The Plights of West-African Students in Turkish Universities: A Case Study of Gaziantep University

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Abstract

Like any other Western country, Türkiye is becoming an educational destination for many international students, especially Africans. Therefore, Turkiye emphasizes universities' internationalization, which brought rapid success to its political and economic trends. Therefore, this present study investigated the plights of West African students in Turkish universities, specifically focusing on the West African students at Gaziantep University. The study is based on a qualitative research design with a case study approach. This study used interviews and observation to collect data from 12 participants—one participant at least from each of the 10 West African countries presently active at Gaziantep University. The data collected were qualitatively analyzed based on common themes designed for this study. According to the findings of this current study, the language and prejudice of locals against West African students and the country they come from where the enormous challenges they faced while at Gaziantep University. Concerning these findings, the present study recommends addressing the problems mentioned earlier, such as special orientation programs organized by the university and other relevant bodies, which should be delivered by university staff familiar with Africans' socio-cultural heritage and economic and political background. Likewise, scholarships and financial support from the government and other relevant authorities should be given to West African students to overcome the financial problems they encountered during their stay at Gaziantep University.

Key words: Academy, economy, finance, language, West-African students

Introduction

The importance of education to national and individual development remains undeniable, and it is the bedrock of progress and society's way of growth (Shavkidinova et. al., 2023; Upadhyay, 2022; Sharma & Ankit, 2023). When people are educated, the safety of society is assured, and they can significantly contribute to this society and their families in various fields. For this reason, creating a healthy environment and stable community for the people to undergo a formal way of acquiring knowledge and skills is very important. The quest to acquire qualitative education by individuals brings about rapid educational changes. As a result of these rapid changes, the international education market is also proliferating (Abella, 2015; Johnson, 2023). Looking at the global index, America, England, Canada, Australia, France, China, Russia, Japan, and Malaysia are experiencing the highest number of international students (Douglass & Edelstein, 2010; Bound et al., 2021). Turkiye is now on the top list, especially from 2016 to date (Durnali & Ayyildiz, 2023). Turkiye is becoming an educational destination for many international students, especially Africans (Aydın, 2022). Apart from the economic and political success recorded, Turkiye places more importance on the internationalization of universities (Durnali & Ayyildiz, 2023; Johnson, 2020). In 2014, the number of international students in the Turkish higher education system was around 48 thousand (YÖK, 2017; Aydın, 2022; Efe & Ozer, 2023). This number has kept increasing significantly over the years. While the number of international students targeted for 2019-2020 in the Internationalization Strategy Document was 159 thousand, there was an increase above this target. The number of international students educated reached 185 thousand in recent years (YÖK, 2020, a1), bringing students from many countries to Turkish universities under Turkiye Scholarships .

According to the data published by UNESCO 2018, Turkiye has managed to be among the top 10 countries accommodating the highest number of international students, with 125 thousand, and now reached 200

thousand with its recent significant performance (Aydın, 2022). Many governments and non-governmental organizations are involved, such as the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), Diyanet Isleri Scholarship, Turk Kızılay, TIKA, and others. These organizations bring students from many countries worldwide to Turkish universities under Turkiye Scholarships. These incoming students are educated with scholarships (Basaran et al. 2022) throughout their education life in Turkiye, and the state covers their expenses and many social activities. YTB carries out the activities with its established International Student Department (YÖK, 2020, a2). Furthermore, YOK established the Mevlana program in addition to the Erasmus with EU countries, which allowed universities to integrate student exchange with other countries' institutions across the world. Aside from all these, universities such as Bilkent and Bahçesehir also provide scholarships and support for international students (KB, 2014). This scholarship allows many African students to come to Turkiye for their education.

