023-2024 statistics by 2023 (TRNC Ministry of Education, 2023; TRNC Statistical Institution). The number of students enrolled in the country during this period is remarkable. According to the data, the number of students from Turkey is 49,049, and the number of foreign students is 44,539. These statistics reveal the attractiveness of the TRNC's education sector and the importance of international students in choosing this country to study (TRNC Ministry of Education, 2023).

Since it offers an extensive selection of educational opportunities for those seeking degrees, Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) and Cyprus International University (CIU) have designated the region as one of the top tourist destinations for those interested in furthering their education with campus facilities. The campus is widely recognized as a diverse environment and serves as a vital space where students from various backgrounds interact and connect on a daily basis (Anderson, 2020; Chen et al., 2019). With their extensive array of programs, the EMU and CIU are regarded as significant institutions for welcoming educational tourists in North Cyprus.

To enhance the objectivity of the study's findings, the present investigation deliberately selected two distinct universities as sources of samples. The primary university of choice, EMU, was meticulously chosen due to its distinguished status as the largest public institution of higher education situated in Famagusta, an urban center renowned as the third most populous city within the context of North Cyprus. Conversely, the secondary university, CIU, was purposefully included as a private university located in Nicosia, the capital city of the island. By incorporating these two contrasting academic institutions, the study endeavors to mitigate bias and promote a more comprehensive and diverse representation of the region under investigation.

The growth of numerous tourist businesses and goods, varied tourism attractions, and a rising number of young travelers have resulted in the creation of a distinct segment known as educational tourism, which incorporates characteristics of both the tourism and education industries (Tashlai & Ivanov, 2014). According to Tashlai and Ivanov (2014), the term "educational tourism" refers to a variety of tourist-related services and goods, including various educational programs, student exchange programs, tours, excursions, and different sorts of tours with a study-related goal. The benefits of international education are numerous, including increased interest in lifelong learning and further academic study, increased chances of employment achievement, improved self-awareness and awareness of cultural prejudices and values, and the development of close friendships (Nissen, et al., 2022).

Additionally, graduates of study abroad exhibit greater values in the soft skills and attitudes that employers find desirable. As a result, studying abroad increases one's potential for employment (Sisavath, 2021). Students become more adaptable, explore living abroad, and dramatically lower their likelihood of long-term unemployment by engaging in the duration of their education in another nation (Pártlová & Humlerová, 2018). Furthermore, expanding international education aids in preparing scholars for effective participation in an increasingly interdependent and globally connected world (van't Klooster, 2014).

The main aim of this study is the identification and examination of the motivation and experience of international students from Muslim countries to participate in different educational programs and to continue their studying abroad and determination of the consequences of such decisions in EMU and CIU.

Four research questions were created as a result:

1. What are the primary motivators that draw students from abroad to North Cyprus for educational tourism?

2. How do students from other Muslim countries assess their academic, social, and cultural experiences in North Cyprus throughout their educational tourism?
3. What professional and personal growth results do foreign students who study in North Cyprus perceive because of their involvement in educational tourism in terms of cultural and religious identity?
4. What are the degrees of fulfilment among foreign students at North Cyprus institutions with their educational tourism experience, and what variables lead to their ultimate pleasure or dissatisfaction?

The proposed topic can provide insights into the reasons for Muslim students' motivation and experiences in North Cyprus, together with what factors influence their decision to do so. Because, in addition to common challenges faced by all international students, Muslim students encounter unique difficulties related to a lack of respect or understanding of their religious practices, as well as internal and external struggles in adhering to Islam (Chen, 2019). This information can be useful both for universities in North Cyprus and in other countries that are willing to recruit Muslim university students. The following are some helpful contributions that will be made by this study to literature. There is currently an absence of study that investigates various institutions at the same time, notably how various locations within the same nation may demonstrate varying motivating elements. Secondly, gaining data from more than one university will give the ability to the researcher to compare not only what motivates Muslim students to choose North Cyprus as an educational tourism destination but will give more in-depth knowledge about the motivating factors to choose different universities in the same island and if their experience differs from each other within the same country.

