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FROM BEING DEPARTURE TO  
DESTINATION POINT:  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT  
MOBILITY IN TURKEY

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From being departure to destination point: international student mobility in Turkey

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## **Abstract**

If internationalization of higher education is defined as particular policies and initiatives of countries and academic institutions structured to handle global trends, then policies stimulating international student mobility and students themselves are indispensable components of this process. In the European context, it is the Bologna Process which promotes internal mobility of students, teachers, and administrative staff, and establish a framework of magnifying competition to magnetize international students and have a general purpose of transforming Europe into a prominent knowledge-based society. This article first briefly explains the Bologna Process and its main goals. Subsequently, it will give a brief overview of Turkish higher education system and demonstrates developments and implementations of the Bologna Process. Next, it will concentrate on the situation of international students in Turkey. Consequently, it has several recommendations on how to attract more international students and thus move a step closer to be a knowledge-based society in a globalizing environment.

## Introduction

The concept of internationalization in higher education is an incorporation of all aspects of higher education systems or institutions that goes beyond national borders or that is influenced by or cooperates with students, academic staff, administrators, institutions, governments or other stake holders in other countries (Thorsby, 1991: 8). To put it differently, the term 'internationalization' in that case is associated with the higher education institutions' activities assisted or constructed by multilateral agreements or policies in order to extend their reach over national borders at different levels (Van Damme, 200: 417). International student mobility is one of the major issues in internationalization of higher education systems among strengthening international research collaboration and many others. The paper provides a brief overview of the nature and contemporary developments in internationalization of higher education especially focusing on student mobility programs in Europe in an analysis of the relevant secondary literature. This will shed light on relevant concepts and strategies from a European perspective.

When the number of institutions, exchange contracts and equivalence agreements is considered, there is an obvious augmentation in cooperation of higher education systems in Europe. The most significant development in Europe is European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which is to be created by the Bologna Process aimed at facilitating international mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff. The main purpose of this paper is an attempt to present a display of the Turkish case in the field of student mobility within the general framework of Bologna Process with relevant statistical overview. In the literature, Turkey is always referred to as a student sending country, for instance, according to UNESCO statistics, it is the seventh highest ranking country in terms of gross outflow of students in 2006. The related studies reflect upon either brain drain or brain circulation such as Turkish graduate students' situation, their intentions to stay in the U.S. or in the EU. However, there are also international students enrolled in Turkish higher education institutions and therefore nowadays Turkey is not only a departure country of students any more but also a destination for international students whose numbers are on the rise. This topic is neglected, therefore this article is designed to fill the gap in the subject matter. In conclusion, it will propose recommendations on rising Turkey's attractiveness as a place to study and thus move a step closer to be a knowledge-based society such as introduction of awareness-raising campaigns aiming at decision makers, administrators of institutions highlighting the significance of student mobility.

## The Bologna Process

Even though the Bologna Process is almost ten years old, it has very crucial impacts on higher education in Europe. The Bologna Declaration<sup>1</sup> (1999) has been signed by forty- five members of the Council of Europe including all of the EU member countries and twenty non-EU member countries (Terry, 2006: 864). Eliminating the barriers to student mobility across Europe; improving the attractiveness of European higher education worldwide and founding a common structure of higher education systems across Europe which is based on two cycles: undergraduate and graduate are among the essential objectives of the Process (King, C., 2006: 2).

Although the Declaration which gave the name to the process is signed in 1999, the initiatory impetus came from Sorbonne Declaration<sup>2</sup> in 1998, signed in Paris by Ministers of Education of France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. The agreement highlighted the key role of universities in developing European cultural dimensions. It underlines the formation of the European Area of Higher Education as a significant method to advance the mobility and employability of citizens and the development of throughout the continent (The Bologna Declaration, 1999: 1-2).

Despite the fact that the Bologna Process is not an official EU initiative, it still overlaps with the other EU projects, including the Lisbon Strategy<sup>3</sup> that is contemplated to make the EU “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions). Its goals are particularly economic, likewise social and environmental renovation which fosters investment in people (Terry, 2006: 864).

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education, The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, available at:[http://www.bolognabergen2005.no/Docs/00Main\\_doc/990719BOLOGNA\\_DECLARATION.PDF](http://www.bolognabergen2005.no/Docs/00Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF)

[hereinafter Bologna Declaration]

<sup>2</sup> Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System By the Four Ministers in Charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, May 25, 1998, available at: [http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne_declaration.pdf) [hereinafter Sorbonne Declaration].