Despite the all-odds African students face while in foreign countries for their education, they see Turkiye as a better place and a milestone in realizing their potential as students than in their home countries (Farah & Barack, 2021). The quality education offered in Turkiye, with some modern technological innovation, is why Africans choose Turkiye as their education destination (Baydemir, 2020). Another reason for African students' quest for Turkish universities, as stated by Farah and Barack (2019) scholarships and opportunities are the reasons for the student's quest for schooling in various Turkish universities. Like in other Western countries, African students studying in Turkiye find many opportunities and guaranteed job placement in many fields when they return to their home countries (Kaya, 2014). As observed in many Turkish higher institutions, Gaziantep University is also among the top universities hosting many international students worldwide. As a result, the number of African students in Gaziantep has increased considerably in recent years. However, there has been a sliding decrease in students coming from sub-Saharan African countries after a 2015 attempted coup (Akyar, 2019; Farah & Barack, 2021)

According to the Gaziantep University Registrar's Office of International Students, 2021-2022 Activity Report, 5,897 international students are registered at Gaziantep University. According to this data, Syria has the highest number of 4598, followed by Iraq with 266, Azerbaijan with 98, Iran with 87, and Egypt with 83 students. While from the West African countries, Nigeria has the highest number of students with 22, followed by Mauritania with 11, Burkina Faso with 8, Mali with 7, Ghana with 5, Guinea Bissau with 3, Senegal with 3, Sierra Leone with 3, Congo 3, Liberia 2 and then Gambia 1. As stated above, the increasing number of international students in Turkiye has brought rapid academic and economic changes. As a result of these changes, more attention is given to some issues Black-African students face in Turkish higher institutions. As a subject matter of this study, there are various difficulties for West African students who quickly undergo cultural and environmental changes, and the difficulties they come across in both social and academic environments may hurt these students. However, when these difficulties are traced and significant attention and support are given, there will be positive experiences for West African students in Turkiye, which will pave the way for other African students willing to study in Turkiye. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to reveal the perceptions of West African students coming to universities in Turkey about Turkey and Turkish universities.

Method

This section gives information about the study design, study group, data collection tool, data collection process, data analysis, and validity and reliability of the study.

Research Design

In this present study, a case study approach is adopted to investigate the plight of West African students in Turkish universities, focusing on the West African students studying at Gaziantep University to collect comprehensive data based on the subject matter of the study. The qualitative case study approach is a type of approach that includes an open-ended, in-depth, and precise exploration of the subject matter of the study and its other dimensions. Factors related to a phenomenon, such as an environment, individuals, events, and processes, are investigated through a holistic approach, and it is tried to reveal how they are affected by the relevant situation (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). A holistic approach is a way of thinking or problem-solving that considers the whole system, entity, or context rather than focusing on individual parts or components in isolation (Miroslav & Ladislav, 2022). The qualitative case study approach in research has long been widely used and applied in different disciplines by researchers and investigators (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The case study approach is fundamental as it helps to understand a multifaceted issue or object. It also tends to extend experience or strengthen the present knowledge through later research.

Study Population and Sample

The population of this study includes West African students pursuing different levels of degrees in various departments at Gaziantep University. To select the participants, a purposive sampling technique was used to determine at least one or more participants from each West African country. The table below shows the distribution of 12 participants from 11 West African countries.

Table 1. Name of country and number of participants selected

Sn	Name of Country	Participants No
1	Burkina Faso	1
2	Gambia	1
3	Ghana	1
4	Guinea-Bissau	1
5	Ivory-Coast	1
6	Mali	1
7	Mauritania	1
8	Nigeria	1
9	Niger	2
10	Senegal	1
11	Togo	1

Data Collection Tool

An interview and observation method were adopted while collecting data from the sampled participants to obtain reliable and rich information regarding the plight of West African students at Gaziantep University. The study used the open-ended interview technique as a data collection tool. The student's experiences in and outside the school as international students from West African countries studying at Gaziantep University were analyzed in the light of interviews. The interview questions were prepared in English and Turkish; all the international students studying at Gaziantep University must be undergoing their program in either. In addition, an observation method was used to complement the study findings obtained via the interview method (Creswell, 2015). The interview technique was used to collect data in this present study. According to Creswell (2012), it is a commonly used method of obtaining crucial information from the participants on a specific topic. The researcher uses interviews as a guide to retrieve relevant information from the participants. It also covers basic questions to be asked via open-ended questions.

