

# Intercultural Attitudes of Turkish Students Studying in a UK University

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## Abstract

The study aimed at identifying intercultural attitudes of Turkish students enrolled in the University of Southampton, in the UK, towards both host and other cultures. The data were elicited through a questionnaire consisting of two parts. Data were analyzed through statistical package software called SPSS. Descriptive statistics i.e. mean scores; standard deviations and percentages were utilized in the presentation of the results. The results were introduced by quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretations. The findings demonstrated that Turkish students held confounding attitudes depending on various factors and engaged in multifarious interactions with their British and non-British friends.

**Keywords:** *intercultural attitudes, study abroad, intercultural communication*

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## Introduction

In our time, when mobility has accelerated due to the increased developments in transportation technology and higher levels of economic welfare, distances no longer constitute any problem for people willing to travel across overseas. Therefore, currently, it is not surprising to hear that the world has become a “global village”, a term first coined by Marshall McLuhan in 1962 (cited in Nash, 2009), where any encounter of any people across the world is more likely than it was in the past. People from different walks of life have started to mingle with each other in a number of various contexts including business meetings, educational settings, sightseeing tours, religious activities and work places for a large number of reasons.

Students going abroad for education constitute a very large proportion of the most mobile folks around the world. This is because “[s]tudy abroad is a fast-growing phenomenon, urged on by ease of travel, by political changes, by economic need, by *cultural interaction*” (Byram and Feng, 2006; p.1; emphasis added). As a policy, for instance, a significant number of governments and higher education institutions encourage their students and members to go abroad for education by providing them educational scholarships. Moreover, universities make agreements with each other to exchange students under different programmes such as Erasmus and Comenius. On the other hand, those parents who can afford to meet the costs of education prefer to send their children abroad. This is because parents presume that a number of opportunities emerge for their children due to an international educational background, such as future job opportunities and higher social status.

According to the Association of International Education Counsellors (AIEC), Turkey, with a very young average population, has become “a great target for international schools who want to reach more international students”. Each year thousands of students are taking various exams i.e. GRE, IELTS and TOEFL to apply for international universities in the hope that they can obtain a place. The National Report for FELCA (The Federation of Education and Language Consulting, 2011) lists the countries favoured by Turkish students in 2010 as follows: UK 38%, USA 37%, Australia 11%, and Canada 8%, and Germany % 4. For Turkish students studying in these countries, cultural interaction has become an inevitable phenomenon. It is because they are required to intermingle with students and people of different cultures “in the internationalization of higher education” institutions (Deardorf, 2004; p. 13) and in daily encounters (i.e. shopping, banking). It is known that wherever there is cultural interaction among

different nationals, the notion of 'intercultural communication' appears ipso facto. In such interactions, individuals' attitudes may play a central role to arouse their interest in other cultures or avoid having contacts with culturally different individuals. To explore how attitudes affect students' willingness to learn about, and engage in other cultures in multicultural settings, this study aims at assessing intercultural attitudes that Turkish students hold towards both host culture and other cultures.

## Literature Review

### Intercultural Communication

Though the term is widely used today, what it means may differ according to who defines it and how culture and communication are described (Stepanovienė, 2011). Intercultural communication has been attempted to be defined by a great number of researchers; yet, no definition has been completely gained consensus among writers and researchers. Numerous definitions exist in the literature. In its narrowest sense, it can be described as the interaction between persons who do not share the same culture. Nevertheless, this description itself is too general and straight forward. Contrary to this, in its broadest sense, Goshlyk and Goshlyk (2010) define it in great detail as

*An interdisciplinary field of research that studies how people communicate and understand each other across group boundaries or discourse systems of various sorts of including national, geographical, linguistic, ethnic, occupation, class or gender-related boundaries and how such boundaries affect language use. (p. 31)*

Considering the diverse group boundaries and discourse systems, it is highly probable that people are confronted with challenges and difficulties while communicating with others of diverse cultural backgrounds. Many researchers claim that such troubles are available in any interaction involving individuals culturally unlike (e.g. Braber, 2005). Wiwczarowski (2011) argues that especially for young adults, it could be much more problematic when they lack experience of having previous contacts with other people and foreign cultures, particularly when they leave their homes for the first time. To be able to deal with potential challenges encountered, individuals are required to develop intercultural competence, a prerequisite to establish well-grounded intercultural communication.

