

TÜRKİYE'S COUNTRY IMAGE THROUGH THE EYES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS¹

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ABSTRACT

The increasing visibility of international students as actors of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy has become an undeniable reality for today's international policymakers. It can be said that meeting the expectations of international students and developing their positive opinions about the host country and society is an important public diplomacy goal for building a positive country image. In this regard, identifying how students' perceptions change before and after arriving in Türkiye is of particular importance. This study was conducted with the aim of understanding the thoughts, perceptions and expectations of the students studying at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University about Türkiye and Turkish society on issues closely related to the country image in general, as well as their adaptation to the city and the country - by comparatively analysing before and after their arrival. Quantitative data collected through surveys have been interpreted through tables and some results including solutions and policy recommendations have been tried to be put forward together with the determination of the current situation and problem areas.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, International Studentship, Country Image, Soft Power

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INTRODUCTION

The current century presents a picture in which social interaction at the global level has developed and deepened to an unprecedented extent. It is indisputable that this situation is related to the rapid development and diversification of communication and transportation tools. However, it would be more accurate to say that the fundamental paradigm shifts in international policy-making processes since the mid-20th century have made such interaction both possible and necessary. Undoubtedly, the key concept in this process is globalization, which has been the subject of many positive and negative assessments. Along with globalization, the movement of people, in addition to commodities, money, services, etc., has increased dramatically, leading to significant changes in the relationship patterns of states, which are the primary actors and essential elements of the international system.

The functioning of the international system is dynamic and closely related to the requirements and specific conditions of the era in which the relationships between actors exist. The relationship forms, interaction models and tools of the system's actors are changing in parallel with globalization based on developing communication and transportation technologies and are constantly being updated. Diplomacy, the primary tool for conducting inter-state relations, is also one of the concepts that has changed and transformed with globalization. Diplomacy, which began to emerge from being a process operating solely between official foreign policy actors in the middle of the last century, has taken on entirely new dimensions with the involvement of many civil elements. As required by the new functioning, foreign policy makers must now adopt multidimensional political communication strategies that take into account not only the political elites of other countries but also their public opinions. Public diplomacy practices and country image building activities correspond precisely to these interaction processes.

In the globalizing international system, countries are not only political actors but have also become brands. In this context, the concept of country image, which can be considered one of the fundamental elements of international political communication, lies at the intersection of many different disciplines such as international relations, communication, marketing, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. Country image shapes the perceptions of both the international public and individuals about a country and is also shaped by these perceptions. The perceptions of the international community/public have a multifaceted impact on a wide range of areas, from countries' tourism and education destination preferences to investment decisions, diplomatic relations and foreign policy support.

Undoubtedly, international students (IN students) are one of the most important civilian actors in public diplomacy activities. Today, it is clear that countries hosting IN students, like every other country, are striving to build and maintain a positive image in all areas of interaction, particularly with the countries from which the students originate. In the globalized educational environment of the current century, country image has become one of the main factors influencing international student mobility. Universities, in particular, are no longer merely institutions that produce knowledge; they are also soft power tools for countries and effective carriers of their international identities. In this context, the internationalization of higher education must be viewed not only as an academic process but also as a political, economic and cultural one.

The attractiveness of countries in the field of education is an important element of national branding and country image building. Internationalization, especially at the higher education

level, positively affects a country's IN student image thanks to its human resources, potential for cultural interaction and ability to renew itself.

Türkiye is in the process of establishing itself as an education brand that attracts students, particularly from Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, thanks to its scholarship programs and regional opening policies based on historical and cultural proximity. In addition to “providing equal opportunities to successful students worldwide to receive scholarship-based education at international standards,” it is clear that the Türkiye Scholarships program (YTB, no date/t.y.), which is being carried out with the aim of developing mutual cooperation between Türkiye and other countries, is a direct element of public diplomacy. In the Türkiye higher education system, which is moving towards the goal of “making Türkiye an international center of attraction in higher education” (YÖK, 2025), strategic steps are being taken to increase regional and national diversity in addition to quantity and quality in the admission of international students.

A country's image among IN students is shaped by factors such as the quality of education, living conditions, safety, social tolerance and cultural appeal. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between a country's image and IN student preferences. Considering that international students are a direct conduit for issues related to country image, the importance of taking their expectations and perceptions into account, measuring and analyzing them and taking strategic steps will be better understood. This study aims to achieve precisely this goal by providing data/findings that will enable the development of policy recommendations that will positively influence the host countries' soft power and the success of their public diplomacy practices, particularly within the IN student system.

It can be said that Türkiye, which appears to recognize the importance of the IN student system as a public diplomacy tool in building the country's image, is consciously taking action in this regard and demonstrating serious activism. Within the scope of the research project that forms the basis of this article, important findings were obtained from the analysis of the results of a survey conducted to determine the perceptions and expectations of IN students studying at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University (KMU) regarding Türkiye. It is assessed that these findings can be transformed into recommendations that can guide decision-makers to a certain extent in the process of building a positive country image for Türkiye.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the age of globalization, countries are increasingly being monitored by international media and public opinion. Countries are rated and compared with other countries based on their economic development, political stability, the effectiveness and ethics of their national and international policies and the attractiveness of their external image and culture (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015: 103). Thanks to mass media and the internet, the positive or negative image and reputation of countries are now closely followed not only by policymakers but also by domestic and international public opinion. Indeed, looking at developments over the past few decades worldwide, it would not be wrong to conclude that the main dynamic shaping international politics is public perception and reaction rather than governments. It can be said that these perceptions and reactions are influenced by the international image of the country in question and, at the same time, play an important role in shaping the country's image.

The concept of country image has been addressed in a multidimensional manner in the literature on international relations, marketing, communication and public diplomacy since the second half of the 20th century. In general terms, country image refers to the cognitive, emotional and behavioral perceptions that foreign individuals or societies have about a country. It is shaped not only by the form of political governance or economic performance, but also by cultural symbols, social values, media representations and human relations. As the dominant actors in the international system, states seek to influence foreign public opinion in order to achieve a positive image and thereby increase their power.

Today, it is possible to observe that international political communication management and image-building activities are widely practiced by almost every state, albeit at different levels (Dinnie, 2008; Snow and Taylor, 2009: ix). This situation shows that political leaders increasingly care about their countries' reputation abroad, both in terms of its positive and negative aspects (Kunczik, 2003; Price, 2003). From the perspective of nation-states, new interaction models that can be formulated as understanding the world and introducing oneself to the world are beginning to be implemented in almost every field, from economics to politics, diplomacy to education. Moreover, interaction activities related to these fields have become inseparable from each other due to their multidimensional and interdisciplinary nature within the framework of international political communication.

