

Original Article

Cultural Similarities and Differences in the Eating Habits of International University Students: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract

Aim: This descriptive research aimed to identify cultural similarities and differences in the eating habits of international university students.

Methodology: The study included a total of 1000 international students who completed the preparatory class at a state university in western Turkey. The researchers did not use sample selection; instead, they conducted the study with 307 students who voluntarily agreed to participate. The researchers obtained ethical committee approval, institutional permission, and verbal consent from the participating students. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire developed by the researchers and analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS 25.

Results: The majority of the participants in the study represented 36 different countries, including Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Syria, and Greece. It was found that 57.3% of the students (n=176) perceived their eating habits as similar to their own country's. The students reported similarities in the consumption of meat, cheese, pasta, rice, butter, spices, fresh vegetables, soup varieties, and pastries. However, they also noted differences in breakfast culture, the preference for vegetable-based diets, and lower consumption of meat dishes compared to their own cultural eating habits.

Conclusion: This study revealed that international students studying in western Turkey encounter various cultural similarities and differences in their eating habits within the city where they are studying.

Keywords: Students; universities; feeding behaviour; culture

Introduction

The international mobility has also affected students studying abroad. The number of students going abroad for education has been increasing annually. This student mobility has become one of the new sources of income for countries, creating a new field of competition to attract more international students. While 2.1 million students worldwide participated in international mobility in the year 2000, this number is expected to reach 7.2 million by 2025 (Yilmaz and Guclu, 2021).

Due to the opportunities offered to international students and the increasing

importance given to the internationalization of universities, Turkey has become one of the preferred destinations for higher education (Yilmaz and Guclu, 2021). International students choose Turkey for various reasons such as geographical proximity, fondness for Turkish people and culture, historical, religious, cultural, and ethnic characteristics, the desire to learn/experience a different culture, livability, education, scholarship opportunities, and recommendations from family and friends (Yardimcioglu et al, 2017). According to the data from the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS), the number of international

students studying in universities in Turkey for the 2021-2022 academic year is 260,289. This means that approximately 3.14% of the students are international students (HEIMS, 2023).

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and it is influenced by various factors such as geography, climate, religion, socioeconomic status, media, industrialization, agriculture, animal husbandry, and the spread of mass communication (Karaca, 2024). Eating habits are emphasized as one of the main sources of differentiation among communities (Sagir, 2020). Additionally, food represents national and regional identities (Choe and Kim, 2017). Thus, it is an undeniable fact that different societies and cultures have different eating habits (Guler, 2010; Onur et al., 2017). Research indicates that the process of adapting to meals in the countries where students go affects their behavior and causes concerns about their health (Soylu, 2018; Nemeth et al, 2019; Jin et al, 2023). In a study conducted in the United States, it was found that the eating behaviors of international students were influenced, and those who transitioned to a typical American diet experienced weight gain, increased fatigue, stomach discomfort, and other health problems (Alakam and Willyard, 2020).

In Soylu's research with international students in Turkey, it was determined that students did not have a healthy diet, did not consume sufficient vitamin and protein sources, and consumed more processed foods and carbonated beverages (Soylu, 2018). Furthermore, it was found that as the risk level related to students' eating habits increased, their academic achievements decreased (Aktas, 2019). The literature emphasizes that international students develop a hybrid eating habit without completely abandoning their own eating habits (Jin et al, 2023).

The improvement and enhancement of individuals' healthy eating and lifestyle practices, as well as the prevention of diseases, hold great importance for public health. Access to healthy nutrition is a fundamental human right (Pekcan, 2022). Transforming eating behaviors into healthy and proper dietary habits is crucial in preventing potential health issues in later years. Understanding individuals' eating behaviors is important for preserving, enhancing, and improving health and quality of life (Ozkan ve Calisir, 2019).

In a study conducted with international students in Turkey, it was found that only 18.3% of students (Soylu ve ark. 2018) and 42.8% in another study (Savassan ve ark. 2015) considered themselves to have a healthy diet. While only 24.7% of international students stated that they could access similar foods from their countries in Turkey, 75.9% expressed a lack of an environment where they could share their dietary cultures (Soylu ve ark. 2018).