The term 'intercultural competence' has been subject to a wide range of variations in terms of definitions as seen in defining intercultural communication. Deardorf (2004) points out the lack of common agreement among researchers on the definition of intercultural competence and its components. In her words, "[i]ntercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection" (Deardorf, 2006; p.5). Regarding this definition, an interculturally competent individual is expected to engage in a variety of intercultural encounters without experiencing much trouble and challenge. However, pure knowledge about other cultures is not enough to be counted as interculturally competent. It is just one of the components of intercultural competence, and it helps individuals raise awareness about the differences between their own culture and those of others. It also sustains three more components: values, skills and attitudes (Byram, Nichols & Stevenson, 2001), all of which are highlighted in Deardorf's definition. Of these components, Byram *et al.* (2001) regard attitudes held by individuals as the 'main foundation' for intercultural competence. The reason could be that attitudes are likely to affect individuals psychologically (i.e. emotions, feelings) and these effects are to be reflected upon the acts of people, which might be perceived in others' eyes as either favourable or unfavourable depending on the types of displayed behaviours (e.g. keeping distance, openness to others, willingness) in interaction. In this sense, intercultural attitudes could be taken as by far the most influential determiner of well-grounded intercultural communication. Despite its significance, previous studies centred on intercultural attitudes have so far remained limited except for a few studies (e.g. in Netherlands, Osch & Brugelmanns, 2011; USA, Schafel, Schafel & Ahluwalia, 2007) which partly touched upon the issue at hand.

# Intercultural Attitudes

The concept of intercultural attitudes could be better understood via reference to the notion of attitude. Researchers from different disciplines such as psychology, linguistics or educational sciences, to name a few, have shown interest in conducting studies concentrating on assessing attitudes held by their informants. Krosnik, Judd & Wittenbrink (2005) after reviewing a number of broadly set definitions in early studies, settle for a narrower definition that is more concerned with “a particular entity or object rather than all objects and situations with which it is related” (p. 22). As simply put by them, attitude is an inclination to favour or disfavour a specific entity with explicit or implicit indications of avoidance or approach. Building on this definition, intercultural attitudes could be described as those which emerge in contexts where contact among culturally divergent individuals is unavoidable. Osch & Brugelmans (2011) take intercultural attitudes to simply mean ‘*attitudes towards others*’ in their study. While highlighting components of intercultural competence, Hamburg (2011) exemplifies perceivable indications of intercultural attitudes as *openness*, *curiosity* and *readiness* in individuals’ behavioural and affective acts overtly or covertly to merge with others from various cultures. Finally, Byram et al. (2001) incorporate the attributes ascribed to intercultural attitudes above in their broad definition as follows:

*Intercultural attitudes (savoir être): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other culture and belief about one’s own. This means a willingness to relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs, and behaviours. This can be called the ability to ‘decentre’.* (p. 5; emphasis added)

In this paper, intercultural attitudes are taken to mean students’ eagerness, openness, willingness and readiness for and interest in discovering, learning and experiencing other cultures through familiarizing with local people in the host culture and their friends from various cultures in several ways. Since attitude is a psychological construct, it is invisible; therefore, individuals’ daily practices (e.g. travelling, going to the theatre) preferences (e.g. for food, events, friends) affective activities (e.g. liking, disliking, avoidance, approach) are to be looked in order to evaluate intercultural attitudes within the framework of this study.