Data Collection Process

Before the data collection process, West African international students from various departments and faculties of Gaziantep University were identified. An open-ended interview approach is deemed suitable for this study to increase the flexibility it offers to the interviewer with unbiasedness (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Thus, in the study, the differences arising from the individual characteristics of the participants were avoided. In addition, an open-ended interview was used since it is an approach that allows participants to express their experiences by going beyond the questions—an average of 20 minutes with each participant during the data collection process. Furthermore, with the participants' permission, voice recorders were used to record the interview to avoid misinterpretation of the data during the analysis. Then, the written transcripts of the interviews were also deciphered. In addition, the interviewees were observed during their time at the school. The data obtained from this observation were used to enrich the data obtained in the interview.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data collected during the interviews. The qualitative content analysis was used to reach the concepts and relationships that describe the data obtained. Qualitative content analysis has a systematic structure, but researchers can perform data analysis by following different steps since it does not have a universally accepted form (Mayring, 2015). However, following Creswell's (2015) suggestion, the present data used in this study were transcribed before starting the analysis because data analysis cannot be performed without transcription. The data collected from the

participants in this study was transcribed by listening to voice recordings of the interviews conducted repeatedly to avoid the loss of any data. A laptop, a piece, a jotter, and other writing materials were used during the data transcription. After the transcription process, the researcher created a coding table. The participants in the study were assigned codes, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The codes of the participants

Participants	Codes
1	BF
2	G
3	GH
4	GB
5	IV
6	M
7	MT
8	N
9	NG1
10	NG2
11	S
12	T

Note: BF=Burkina Faso, G=Gambia, GH=Ghana, G=Guinea-Bissau, IV=Ivory-Coast, M= Mali, MT=Mauritania, N=Niger, NG=Nigeria, S=Senegal, T=Togo.

Thematization

Thematizing is analyzing and categorizing the interviews or responses obtained from the participants. Data is analyzed for the presence of themes in the interview responses. These responses are repeatedly examined on an overall basis to identify the pieces. These themes refer to the participant's responses, accounting for the characterized views, perceptions, or experiences the researcher aimed to reveal. The main themes and the sub-theme of the coded data are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Thematic coding of the data

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Social Problems	Relationship
	Communication
	Cultural differences
	Racism
Economic Problems	Finance
Academic Problems	Language of instructions/communication
	Educational environment
General Services offered	The services offered by the school

Reliability and Validity

Creswell (2012) defines reliability as the assurance of the accuracy of the data obtained in the research from the participants' perspective. In this study, participant verification, expert verification, and data triangulation were conducted to ensure reliability. For the reliability analysis of the open-ended interview form, the interview question was sent to experts in the science education department via email to check the quality and relevance of the questions. In addition, after the researcher did the interview and observation coding, two faculty members were consulted to confirm this coding. The experts' opinions were tested using the formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Since the differences of opinion collected from the experts were arranged, the reliability was found to be 90% due to applying the formula in the corrected interview questions.

Furthermore, all the consulted experts were interviewed using a semi-structured interview form. For data triangulation, the data obtained through interviews were enriched with observations and a literature review. The study is reliable for the research.

In this study, to ensure validity (transferability), one-on-one interview transcripts and detailed descriptions were used to reach conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the interview process and the development of data collection tools were explained in detail. A semi-structured interview form was

prepared to collect data for the research. 6 sections containing a total of 36 questions were first created based on the literature review, and 3 questions were excluded after being presented to the research experts in the Department of Science Education. The interview form consisted of the remaining 33 questions in total. Interview questions, consisting of a total of 33 questions, 7 of which are personal and 26 of which are in the participants' opinions based on the study's objective, were applied as pilot applications in the university. As a result of the opinions of the experts consulted whose opinions were taken and the pilot application, it was concluded that the prepared interview form had the feature of collecting data suitable for the stated purpose of the study.

The Research Ethics

The purpose of the research, the questions in the interview, and the process through which the data would be evaluated were clearly stated to the participants. Qualitative research ethics is a crucial step to follow when conducting research via a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2015). Although participation in the study was voluntary, the participants had the right to withdraw from the interview whenever they wanted. The findings can be cancelled if they do not want their data to be used. Concerning the present study, before collecting data, the participants' consent was sought, and the purpose of the study was explained. The participants in this study were assured of the confidentiality of their information, which will only be used for the research.