Two separate studies revealed that international students struggled to find meals that suited their taste preferences in Turkey and brought food from their countries (Savasan ve ark. 2015; Soyly ve ark. 2018). Additionally, another study found that 2.24% of students encountered difficulties due to cultural differences in cuisine (Osmanli, 2018).

It has been suggested in studies that the ideal food and beverage service for university students should encompass cultural diversity (Kalyoncu ve ark. 2020; Nemeth et al., 2019). Another study emphasized the importance of not overlooking the silent dangers of inadequate nutrition among international university students (Murzalieva and Manivannan, 2023). It is believed that identifying the similarities and differences between the dietary habits of international students and those of the host country, even the city, will not only contribute to preventing potential issues of insufficient and unbalanced nutrition but also enhance student satisfaction.

It is considered important for healthcare professionals, who are advocates for disadvantaged groups, to raise awareness and conduct studies on this subject. However, there is a limited number of national and international studies that identify the cultural similarities and differences in the dietary habits of international students in Turkey. In this context, this study is deemed significant as it will fill an existing gap in the literature and provide preliminary data for comparison with previous and future quantitative findings. The international mobility has also affected students studying abroad. The number of students going abroad for

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Objective: This research was conducted with the aim of identifying the cultural similarities and differences in the dietary habits of international students studying at a university in western Turkey.

Methodology

Type of study: This descriptive study was conducted between November 2019 and August 2021 at a state university in western Turkey. The study population consisted of approximately 1200 international students who were enrolled in the 2019-2020 academic year and had successfully completed the TLP

(Turkish Language Proficiency) exams, and were able to read and comprehend Turkish. Sample selection was not employed as the entire population was included.

Population: The study population consisted of approximately 1200 international students who were enrolled in the 2019-2020 academic year and had successfully completed the TLP (Turkish Language Proficiency) exams, and were able to read and comprehend Turkish. Sample selection was not employed as the entire population was included. The study was completed with 307 voluntary participants (30.7% of the reached and willing students). Data was collected between November 2019 and December 2020 through face-to-face interviews conducted by the researchers using a 32-item questionnaire developed by the researchers. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration. Prior to the commencement of the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee (2019-2020), institutional permission was obtained from the University Student Affairs Department (93130991-044-E.1900144485), and verbal consent was obtained from the participating students. The data was transferred to a computerized database and analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS 25.

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Limitations of the Study: The study faced limitations due to the coinciding pandemic period, which made the data collection process challenging. The students' hesitancy towards signing written consent forms also posed another limitation. The fact that students came from similar countries and there were only one or two students from many countries limited the comparison of

similarities and differences by countries. Particularly, having only one or two students from certain countries posed difficulties for statistical evaluations. The fact that the study was conducted in only one city does not reflect the culinary culture of Turkey. Additionally, being in a city in western Turkey, where the Mediterranean cuisine is widely accepted, can be considered as a limitation that should be taken into account regarding the differences and similarities.

Results

The age range of the participating students was 17-38, with a mean age of 22.75 ± 3.6 . The majority of them were female (n=84, 59.9%); second-year students (n=98, 3.9%); without any chronic illness (n=286, 93.2%); living with their nuclear family (n=139, 45.3%); with a mother who had completed high school (n=86, 28.0%); with a father who had a university degree (n=100, 32.96%); with a stay-at-home mother (n=143, 46.6%), and with a father who worked as a civil servant (n=118, 38.4%). 57.3% of the students (n=176) perceived their economic status as moderate (Table 1). The monthly income ranged from 200 to 8000 TL, with an average of 1460.68 ± 1229.01 TL.

A 24.1% of the students (n=74) are from Turkmenistan, 18.2% (n=56) from Azerbaijan, 9.1% (n=26) from Uzbekistan, 6.5% (n=20) from Syria, 5.9% (n=18) from Greece, 4.6% (n=14) from Iran, 3.9% (n=12) from Albania, 3.9% (n=12) from Bulgaria, and 3.3% (n=10) from Afghanistan. The percentage of participants from other countries is below 3% (n=1) (Table 2).