## Previous Research on Intercultural Attitudes

Students studying abroad have aroused interest in researchers to explore the experiences, problems and difficulties faced and attitudes held by them; and consequently, to provide suggestions or solutions to amend the restrictions on their interactions. One study conducted by Stepanovienė (2011) in Lithuania aimed to investigate 34 Lithuanian exchange students’ experiences in four different host countries; Germany, USA, Finland and Czech Republic through a questionnaire comprising closed and open-response questions and semi-structured interview questions. She specifically attempted to analyze students’ perceptions, opinions, common problems and curiosity related to intercultural communication with foreign students. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the students reflected openness and willingness to participate in intercultural communication. However, students in general refrained from talking about serious culturally bound topics such as religious beliefs, personal affairs and traditions, and chose to remain safe by talking about casual topics including weather, classes, and TV. Such intercultural attitudes as readiness for communication but reluctance to learn more about others’ culture through elements, according to Stepanovienė, stemmed from the lack of intercultural knowledge in students.

In a different study, Xiao & Petraki (2007) attempted to identify the challenges 32 Chinese undergraduate and graduate students faced in an Australian university. To elicit information from the informants, researchers adopted a mix-method approach by designing a questionnaire and conducting interviews with 10 voluntary students. Apart from investigating the challenges, their research also explored students’ attitudes towards others in interactional acts, perceptions of others, communication preferences based on nationalities, and their eagerness for having intercultural skills. In accord with Stepanovienė’s (2011) findings, Chinese students were found to hold very positive attitudes towards mixing with others from different cultures in conversation exchanges. Yet, they were hesitant, as their Lithuanian counterparts

were, to talk about personal and more cultural issues. Despite this, almost all students expressed preference and keenness to learn more about intercultural communication skills. Their choice of friendship was affected to some degree by previous contact and familiarity with the culture through media or TV. In this sense, students took a negative attitude in the form of avoidance of different cultures they are not familiar with.

Unlike the abovementioned small-scale studies, Schaftel, Sschaftel & Ahluwalia (2007) undertook research to discover the experiences and attitudes of 660 undergraduate students from various universities in an intercultural context, a school program in Italy. The data tools used for elicitation were twofold: Cross-cultural adaptability inventory and Student attitude survey which involved 11 items to collect information about students' attitudes to learning about other cultures (willingness), values of interacting with foreign cultures (acceptance), pleasure of interacting and increasing intercultural knowledge (enjoyment-openness). The participants were first divided into four groups and stayed in the target culture in different lengths of time/stay, which was one of the goals of the study: to see whether the length of stay would cause students to hold different attitudes. Their length of stay ranged from 4 weeks to 14 weeks. The general findings of the study demonstrated that adaptation and attitudes of the majority of the students, especially of those who stayed longer, changed considerably for amore positive direction in such perceivable ways as open-mindedness, tolerance and emotional flexibility as a result of intercultural communication.

As distinct from the aforementioned studies which to some extent attempted to measure intercultural attitudes, this current study predominantly concentrates on intercultural attitudes with a deeper examination of participants' daily practices, preferences, perceptions, both in the forms of approach to and avoidance of interactions with members of target cultures and those of other cultures present in their current living areas.

## Methodology

### Setting and informants

The study was undertaken in Southampton, UK, towards the end of the fall academic term, 2011/2012. The participants comprised 36 Turkish adult students studying in a number of different disciplines ranging from chemistry to naval architecture at the University of Southampton. The majority of the participants were male students (N=20). The participants were selected through convenient sampling at the convenience of the researcher. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were reached through e-mails, facebook and in person in several contexts including university library, prayer room and university halls.

### Data Collection Tool

In the collection of the data, a quantitative questionnaire consisting of two parts was utilised. The first section addressed ten questions to elicit personal information from the informants. The items aimed to identify participants' gender, age, disciplines, and number of friends, membership of any student union, preferences for food, and topic preferences in conversations with others. The sixteen items in the second section were directed at participants with the aim of evaluating their intercultural attitudes by looking into how willing, curious and open the participants are to take part in events where contact and cultural learning would be inevitable. The items were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'not comfortable at all' to 'very comfortable', 'not curious at all to very curious', 'never to always' and 'strongly disagree to agree' as illustrated in Table 1.