Demographic Information

In qualitative research, providing the participants' demographic information is essential. This gives a clear view and understanding of the participants based on the characteristics that qualified them to participate in the research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Table 4 below shows the distribution of participants:

Table 4. Participants specification

		No. participants
Gender	Male	9
	Female	3
	TOTAL	**12**
Level of Education	PhD	1
	MSc	3
	BSc	6
	Preparation/TÖMER	2
	TOTAL	**12**
Type of studentship	Scholarship	5
	Self-sponsorship	7
	TOTAL	**12**

Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the findings that emerged from the coding made on the data obtained and the discussions related to the findings under the following sub-headings.

Social Problems

Based on the data obtained from the participants in this study, the study revealed some of the social problems faced by West African students who are presently undergoing training at different levels of education. These problems were classified under relationships/communication, cultural differences, and racism.

Relationship/Communication

Based on the interviews conducted in this study, the result shows that most West African students at Gaziantep University choose to establish relationships with their fellow international students simply due to the language barrier between them and their fellow Turkish students. For instance, the interview revealed that some participants found it challenging to communicate with Turkish students since some could not speak any foreign language other than Turkish.

For example, NG1 stated, *"I usually establish relationships with my fellow foreign students, especially those speaking English and Arabic because I cannot speak Turkish and almost all the Turkish students I met could not speak any foreign language."* Other participants 'evidence shows that foreign and Turkish students sometimes need each other to improve their language skills, especially those undergoing Turkish language training courses. As stated by S, "*I always used to communicate and establish a good relationship with Turkish students because we used to practice English and Turkish together."* Contrary to the above evidence from the participants, the result of interviews in this study also revealed that some of these West African students are not interested in having any relationship with Turkish students in any way due to their reasons, as stated by IV when asked, "*I do not want any relation with Turkish students."*

Cultural differences: Adapting to the host country's culture is one of the primary issues facing West African students and all international students. However, it is even more difficult for African students to enter a far different society from their own culture due to their skin colour, socio-cultural background, and family background. Although dominants in Turkiye are almost Muslims, the wrong image of Africa in the eyes of locals made it more challenging for West African students to fit themselves into the host culture. This causes them to feel isolated, deprived, and foreigners almost all the time, and such feelings cause problems while trying to integrate themselves into the host culture. However, there is an undeniable effort made by many organizations in the university, such as Uluslararası Öğrenci Dernekleri Federasyonu (Federation of International Student Associations) (UDEF), the International Students Club (ISC), and the African Students Union in Gaziantep (ASUG), etc. These clubs organize many activities to integrate international students into Turkish culture and make them feel like they belong.

The evidence from the interview in this study revealed the cultural differences between West African students' countries and their host countries in terms of dress, food, and other ways of life. During the interview with BF, the participant stated, *"I found it difficult to adapt to Turkish food, especially during my first year."* Another participant noted that sometimes they might like to prepare their cultural foods but are not allowed to do so in dormitories. For instance, T said, "There *are many differences between my culture and Turkish culture, especially in terms of food. My cultural food is better, and the dormitory's food is not good as they always give us the same food".* Meanwhile, the contrary view of other participants in this study shows that they do not feel or see any cultural differences from their own cultures, thus feeling comfortable.

Racism: There is forejudge regarding race, culture, ethnicity, and skin color against international students at all levels (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). However, evidence in this study revealed some of the West African students' opinions regarding racism in different ways. The results obtained during the interview show that racism occurs differently, either directly or indirectly, and the students feel uncomfortable in such situations even though many participants believe that there is no racism. They have not been faced with racism either in university or outside the university.

For instance, NG2 stated, "*Since I came to Turkiye, I have never faced racism in whatever form."* Another participant's opinion regarding racism referred to indirect racism against Black-African students, especially outside the campus. "*As you can see, I am black, and sincerely speaking, sometimes I do not feel comfortable while walking even though any physical racism has not attacked me. However, I have been called "Zenci" in the Turkish language, which means "Negro" OR "nigga"* IV stated, and this sound very offensive. A shred of evidence from other participants indicates the worries of some West African students about the negative perception of some locals regarding their countries' situation. In aspect of this, an opinion of ML is "*I do not feel comfortable when some people ask me some questions such as 'Afrika'da su var mı' meaning, is there water in Africa or Afrika'da araba var mı? meaning, is there a car in Africa?".* The issue of racism is defined and understood based on individual perception. For that reason, the participants have different opinions regarding racism.