<sup>3</sup> Lisbon European Council, March 2000, Presidency Conclusions, available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_en.htm#2](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm#2) [hereinafter Lisbon Strategy].

The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental effort which intends to found a European Higher

Education Area (EHEA) by the year 2010 (King, C., 2006: 2). The aims of the EHEA and the Bologna Process flourished via series of five meetings, in which contributors magnified the objectives and work program of the Bologna Process. The Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and the Bologna Declaration (1999) embody the results of the first two meetings in this sequence. And the remaining three are formulated as 2001 Prague Communiqué<sup>4</sup>, 2003 Berlin Communiqué<sup>5</sup> and 2005 Bergen Communiqué<sup>6</sup>. The European Quality Assurance Standards<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> Towards the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the meeting of the European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001 available at: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/010519PRAGUE_COMMUNIQUE.pdf)

Main\_doc/010519PRAGUE\_COMMUNIQUE.pdf [hereinafter Prague Communiqué].

<sup>5</sup> Realising the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003, available at: [http://www.bologna-](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF)

bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\_doc/030919Berlin\_Communique.PDF [hereinafter Berlin Communiqué].

<sup>6</sup> The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals, Communiqué of the Conference of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, May 19-20, 2005, available at: [http://www.bologna-](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf)

bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\_doc/050520\_Bergen\_Communique.pdf, [hereinafter Bergen Communiqué] See also

From Berlin to Bergen: General Report of the Bologna Follow-up Group to the Conference of the

European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, May 03, 2005, available at: [http://www.bologna-](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Bergen/050503_General_rep.pdf)

bergen2005.no/Bergen/050503\_General\_rep.pdf, [hereinafter Bologna Follow-up Group Report for the Bergen

Ministerial Meeting] (illustrating the procedures for admittance into the Bologna Process and the acknowledgement of

applications from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.)

<sup>7</sup> European Quality Assurance Standards, available at: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/050520\\_European\\_Quality\\_Assurance\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/050520_European_Quality_Assurance_Standards.pdf)

the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area<sup>8</sup> are the two documents adopted during the 2005 Bergen meeting. Whereas the former outlines the model for internal and external quality assurance standards; the latter lays down recommended credits necessary for various types of degrees and suitable outcomes that a student should accomplish at each degree level (Terry, 2006: 865).

The following ten “action lines” are always referred by the various documents of the Bologna Process:

Introduced in the 1999 Bologna Declaration:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles;
- Establishment of a system of credits;
- Promotion of mobility;
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance;
- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education.

Introduced in the 2001 Prague Communiqué:

- Lifelong learning;
- The partnership of higher education institutions and students;
- Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Introduced in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué:

- Expansion of the focus on two degree cycles to include a third degree cycle of doctoral studies and synergy between the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Framework for the Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (2005), available at: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Bergen Bologna Website; Work Programme Action Lines, available at: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Work\\_prog/1Prog\\_Back-Action\\_lines.HTM](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Work_prog/1Prog_Back-Action_lines.HTM) [hereinafter Bologna Action Lines]

According to the study in Portugal conducted by Cardoso et al (2005), higher education programs that adapted their curricula to comply with the Bologna standards are attracting more students. Moreover, comprehensive programs that adapted their curriculum in order to provide a unitary master program, thus adjusting to the Bologna standards while not shortening the length of the program, were subject to additional expansion in demand (Cardoso et al, 2005: 21). Therefore, it is Bologna Process which made possible to have a common structure of higher education systems among European countries and in return attract more students both nationally and internationally.

### 3. The Turkish Case

#### 3.1. The Turkish Higher Education System: Background Information

In Turkey, admission to higher education is highly centralized and based on a nation-wide single exam taking place every year after completing eight years of primary and four years of secondary education as it is shown in the chart below. The education language at the universities is mainly Turkish at the public universities with some exceptions<sup>10</sup> and the academic language at the foundation (private) universities is generally English. To be exact, 14 universities uses totally English as their medium of instruction and only one in French.