*Table 1: 5-point Likert items used in the data collection tool*

Not comfortable at all	1	2	3	4	5	Very comfortable
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Not curious at all	1	2	3	4	5	Very curious
Never	1	2	3	4	5	Always
Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

## Data analysis

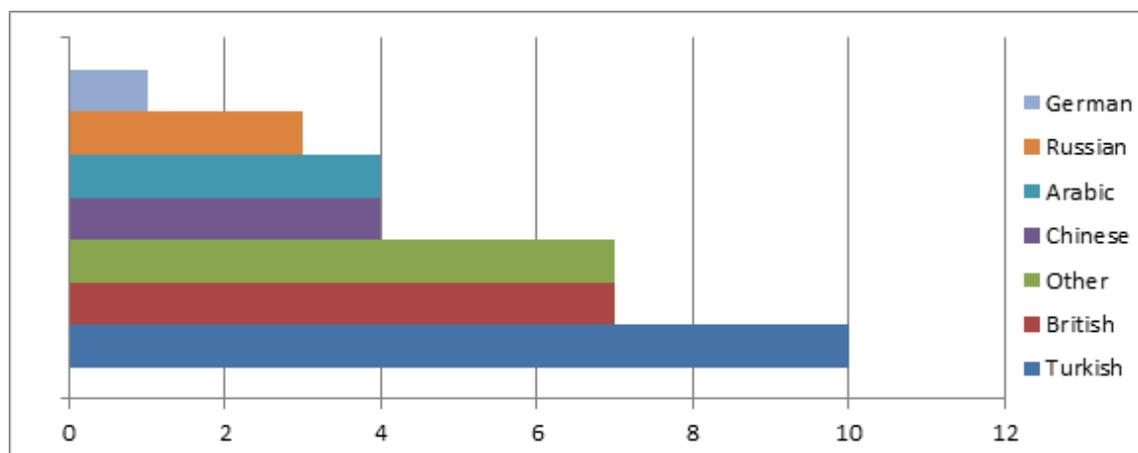
The obtained data were analyzed by uploading the number-coded items into SPSS statistical software. To be able to define the overall pattern of the informants' responses, descriptive statistics were employed by applying measures of central tendency and dispersion i.e. frequency, mean, standard deviation.

## Results

### Background Information

Out of total 36 respondents, 20 were male (56%) and 16 female students (44%). The sampling did not show a huge inequality in terms of representing genders. The minimum age was 20 and maximum 35 with an age range of 15. Participants represented various levels of higher education ranging from the undergraduate to post doctoral degrees in various fields such as finance and marketing, promotional media, chemistry, to name a few. The majority of the students were studying at the undergraduate level (f=15) and the rest respectively at master (f=9), PhD (f=9) and post-doctoral (f=3) levels. Over two-thirds of students (f=22) have more than 9 friends who are not Turkish. The nationalities constituting participants' majority of friends in UK showed divergence from Middle East to central Europe. The details concerning nationalities of informants' friends are presented in Graph 1 below.

Graph 1: Majority of friends according to nationalities



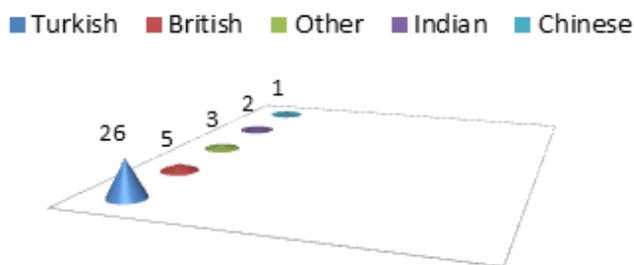
Preference for Turkish friends was expressed by almost one-third of the informants. Following this, respondents marked British and 'other' friends as the second majority group with the same frequency. However, those who marked 'other' either missed to specify the nationality of their friends or used continental associations regarding their friends' nationalities such as Asian and European. These answers were all considered as 'others' since the nationalities were not explicitly reported. Graph 1 clearly illustrates that Many Turkish students (f=26) have befriended others from a different range of countries within which diverse cultures are embodied.

More than half of the respondents (f=22) hold a membership in at least one student society. Primarily, two student societies were reported in the data: SOTON (Southampton) Turkish Society and Islamic Society. Those who marked that they are a member of a society but failed to give any name caused ambiguity in

identifying societies in which participants hold membership. It is this reason why only two societies came to appearance in the responses.