Economic Problems

According to the interview conducted in this study, the economic problems of West African students at Gaziantep University were determined under the sub-themes as follows:

Financial: According to the findings of this study and the social problems experienced by the West African students at Gaziantep University, the most critical issues of these students include the economic matters in supporting their studies and the cost of living during their stay at the university. This finding aligns with similar research conducted by Deressa and Beavers (1988); it was stated that one of the crucial problems experienced by foreign students is "financial constraints." Students who are not receiving any financial support from the government or non-governmental organizations and whose families' low economic status

result in striving to find a job to support themselves. As pointed out by G, "*Even though I received some financial support from my family, I sometimes have to do a part-time job to support myself due to the high cost of living here in Gaziantep.*"

Another piece of evidence from other participants shows that some West African students face problems with the high rent rate, which affects their living in Gaziantep. NG1 said, "*Due to the high currency exchange rate, I found it difficult to pay my rent and other monthly bills.*" However, evidence from the students who came through scholarships, such as Turkiye Bursları, Diyanet Isleri scholarship, etc., have fewer financial problems than those who are not scholarship holders. For instance, GB stated, "*I do not have any financial problems because Turkiye Bursları covers all my expenses, so I am staying in a dormitory. I used to collect a monthly stipend, which is enough to handle my order needs.*" These scholarship bodies cover all their expenses, including tuition fees, dormitory, health insurance, and additional monthly stipends. For example, as of the time of writing this study, Turkiye Bursları scholarship holders receive monthly stipends of 1000 Turkish lira for undergraduate, 1400 Turkish lira for master's degree students, while Doctoral program students receive 1800 Turkish lira with an optional of 750 Turkish lira for house rent.

Another shred of evidence from other participants shows that despite receiving support from the scholarship bodies. Still, the current economic inflation has negatively affected them due to the hike in the price of everything. For example, ML stated, "*The stipend I received is not enough than before, because now the price of everything has risen and become even three times. So, I have to work to support myself*". Due to the high rate of house rent, some students are forced to move to government dormitories because they cannot afford to pay.

Academic Problems

West African students need help with their academy at Gaziantep University, including the language of instruction/communication, the learning environment, and the teachers' approaches discussed under the sub-theme of this study design.

Language of Instruction: When students of different cultures from the host country find themselves in a foreign country like Turkiye with different customs, cultural/traditional values, and language, the communication challenges are vulnerable. Language is one of the major problems most international students face in their academic life. Many participants expressed the difficulties of needing help to speak themselves fluently during the lessons. At the same time, most local students and instructors use only the local language with a strong accent. For instance, participant NG2 stated, "Even *though the language of instruction in my department is a hundred percent English, our teachers and other local colleagues use the Turkish language most of the time, which makes me feel lost in the class.*" This experience is not uncommon for all international students. Almost all West African students currently studying at Gaziantep University went through their education journey in English or French. At the same time, some looked back at the Arabic language from their various countries. Many West African students expressed their worries about the complexity of the Turkish language used in their various departments.

However, all international students who come to Turkiye for education through Turkiye Burslari and other similar scholarship bodies must undergo a one-year compulsory Turkish language proficiency course irrespective of their system or department. Despite all this, the findings of this study show that West African students experience difficulties in their day-to-day educational life, especially when they first find themselves in the classes, due to the differences in teaching-learning culture. A piece of evidence from another participant shows that international students need help to fully participate in class discussions due to language limitations, which could not be learned within the one-year professional course. BF stated, "As *you know, I have a C1 certificate in the Turkish language. Still, it is not easy for me to fully comprehend what the teachers are saying during the lecture, talk less of participating in the class discussion as my local folks are doing".* For students to study in a language that is not their native or the language they did not grow up with is an enormous burden, increasing their workload. For instance, M stated, "*A book that can take my local colleagues to complete studying in an hour might take several hours because I am not a native speaker of the Turkish language.*" These processes seem more difficult to all West African students studying at Gaziantep University, especially those whose language of instruction is entirely Turkish.

Learning Environment: The educational process of individual development takes place in the physical, social, cultural, and psychological environment as well. For this reason, this study also investigates how these environmental problems affect the educational process of West African students studying at Gaziantep University. Academic integration of international students into an academic environment significantly different from their home countries is another problem faced by West African students.