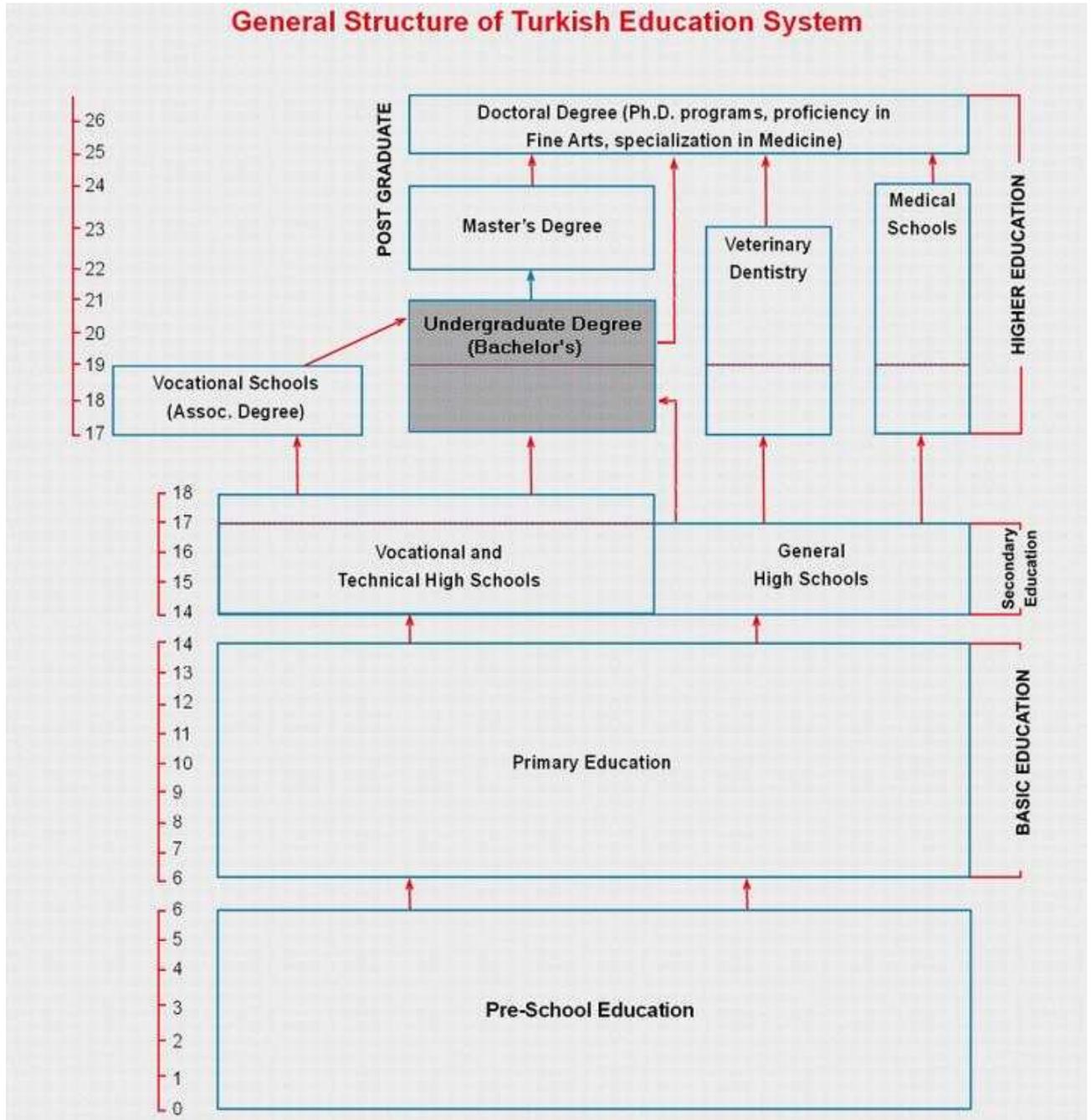
For instance, in 2007, even though 1, 776, 441 students applied for admission to higher education institutions, only 193, 542 student could enroll for a four year bachelor degree programs (Oktik, 2007) which is less than 10 per cent. Therefore, in Turkey there is a large, yet unmet demand for higher education. There are several reasons triggering the high demand. First, high population growth rate and secondly, as a result of massive rural to urban and

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<sup>10</sup> The education language in French at the University of Galatasaray and it is the only university in French and there are two majors at the University of Marmara totally being taught in German. Moreover, there are other few

universities offering some courses in English, French and German.

recently urban to urban migration, enrollment rates at all levels of education raised and thus exert pressure on the higher education system. Thirdly, the value given by Turkish families to university education as a mechanism of gaining social mobility and prestige partly explains such a high demand. Lastly, the assumption of better economic achievement is a powerful catalyst for higher educational investment (Güngör & Tansel, 2007: 1).