This study aims to explore various aspects of educational tourism for Muslim students in North Cyprus. First, it seeks to identify and analyze the motivating factors that encourage Muslim students to choose North Cyprus for their educational pursuits. Second, it examines their academic, social, and cultural experiences during their time in North Cyprus. The study also investigates the impact of educational tourism on the personal and professional development of these students. Additionally, it assesses their satisfaction levels with their overall educational experience at universities in North Cyprus. Furthermore, the study identifies the challenges and barriers Muslim students face during their educational journey and explores the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles. Finally, the research provides recommendations and insights for North Cyprus universities and policymakers to improve and enhance the educational tourism experience for Muslim students.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature on Muslim students' motivations and experiences with educational tourism, specifically within the context of North Cyprus universities. This paper significantly contributes to the existed literature by providing a comprehensive examination of Muslim students' experiences in North Cyprus, highlighting their motivations, academic and cultural interactions, and personal development. By analyzing experiences across two distinct universities, the study offers unique

insights into how institutional environments impact student satisfaction and growth. This research also enriches the literature on educational tourism by addressing the intersection of cultural and religious factors, offering practical recommendations for improving support and inclusion for Muslim students in international educational contexts. The findings of this study can serve as a valuable resource for universities, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in promoting and facilitating educational tourism in the region, ultimately leading to improved recruitment strategies, enhanced student support services, and an enriched educational experience for Muslim students in North Cyprus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People start seeking more than simply leisure activities throughout their journey since the total education level rises all around the world. As a result, there is an increasing need for tourist programs that incorporate both entertainment and educational elements (Kalinowski & Weiler, 1992). The unifying theme of all educational tourism experiences is that learning can be enjoyable when mixed with travel to new locations and self-improvement (Slyshkova, 2018). In recent decades, the concept and relevance of Educational Tourism as a subgroup of tourism have acquired widespread attention and appeal among scholars, tourism decision-makers, as well as the public and commercial sectors. Despite technological advancements and the development of innovative techniques for learning, educational tourism is still regarded as one of the primary means of providing an opportunity for travelers and the local community of the destination to learn, develop, or exchange knowledge (Pittman, 2012). It is also predicted that a significant number of nations would reap economic benefits from growing educational tourism. Many countries are pursuing educational tourism as a primary source of revenue (Bhuiyan, et al., 2010).

Educational tourism can benefit tourists in various ways, including satisfying interest in other nations and their cultures and languages, boosting enthusiasm for performing arts, architecture, or folklore, inspiring concerns about natural conditions, landscapes, plants, and animals, or improving interest in culturally significant and historic locations. While offering a wide range of activities, educational tourism also includes travel adventures focusing on organized learning (Kalinowski & Weiler, 1992).

According to Ritchie (2003), educational tourism is any tourist activity that people who are on an overnight trip or going on an excursion engage in, either as the primary or secondary purpose of their trip. Educational tourism is defined as special interest tourism experiences where the primary motivating factor is learning interest in one of the earliest studies conducted by (Weiler & Hall, 1992). The term "educational tourism" has also been described by Abubakar et al. (2014), as the relocation of a group of prospective students to a location as part of a program with the main objective of learning about that location. Similarly, Bhuiyan et al. (2010), defined "educational tourism" as the movement of a group of tourists to a location to participate in an educational experience related to tourism.

Educational tourism may be distinguished by three major characteristics: the trip is specifically designed with education in mind; learning occurs through experience; or the whole experience is organized within an educational program (Pitman, et al., 2010). Pitman et al. (2010), define educational tourism as "involving an intentional and direct educational experience" since they also think that active involvement is a distinctive characteristic. It's vital to note that certain professionals think a person can only learn throughout their educational tourism experience if the new setting differs somewhat from their everyday surroundings (McGladdery, et al., 2017). The regional factor also has been used to discuss educational tourism. For instance, various studies (Middleton & Lickorish, 2007; Reisinger & Dimanche, 2010) examine the historical growth of the hospitality industry and the emergence of educational tourism as a distinct market niche in the British, American, and Australian markets. The studies also discussed the diversity and future growth of the hospitality industry, which suggests that the significance of education would increase consumer demand for goods that promote educational opportunities. However, because the studies were carried out for nations, it is not possible to extrapolate the results to other regions of the world; they can only be used as a starting point. It is worth noting that the topic of educational tourism is rarely explored individually (Robinson, 2012).