Another environmental problem that also stands out as a factor affecting West African students is adapting to new weather conditions, socio-cultural environment, educational system, and discrimination on their stereotypes about who they are and where they come from. As stated by S, a piece of evidence from a participant mentioned that "*I think because of skin color, many students in my department used to stare at me while moving around, which makes me feel unmotivated toward my department learning.*" Another problem is the differences in weather conditions between the host country and most African countries; there is an indirect effect on these students, as revealed by the data collected from the participants in this study. N stated, *"During the winter, the weather was so cold that I used to skip my lesson when there was much snow. I do not use it at all"*.

General Services Offered

Based on the interview results obtained from the participants in this study, many of these West African students placed Gaziantep University in a better position regarding learning facilities, instructional materials, modern technology, and general services offered. Like other students studying in other Western countries, West African students at Gaziantep University feel that Gaziantep University offers them good training, which gives them more opportunities for job placement in many sectors, especially when they return to their home countries.

Most of the participants in this study expressed their satisfaction with the service, such as internet speed, library, etc. For example, MT stated, "*I like how we have good internet throughout the whole university; it is perfect and strong.*" This shows that there is no significant problem in terms of the general services offered by the university.

Discussion

The aim and objective of this study were to investigate the plight of West African students studying at Gaziantep University. Our findings revealed some problems West African students faced at Gaziantep University, including social, economic, and academic problems and general services offered. The findings are discussed under the four themes mentioned above.

Firstly, on the social problem, the study revealed that West African students at Gaziantep University often establish relationships with international students rather than Turks due to language barriers. Some need help communicating with Turkish students, as they cannot speak any foreign language. Aydin (2020) and Farah and Barack (2021) mentioned the same problem in their studies. The biggest obstacle to establishing intercultural friendships and successful interaction between international students studying in Turkey and Turkish students is the Turkish students' need for sufficient language ability (Aydin, 2020). This study supports the finding of Aydin and Farah's findings. However, some students, particularly those undergoing Turkish language training, find practicing English and Turkish together beneficial. Despite this, some West African students need help establishing relationships with Turkish students, stating that they find it challenging to engage in such relationships.

As for cultural integration, West African students face challenges adapting to their host country's culture due to their skin colour, socio-cultural background, and family background. Despite the predominantly Muslim population in Turkiye, the negative image of Africa in the eyes of some locals makes it difficult for them to fit into the host culture. Sokolova et al. (2022) also mentioned similar problems in their study on the adaptation of West African students in Russia. They stated that West African students had difficulty adapting to Russian culture due to different cultural structures. However, organizations like UDEF, ISC, and ASUG are working hard to help integrate international students into Turkish culture, promoting a sense of belonging and integration. The study found some cultural differences between West African students and their host countries, such as dress, food, and lifestyle. Some found it challenging to adapt to Turkish food, while others preferred their cultural food. However, others felt comfortable with their culture, indicating that cultural differences are not significant. As for racism, this study also explores the opinions of West African students on racism, revealing that racism occurs differently, either directly or indirectly, and students feel uncomfortable in such situations. Many believe there is no racism and have not faced it in university or outside the university. However, some students feel uncomfortable when called "Zenci" in Turkish, which means "Negro" or "nigga." They also worry about the negative perception of their countries' situation perceived by locals. From this point of view, the issue of racism is defined and understood based on individual perceptions, leading to different opinions.

The second theme of this present study is economic problems; the findings of this study revealed that West African students at Gaziantep University face significant social problems, including economic constraints and high living costs. These students often struggle to find jobs to support themselves, often

relying on part-time jobs. The high rent rate also affects their living, making paying rent and other bills difficult. However, students who receive scholarships such as Turkiye Bursları and Diyanet isleri scholarships have fewer financial problems than those without scholarships. For instance, Turkiye Bursları scholarship holders, as at the time of writing this paper, receive monthly stipends of 1000 Turkish lira for undergraduates, 1400 Turkish lira for master's degree students, and 1800 Turkish lira for doctoral program students. These scholarships cover tuition fees, dormitory, health insurance, and additional monthly stipends.

