The Impact of Leisure Participation on Social Adaptation of International Students

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Abstract

International students, often a noteworthy group, constitute about 10 per cent of the student population on many campuses throughout the world (OECD, 2009). At any time, there are likely to be over a million students and scholars attending institutions of higher learning abroad, and recent estimates have set the figure at about 4.5 million (Çetinsaya, G.2014). A significant portion of the contemporary literature has dealt with the problems of international students. Owing to the importance of international students to culturally diverse blend of colleges and universities, higher education institutions must develop support services to assist international students with a series of special needs ranging from adjusting to the academic requirements, to dealing with cultural factors of being drown in new community settings (Cho & Yu, 2015). Leisure, in the meanwhile, is an important experience for university students since it is a functional tool to create socially accommodating environments for this population. However, how active leisure participation impact on social adjustment has not been studied extensively in qualitative studies. Therefore, this qualitative study intended to examine the benefits and impacts of active leisure participation on social adjustment of international students in a mid-size metropolitan university in Manisa, Turkey. Overall, students demonstrated gains in social adjustment and reported psychological and physical benefits when they actively participated in leisure time activities. Study showed that international students have demands and expectations from the university in terms of leisure time activities.

Keywords: international students, social adjustment, leisure time activities

1. Introduction

Current statistics released from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports a sharp increase in the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD, 2013). This means an average annual growth rate of almost 6%. Moreover, the relevant data in the same report describes a noticeable expansion in the numbers of higher education institutions worldwide, which host more than 1,000 international students. The top five countries that international students prefer are; The USA, The UK, Australia, France and Germany. Turkey hosts more than 100.0000 international students (Çetinsaya, G.2014). Even though overall proportion of the international students in higher education institutions is still only about 10 %, the grow in the numbers of these students is noticeable.

This considerable and constant increase in this minority raised the awareness of many scholars for the greatly diverse issues (e.g., social adjustment, life satisfaction and/or academic issues) solely pertinent to these students (Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, & Kondakci, 2011; Haines, 2005). Principally higher education institutions must develop support services to assist international students with a series of special needs ranging from adjusting to the academic requirements, to dealing with cultural factors of being drown in new community settings (Cho & Yu, 2015). Particularly focusing on leisure is a promising tool to create socially accommodating environments for this population. However, how active leisure participation effect international students has not been studied extensively in qualitative studies. Accordingly, this qualitative study intended to examine the benefits and impacts of active leisure participation with a focus on social adjustment of international students in a mid-size metropolitan university in Manisa, Turkey.

2. Relevant Literature

Developments in health, economics, work life and education for a more independent life made leisure an important component of human life in this century. Practically, leisure time can be described as time spent on activities of free

choices either collectively or individually rather than obliged time spent on activities such as eating, sleeping, work, domestic chores and education (Aslantürk & Amman, 2009). This description of leisure time explains the community life and culture that comprise the activities based on the individuals' own choices for relaxation, enjoyment, increased self-awareness and involvement in community life away from the requisites of work, family and school life.

Leisure time activities support individuals to take part in community either psychologically, physically and socially to make life more satisfactory (Yerlisu Lapa & Ardahan, 2009:132–144). This support is crucial in higher education period since it is one of the most critical course of life which constitutes the long-lasting behaviour patterns of young people. The way in which the student population in university settings organize and spend their leisure time changes as societal developments advance. Because of the rapid increase of leisure activities on offer, the widespread use of the media, the increase in financial resources of individuals, young people leaned themselves towards a wide variety of commercial leisure products, fashions, music styles, leisure clubs and hobbies, and constructed their own leisure biographies. This shift in leisure behaviours has negative effects consequently. University students face difficulties in adjusting to the new environments and they have difficulty in making their free time more meaningful (Özgüven, 1992). In the studies concerning young generation and their problems in general, it is pointed out that adjustment to the university is a broader and multidimensional concept considering the variables effecting the university adjustment (Aslantürk & Amman, 2009; Kılıç & Şener, 2013). Adjustment has academic, social, personal and emotional dimensions. Adjustment in general was described as answering the academic needs, having social interaction with other students, staff and administration in the university, taking part in the campus facilities, keeping psychological and physical wellbeing and sense of belonging to the university (Sağınç, 2011; Özçetin, 2013; Yerlisu Lapa and Ardahan, 2009; Kır, 2007).