Public diplomacy, as an international political communication activity, and its sub-discipline—and in a sense, derivative—cultural diplomacy has begun to gain widespread acceptance as effective foreign policy tools. New civil tools and actors, which differ significantly from traditional foreign policy tools, are emerging as more visible and decisive elements in the functioning of the international system. In this process, concepts such as soft power, nation branding, country image and country reputation are coming to the fore.

Just as personal reputation and corporate reputation are important, so is national reputation (Wang, J. 2006). Positive image and reputation are as important for individuals to establish themselves in society and build and maintain healthy relationships, or for institutions to gain respect and success, as the image of a country is important for states to gain the necessary power to secure an effective place in the international system and it is an indisputable instrument of power. Simon Anholt (2007), who states that countries carry out brand management processes just like companies, addresses country image within the framework of the concept of “nation brand.” According to Anholt, a country's brand identity consists of sub-dimensions such as management quality, investment environment, cultural production, people, tourism attractiveness and education. Public diplomacy is based on the premise that a country's image and reputation are public goods that can create an environment conducive or detrimental to individual transactions. Efforts made on specific issues will feed into the country's overall image and reflect on it both positively and negatively (Leonard, 2002; 9). National prestige, which can be achieved through a positive country image, is related to having a good reputation among global system actors as well as the international public and it fully corresponds to the goals of public diplomacy. In this respect, the management of national prestige and the construction of country image have become an integral part of nation-states' relations with the international public defined outside their own borders, their foreign policy-making processes and public diplomacy as a whole.

The concept of country image, defined as the totality of beliefs, impressions and ideas that people in one place hold about another country (Kotler et al., 1993), essentially refers to the position that a nation occupies in the minds of other nations (Anholt, 2007). The country

image, which corresponds to an individual's overall perception and evaluation of a nation, represents an integrated mental construct encompassing various dimensions such as that nation's political maturity, economic prospects, level of industrialization and technical competence, products, historical events, diplomatic relations, culture, traditions, and social life (Zhao et al., 2022, p. 2). Similarly, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999, p. 525) define the country image as the mental representations of a country's people, products, culture, and national symbols.

As a natural consequence of globalization, international interaction and multidimensional competition, many scholars have argued that nations' modes of presentation and appearance to the outside world have become increasingly significant for other societies. This external appearance, referred to as the national or country image, is considered measurable, manageable, improvable and subject to both internal and external factors that may influence it positively or negatively (Olins, 2002; Anholt, 2007; Hakala et al., 2013; Buhmann, 2016; Dragoi, 2021). A well-enhanced country image, achieved through appropriate strategies and methods, becomes an extremely important element of power within the functioning of the international system. Therefore, it can be stated that the construction and sustainability of a positive country image hold a central place among the objectives of today's policymakers.

In the process of international policymaking, states' efforts to build a positive image have evolved into a form of activism of strategic importance within the functioning of the modern international system. Influencing the populations of foreign countries within spheres of interaction in ways favorable to their own interests has become one of the primary objectives of states. In other words, conducting strategic political communication activities to shape international public opinion in accordance with national interests has turned into a foreign policy instrument that policymakers and decision-makers can no longer ignore. Consequently, in engaging with foreign societies, the implementation of new communication models—characterized by diversification and enrichment of both tools and actors—alongside traditional foreign policy and diplomatic practices has become a necessity rather than a choice. Within the general framework of the concept of public diplomacy, these new models of interaction involve a wide range of new actors supplementing traditional diplomacy, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private sector companies, universities, IN students, athletes and artists. Although each of these actors operates in different domains, it can be argued that they collectively contribute to the realist objective shared by states: the pursuit and enhancement of power.

Discussions on country image are directly related to the concept of public diplomacy and Joseph S. Nye's (2019) notion of "soft power." Nye argues that a nation's global influence can be established not only through military or economic means, but also through culture, values and political ideals (Nye, 2019). One of the most effective components of soft power is education, since it allows individuals to directly experience a country's cultural codes, social structures and values. IN students are the key actors in this process. Foreign students who come to a country for educational purposes are able to form opinions about that country both as learners and as observers. After graduation, these students often serve as cultural bridges between their home countries and the countries where they studied. Moreover, it can be argued that, over time, these individuals become "voluntary ambassadors," generating social capital that supports the foreign policy objectives of the host country.

When evaluated from the perspective of IN students, country image can be considered a fundamental factor influencing how students perceive a nation as an educational destination

and how they make their study-related decisions. Multiple dimensions affect IN students' choice of a country, including academic quality, education costs, scholarship opportunities, safety, quality of life, cultural proximity and post-graduation prospects (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). These factors can also be viewed as subcomponents of a country's overall image. Therefore, higher education can be regarded not only as a domain of knowledge production but also as a field of public diplomacy. In this context, the education sector holds strategic importance as both a reflector and a producer of a country's global image.

Due to their capacity to enable direct contact among different societies, IN students who pursue education abroad within the framework of exchange or mobility programs occupy a significant position among the actors of intercultural interaction processes. In particular, undergraduate and graduate students who study in a foreign country and live there for at least four to five years—often much longer—closely engaging with the local people and culture, can be regarded as cultural ambassadors and, in a sense, informal diplomats contributing to the development of mutual relations.

When these IN students return to their home countries, it can be assumed that they will occupy a relatively respected position within their societies as individuals who have studied abroad and gained direct experience of the outside world. In the near future, many of these graduates are likely to begin professional careers in the public or private sectors—in fields such as education, culture, law, health, engineering, or media—or to hold influential positions in decision-making bodies and political institutions that shape the future of their nations. This, undoubtedly, indicates the presence of valuable human capital that will contribute to fostering positive relations between their home countries and the societies in which they have studied and spent a significant part of their lives.

However, the generation of positive outcomes from this significant resource in favor of the host country naturally depends on the presence of a deliberate political communication strategy. In other words, the host country must make conscious efforts to render its attractive soft power elements visible through well-designed and proactive engagement so that these elements can be acknowledged and internalized by target audiences. Within this framework, measuring and analyzing the expectations and perceptions of the recipients of this communication process—in this study, IN students—toward the host country can be considered one of the primary steps. Given the difficulty of conducting an analysis and evaluation at the national level, as well as the scope and limitations such a study would entail, focusing on one or several universities in specific regions is expected to provide a reasonably comprehensible and acceptable overview. In this context, both the specific potential of the selected universities and the number, quality and diversity of the IN students they attract will be decisive factors influencing the outcomes of the analysis.