When participants' responses were analyzed in terms of preference for food in the event that they go out for eating, it was found that more than half of Turkish students (f= 26) rated Turkish restaurants as their first option. The remaining expressed preferences for British, Other, Indian and Chinese food respectively. The food preference of informants is illustrated in the following graph with a clear depiction indicating the frequency of each type of cuisine by participants.

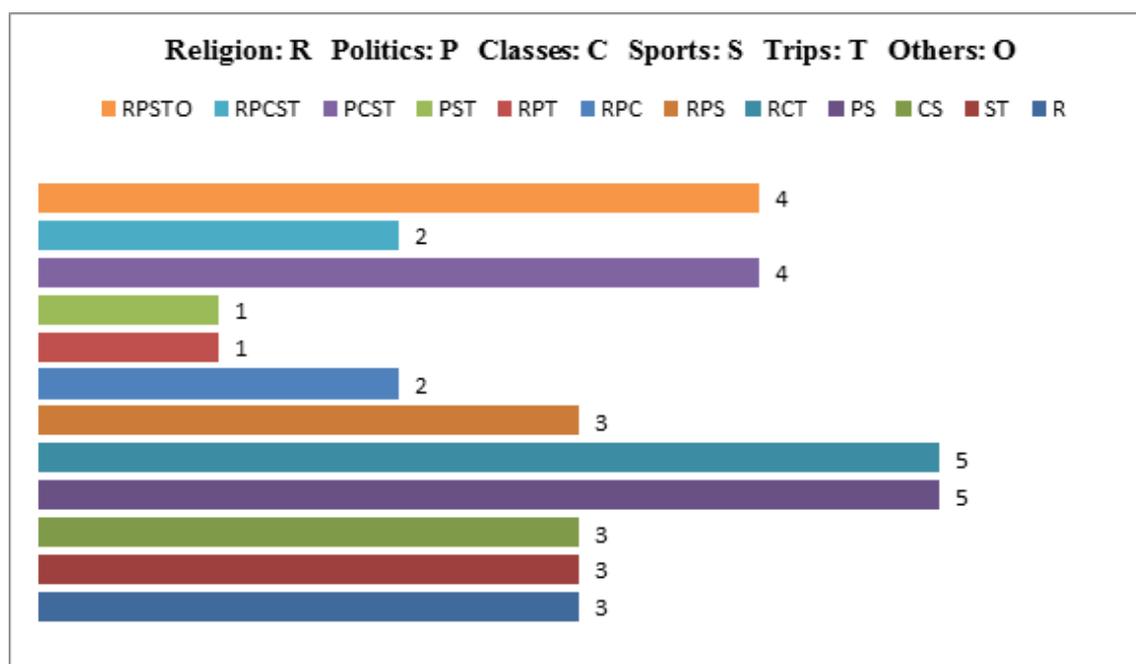
Graph 2: Preferences for different cuisines and frequency scores



With regard to having a non-native lecturer, students' responses indicated a close similarity in that 19 students have at least one non-British lecturer and the other 17 have only British lecturers. The nationalities of non-British lecturers were principally reported as German, Chinese, Turkish and Iranian. Few students just marked that they have a non-native lecturer but further skipped pointing to a nationality.

The last item addressed to students in the first section of the questionnaire aimed to describe the topics that they usually talk about in their meetings with their non-Turkish friends. It is remarkable that participants talk about a variety of topics, several of which are culturally bound such as religious issues. The participants were allowed to pick more than one topic they frequently talk about. As can be seen from Graph 3, Turkish students indicated a positive inclination towards talking about more than one topic covering practices in daily life, personal affairs, religious matters, food, and politics.