On the other hand, the push-pull theory of motivation states that individuals are motivated to travel by both internal considerations (push factors) and external circumstances (pull factors) when making such decisions (Dann, 1977). Most push factors are inward pressures or motivations that are intrinsic, mostly of a cultural-psychological character, such as the need for relaxation that fuels a desire to travel (Klenosky, 2002; Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). On the other hand, pull factors are external influences brought about by the characteristics of the tourism product or location. They can support the underlying push motives and persuade travelers to visit a certain location (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). As a result, a mix of push and pull forces affects students' decisions to study in another country. Students' desire to study outside the country may be explained by the push factors, while the pull elements influence where they decide to go (Rodríguez González, et al., 2011). Initially, learners are motivated to pursue higher education abroad by internal forces. After that, once they've decided where they want to go, they assess the different attractions the decided location can provide. Broadly, understanding the educational tourism motive enables professionals to satisfy traveler expectations and provide superior goods and services following their specific demands (Castillo Arredondo et al., 2018).

METHOD

The qualitative research method has been selected to use for this study which is explained in the methodology part of the paper in detail. Qualitative research explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Tenny, et al., 2017). Our research aims to provide deeper insights into the experiences of international students in North Cyprus universities. Educational tourism is a new concept, and it is important to identify the motivating factors and experiences

associated with it. By doing so, this paper can detect any potential problems and address them. This can help to prevent them from becoming significant issues. Therefore, qualitative research is suitable for this paper. This research used a case strategy approach. The case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context (Crowe, et al., 2011). Given that the objective of this research is to obtain insights into the educational tourism experience in north Cyprus, the case study approach is well-suited for this purpose. This is because the case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subject matter.

Data Collection

In this research, we used a purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan, 2016). This nonrandom approach does not require underlying theories or a predetermined number of participants (Etikan, 2016). We selected participants who have been registered and active students either at the Cyprus International University (CIU) or Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Respondent	Gender	University	Country	Age	Department	Level of Education
P1	F	CIU	Jordan	19	Nutrition and Dietetics	Bachelor
P2	F	CIU	Jordan	21	Accounting and Finance	Bachelor
P3	M	CIU	Syria	28	Architecture	Master
P4	F	CIU	Pakistan	30	International Relations	PhD
P5	F	EMU	Cameroon	28	Architecture	Master
P6	F	EMU	Nigeria	30	Chemistry	PhD
P7	M	EMU	Nigeria	33	Tourism Management	PhD
P8	F	EMU	Jordan	30	Computer Engineering	Master
P9	M	EMU	Iran	29	Tourism Management	PhD
P10	F	EMU	Nigeria	25	Psychology	Master

Before setting up the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from the EMU and then from the CIU ethical boards. Since we used purposive sampling, we contacted the directors of the international offices at Cyprus International University and Eastern Mediterranean University, as those are the main institutions for coordinating the needs of international students from the time they enroll until they graduate. The supervisors of the foreign offices at both universities were informed of the study's purpose, and they helped select participants. We asked international office students who are actively enrolled as international students. International offices try to diversify student attributes such as gender, age, religion, nationality, level, and the program's department when presenting them to us. They provided us with around 20 students from each university who can fit into our research. However, after 10 interviewees—four students from CIU and six from EMU—interviews started to repeat themselves. This leads to data saturation after 10 interviews. Therefore, we feel that we have reached sufficient results to analyze. Ethical guidelines were followed during the interview process with the participants, including asking for their consent to record their replies and letting them respond freely to the questions.

For data collection for the study, a semi-structured interview method was applied only to international students, who are defined as students from different Muslim countries outside of Turkey. A semi-structured interview is one of the qualitative research methods and the quality of the interview guide fundamentally influences the study's results (Kallio et al., 2016). This research uses semi-structured interviews because it allows researchers to use open-ended questions and wants to know the independent thoughts of everyone in a group (Adams, 2015). The interview questions were divided into two sections. The first section focused on the students' backgrounds, while the second section explored their experiences of studying abroad and studying in Northern Cyprus. The second section considered the benefits and challenges of their decision, the selection and evaluation criteria of the enrolled university, and a comparison of their homeland in terms of studies, culture, and daily life. Examples were provided where applicable.