When considered in the context of Türkiye, it is clear that the situation regarding the presence of IN students differs between cities that host multiple well-established public and/or private universities and smaller cities where universities are relatively new. Likewise, it should be taken into account that various factors—such as the students' countries of origin, the academic reputation of the university and the social and economic opportunities offered by the city and the institution—shape IN students' expectations, perceptions and opinions about the host country under distinct local conditions. Nevertheless, small universities that accommodate students from different cultures, countries and continents can also serve as viable analytical units in terms of sample design and research scale. In this regard, it has been deemed appropriate to select Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University (KMU), which hosts

students from more than 30 different countries, as the case study for the research project that forms the basis of this study.

Within the framework of Türkiye's public diplomacy practices, this study comparatively measures and analyzes the expectations and perceptions of IN students studying at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University (KMU) regarding Türkiye, both before their arrival and after their arrival. Furthermore, the study aims to identify and interpret the variables and their levels of significance that influence the formation of positive and negative perceptions. By doing so, it seeks to produce practical outcomes that may assist policymakers in developing and implementing model-based strategies to enhance Türkiye's soft power elements and its national image construction.

2. SIMILAR STUDIES CONDUCTED IN TÜRKİYE

It should first be noted that, in recent years, a considerable number of academic studies have been conducted on IN students in Türkiye. However, these studies have predominantly focused on themes such as IN students' adaptation to universities, cities, or the country (Türkiye), as well as topics related to career opportunities, employment, migration, cultural adjustment and social integration. In contrast, studies directly addressing the host country's international image remain quite limited. According to data from the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) Thesis Center, as of June 2025, a search for the keyword "international student" in theses completed between 2020 and 2025 yields 134 results. When the term "foreign national student" is used, 76 theses are found, while the search term "foreign student" returns 53 theses (YÖK Thesis Center, 2025). An examination of these thesis titles reveals that, as mentioned above, the majority focus on issues such as students' adaptation to the system, the university and the city; their economic and social impacts on host communities; exclusion; social integration; cultural conflict; and academic success, among other diverse topics. Only a few graduate theses have directly addressed IN students and Türkiye's international image. Among these, two studies stand out for examining IN students' perceptions of the host country (Türkiye) and how these perceptions evolve over time—one a doctoral dissertation (Özdede, 2023) and the other a master's thesis (Karabacak, 2024).

In the dissertation titled "Evaluation of IN Students' Perceptions of Country Image," Özdede (2023) focused on identifying the perceptions of IN students who came to Türkiye from different countries within the framework of international student programs, as well as those Turkish students who studied abroad. The study aimed to determine the levels of importance of the factors influencing the formation of general country image perceptions, travel/visit recommendations and program recommendations, while also emphasizing the mediating effect of emotional country image in this process (Özdede, 2023).

In the thesis titled "A Study on the Perceptions of Foreign Students Regarding Türkiye's Image," Karabacak (2024) found that there is a significant relationship among the functional (cognitive), normative, aesthetic and emotional components that constitute the country image influencing foreign students' choice of Türkiye as a study destination. The study also revealed that, despite facing various challenges during their stay, the students wished to continue their education in Türkiye and did not intend to abandon their studies and return home. Furthermore, it was found that foreign students held positive impressions of Türkiye both before and after their arrival (Karabacak, 2024).

Apart from the aforementioned theses, two separate studies have directly focused on IN students and Türkiye's international image. The first of these is the research article titled "The Image of Türkiye Among IN Students in Higher Education: The Case of Selçuk University," authored by Özlük and colleagues (2019). Based on the premise that there is a direct relationship between internationalization in higher education, the number of international students and the host country's global image, the study aimed to measure international students' perceptions of Türkiye at the undergraduate and graduate levels through the case of Selçuk University. Using a questionnaire designed to assess students' perceptions of Türkiye both before and after their arrival, the findings revealed that IN students held highly positive perceptions of Türkiye (Özlük, Doğan, Işıklar and Özlük, 2019).

The second study is the research article by Taşoğlu, Malkawi and Al-Ameer (2021), titled "The Image of Türkiye in the Eyes of Foreign University Students in Türkiye." This study examined the dimensions of the image of Türkiye held by foreign students, both before and after their arrival, from political, economic and social perspectives. Within the scope of the research, focus group discussions were conducted with foreign students studying at various universities in Türkiye to explore the sources from which they derived this image, the dimensions that shaped the image in their minds and the channels that most strongly influenced their perceptions (Taşoğlu, Malkawi and Al-Ameer, 2021).

Finally, in the report titled "The Contributions of IN Students to Türkiye," prepared by Taşçı and Kızılkaya, it is emphasized that IN students make significant contributions within the framework of soft power in various domains, including economic, political-diplomatic, academic and sociocultural spheres. The report notes that after graduation, many of these students, by virtue of the positions they hold in their home countries, can create favorable public opinion in support of Türkiye. This situation contributes to greater recognition of Türkiye abroad and, over time, to the strengthening of Türkiye's national image through the efforts of these IN students and alumni, who effectively serve as "voluntary ambassadors" (Taşçı and Kızılkaya, 2025, p. 101).

In the theses, articles and reports mentioned above, the relationship between IN students and Türkiye's image has been examined from various perspectives, with particular attention given to the motivations of students in choosing Turkish universities. Furthermore, while several studies have partially explored the transformation of students' perceptions before and after their arrival in Türkiye, it appears that the components of the country image addressed in these studies have largely been limited to sociocultural, political and economic dimensions.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research population consists of 537 IN students enrolled at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University (KMU) during the 2024–2025 academic year. Within the scope of the study, a sample of 136 students representing the population was surveyed both face-to-face and through Google Forms. The questionnaire administered to the students included demographic information and utilized a perception and expectation scale designed to measure IN students' views on Türkiye, Turkish culture and the city of Karaman.