### 3.1.1. The structure of administration

**The Council of Higher Education (CoHE/YÖK)** is an autonomous corporate public body regulating higher education institutions in Turkey since 1975 (Uzun et. al., 1990: 491). The Council has twenty-two members and is responsible to program, organize and manage higher education in accordance with the provisions set by the law (The Higher Education Law No. 2547).

In the field of higher education there are three other administrative bodies. First, **Inter-university Council (UAK)** which is both an academic advisory and decision-making body depending on the matter and formed by all the rectors of universities and one member elected by the senate of each university. Secondly, **Turkish University Rectors' Committee (TURC)** consists of all university rectors. Lastly, **Higher Education Supervisory Board** which supervises and manages the universities, their units and activities, and the teaching staff.

There are several sources in terms of financial administration: annual budgetary allocations, aids from institutions, fees and payments received, income from sales and publications, income from movable and immovable property, profit from the enterprises of the revolving fund, donations, bequests and sundry.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1.2. Institutions

Turkish higher education system is unitary and consists of all the educational institutions after secondary education, which provide at least two years of higher education and provide education at bachelor, master or doctorate degree levels. Institutions of higher education include universities, faculties, departments, institutes, schools of higher education, conservatories, vocational schools of higher education and application-research centers. University is

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<sup>11</sup> “Higher Education in Turkey – Implementing the Assumptions of the Bologna Declaration – I. Overall Condition of Higher Education in Turkey – Administration.” available at: <http://www.ua.gov.tr/Socrates/docs/tur/Arion>

defined by the law as an institution of higher education having academic autonomy and juristic personality, conducting advanced-level education, scholarly research publication, consultancy and composed of units such as faculty, department and graduate school.

Turkey has different forms of university organization since the country is influenced by German and American educational thought at particular periods of national development at the public higher education. Therefore, the system has both faculty, department and numerous mixed organizational types (Tinto, 1974: 287). In the last fifteen years, the Turkish higher education system has experienced a process of expansion and structural transformation in order to meet the high demands mentioned earlier. Beginning from having 16 public universities in 1981, the number reached to 85 by 2007, seeing the peak point in 1992. In 1984 there was only one foundation (private) university in Turkey. Their number reached to 20 by 1999 and to 30 by 2007. (Senses, 2007: 2).

As of 2007 there are 122 higher education institutions in Turkey composed as follows: eighty-five public universities, thirty foundation (non-profit private) universities, three military academies, one police academy, one military medical school, one military professional school and one private vocational high school (Oktik, 2007: Slide 9). However, in general, the rate of schooling in higher education in Turkey is still very low compared to industrialized countries (Senses, 2007: 3).

### 3.2. Implementation of the Bologna Process: what has been done so far?

As a candidate country to the European Union, Turkey became part to the Bologna Process in 2001 in Prague and since then there has been major steps taken parallel to the principles of the Process. This subsection will outline some key developments in Turkey in that respect and Table 1 below indicates how those developments are evaluated in comparison to the other participating countries. It should be emphasized that the notes from one to five are not for the indication of success but rather they demonstrate the degree of betterment (Askar, 2005: 101). Therefore, as it is clearly seen, there is a need for improvement in Turkey in the areas of implementation of national qualifications framework, level of international participation and recognition of prior learning.

Nevertheless, the existing Turkish higher education system already meets those initial two action lines “easily readable and comparable degrees” and “two-tier system”. Secondly, since 2005/06 academic year, diploma supplement and ECTS credit system became obligatory implementations at all higher education institutions. “Diploma Supplement that includes