As seen in Table 3, it was determined that 88.6% of the students (n=272) considered healthy eating important, 66.4% (n=204) were able to eat healthily in Turkey, 53.7% (n=165) were able to find their country's food/meals occasionally, and 67.1% (n=206) brought food from their own country. Furthermore, 41.4% of the students (n=127) had three meals a day, 58.3% (n=179) believed that a healthy person should have three meals, 40.4% (n=124) considered lunch as the main meal, 35.5% (n=110) regarded breakfast

as the most important meal, and 81.1% (n=249) skipped meals. Regarding snacks, 42.3% of the students (n=130) preferred tea as a beverage, and 38.8% (n=119) preferred fruit as a snack. During meals, 57.3% of the students (n=176) preferred water, while 63.5% (n=195) did not prefer to consume alcohol (Table 3).

In general, it was determined that 57.3% of the students (n=176) expressed that their eating behaviors in their home country and in Turkey are similar (Figure 1).

As seen in Table 4, 84.6% of Uzbekistani students (n=22), 83.3% of Greek students (n=15), 66.7% of Albanian students (n=8), 58.9% of Azerbaijani students (n=33), 56.8% of Turkmenistani students (n=42), 50% of Iranian students (n=22), and 35% of Syrian

students (n=22) stated that their eating habits resemble those in Turkey.

As seen in Table 5, 33% of the students stated that their eating habits in their home country and in Turkey are the same. The students mentioned that they have similarities with their countries in terms of liking meat, cheese, fresh vegetable varieties, pasta, rice, soup varieties, pastries, butter, and spice consumption.

7.5% of the students (n=23) mentioned that the breakfast culture in the two countries is different, while another 7.5% (n=23) expressed that Turkey has a vegetable-based dietary habit. Additionally, 6.8% (n=21) highlighted the lower consumption of meat dishes in Turkey as a common difference in eating habits between the two countries (Table 6).

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Students (n=307)

Characteristics	n	%	Characteristics	n	%
Gender (n=307)			Family Structure (n=304)		
Female	184	59.9	Nuclear family	139	45.3
Male	123	40.1	Extended family	136	44.3
			Broken family	29	9.4
Sınıf (n=307)			Economic Status (n=307)		
1st class	85	20.7	Bad	71	23.1
2. class	98	31.9	Middle	176	57.3
3rd class	64	20.8	Good	53	17.3
4th grade	46	15.0	Very good	7	2.3
5th grade	10	3.3	Chronic Disease (n=305)		
6th grade	4	1.3	Yes	19	6.5
			No	286	93.5
Father's Education Level (n=306)			Mother's Education Level (n=307)		
Literate	47	15.4	Literate	37	12.1
Illiterate	21	6.8	Illiterate	42	13.7
Primary school graduate	19	6.3	Primary school graduate	25	8.1
Middle school graduate	19	6.	Middle school graduate	86	28.0
High school graduate	95	30.9	High school graduate	73	23.8
University graduate	100	32.7	University graduate	6	2.0
Master's/Doctorate degree	5	1.6	Master's/Doctorate degree		
Mother Profession (n=307)			Father's Profession (n=306)		
Housewife	143	46.6	Small business	55	17.9
Officer	91	29.6	Officer	118	38.4
Employee	44	14.3	Employee	88	28.9
Retired	29	9.4	Retired	45	14.8

Table 2. Distribution of Students by Country of Origin (n=307)

Countries	n	%	Countries	n	%
Turkmenistan	74	24.1	Serbia	2	0.7
Azerbaijan	56	18.2	Macedonia	2	0.7
Uzbekistan	26	9.1	India	2	0.7
Syria	20	6.5	Romania	1	0.3
Greece	18	5.9	Jordan	1	0.3
Iranian	14	4.6	Sudan	1	0.3
Bulgaria	12	3.9	Japan	1	0.3
Albania	12	3.9	Democratic Congo	1	0.3
Afghanistan	10	3.3	Kazakhstan	1	0.3
Georgia	7	2.3	Russia	1	0.3
Palestine	7	2.3	Kyrgyzstan	1	0.3
Yemen	6	2.0	France	1	0.3
Somalia	5	1.6	Spain	1	0.3
Ukraine	4	1.3	Tunisia	1	0.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4	1.3	Saudi Arabia	1	0.3
Iraq	3	1.0	Tatarstan	1	0.3
Indonesia	3	1.0	Italy	1	0.3
Belarus	3	1.0	Burkina Faso	1	0.3