The questionnaire was first administered to a small pilot group, after which necessary adjustments were made. For testing and analyzing the data collected from participants, the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software package was used. Through this program, various tests such as reliability analysis, descriptive statistics and demographic analysis were conducted to

determine the extent of IN students' positive and negative perceptions and opinions about Türkiye and Turkish society. Additionally, questions focusing on how these perceptions changed after the students' arrival in Türkiye were used to assess whether their expectations aligned with their actual experiences. The findings obtained from the questionnaires were systematically analyzed and presented in tabular form. In the conclusion section, evaluations were made and policy recommendations were provided based on the results derived from the survey findings.

3.1. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify Türkiye's IN student image by focusing on questions that explore how the perceptions and opinions of foreign students studying at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University about Türkiye and Turkish society—both positive and negative—change and transform before coming to Türkiye and after living there for a certain period of time, as well as the factors influencing these changes.

There is no doubt that, in international politics, beyond the power and wealth of states as the main actors of the system, the country image, shaped by various components, also plays a crucial role as a determining factor. Especially with the process characterized by globalization, the increasing intensity, scope and speed of interactions within the international system have made it inevitable for individuals and societies to engage in closer contact and to establish deeper and multidimensional relationships.

Along with the developments in transportation and communication technologies, significant global transformations, such as the end of the Cold War, have introduced new paradigms that have reshaped the functioning of the international system. These changes have diversified inter-state economic and military relations, social interactions and both domestic and foreign policy agendas. The transformation of agendas in international politics has also led to the emergence of new tools and actors. Among the instruments whose importance cannot be overlooked for states engaging in public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy practices are, undoubtedly, the policies that encourage the admission of foreign students to universities; and the primary operative actors of this process are the IN students themselves.

The positive or negative perceptions that IN students develop through their interactions both with local students at the universities where they study and with the residents of the cities in which they live play a decisive role in the construction of a country's image. It is essential that policymakers and decision-makers at all levels first recognize the significance of these perceptions and then manage the process effectively through coordinated efforts to foster positive developments in this regard. This study is significant in that it analyzes the perceptions and future expectations of foreign students studying in the city of Karaman regarding Turkish society and culture, both at the local and national levels. It thus has the potential to provide valuable insights for university and city administrations seeking to implement best practices that will contribute positively to Türkiye's international image. Furthermore, the survey forming the basis of this study is considered to be both adaptable and replicable, which suggests that it could serve as a model and an inspiration for similar studies across the country.

3.2. Research Assumptions

The main assumptions of this study, which focus on the role played by international students in the construction of a country's image and on the approach of decision-makers to this process, can be summarized as follows:

- i. There is a bidirectional relationship between country image and internationalization in higher education; a country with a positive image attracts more IN students, while the experiences of these students, in turn, strengthen that country's image.
- ii. Türkiye is an increasingly attractive destination for IN students and the number of such students is expected to continue rising in the coming years.
- iii. It is likely that IN students' expectations and perceptions of Türkiye—both before and after their arrival—may undergo positive or negative changes.
- iv. It is possible to a certain extent to manage and influence this change.
- v. Within the framework of its public diplomacy activities, Türkiye operates with the awareness that IN students play an important role as cultural ambassadors in the construction of a positive country image.

3.3. Research Population and Sample

As of the 2024–2025 academic year, the number of IN students enrolled at KMU is 537. Accordingly, the main population (universe) of the research consists of international (foreign) students studying at KMU. A total of 136 students participated in the survey, which was conducted both face-to-face and via Google Forms. Therefore, the sample size of the study was determined as 136.

3.4. Research Limitations

The quantitative scope of this research is limited to IN students actively studying at KMU. Although concerns may arise as to whether a study conducted at a relatively new university located in Karaman—a small-scale city—can yield results that are generalizable or modellable at the national level, this limitation is largely mitigated by the participation of students from 20 different countries across three continents.

By its very nature, this study focuses on measuring participants' expectations and perceptions; therefore, it is not possible to present the findings as absolute or definitive facts. Perceptions are neither homogeneous nor static, as they may vary depending on numerous factors. Nevertheless, this very characteristic of perceptions makes it possible to identify the changes in IN students' views of Türkiye before and after their arrival in the country.

Another limitation of the study concerns language. The questionnaire forms were prepared in both Turkish and English. This situation may have created a risk that participants who were not fully proficient in either language might have misunderstood certain questions, responses, or instructions regarding how to complete the survey. To minimize this risk, the questionnaire items were designed using concepts commonly encountered in daily life and international affairs—terms assumed to be familiar to almost all participants to some extent.

Finally, the majority of the IN students who participated in the survey are from the Turkic Republics. This may raise the concern that such a demographic composition could lead to predominantly positive opinions about Türkiye. However, considering that, as in the national

context, nearly all IN students studying at KMU come from countries that are less developed than Türkiye, it is reasonable to assume that a certain degree of sympathy toward Türkiye naturally exists, regardless of the participants' differing motivations. Accordingly, even if the participant profile were to change, it would not be inaccurate to predict that the overall perception of Türkiye's IN student image would remain largely consistent.

3.5. Research Methodology

In this study, the “survey method,” one of the quantitative data collection techniques, was employed. A hybrid approach was adopted, combining both face-to-face administration and online data collection through Google Forms.

The questionnaire form, which was preceded by an introductory section providing participants with information about the study, was designed in accordance with the purpose and methodology of the research. It consisted of two main sections containing questions of different content and categories.

In the questionnaire, which began with a brief explanation of the study, questions were formulated in accordance with the research objectives and methodology and were organized into two separate sections with different content and categories. In the first section, a total of 33 questions were included to identify participants' demographic characteristics—such as gender, age, level of education, income and expenditure status, scholarship, accommodation and transportation conditions—as well as to determine whether the conditions they encountered in Türkiye met their expectations. This section also sought to examine whether the students experienced any difficulties in their interactions with their peers at the university or with the local community, and, in the final question of the section, whether they felt a sense of responsibility toward contributing to the improvement of relations between their home countries and Türkiye.

In the second part of the questionnaire, 26 items were presented in the form of paired sequential statements designed to comparatively examine IN students' opinions about Türkiye's international image before and after their arrival. This section included 13 different topics intended to analyze participants' perceptions across multiple dimensions. A five-point Likert scale was used, in which participants were asked to respond to each statement by selecting one of the following options: “strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree.” The responses were scored from 1 to 5, ranging from negative to positive.