ECTS credits is issued to students upon their graduation, in English, German or French, upon request, first copy being free of charge.” (National Report Turkey, 2006: 17) Thirdly, regarding “promotion of mobility” Erasmus program is started in 2003/04 academic year in a few universities as a pilot study and the exchange numbers of students and academic staff increase steadily. Fourthly, number of assessment and accreditation exercises at the domestic, European and international level have been carried out by universities or programs and works on the establishment of a national quality assurance system has demonstrated adequate improvement concerning “the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance”. Fifthly, new research centers and graduate programs have been created in the higher education institutions that focuses on research about various EU related topics in accordance with the principle of “the promotion of the European dimensions in higher education”. Sixthly, in relation to the point of “lifelong learning” almost all universities have ‘continuous education centers’ that offer seminars, conferences and courses to those who wants to be professionally au courant or to those who wants to attain further skills and/or knowledge in another area. Seventhly, with regard to “participation of students and higher education institutions to the Bologna Process” a national- level student council was created and the election of the president and the bodies of the national student council occurred in 2005. Lastly, concerning “synergy between doctorate studies and ERA and EHEA”, Turkey joined to 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Program fully and joint degree programs at the doctoral level have been implanted by bilateral agreements for specific cases (National Report Turkey, 2005: 1-2).

**Table 1. Bologna Scorecard for Turkey in 2007<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>12</sup> Bologna Process Stocktaking, Report from a Working Group Appointed by the Bologna Follow-up Group to the

Degree system	Turkey	mean score of Bologna Countries
1. Stage of implementation of the first and second cycle	Excellent performance (5)	4.1
2. Access to the next cycle	Excellent performance (5)	4.5
3. Implementation of national qualifications framework	Good performance (3)	2.9
Quality assurance		
4. National implementation of Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA	Excellent performance (5)	4.2
5. Stage of development of external quality assurance system	Very good performance (4)	4.2
6. Level of student participation	Very good performance (4)	4.0
7. Level of international participation	Good performance (3)	3.5
Recognition of degrees and study periods		
8. Stage of implementation of Diploma Supplement	Very good performance (4)	4.1
9. National implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention	Very good performance (4)	4.0
10. Stage of implementation of ECTS	Excellent performance (5)	4.2
Lifelong Learning		
11. Recognition of prior learning	Good performance (3)	3.7
Joint degrees		
12. Establishment and recognition of joint degrees	Excellent performance (5)	4.6

Principal areas of progress in accordance with the aims of the Bologna Process especially since 2005 can be summarized as follows: adopting a number of regulations to advance Bologna reforms; finalizing the ratification process for the Lisbon Recognition Convention; establishing the independent Commission for Academic Assessment and Quality Improvement in Higher Education Institutions (YÖDEK), a national student council and a commission to realize a national qualifications framework; mandatory introduction of ECTS and diploma

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Ministrial Conference in London, May 2007, pg. 78. The column indicating the mean score of Bologna countries is

taken from Oktik, 2007, Slide 16.

supplements; implementing joint degrees; broadening access for disabled students; and providing a Report on the Strategy for Higher Education to 2025.

Despite the fact that there have been numerous developments in Turkish higher education system, there remains some challenges. They include such as balancing supply and demand for higher education; enforcing an internationally acknowledged national quality assessment system; a more competent and productive funding model; broadening access to higher education; and maximizing the advantage given by the increasing young population (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007: 78).

### 3.3. International Students in Turkey

The international significance of the system of higher education of a country can be assessed in relation to international mobility of students. There is a general consensus that student mobility is a potential flow of qualified labor either during their studies or their subsequent recruitment upon graduation. Furthermore, international students would create economies of scale in higher education system such as creation of new (interdisciplinary) branches and bring in additional resources to finance them. If they have significant numbers, international students would have an impact on local economies through consumption or accommodation among many other contributions (OECD Report, 2001: 93).

Foreign students who prefer to undertake an undergraduate study in Turkey must have completed their secondary education which is equivalent to Turkish high school. Secondly, and more importantly, they need to take the Entrance Examination for Foreigner Students (YÖS).<sup>13</sup> According to the decision of the Council of Higher Education in 2003 besides Entrance Examination for Foreign Student Examination (YÖS) results, universities have the autonomy to admit international students to their undergraduate programs based on the results of international examinations (e.g. SAT, GCE, International Baccalaureate, etc.) or university entrance examinations that are reliable and accurate in other countries (e.g. Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, China, etc.). Therefore, universities are free to develop their own criteria in admitting international students at the undergraduate level and students themselves have to communicate with the corresponding universities.

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<sup>13</sup> The exam is composed of two tests assessing abstract reasoning and comprehension of written Turkish.