Table 3. Some Descriptive Eating Characteristics of Students (n=307)

Characteristics	n	%
Is healthy eating important to you?		
Yes	272	88.6
No	35	11.4
Do you think you eat healthy in Turkey?		
Yes	204	66.4
No	103	33.6
Can you find the foods of your own country in Turkey?		
Always	102	33.2
Sometimes	165	53.7
None	40	13.1
Do you bring food from your home country?		
Yes	206	67.1
No	101	32.9
How many main meals do you eat per day?		
Two meals	93	30.3
Three meals	127	41.4
Four meals	77	25.1
Five meals	9	2.9
Six meals	1	.3
How many meals a day do you think a healthy person should eat?		
Two meals	30	9.8
Three meals	179	58.3
Four meals	82	26.7

Five meals	14	4.6
Six meals	2	0.6
Which meals define your main meals?		
Breakfast	68	22.1
Afternoon	124	40.4
Evening	110	35.8
Night	5	1.6
What meal do you care most about?		
Breakfast	109	35.5
Afternoon	102	33.2
Evening	90	29.3
Night	6	2.0
Meal skipping status of students		
Yes	249	81.1
No	58	18.9
What kind of drinks do you consume at snacks?		
Tea	68	22.1
Fruit juice	64	20.8
Coffee	18	5.9
Milk	27	8.8
Carbonated drinks		
What kind of food do you consume between meals?		
Fruit	119	38.8
Cookie	116	37.8
Nuts	58	18.9
Junk food	13	4.5
Drink of choice during the meal		
Water	176	57.3
Sodas	128	43.7
Alcohol intake during meals		
No	195	63.5
Yes	81	26.4
I quit	31	10.1

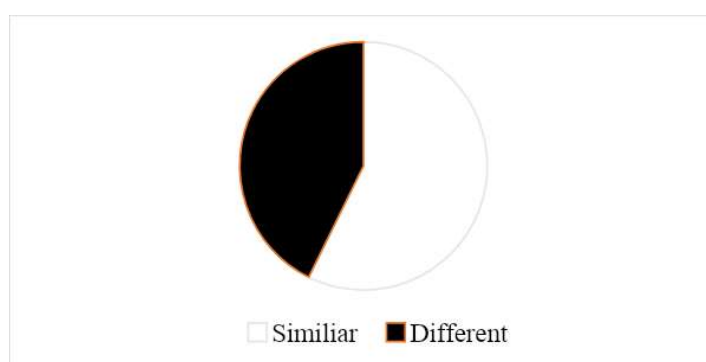


Figure 1. Eating Habits

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of Similarity in Eating Behaviors Based on Their Countries (n=307)

Countries	Total (n)	Similar n(%)	Countries	Total (n)	Similar n(%)
Turkmenistan	74	42 (56.8)	Serbia	2	1 (50.0)
Azerbaijan	56	33 (58.9)	Macedonia	2	2 (100.0)
Uzbekistan	26	22 (84.6)	India	2	1 (100.0)
Syria	20	7 (35.0)	Romania	1	0 (00.0)
Greece	18	15 (83.3)	Jordan	1	0 (00.0)
Iranian	14	7 (50.0)	Sudan	1	0 (00.0)
Bulgaria	12	5 (41.7)	Japan	1	0 (00.0)
Albania	12	8 (66.7)	Democratic Congo	1	0 (00.0)
Afghanistan	10	3 (30.0)	Kazakhstan	1	0 (00.0)
Georgia	7	2 (28.6)	Russia	1	0 (00.0)
Palestine	7	3 (42.9)	Kyrgyzstan	1	0 (00.0)
Yemen	6	2 (33.3)	France	1	0 (00.0)
Somalia	5	3 (60.0)	Spain	1	0 (00.0)
Ukraine	4	2 (50.0)	Tunisia	1	0 (00.0)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4	2 (50.0)	Saudi Arabia	1	0 (00.0)
Iraq	3	2 (66.7)	Tatarstan	1	0 (00.0)
Indonesia	3	2 (66.7)	Italy	1	0 (00.0)
Belarus	3	2 (66.7)	Burkina Faso	1	0 (00.0)