For the analysis of the data collected in this study, the SPSS statistical software package was employed. The data organized into tables through this program were analyzed and evaluated systematically. Frequency and descriptive analysis methods were applied to both the demographic information and the perception-related items included in the questionnaire. Subsequently, the results of frequency, percentage and mean values were tabulated and interpreted accordingly.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of the survey are addressed in two main categories: the first concerns participants' demographic characteristics and their adaptation to the university, city and country in which they study; the second examines their perceptions of Türkiye's international image before and after their arrival. The data obtained from the survey are presented in

tabular form and the findings are analyzed accordingly. Based on these results, policy recommendations will also be proposed for both practitioners and decision-makers. However, before presenting the information and findings obtained from the survey participants, it is useful to first examine a set of tables containing basic data—such as nationality and gender—regarding all international students (a total of 537) enrolled at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University during the 2024–2025 academic year.

Table 1. Gender Distribution of International Students Studying at KMU

Female	105	Male	432	TOTAL	537
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It is observed that the number of male international students studying at KMU is considerably higher than that of female students.

Table 2. Distribution of International Students Studying at KMU by Nationality

Nationalty	Number of Student	Nationality	Number of Student
Afghanistan	11	Mongolia	3
Austria	2	Nigeria	3
Azerbaijan	278	Russia	1
Belgium	1	Serbia	1
Burkina Faso	5	Somali	14
Cad	1	Sri Lanka	1
Cameroon	18	Sudan	9
Canada	1	Syria	56
Egypt	1	Tajikistan	5
Eritre	2	Tanzania	3
Ethiopia	2	Turkish Origin	29
Gabon	4	Turkmenistan	10
Germany	5	Ukraine	1
Ghana	1	Uzbekistan	22
Iran	1	Yemen	8
Iraq	5		
Ivory Coast	4		
Kazakhstan	2		
Kyrgyzstan	5		
Mali	1		
Netherland	6		
Palestine	15		
TOTAL			537

KMU, which hosts international students from three different continents—Asia, Africa, and Europe—receives the largest number of students from Azerbaijan (278), followed by Syria (56) and Uzbekistan (22).

4.1. Demographic Data and Adaptation Findings Related to Participants

In this section, the demographic data of the 136 international students who participated in the survey—out of a total of 537 international students studying at KMU—are analyzed. In addition to demographic characteristics, participants' responses to questions concerning their adaptation to the city (Karaman) and to the country (Türkiye) are examined. The data are presented and interpreted through tables accompanied by brief explanations.

Table 3. Distribution of Participants by Gender

Genger		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	82	60,3	60,3
	Female	54	39,7	39,7
	Total	136	100,0	100,0

When the participants are compared in terms of gender, it is observed that 60.3% of the respondents are male, while 39.7% are female.

Table 4. Distribution of Participants by Academic Program of Enrollment

Study Level		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Associate	14	10,3	10,3
	Undergraduate	111	81,6	81,6
	Master	9	6,6	6,6
	PhD	2	1,5	1,5
	Total	136	100,0	100,0

When the participants are compared in terms of their level of study, it is observed that the majority are enrolled in undergraduate programs. The results show that 10.3% of the international students participating in the survey are studying at the associate degree level, 81.6% at the undergraduate level, 6.6% at the master's level and 1.5% at the doctoral level.

Table 5. Distribution of Participants by Age Group

Age		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	18-23	89	65,4	65,4
	24-29	45	33,1	33,1
	30-35	1	0,7	0,7
	41 and older	1	0,7	0,7
	Total	136	100,0	100,0

When the age distribution of the participants is examined, it is found that 65.4% of the respondents are between the ages of 18 and 23, while 33.1% are between 24 and 29 years old. Only 0.7% (1 person) of the participants are between 30 and 35 years old and another 0.7% (1 person) are over the age of 41.

Table 6. Distribution of Participants by Year of Study

Year		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	1. Year	24	17,6	17,6
	2. Year	56	41,2	41,2
	3. Year	19	14,0	14,0
	4. Year	37	27,2	27,2

Total	136	100,0	100,0
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When the distribution of participants by year of study is examined, it is observed that the highest participation came from second-year students. Specifically, 17.6% of the respondents were first-year students, 41.2% were in their second year, 14% were in their third year and 27.2% were fourth-year students.

Table 7. Responses to the Question: “Which Country Are You a Citizen of?”

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Morocco	3	2,2	2,2	2,2
Azerbaijan	38	27,9	27,9	30,1
Cameroon	6	4,4	4,4	34,6
Burkina Faso	7	5,1	5,1	39,7
Somali	5	3,7	3,7	43,4
Uzbekistan	12	8,8	8,8	52,2
Syria	18	13,2	13,2	65,4
Benin	1	0,7	0,7	66,2
Kyrgyzstan	6	4,4	4,4	70,6
Cad	1	0,7	0,7	71,3
Türkiye	1	0,7	0,7	72,1
Eritre	2	1,5	1,5	73,5
Bangladesh	1	0,7	0,7	74,3
Turkmenistan	4	2,9	2,9	77,2
France	1	0,7	0,7	77,9
Gabon	5	3,7	3,7	81,6
Ivory Coast	3	2,2	2,2	83,8
Kazakhstan	5	3,7	3,7	87,5
Palestine	15	11,0	11,0	98,5
Afghanistan	2	1,5	1,5	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

A total of 136 international students from 20 different countries participated in the survey. When the participants' citizenship distribution is examined, it is seen that the highest participation came from Azerbaijani students, who accounted for 27.9% of the total sample, followed by Syrian students with 13.2% and Palestinian students with 11%.

Table 8. Responses to the Question: “Do You Feel a Sense of Responsibility to Play a Role in Improving Relations Between Your Country and Türkiye in the Future?”

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	93	68,4	68,4	68,4
No	42	30,9	30,9	99,3
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

As one of the most significant questions in the survey, directly related to public diplomacy practices and the role of IN students as active participants, the item “Do you feel a sense of

responsibility to play a role in improving relations between your country and Türkiye in the future?” revealed that 68.4% of the participants responded “yes,” while 30.9% answered “no.”