International students face with identity conflicts, academic obstacles and stressors deriving from the transition to the new school environment since they are in post adolescent and early adulthood period like many other native students. A great deal of research conducted on those groups show that those students have social adaptation problems (Busby, 2011; Huang & Carleton, 2003:129-132; Haines, 2001:25-33; Cressy, 2011; Masrour et.al, 2012). The most common mentioned problems by international students, mostly because of being foreign to the new culture can be summed up as; language barriers, cultural shock, feeling of compelling to acquire cultural skills, prejudices, homesickness and loneliness.

Leung and Stahura (2010:7), in their study with Chinese international students at American universities, suggested that socio cultural adaptation is an important aspect for international students among many other variables ranging from adjusting to the academic requirements, to dealing with cultural factors of being submerged in new societal settings. Sandhu (1995) and Berry (1997) found that cultural differences and being away from home country are important stress factors for international students. This situation can be described as acculturation stress that international students frequently face with (as cited in Ward et al., 2005:153). In addition many other studies in literature verify that experiencing prejudices cause psychological and cultural adjustment complications for international students and thus ending in socio-cultural problems (Haines, 2005:25-33; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002:305-322; Kıroğlu et al., 2010: 26-39; Özçetin, 2013; Güçlü, 1996:101-110). Ward et al. (2005:40), stresses that intercultural contact is a significant and stressful life event and that cognitive, behavioural and affective responses of individuals to life changes that occur as a result of sustained first hand contact with individuals of differing cultural origins bear psychological and sociocultural outcomes. Peer interactions and active learning are moderately and positively correlated with students' self-reported personal and social learning gains. The implication is that students benefit from campus programs and services that require them to engage with their peers in meaningful dialogue and activities (Strayhorn, 2008 as cited in Cressy, 2011:195). Provided that, free time activities that enable this population stay connected to the social life have significant roles for a trouble-free social adaptation period. With the fact that the number of students spending leisure time in the campus has also been increasing, active leisure participation and recreation activities should become an important component of the higher education planning. Furthermore, student engagement within the campus was emphasised as a functional tool to ease social and cultural integration and interaction among diverse student populations, contributing to social belonging and student retention (Zarei& Jafari, 2013; Miller, 2011; Smith, 2008; Cheng et.al, 2004; Lapa & Ardahan, 2009; Kılıç & Şener, 2013). Cho & Yu (2014) stress that social support is one of the most important determiner of international students' psychological well-being. Social adaptation of international students to their new places is a highly critical need. In the study "Qualitative Look at Leisure Benefits for Taiwanese Nursing Students", Hsieh et al. (2004), examined the leisure participation patterns of university students and found out that social interaction is an emergent issue of student engagement and that the diverse needs of the students affect their participation status and leisure activity preferences. Zarei et al., (2013:30-36), have examined the students who used campus recreation centre and according to the results of the study they found out that students that utilize the student recreation centre more frequently are more likely to participate in both competitive and recreational activities. It is stated that students feel more sense of belonging to peers through involvement in activities offered at the student recreation centre.

Apparently, there is a consensus in the literature that international students are highly contingent for the support of their host institutions in multifarious reasons. One of the basic and the most prominent dependence to the university is their visa conditions. The residency rights of international students are due to the submission of academic admissions from the host university. In addition to this, financial restrictions (e.g. financial dependency on family funds or scholarships and/or working restrictions of the host country) contributes negatively to the integration and adaptation processes. The last and the most complicated issue is that those students should build social networks and thus become a part of the new society they live in. This fundamental purpose to integrate those newcomers to the university can only be achieved through a comprehensive planning, in other words, involving more affairs of this population into the decision-making mechanisms. As such, extended efforts to organize and ensure the sustainability of cultural orientation programmes and facilities that connects international students with domestic students is crucial as part of the university support for international students' creation of social relationships. Therefore, within this study, we worked jointly with the academicians and students from the School of Physical Education and Sport and staff of international office. The aim of this research was to design leisure activities for international students and examine the impacts of active participation with a specific focus on social adjustment.