Table 5. Expressions of Students about Similarities in Eating Habits (n=307)

Similarities	n	%
The food culture is the same in both countries.	33	10.8
Varieties of meat and cheese are similar.	41	13.4
There are three meals a day, and the meals are similar to each other.	22	7.2
Fresh vegetables are the same.	12	3.9
Types of pasta, rice, and soup are similar.	11	3.6
Bakery products are popular and enjoyed in both countries.	6	2.0
The use of butter shows similarity.	6	2.0
Use of spices.	6	2.0
Consumption of fruit juice is similar.	5	1.6
Meals are low in fat.	5	1.6
Breakfast is rich and the same.	4	1.3
Tea, coffee, cookies, and pastries are the same.	4	1.3
Lunch meals are also important.	3	1.0
Foods like rice dishes are the same.	3	1.0
Dish names may be different, but the prepared meals are the same.	2	0.7
Breaking eggs, frying potatoes, boiling dumplings are the same in both countries.	2	0.7
Cooking methods are similar.	2	0.7
Eggs are consumed abundantly.	1	0.3
Fish, chicken, and spicy pepper sauces are common in both countries.	1	0.3
Both countries have breakfast, lunch, and dinner.	1	0.3
Dinner is given importance in both countries.	1	0.3

*Multiple responses.

Table 6. Differences in Eating Habits According to Students' Expressions (n=307)

Differences	n	%
The breakfast culture differs between the two countries.	23	7.5
Vegetables are consumed more predominantly in Turkey.	23	7.5
Meat consumption is lower in Turkey.	21	6.8
Olive oil is consumed more than butter in Turkey.	20	6.5
Cheese varieties differ between the two countries.	10	3.3
There are differences in soup culture.	9	3.0
The culinary cultures are distinct.	7	2.3
Fatty foods are consumed more in Turkey.	6	2.0
The quality of the food here is not as high.	6	2.0
Turkish dishes are spicier and more raw.	6	2.0
The dishes are excessively watery, and olive oil is preferred over butter, which is different.	6	2.0
The dishes are less salty.	4	1.3
Some dishes and ingredients that exist in our country are not available here.	4	1.3
Saffron usage is not common here.	4	1.3
The calorie content of the meals is lower.	4	1.3
Most of the foods that exist in our country are either absent or prepared differently here.	4	1.3
Meals in my own country are lighter.	3	1.0
There are variations in salad varieties.	3	1.0
Coffee consumption is higher in Turkey.	2	0.7
Some dishes eaten for breakfast in my hometown are preferred as lunch and dinner meals.	2	0.7
The dishes are significantly different.	2	0.7
Products in Turkey are not natural and lack flavor.	2	0.7
There are variations in rice varieties.	1	0.3
The late timing of dinner is different.	1	0.3
Turkish culture is richer in terms of food.	1	0.3
Here, breakfast is generally served as an evening appetizer in our country.	1	0.3

*Multiple responses.

Discussion

The majority of the participants in the study were students from 36 different countries, mainly Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Syria, and Greece. 57.3% of the students (n=176) expressed that their eating habits in their home country and Turkey were similar. According to the research results, students from Uzbekistan, Greece, Albania, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Syria, and Iran, particularly Uzbekistan, perceived their eating habits as most similar to those in Turkey. A study conducted with international

students at a university in Turkey revealed that 42.2% of the students found Turkish cuisine similar to their own culinary culture (Soylu et al, 2018). In a study conducted with Turkmen students, it was found that 70.4% of Turkmen students liked Turkish dishes and considered them similar to their own cuisine (Girgin, 2017). These research findings support the outcome of the current study. Additionally, the similarity in eating habits with countries that share ethnic, religious, geographical, and cultural proximity can also explain the results of this study.