4.2. Findings Related to IN Students’ Perceptions of Türkiye’s International Image

In this section, the findings obtained from the survey set containing 26 statements designed to identify IN students’ expectations and perceptions of Türkiye’s international image, the main objective of this study, are analyzed. Within the scope of the research, IN students who participated in the survey were presented with a number of statements intended to determine how they perceived Türkiye’s image in various fields such as economy, security, education, health, foreign policy and diplomacy. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

4.2.1. Table of Country Image Statements and Descriptive Analysis

The total number of statements in this section is 26. However, in the questionnaire, these 26 statements were arranged as 13 pairs: the first 13 items referred to the participants’ opinions before coming to Türkiye, and the subsequent 13 referred to their opinions after arriving in the country. Each topic was thus organized into paired sequential statements, displayed in the table below with alternating light gray and white background colors for visual clarity. This design aimed to compare the expectations and perceptions of international students regarding Türkiye’s national image before and after their arrival, thereby allowing for meaningful conclusions about possible changes in their views. The 13 pairs of questions included in the survey were presented in random order without any specific thematic grouping. This approach was chosen to prevent participants from focusing on similar topics consecutively or providing monotonous responses. At this stage, the statements were first evaluated using descriptive analysis techniques, and the findings obtained were presented in a single summary table for general assessment. Subsequently, frequency, percentage, and mean values were analyzed and interpreted through detailed tables and charts, accompanied by concise explanations.

Table 9. SPSS Descriptive Statistics Table

Descriptive Statistics						
		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of fundamental human rights and humanitarian values. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,45	1,276
2	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of fundamental human rights and humanitarian values. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,71	1,198
3	Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,89	1,073
4	Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	4,00	1,075
5	Türkiye is sensitive to environmental issues at the local, regional, and global levels and supports positive environmental policies. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,74	1,054

6	Türkiye is sensitive to environmental issues at the local, regional, and global levels and supports positive environmental policies. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,78	1,093
7	Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,99	1,022
8	Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,85	1,214
9	Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,90	1,115
10	Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,88	1,232
11	Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to international students. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,83	1,119
12	Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to international students. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,84	1,181
13	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,76	1,110
14	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,53	1,344
15	Türkiye is a developed and safe country in terms of the provision and infrastructure of healthcare services. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,76	1,189
16	Türkiye is a developed and safe country in terms of the provision and infrastructure of healthcare services. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,74	1,255
17	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities, and partnerships. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,79	1,041
18	Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities, and partnerships. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,82	1,143
19	Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,99	,951
20	Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,90	1,135
21	Türkiye is a suitable and safe country for career planning, with promising employment opportunities and a strong vision for the future. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,91	1,000
22	Türkiye is a suitable and safe country for career planning, with promising employment opportunities and a strong vision for the future. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,97	1,011
23	Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,99	1,099
24	Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	4,10	1,060
25	Türkiye is an important and reliable country that contributes to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,89	1,146
26	Türkiye is an important and reliable country that contributes to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)	136	1	5	3,98	1,125
	Valid N (listwise)	136				

As observed, the propositions presented in the questionnaire consist of “positive” statements. The degree to which international students agreed or disagreed with these statements, reflecting Türkiye’s international image, and the extent to which their opinions changed (positively or negatively) before and after their arrival are summarized in the table above. Accordingly:

- The level of agreement with the positive statements was generally high, with mean scores ranging between 3.45 and 4.10.
- In eight (8) of the statements, IN students’ perceptions of Türkiye showed a positive change after arrival, whereas in five (5) statements, a negative change was observed.
- The five statements showing a negative change were highlighted in the “mean” column of the table with a dark background to make them more easily identifiable.

4.2.2. Tables of Paired Propositions and Frequency Analysis

The following tables present the frequency values (number of responses) and valid percentages for each proposition included in the survey as answered by IN students. In this part of the questionnaire, the level of agreement with each proposition was structured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from negative to positive, as follows:

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree...5 = Strongly Agree.

At this stage, it was deemed appropriate to analyze the total of 26 propositions as 13 pairs of statements, each pair comparing IN students’ opinions before and after their arrival in Türkiye. These paired propositions enable a comparative assessment of students’ changing perceptions regarding Türkiye’s international image across different thematic categories such as politics, economy, education, culture and social life.

Table 10. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a safe country in terms of fundamental human rights and humanitarian values”

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of fundamental human rights and humanitarian values. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	15	11,0	11,0	11,0
Disagree	17	12,5	12,5	23,5
Neutral	27	19,9	19,9	43,4
Agree	46	33,8	33,8	77,2
Strongly Agree	31	22,8	22,8	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of fundamental human rights and humanitarian values. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	5,1
Disagree	20	14,7	14,7	19,9
Neutral	20	14,7	14,7	34,6
Agree	47	34,6	34,6	69,1
Strongly Agree	42	30,9	30,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It is observed that IN students gave a higher rate of positive responses after arriving in Türkiye compared to before their arrival regarding the statement that Türkiye is a safe country in terms of human rights and humanitarian values.

Table 11. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system”

Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	5	3,7	3,7	3,7
Disagree	11	8,1	8,1	11,8
Neutral	23	16,9	16,9	28,7
Agree	52	38,2	38,2	66,9
Strongly Agree	45	33,1	33,1	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	4	2,9	2,9	2,9
Disagree	13	9,6	9,6	12,5
Neutral	15	11,0	11,0	23,5
Agree	51	37,5	37,5	61,0
Strongly Agree	53	39,0	39,0	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It is observed that IN students expressed a higher level of positive opinions after arriving in Türkiye regarding the statement that Türkiye is an influential and respected actor in the international system.

Table 12. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is sensitive to environmental issues at the local, regional, and global levels and supports positive environmental policies”

Türkiye is sensitive to environmental issues at the local, regional, and global levels and supports positive environmental policies. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	4	2,9	2,9	2,9
Disagree	11	8,1	8,1	11,0
Neutral	40	29,4	29,4	40,4
Agree	42	30,9	30,9	71,3
Strongly Agree	39	28,7	28,7	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is sensitive to environmental issues at the local, regional, and global levels and supports positive environmental policies. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	5,1
Disagree	10	7,4	7,4	12,5
Neutral	27	19,9	19,9	32,4
Agree	54	39,7	39,7	72,1
Strongly Agree	38	27,9	27,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Although a slight increase was observed in the proportion of respondents who disagreed with the statement concerning Türkiye's sensitivity to environmental issues and its support for positive environmental policies at the local, regional and global levels, it is noteworthy that the proportion of those who agreed with the statement increased substantially overall.

Table 13. Responses to the Statement "Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers"

Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	4	2,9	2,9	2,9
Disagree	9	6,6	6,6	9,6
Neutral	20	14,7	14,7	24,3
Agree	54	39,7	39,7	64,0
Strongly Agree	49	36,0	36,0	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	10	7,4	7,4	7,4
Disagree	12	8,8	8,8	16,2
Neutral	15	11,0	11,0	27,2
Agree	50	36,8	36,8	64,0
Strongly Agree	49	36,0	36,0	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It is observed that perceptions regarding the statement Türkiye possesses social and cultural diversity, and this diversity is regarded as a source of richness by both the public and policymakers have changed negatively among international students after their arrival in the country.