We divided the questions into two categories because culture plays an important role in students' experiences. According to the latest research, there are psychological and sociological aspects to adjusting to or adapting to culture shock (Al-Krenawi & Al-Krenawi, 2022; Al-Krenawi et al., 2021). Scholars also added that "Cultural distance" refers to the greater difficulty of adjusting to certain cultures, further intensified by learning fatigue, social or economic status changes, academic performance expectations, and family-related pressures (Al-Krenawi & Al-Krenawi, 2022). Thus, we aimed to compare their cultural backgrounds and experiences as Muslim students. These open-ended questions and independent answers allow this research to use a thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As we discussed earlier, this research is based on 6 main objectives. These objectives can be considered research themes. Figure 1 shows how this

study obtained through adequate paths of the collected data in order from interviewees in May 2023.

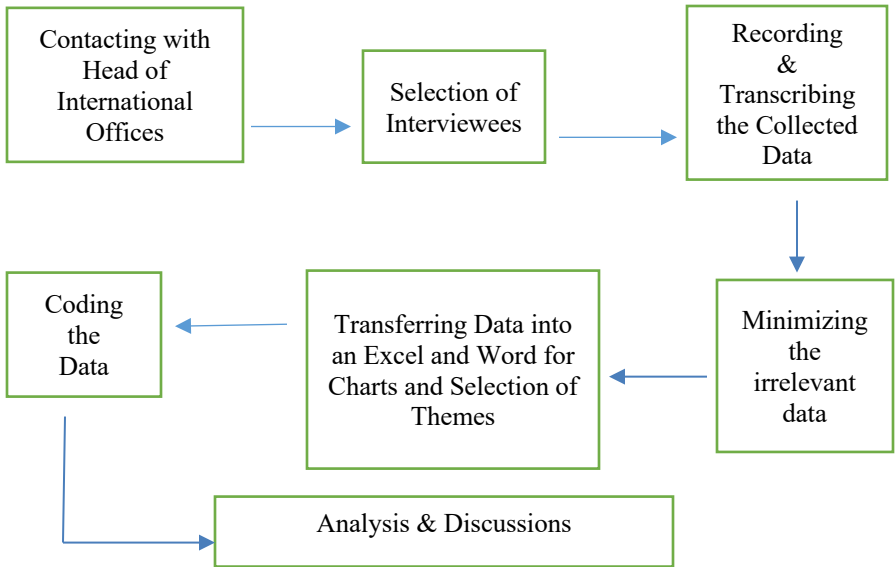


Figure 1: The study's route map for analyzing the data

Sampling

First, the background information of the students from CIU includes age, nationality, and educational details. All participating students registered with the university between 2018-2022 and are from the same regional location (Asian continent). Moreover, two of them studied at the undergraduate level, and two of them studied at the graduate level. They all study in different departments, including social and health sciences. The background details of four interviewees from CIU provide rich data for the project's aim. Second, the data was from six Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) interviewees. Most of the students (4/6) registered with the university during 2012-2017 and they are from the African continent (4/6). All the students are studying at the graduate level (3-master/3-PhD) in five different disciplines. This data shows that students started their education at the EMU as undergraduate students and then decided to continue their education as graduate students. The data has presented important and rich data due to the age range of the students and the fact that they have been studying at the same university for a long time. As an overall data collection represents, the following titles with percentages.

- a. Age: 25-29 (50 %), 30-34 (30 %), 19-24 (20%)
- b. Country: Asian Continent (60 %), African Continent (40%)
- c. Enrollment Year: 2018-2022 (60%), 202-2017 (40%)
- d. Departments: Social Sciences (%50), Others (50%)

- e. Level of Program: Graduate (80%), Undergraduate (20%)

In conclusion, the study's data was gathered from only Muslim students who are from seven different countries, have an age range of fifteen years, and mostly enroll in graduate programs (Master's and Doctoral) in eight different disciplines. This section displays the diverse backgrounds of the interviewees who served as a rich source for the study's quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

This section contains findings and discussions from interviews.

Motivation to Study Abroad

The first theme of this research is to identify and explore the motivating elements that prompt Muslim students to engage in educational tourism in North Cyprus. To find out this theme, this research used 4 different semi-structured interview questions. These are:

1. Have you been to this country before your education?
2. In your opinion why do you think people study abroad?
3. Why did you choose to study abroad?
4. What was the main reason you chose this country?