Graph 3: Conversation topics discussed with non-Turkish friends (N=36)



**Intercultural attitudes**

The second part of the data collection tool included questions to evaluate students' intercultural attitudes towards both host culture (HC) and other cultures (OCs) to which they have been exposed on a regular basis. The first six questions addressed were concerned with participants' comfortableness with their native and non-native lecturers, living with culturally dissimilar people, sharing common areas such as kitchen, bathroom, and their curiosity about learning about HC and OCs. The analyses demonstrated that those participants having at least one non-British lecturer expressed a high degree of comfortableness in their interaction in classrooms (Mean=4.3684). Similarly, comfortableness with British lecturers was rated at a high mean score 4.4167. In terms of living with others of various cultures, participants were not as comfortable as they were with British and non-British lecturers. The mean score, 3.5883, was slightly over a hypothetically neutral score indicating that participants were neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. The lowest mean score was seen in comfortableness with sharing common living areas as 2.2222. With regard to curiosity of learning about British and other cultures, students seemed to be slightly more curious about other cultures (3.1944) than the British culture (2.75). However, students' general curiosity mean scores were not too high compared to their comfortableness scores.

*Table 2: The summary of the descriptive statistics for comfortableness and curiosity*

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D.
1. Comfortableness with NN lecturers	19	2,00	5,00	4,3684	,95513
2. Comfortableness with N lecturers	36	3,00	5,00	4,4167	,60356
3. Living with culturally different people	36	1,00	5,00	3,5833	1,15573
4. Curiosity of learning British culture	36	1,00	5,00	2,7500	,93732
5. Curiosity of learning other cultures	36	1,00	5,00	3,1944	1,11661
6. Comfortableness with sharing common living areas	36	1,00	5,00	2,2222	1,04502
Valid N (list wise)	19				

The following seven items were addressed to students to find out how frequently they are involved in cultural activities that contain attending events, going to the cinema, theatre, visiting museums, art galleries, eating at ethnic restaurants and following the news/events taking place both in the host and home countries. The obtained results were tabulated to draw a general picture of participants' intercultural activities. Table 3 shows wide-ranging patterns of students' responses

*Table 3: The summary of descriptive statistics for frequency of culturally based activities*

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
7. Visiting art galleries, museums etc	36	1,00	4,00	2,3333	1,06904
8. Attending concerts	36	1,00	4,00	1,8056	1,06421
9. Eating at ethnic restaurants	36	1,00	5,00	2,3333	1,06904
10. Travelling within UK	36	1,00	4,00	3,1389	,79831

11. Attending events	36	1,00	4,00	2,5000	1,08233
12. Following news in UK	36	1,00	5,00	3,4167	1,20416
13. Following news in the home country	36	2,00	5,00	4,3056	,78629
Valid N (listwise)	36				

As can be seen from Table 3, the mean scores decreased dramatically in comparison with those of comfortableness and curiosity. The highest mean score (4.3056) was obtained in item 13. The participants seemed to be rather concerned about what is occurring in their homeland. The lowest mean score (1.8056) was seen in item 8, from which it can be inferred that Turkish students are not keen to go to concerts, theatres performed round the city. The other activities they are involved in can, in terms of frequency, be itemised respectively as visiting art galleries, museums (2.3333), eating at ethnic restaurants (2.3333), attending events led by student societies (2.5000), travelling in the host country (3.1389), and following events or news concerning the UK (3.4167).

The last three items of the questionnaire were about participants' affective intercultural attitudes which encompass their feelings and beliefs with regards to spending time with their friends such as how they feel upon learning something new, whether living in an intercultural setting raises their intercultural awareness about cultural differences. Almost all students (4.5556) expressed a strong agreement on the fact that interacting with others in a multicultural context helps them create an awareness to know more about cultural differences. Feeling happiness upon learning new information about other cultures followed the preceding item with a lofty mean score of 4.1111. Finally, a large majority of the participants did not agree with the view that spending time with their unlike friends culturally makes them feel lonely and comfortless. Table 3 below statistically summarizes these points.