Similarly, Dereli (2020) stated that Syrian and other international students at Gaziantep University are supported with various scholarships and that international students are offered much better conditions than other universities. Despite receiving scholarship support, economic inflation has negatively impacted students due to increased prices. The high house rent rates have forced them to move to government dormitories to afford housing. This highlights the need for students to work to meet their financial needs. The study by Mngomezulu et al. (2017) emphasizes the importance of financial assistance for South African university students to overcome the risk of academic failure and exclusion. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of financial support for West African students in overcoming these challenges.

The third theme of this study is academic problems. It was found that international students face communication challenges in foreign countries like Turkiye due to cultural differences and language barriers. Many international students struggle to speak fluently during lessons, while local teachers and instructors use the local language with a strong accent. This is common for West African students studying at Gaziantep University, especially for those who have previously experienced education in English or French. Some express concerns about the complexity of the Turkish language used in their departments. However, some participants who see their language level as high and consider themselves competent in some areas, such as reading, writing, speaking, and understanding, show no severe linguistic problems in their academics. In Kurum and Erdemli's (2021) study, one of the biggest problems encountered in the education of international students is language barriers. In Kurum and Erdemli's study, 8 out of 10 participants stated that academic language is an essential problem for international students. At the same time, some of the students found it challenging to communicate with some Turks. The environment is an essential factor in the teaching-learning processes; this study revealed the impact of environmental problems on West African students studying at Gaziantep University. It was found that the challenges of academic integration, adapting to new weather conditions, socio-cultural environment, educational system, and discrimination. Students face challenges such as being stared at by other students due to their skin color and facing differences in weather conditions between their home country and host country. These factors indirectly affect their motivation and learning experience. Gunes and Aydar (2019) stated that international students face challenges in their academic integration and adaptation to new environments (Titrek et al., 2016). These challenges include difficulties finding suitable housing, limited socio-cultural activity facilities, issues with institutional relations, problems with health insurance, and limited leisure activities. Panadero et al. (2022) also mentioned similar things in their studies. Panadero et al. stated that students studying geography different from their home country must adapt to new weather conditions, climate, and culture, which may indirectly affect their motivation and learning experience.

The fourth theme of the study is general services offered by the university; the study found that West African students at Gaziantep University are satisfied with the university's learning facilities, instructional materials, modern technology, and general services. They believe the university offers good training and ample job placement opportunities, especially when returning home. Most participants expressed satisfaction with the university's facilities, such as internet speed and library, indicating no significant problems regarding general services offered. Generally, the university offers a better learning environment for West African students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As discussed in the findings of this present study, even though Turkiye is now becoming an educational destination for not only West African students but all international students worldwide. However, West African students encounter minor challenges in both social and academic life. These challenges may pave the way for harmful traces on Turkish universities. Like many other studies on the problems encountered by international students, this study strongly emphasizes that African students have difficulties ranging from social integration, language barriers, prejudice, and economic and other related issues. The findings of this study have successfully revealed that the significant problems of West African students at Gaziantep University are language prejudice and indirect discrimination of their stereotypes and the country they come from. Social integration among international and local students is another problem West African

students encounter at Gaziantep University. This is due to the bad image of Africa and its history painted by the media and other related agencies.

Language is the major problem. Thus, it affects students' academic lives, which might result from the fact that the Turkish language used in lectures as a literary language is different from the ones used on the streets and in day-to-day life. However, students could be familiar with the Turkish language used in day-to-day life but may need help understanding and using it for academic purposes. Apart from the effect of language and financial issues, socio-cultural adaptation is also among the plights of West African students at Gaziantep University. Given the above findings on the plights of West African students at Gaziantep University, the following recommendation was outlined:

- Even though Turkish is the language of instruction in most departments at Gaziantep University, English should be prioritized since most West African students see Turkiye as their educational destination with much hope and expectations.
- To give West African students a sense of belonging and reduce the prejudice against them while undergoing their training at Gaziantep University, special orientation programs should be organized by the university and other relevant bodies, which should be delivered by university staff who are familiar with African socio-cultural heritage, economic, and political background.
- Scholarship opportunities and other financial support could be provided for West African students, especially for the existing students who have some financial problems in one way or another. Doing so will gear up the current ranking of Gaziantep University.
- Even though the current study on the plights of West African students at Gaziantep University was conducted using an interview method with limited participants from West African countries, fascinating findings were obtained. In the case of a similar study, it is recommended to include all African students at Gaziantep University to collect data from many students.

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