Before understanding the participants' motivations, this research asked them whether they had visited Northern Cyprus before. Nine out of ten participants had never visited Northern Cyprus before, and only one had. This clearly shows that even though Northern Cyprus is a tourist destination, many people have not visited Cyprus. So, education is their starting motivation to visit Northern Cyprus.

The first theme emerged and gathered data from questions 2-4 of the interview that indicated initial criteria on behalf of the student's motivation and decision-making process when considering the possibility of studying abroad. These inquiries provide the basis for this study's attempt to comprehend the drivers of the participants' motives and choices to study abroad in general and in north Cyprus in particular as opposed to their home nations and other places.

The Desire for International Education and Study Abroad

Many participants showed their motivations and decision-making for studying aboard and explained why they preferred north Cyprus for their education.

For instance, many participants explained that they wanted to have to study abroad experience.

For example, Participant 4 said

“ ... I would like to go to a new country, explore for independence, for more freedom. ... they want to see how other cultures are or they feel like they don't

have quality education in their own country. So they prefer going abroad for better quality education.” (CIU 4)

Political Situation and Frustration at Home Country

There are many participants who mentioned that they preferred to study abroad due to the political instability in their home country, and this motivated students to leave their home environment for having better student and educational life abroad.

For example, some of the respondents said;

“I left my country scared because of the stability. We usually experience strikes, and industrial actions by the universities, so there’s no guaranteed time for graduation when you start your program, except if you are in your expensive private universities... we come to Famagusta town for a good education at a very affordable cost.” (EMU 3)

Other participants also point out the limitations of their country. He said:

“Because in Iran we have many limitations, and I was frustrated to just study in a place that it has many limitations and there was no future to just grow up your skills and your feature in Iran. So, I have decided to come to north Cyprus to continue my education.” (EMU 5)

Economic Affordability and Accessibility

Participants usually combine their motivations for studying abroad and why they choose Cyprus as their destination.

Many participants mentioned that they choose to study abroad due to financial affordability. For instance, they said that;

“It’s affordable and it’s also good.” (EMU 3)

“People choose to study abroad because of the costs. It’s a little bit cheaper.” (EMU 1)

Not only did they find Northern Cyprus cheap, but also many participants mentioned that northern Cyprus have easier entry requirements compared to other countries. For example, participant 5 said:

“The main reason was that it was easy to come. I didn’t need any visa to just come to north Cyprus and the point is the problem was that I couldn’t have a visa from other European countries. So I have decided to come here. As the best option.” (EMU 5)

Educational Learning Experiences

The second theme which aims to examine the educational experiences of Muslim students during their educational tourism in North Cyprus has emerged and gathered data from interviewees who shared their thoughts about their positive and negative educational learning experiences while they are studying abroad. To

find out the answers, this research used several semi-structured questions, such as 1) What are the reasons you chose to study at EMU? 2) What was the difference from studying in your homeland? In terms of: a) Studies, b) Culture, c) Daily life.

Based on their answers, the following results have appeared.

Educational Quality and Experienced Instructors

Many participants have positive responses about the educational quality and capacity of instructors. For instance;

“Because the university that I study is the best university in north Cyprus ...universities that they have a good ranking and good professors also, they have more facilities than other universities.” (EMU 5)

Another participant mentioned the same thing.

“I think my department particularly is really good and the teachers are professional. They're foreign qualified. I also feel like I mean it has been a good experience.” (CIU 4)

Participants were not only said good or bad, but they are aware of the academic environment. They mentioned accreditations, specialized programs and teaching materials.

For example, one participant said:

“... program was very well accredited. Professors had extremely high degrees in, they were very specialized in what they were doing and what they were going to be teaching.” (EMU 6)

Other participants said:

“...the quality materials, the laboratories, are excellent here for students for learning by practice...” (EMU 3)

Also, participants mentioned that North Cyprus universities have good networks and open doors to the World.

He said:

“... I was able to get a foundational education because the university is a public university which is very solid. Secondly, I have gotten a network of colleagues and a network of other international students and also the diploma I got from north Cyprus which I have is very important in, the job market...” (EMU 1)

Another participant said:

“...particularly north Cyprus opened a lot of doors for me in Europe. I'm going to present a paper soon, for example in Prague.” (CIU 4)

Interviewees mentioned that they are studying at the campus universities in north Cyprus in a safe environment with accredited programs with experienced

instructors. In contrast, they shared their opinions that they face challenges to find a job and social benefit opportunities to improve themselves more during their studies.