*Table 4: The summary of descriptive statistics for affective intercultural attitudes*

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
14. Living in intercultural context increases my awareness	36	3,00	5,00	4,5556	,73463
15. Feeling isolated among friends from other cultures	36	1,00	4,00	2,4167	,93732
16. Feeling happy upon learning something new	36	2,00	5,00	4,1111	,97915
Valid N (listwise)	36				

## Discussion and Conclusion

Given the background details of informants, it can be maintained that selection of high numbers of friends from diverse backgrounds could increase social relationships and this can, in effect, affect their closeness to and involvement in HC and OCs. In parallel to this, holding a membership of a student union could strengthen cultural ties between participants and members of the host culture and other cultures. However, holding membership confined to solely two unions founded on ethnicity and religion might

indirectly cause low level of contact with other cultures, particularly with the host culture. This could be interpreted as 'avoidance of unfamiliarity' concerning their attitudes, since the goal is to maintain contact with people culturally familiar. Such attitude is in tune with findings of McKinlay, Pattinson and Gross' (1996) study conducted in a British university where their participants –international students- chose their close friends from their own nationals rather than those of the host culture.

Students showed a very strong preference for Turkish food when they go out for eating. As put by Novinger (2001), for those who have to reside abroad for a while, food is an utmost concern especially in adapting into the new culture and environment. According to Pearson-Evans (2006), food as a cultural artefact is a way of participation in diverse cultures in the form of keenness to try out new tastes. By the same token, avoidance of unfamiliar food could be interpreted as 'rejection' of engagement in diverse cultures. In our case, Turkish students, in relation to food, displayed strong negative attitudes towards other cultures.

The conversation topics among participants and members of HC and OCs are more dependent on sensitive issues in contrast to the results of previous studies (e.g. Xiao & Petraki, 2007; Stepanovienė, 2011). Topic selection is, indeed, among the strategies of successful intercultural communication, such as avoiding personal, sensitive and values-based topics (Chen & Isa, 2003). Yet, these are the topics in which cultural norms, elements and concepts can be expressed and revealed. Participants, at large, did not hesitate to bring up such topics as religion, politics, and personal affairs in conversation exchanges. The more they talk about such issues within the framework of mutual respect, the more understanding and awareness of cultural differences they can develop.

The majority of participants expressed a high degree of contentment with both British and non-British lecturers. This could be taken as an indication that they don't experience language related problems, partly culturally rooted, in their classes. Living with others or sharing common areas might enable participants to contact more individuals and learn more about their life styles, privacy and food preferences. However, students, in general, did not prefer sharing common areas, show much curiosity about British culture and OCs, and consequently showed strong reluctance to living with others. These all can be considered as lack of interest in diverse intercultural knowledge and avoidance of intimate friendship relationships with dissimilar people.

Students' frequency of participation in cultural activities is relatively low. By a majority, they follow the news/events happening in the UK and go on trips within the UK. However, such attractions as museums, art galleries, theatres, cinemas where a set of cultural artefacts, elements and norms can be experienced naturally, did not draw much interest from students. They most often followed the happenings in their home country. This approach among students can be interpreted as a strong attachment to home, reluctance to adaptation into the new surroundings, and refusal of new experience. In this manner, negative intercultural attitudes surfaced in students' behaviours, perceptions, and beliefs.

Participants firmly expressed that spending time abroad with diverse people together with hosts creates and enhances awareness about cultural diversities. Living in a different culture, in their sense, does not make them feel lonely. This might be because they have many friends ethnically similar and dissimilar. To a very large extent, they are content to discover about HC and OCs. However, what they perceptually assert, and what they practically do contradicts. They tend to attend activities less but agree on that involvement in interactions with others will provide insights into their understanding of cultural diversities.

In conclusion, Turkish students displayed rather complicated and contradictory intercultural attitudes towards both members of HC and OCs. Their attitudes were expressed positively or negatively, as indicated, depending on various factors such as topic selection, food preference, adaptation into the host culture, to name but a few. It could be presumed that there is a disproportional interaction between Turkish students and others concerning intercultural communication: (1) highly mono-cultural interaction (Turkish-Turkish), (2) moderately multicultural (Turkish-others), (3) slightly bicultural (Turkish-British). There might be various reasons behind such imbalanced intercultural communication such as strong attachment to home and familiarity. However, as a preliminary research, this study could only describe the patterns and trends in the current situation but could not go beyond this. Further research is to be

conducted with a large sample for inferential results, especially to see the differences between different variables such as gender, level of study and length of study in relation to intercultural attitudes.

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