Table 14. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners”

Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	4,4
Disagree	11	8,1	8,1	12,5
Neutral	22	16,2	16,2	28,7
Agree	48	35,3	35,3	64,0
Strongly Agree	49	36,0	36,0	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	12	8,8	8,8	8,8
Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	14,0
Neutral	19	14,0	14,0	27,9
Agree	46	33,8	33,8	61,8
Strongly Agree	52	38,2	38,2	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It can be stated that, albeit to a small extent, perceptions regarding the statement Türkiye is a tolerant and hospitable country toward foreigners” shifted from positive to negative after the students’ arrival. The proportion of respondents who selected “strongly disagree” approximately doubled, indicating a slight rise in critical opinions. However, this tendency appears to be partially balanced by an increase in the proportion of those who responded “strongly agree.”

Table 15. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to international students”

Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to international students. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	8	5,9	5,9	5,9
Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	11,0
Neutral	29	21,3	21,3	32,4
Agree	48	35,3	35,3	67,6
Strongly Agree	44	32,4	32,4	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to international students. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	5,1
Disagree	16	11,8	11,8	16,9
Neutral	17	12,5	12,5	29,4
Agree	48	35,3	35,3	64,7
Strongly Agree	48	35,3	35,3	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It can be stated that there was a slight increase in positive opinions regarding the statement that Türkiye is a successful country in terms of its policies and practices related to IN students.

Table 16. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom”

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	4,4
Disagree	11	8,1	8,1	12,5
Neutral	34	25,0	25,0	37,5
Agree	43	31,6	31,6	69,1
Strongly Agree	42	30,9	30,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	16	11,8	11,8	11,8
Disagree	16	11,8	11,8	23,5
Neutral	25	18,4	18,4	41,9
Agree	38	27,9	27,9	69,9
Strongly Agree	41	30,1	30,1	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

A negative shift in participants’ perceptions regarding the statement “Türkiye is a safe country in terms of media diversity and freedom” is clearly observed. It can be stated that identifying the factors that negatively influenced IN students’ perceptions in this regard constitutes an important issue that deserves further attention. Indeed, a significant portion of the debates surrounding a country’s international image often revolve around such topics, including media freedom, transparency and access to diverse information sources, which are widely recognized as key indicators of democratic credibility and global reputation.

Table 17. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a developed and safe country in terms of the provision and infrastructure of healthcare services”

**Türkiye is a developed and safe country in terms of the provision and infrastructure of healthcare services.
(Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	12	8,8	8,8	8,8
Disagree	5	3,7	3,7	12,5
Neutral	29	21,3	21,3	33,8
Agree	48	35,3	35,3	69,1
Strongly Agree	42	30,9	30,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a developed and safe country in terms of the provision and infrastructure of healthcare services.
(Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	14	10,3	10,3	10,3
Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	15,4
Neutral	24	17,6	17,6	33,1
Agree	47	34,6	34,6	67,6
Strongly Agree	44	32,4	32,4	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Healthcare service delivery and robust infrastructure are among the areas in which Türkiye is considered ambitious at the international level. However, the survey results indicate that IN students' perceptions of this statement have shifted slightly from positive to negative. The rise in negative perceptions may be attributed to several factors, including issues related to service fees, operational models, social security and reimbursement systems, as well as excessive patient density, all of which can hinder access to healthcare services.

Table 18. Responses to the Statement "Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities, and partnerships"

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities, and partnerships. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	4,4
Disagree	9	6,6	6,6	11,0
Neutral	27	19,9	19,9	30,9
Agree	59	43,4	43,4	74,3
Strongly Agree	35	25,7	25,7	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities, and partnerships. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	8	5,9	5,9	5,9
Disagree	9	6,6	6,6	12,5
Neutral	28	20,6	20,6	33,1
Agree	46	33,8	33,8	66,9
Strongly Agree	45	33,1	33,1	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It is observed that IN students' perceptions regarding the statement Türkiye is a safe country in terms of economic potential, investment opportunities and partnerships improved positively after their arrival in the country.

Table 19. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure”

Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1,5	1,5	1,5
Disagree	8	5,9	5,9	7,4
Neutral	26	19,1	19,1	26,5
Agree	54	39,7	39,7	66,2
Strongly Agree	46	33,8	33,8	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	7	5,1	5,1	5,1
Disagree	11	8,1	8,1	13,2
Neutral	19	14,0	14,0	27,2
Agree	50	36,8	36,8	64,0
Strongly Agree	49	36,0	36,0	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

It is observed that there is a generally high level of positive perception regarding the statement “Türkiye is a developed country in terms of its education system and infrastructure.” However, when compared to pre-arrival perceptions, IN students’ positive opinions on this issue declined noticeably after arriving in Türkiye.

Table 20. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a suitable and safe country for career planning, with promising employment opportunities and a strong vision for the future”

Türkiye is a suitable and safe country for career planning, with promising employment opportunities and a strong vision for the future. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1,5	1,5	1,5
Disagree	9	6,6	6,6	8,1
Neutral	35	25,7	25,7	33,8
Agree	43	31,6	31,6	65,4
Strongly Agree	47	34,6	34,6	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a suitable and safe country for career planning, with promising employment opportunities and a strong vision for the future. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1,5	1,5	1,5
Disagree	9	6,6	6,6	8,1
Neutral	32	23,5	23,5	31,6
Agree	41	30,1	30,1	61,8
Strongly Agree	52	38,2	38,2	100,0

Total	136	100,0	100,0
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It is observed that IN students perceive Türkiye as a suitable and safe country in terms of employment opportunities and career planning, and that this perception has improved positively after their arrival. This finding is significant, as it highlights an important factor in making Türkiye an increasingly preferred destination for IN students in the future. The high proportion of positive responses indicates that Türkiye's labor market potential and career development environment are perceived favorably by IN students.