Rate of Satisfaction

The third theme aimed to assess the satisfaction levels of Muslim students with their educational tourism experience in North Cyprus universities. This theme emerged and gathered information from interviewees who discussed their levels of satisfaction. In order to find out these, this research asked participants several questions. These are:

- What is your overall impression of education at EMU? If you would have to evaluate your experience on a scale from “completely positive” to “completely negative”, how would you rate it?
- What are the main benefits for you having studying abroad experience? What did it allow you to achieve and/or learn?

Many of the results give us 2 positive and 2 negative general satisfactions.

For positive satisfaction, participants mentioned the safety of north Cyprus and the campus environment.

Safety Country

Many participants mentioned how safe they feel in north Cyprus.

For example, participant 3 said:

“...it's a safe country...” (CIU 3)

Another participant said the same thing.

“... I feel safer in north Cyprus...” (EMU 4)

Campus Environment and Facilities

Participants are also highly satisfied with their campus life. For example, one participant said:

“... I've always used to tell my friends that, like being inside the campus is good...” (EMU 6)

Another participant said the same and added cultural diversity. This is the next theme that we will discuss in the next subchapter. He said:

“...communication to each culture, each student from different countries in a campus, administration of students clubs organize festivals, parties and all.” (CIU 1)

For negative experiences, participants mentioned the employment opportunities for foreign students and the lack of social benefits and opportunities.

Lack of Employment Opportunities

The lack of employment opportunities for foreign students is considered a big problem for them. The majority of participants complained about the same issue. For example, one participant said:

“...some of the problems include the fact that part-time opportunities are very working. Opportunities are very limited.” (CIU 4)

Another participant not only talks about the lack of job opportunities in Northern Cyprus during their study but also after they graduate as well. He said:

“...it can be quite difficult for Africans to find jobs on the island.” (EMU 6)

Lack of Social Benefits and Opportunities

Not only do foreign students face a lack of job opportunities but also a lack of social benefits and opportunities are limited. Many participants mentioned that problem. For example, one participant said:

“...the other difficult thing is that you cannot have the benefit social benefits as same as locals, foreigners they don't have...” (EMU 5)

Cultural Exchange and Intercultural Competence

Cultural differences play a big role in educational tourism. Therefore, our last theme is to aim to look at cultural exchange and Intercultural competence during educational tourism in Northern Cyprus. To find out about these, this research asked participants several questions. These are: a) What was the difference from studying in your homeland? In terms of: a) Studies, b) Culture, c) Daily life ; and 2) What kind of problems did you encounter while you are living here? What was difficult for you?

Data from the interviews was acquired about the difficulties with language and communication as a negative element, in contrast to good aspects gathered concerning cultural variety and respect for ethnic and religious groups from interviewees.

Table 2.

1. What is the motivation to Study abroad?		
The desire for international education and Study Abroad	Political situation and frustration in the home country	Economic Affordability and accessibility
2. Foreign Students' Learning Experiences in Northern Cyprus Universities		

Educational quality and experienced instructors		Accreditation and specialization	
3. Rate of Satisfaction for Foreign Students in Northern Cyprus			
Lack of Employment Opportunities	Lack of Social Benefits and Opportunities	Safe Country & Environment	Campus Environment and Facilities
4. Cultural Exchange and Intercultural Competence for Foreign Students			
Language and Communication Challenges	Positive Cultural Diversity, Ethnic and Religious Appeal		

Language and Communication Challenges

Language has been a big issue for foreigners since there is only one official language in Northern Cyprus. Many participants complained about this. For example, one participant said:

On the one hand, because a lot of places speak Turkish, and if you don't speak Turkish, then yeah, it's going to be difficult for you to find a job. (EMU 6)

Positive Cultural Diversity, Ethnic and Religious Appeal

On the other hand, even though the language is a big barrier to communication, almost all participants talk about positive cultural diversity and ethnic and religious appeal by locals.

For example, one participant said:

“...the culture and the fact that it seemed very welcoming to Africans, especially Nigerians, I had heard a lot of good things about it, so that's why I chose to come here...” (EMU 6)

Another participant said the same thing as well.