Turkey participates in the EU education and youth programs and particularly to Erasmus Mundus exchange program at the undergraduate level officially since 2003 due to its candidacy status. Furthermore, it is envisaged that Turkey will fully participate in the program for 2004-2008 and so far administrative offices within universities that are particularly dealing with Erasmus program are created. There is an effort in promoting of Erasmus at the Turkish universities especially via organization of information days for students and academic staff, encouraging students to learn or improve a second language, encouraging the faculty to increase their European-wide activities towards signing Erasmus agreements, participating in related networks, projects and propose new projects. On the other hand, there is also an effort to promote Turkish universities in the Erasmus program by designing web-sites where Erasmus activities can be shown, publication of ECTS information packages and course catalogues. Universities began to increase the number of courses offered in English and through participation in educational fairs making visible their institutions.

**Table 2. Erasmus Mobility<sup>14</sup>**

Table 2. Erasmus Mobility<sup>13</sup>

Academic year	Outgoing students	Incoming students	Outgoing academics	Incoming academics
2004/05	1142	299	339	218
2005/06	2860	900	585	350
2006/07	4900	1200	1450	418

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<sup>14</sup> Source: Oktik, 2007: Slide 13.

#### 4. Conclusion: Recommendations to promote Turkey as a destination point for international students

There is a huge imbalance of supply and demand in higher education in Turkey and the gap seriously needs to be lowered. The increase in young population should be distributed to higher education and thus in the demanded fields after a close examination of the needs of labor markets via appropriate infrastructure plan of education and adequate financial resources. There needs to be an efficient dialogue between the state, universities and the labor market to have an affective educational background combined with participation of labor force in a general sense. The existing vocational schools should be promoted more especially in combination with internship places either in public or in private sectors.

According to the argument of De Wit and Scott, the mandates of the market are now driving internationalization trends in the world. Universities and academic systems try to make themselves appealing to foreign students and to establish relations with universities in other countries to improve their global extent. "This often means teaching in English in addition to the national language, developing the means to market higher education programs effectively, treating intellectual property as a commodity, and adopting strategies of profit-driven corporations" (Altbach, 2002). Among the universities in Turkey, there is an unfair competition in terms of education language, numbers of teaching staff and funding between the public and the private universities. As it is seen, they are mostly private universities attracting international students due to their medium of instruction, which is mostly English. According to the national report written by CoHE, one of the most significant national Bologna strategies of Turkey is to be a part of EHEA and ERA as centers of excellence attracting researchers and highly reputable programs at all levels to attract the students from all over the world (National Report, 2004: 15) which is quite ambitious. If it is aimed to attract more foreign students, then the number of not only private universities but also public universities offer more courses in English needs to be augmented. Moreover, it is not only a matter of English courses but to be able to offer attractive courses at the same time where the quality issues arise.

Moreover, there is not a widely recognition of significance of international students as one of the key actors in the process of internationalization of higher education systems in Turkey. Therefore, there is a need for introduction of awareness-raising campaigns aiming at decision makers, administrators of institutions highlighting the significance of student mobility. Unless there is acknowledgement on the issue, there will neither be state support of universities nor an effort from universities to make themselves more attractive than before.161619

Another significant means of attracting international students is the educational fairs for marketing which is began to be done by Turkish universities. However, Turkish participation to international education fairs is mostly limited to its Eastern neighbors. Therefore, Turkish universities should also promote or make themselves more visible to Western neighbors especially to the EU. There is a lot in Turkey to offer in terms of culture, tradition, social life and language, because coming from experience it is not only the courses international students are attracted to but also to the cultural elements. Being at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Turkey should exploit its position and turn it to an advantage to magnetize more international students which would foster the intercultural dialogue among students.

There are recently created Erasmus offices, however international offices should be created at the universities' administrative bodies. There is some progress as indicated before, but since there is not so much experience in Turkey, it can take a look at other countries receiving high amounts of international students such as the U.S. or the U.K. who are old players but also to Germany whose main educational language is German and sort of a newcomer in that game but yet ranks as the third country having the most international students.

This study has limitations to be acknowledged. For instance, even though all possible sources were taken into account, there is a lack of data showing the origin countries, their fields of study, gender, age of international students and at which level of higher education they were enrolled in Turkish universities. Moreover, there is a need for more empirical research supported with the relevant statistical data. If there is a long war going on in the world in terms of attracting international students, sadly Turkey is not aware of even where the battlefield is.

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