Table 21. Responses to the Statement “Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity”

Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	4,4
Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	8,8
Neutral	28	20,6	20,6	29,4
Agree	39	28,7	28,7	58,1
Strongly Agree	57	41,9	41,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	4	2,9	2,9	2,9
Disagree	10	7,4	7,4	10,3
Neutral	16	11,8	11,8	22,1
Agree	45	33,1	33,1	55,1
Strongly Agree	61	44,9	44,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

The statement “Türkiye is a significant and powerful actor both in its region and globally due to its military capacity” received the highest level of positive agreement among all propositions included in the questionnaire. Moreover, IN students' positive perceptions further increased after their arrival in Türkiye. It is undeniable that Türkiye's recent investments and achievements in the defense industry have played a significant role in shaping these perceptions. However, it should also be noted that a considerable portion of the participants (38 out of 136; 27.9%) were Azerbaijani students, which may have influenced this outcome. In fact, Türkiye's direct military support for Azerbaijan through the use of air combat systems during the Second Karabakh War in 2020 significantly enhanced its prestige and credibility within Azerbaijani society, thereby strengthening positive attitudes toward Türkiye among this group of respondents.

Table 22. Responses to the statement “Türkiye is an important and reliable country that contributes to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy.”

Türkiye is an important and reliable country that contributes to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy. (Your opinion before coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	6	4,4	4,4	4,4
Disagree	13	9,6	9,6	14,0
Neutral	22	16,2	16,2	30,1
Agree	44	32,4	32,4	62,5
Strongly Agree	51	37,5	37,5	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

Türkiye is an important and reliable country that contributes to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy. (Your opinion after coming to Türkiye)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	5	3,7	3,7	3,7
Disagree	12	8,8	8,8	12,5
Neutral	21	15,4	15,4	27,9
Agree	41	30,1	30,1	58,1
Strongly Agree	57	41,9	41,9	100,0
Total	136	100,0	100,0	

The high level of positive response to the statement that Türkiye is an important and reliable country contributing to world peace through its distinctive and human-centered foreign policy is noteworthy. It is also observed that IN students' perceptions became even more positive after their arrival in Türkiye. This issue serves as an important parameter reflecting the vision and paradigm shift that Turkish foreign policy has undergone over the past few decades. Based on the positive perception reflected in the survey results, it can be inferred that the steps taken and the initiatives implemented within the framework of a human-centered foreign policy perspective have been positively received by the international community.

5. CONCLUSION

As a result of the survey conducted with the participation of 136 out of 537 active international students enrolled at KMU in the 2024–2025 academic year, significant findings were obtained that help to understand IN students' perceptions and expectations regarding Türkiye's national image, as well as to observe changes, positive or negative, in their views before and after coming to Türkiye. The analysis of these findings allows for a synthesis of results aligned with the objectives of this study, particularly within the context of Türkiye's soft power, national image, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy practices. These results can be summarized within the framework of the following key observations and policy recommendations.

- It is observed that IN students studying at KMU mainly come from Turkic Republics, less developed African countries and the neighboring country Syria. Students from the Turkic Republics, especially from Azerbaijan, may have chosen Türkiye in order to avoid adaptation problems regarding language, culture and religion. Students from African countries, on the other hand, are believed to prefer Türkiye either because it is a more developed and modern country compared to their own or as a temporary destination before moving on to European countries. The significant number of Syrian students can undoubtedly be attributed to the impact of the ongoing civil war in Syria.
- The distribution of IN students' countries of origin presents a natural and expected pattern. However, to further expand international engagement, it is essential to both

increase the number of IN students and diversify the countries or regions from which they come. In this regard, various policies, ranging from promotional activities and scholarship programs to bilateral and multilateral educational agreements and collaborations that enhance career opportunities during and after studies, should be implemented. It is also crucial that local governments, relevant ministries, other official institutions, NGOs and private sector organizations work together in a multi-stakeholder and coordinated manner to contribute effectively to this process.

- It is evident that IN students are aware of their potential future roles in strengthening and sustaining positive relations between their home countries and Türkiye and many already feel a sense of responsibility in this regard. Considering that the primary goal of public diplomacy is to influence foreign publics and foster positive perceptions through strategic communication, it is clear how vital a function IN students perform in this process. Therefore, it is extremely important to maintain systematic contact with IN students after graduation, ensuring that professional and cultural ties continue throughout their careers.
- As one of the subfields or practical models of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy also places IN students in a highly strategic position. The way these students reconcile or fail to reconcile the values of the host society with their own cultural background plays a decisive role in shaping and transmitting the host country's international image. However, IN students' expectations and perceptions do not always align with the actual situation. In such cases, it becomes necessary for the host country to take strategic steps aimed at managing these perceptions and meeting students' expectations.
- It is observed that IN students at KMU hold, in general, a highly positive perception of Türkiye's international image, a finding that likely reflects the broader national trend. Nevertheless, to enhance the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts carried out through IN students, it is essential to address and mitigate the relatively small portion of negative perceptions. This can be achieved by paying special attention to the issues where students' opinions shifted negatively after arriving in Türkiye and ensuring that these perceptions evolve in a positive direction. Depending on the nature of the issue, this may involve actions such as improvement, facilitation, and the removal of access barriers, or, in some cases, simply raising awareness and providing accurate information.
- Within the scope of this study, the survey results revealed a decline in positive opinions in 5 out of 13 statements. These statements were related to the following topics:
 - i. The perception of social and cultural diversity as a form of richness, ii. Tolerance and hospitality toward foreigners, iii. Media diversity and freedom, iv. Health services and infrastructure, v. Education system and infrastructure. Among these, the lowest level of agreement, both before and after arrival, was observed in the statement regarding media diversity and freedom in Türkiye. It is noteworthy that the areas where students' perceptions declined after coming to Türkiye are precisely those in which Turkish society and political elites traditionally take pride. However, despite these minor declines, the average scores in these five statements remained relatively high (between 3.53 and 3.99). Therefore, it can be concluded that through coordinated strategies and cooperation among relevant institutions, it is possible to improve perceptions positively and further enhance Türkiye's national image.
- IN students, as social carriers of the host country's soft power, play a central role in constructing a positive national image at the global level. Their perceptions of the host country and its people represent not only the sum of individual experiences but also

serve as symbolic indicators of that country's cultural inclusiveness, educational quality and governance capacity. Consequently, internationalization policies in higher education should not be limited to increasing the number of IN students but should also aim to produce and reinforce a positive national image. Enhancing students' academic success as well as their social and cultural satisfaction is crucial for the sustainable strengthening of the country's image in the international arena.

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Authors' Contributions

Levent Yiğittepe conceptualized and designed the study, conducted data collection and statistical analyses, and was the primary author of the manuscript. Orhan Battır, Sefa Usta and Uğur Aygün contributed to the study design and provided critical revisions during the manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.