“.. here in I felt comfortable speaking about cultural differences, religious differences...” (CIU 4)

From the above themes and codes, we can develop a table for the findings of this research.

To sum up, there are a couple of clear messages from the data. Firstly, 9/10 participants have never visited Northern Cyprus. Cyprus is famous for being a tourist destination. So, from the above findings, we can say that Cyprus is still not visited as we know. Therefore, educational tourism can attract people to the north. Secondly, one of the reasons particularly why foreign students study in Northern Cyprus is that they feel safe here than in their home country. Not only do they feel safe but also positive cultural diversity makes them feel at home. Also, economically foreign students feel Northern Cyprus is an affordable country. Since they are not citizens, they need visas, and study permits and participants mentioned that they can easily get it. Students were also satisfied with the quality of education. They mentioned professors are well educated, programs are accredited, and facilities are in good condition. However, on the other hand there are some problems that foreign students mentioned. First, since the official language is Turkish, foreign students have a problem. This is leading to a lack of employment and opportunities to receive from north Cyprus during/ after they study.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to offer new and recent sources to the literature on educational tourism, which practitioners and professionals in the field of tourism and education can utilize to advance this form of tourism in their respective nations. Overall, educational tourism opens a new opportunity for each country in terms of socio-economic and cultural aspects. The idea that "studying abroad" might be acknowledged as a crucial step in one's personal growth by academics inspires students to choose to continue their education, especially higher education, outside of their own country. To determine "why students choose to study abroad," it may be necessary to discuss the motivational elements. Therefore, this article aims to ascertain why Muslim students desire to study abroad in general and what drives them to select Northern Cyprus as their study destination.

This study comprehensively explores Muslim students' motivations, experiences, and satisfaction with educational tourism in North Cyprus. The findings reveal that educational tourism is a significant driver for students, particularly those seeking safety, affordability, and quality education amid political instability or economic constraints in their home countries. Despite many students having no prior exposure to North Cyprus, the region's affordability, ease of entry, and perceived safety are compelling factors in their decision to study there.

Many people travel to north Cyprus each year to attend various universities. The number of students is increasing each year, and formal authorities should take this education tourism practice seriously to achieve sustainable educational tourism for the northern part of the island. This study was developed using the findings of interviews with Muslim students from two separate universities to assess students' decision-making processes.

This research enriches the literature by providing insights into the specific experiences of Muslim students in a less commonly studied context. It thus

broadens the understanding of educational tourism dynamics. The findings offer practical recommendations for institutions and policymakers to improve support structures, making educational tourism more accessible and beneficial for Muslim students in North Cyprus and similar destinations.

This research shows that Northern Cyprus can attract Muslim students for three reasons. Firstly, the educational quality and facilities are pretty good. It is one of the reasons why people study abroad. In Northern Cyprus, this is provided to students. Secondly, the economical and easy accessibility of Northern Cyprus is a big advantage for students from third-country nations. Lastly, a country's safe environment for foreigners is a big advantage for feeling safe and respecting their culture. On the other hand, results once again clearly show that, since Northern Cyprus is an isolated country, it doesn't have as much international interaction as other countries. Therefore, the local language is dominant, and job opportunities are limited. Participants highlighted the high educational standards, qualified instructors, and the supportive campus environment as positive aspects of their experience. However, challenges such as language barriers and limited employment opportunities reveal areas for improvement. These are the main problems for Muslim students. By taking into consideration the motivations of students studying in Northern Cyprus as well as the limitations of studying in Northern Cyprus, this research can help to become the starting point of a proper educational tourism plan for Northern Cyprus. This research is only the starting point for educational tourism in Northern Cyprus. The study underscores the importance of addressing these issues to enhance the overall experience for international students.

Economic elements like economic added value could be another study goal to investigate further. For instance, it is possible to empirically test the financial gains and earnings from the increase in educational tourism operations. On the other hand, future research must focus on sociopolitical issues brought on by an increase in foreign immigration, such as issues with crime, gambling, and cultural acculturation. Additionally, action research techniques can be a good way to study the behaviors of students in the field of educational tourism. This method can be also analyzed for more actual research locals can easily create a racist environment. Also, if there are problems that kind of research can help to solve the problems. Additionally, this research can be conducted in action research for target nations to implement proper strategies for attracting students.

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