In this study, international students highlighted that they found similarities with Turkey in terms of consuming meat, cheese, chicken, various fresh vegetables, pasta, rice, soup, baked goods, and the use of butter, as well as the practice of eating three meals a day. A study comparing Iranian and Turkish cuisines revealed common flavors such as döner, kebab, as, dolma, köfte, keskek, helva, pismaniye, lokum, turmeric, muhallebi, sutlaç, keskul, various bread types, and sherbet in both countries' culinary cultures, with both societies having grain-based diets (Cakiroglu, 2007). Another study found that Spanish and Turkish cuisines were influenced by Arab cuisine, and both countries had street food habits, as well as similarities in mezze, rice varieties, sutlaç dessert preparation, tulumba dessert, and cezerye (Akyurek, 2008). The similarity in eating habits between Northern Cyprus and Turkey was attributed to shared religious beliefs, with both countries having meze and kebab consumption (Osmanlar et al, 2021). In a study on breakfast in Turkish and world cuisines, it was determined that the consumption of tea during breakfast was a common feature in China and Turkey (Cekal et al, 2021). The aforementioned research findings indicate that there are similarities in eating behaviors among different countries and cultures. However, studies focusing on highlighting the similarities in eating behaviors within Turkey are limited. It is believed that the observed similarities with neighboring countries, shared beliefs, and a common cultural heritage play a role.

In this study, 34.5% of the students (n=107) stated that their eating habits differed from those in their home country. The students mentioned differences in breakfast culture, a prevalence of vegetable-based diets, and lower consumption of meat dishes as distinctive features of Turkey compared to their home countries. In a study conducted in Russia, 35% of students preferred having 3-4 meals a day, while 58.3% believed that a healthy individual should consume three meals (Titov et al, 2007). Another study found that Arabian students consumed dried fruits more often and did not consume fruits and vegetables, and they had two meals with their

families (Al-Rethaia et al, 2010). A study with Chinese students revealed that they perceived Chinese and Turkish cuisines as very different, with Turkish dishes being meatier, and cheese and olives not being part of their culinary culture. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the food in the university cafeteria in Turkey (Sahin and Zhang, 2020). In a study conducted with Turkmen students, it was found that they considered Turkish dishes spicier and oilier than their own cuisine (Girgin et al, 2017). Another study found that international students perceived Turkish cuisine as very different and had difficulty adapting to it (Turel, 2021).

In a study comparing eating habits between Spain and Turkey, several differences were identified. In Turkey, the consumption of soup, yogurt, and bulgur was found to be significantly higher, and there were variations in the types of fats used. Additionally, it was observed that pork is not used in Turkish cuisine, which also contributed to the differences (Akyurek, 2018). Another research conducted with international students in Turkey revealed that they perceived the absence of meat and the abundance of vegetables and greens in Turkish meals as distinctive characteristics (Kiroglu et al, 2010). In a comparative study of Turkish and global cuisines, variations were found in the types of cheese consumed, with European countries favoring coffee while Turkey preferred tea. Moreover, the inclusion of fruits and vegetables in breakfast, differences in pastry items (e.g., croissants, tortillas, various types of bread and pastries), and the presence of soup in Turkish breakfast were identified as points of differentiation (Cekal et al, 2021). These research findings indicate that there are not only similarities but also differences in eating habits among countries and cultures.

Conclusion: According to the results of the study, more than half of the international students stated that their eating habits were similar to those in their home countries, while close to half of them expressed differences. 10.8% of the students indicated that their food culture was the same. It was determined that the types of meat and cheese, three meals a day, variety of fresh vegetables, pasta, rice,

and types of soup were similar. The students highlighted breakfast culture, a predominantly vegetable-based diet, a lesser consumption of meat dishes, and a higher intake of olive oil as the differences in their eating habits.

Based on these results, it can be recommended to make certain adjustments in the places where students have communal meals. The requests regarding the students' dietary habits can be taken into consideration. Specifically, breakfast menus can be diversified, and a variety of spices can be added. Adequate responses can be provided to the students' questions about the meals. The individuals responsible for meal preparation and service can be informed about these matters.

For future researchers investigating the topic, it is suggested that they examine the differences and similarities in eating behaviors on a country-specific basis and plan their studies in a qualitative manner.

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