3. Methods

For this study we employed a qualitative research method, combining qualitative data from interviews and demographics from Personal Information Forms. The activities and interviews took place in 2014-2015. For the qualitative approach we conducted 23 semi-structured individual interviews with activity participants. The demographics of our interviews samples were summarised in Table 1. The qualitative research method was used in this study since it explores the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013) which best serve to bring forward the voice of international students.

3.1 Participants and Procedure

The participants of this study were 23 (22 male and 1 female) full time international students enrolled at a mid-size metropolitan university in Manisa, Turkey. The university is a public university to a network of 55.000 students. The total number of the international students of the university is approximately 500. 22 male and 1 was female, a total of 23 international students were recruited using convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling method (also known as availability sampling) is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Table 1. Demographics of the Research Participants

Findings about demographics			
Gender	Gender	f	%
	Female	1	%4
	Male	22	%96
Age	22 and below	15	%65
	22 and above	8	%35
Country of origin	Azarbaijan	7	%31
	Uganda	1	%4
	Afghanistan	7	%31
	Macedonia	1	%4
	Kryrgyzsstan	1	%4
	Ghana	1	%4
	Syria	1	%4
	Endonesia	1	%4
	Montenegro	1	%4
	Türkmenistan	2	%10
Education year	1	3	%13
	2	11	%48
	3	8	%35
	4	1	%4
Scholarship	Get Scholarship	7	%30
	Own resources	16	%70
Accomodation type	Dormitory	9	%39
	Hause	14	%61
Participation in Sports	Yes	7	%30
	No	16	%70
Sport branch	Football	2	%29
	Running	1	%14
	Wrist wrestling	2	%29
	Kickbox	1	%14
	Wushu	1	%14
Leisure participation	Yes	12	%52
	No	11	%48
Leisure activity type	Sportive activities	3	%25
	Outdoor activities	1	%8
	Arts and Culture	8	%67

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the research participants. Out of a total of 23 participants, 22 were male and one female. Participants have various cultural and ethnical background. Most of the participants were dependant to their families or own funding for their educational costs. More than half of the participants were accommodating at rent houses. Students who had a sport branch were less than half of the whole group. Earlier leisure participation experience was nearly equal among the participants. As for the leisure activity type they reported "Art and Culture" as the most favoured one.

To recruit international students, the researcher contacted the international office of the university. With the cooperation from the office, an invitation was emailed to the international students who were currently enrolled at the university. From the very beginning, academicians and volunteer students from the School of PA and Sports worked

collaboratively in programme designing, student recruitment and further communication processes with the researcher. Volunteer students from the Recreation and Sport Management and Coaching Departments created social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Messenger, and Facebook) accounts to provide interaction with the participants within easy reach which contributed positively to the accessibility of the researched group. They constantly shared the schedule and content of the leisure activity programme. Subsequent to this, the researcher determined the research participants among the students who wanted to participate actively in the activities. Then a group of 23 international students representing a wide variety of national and cultural backgrounds, was formed. The communication went on within this group. The activities started and held within two months, May and June in 2015, just after the announcements. Within the research three different leisure activities were organized specifically designed for international students. Those activities were Time Travel, Orienteering and Trekking. In order to create a multicultural environment, local and Erasmus exchange students were also invited to the activities, but their feedback was not included in the research.

3.2 Instrument and Data Collection

The instrument used in this study was interview form consisting of two components. The first component consisted of Personal Information Form to collect demographic data. The second component consisted of two research questions. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, one via instant messaging and one via Skype online video programme. The duration was approximately 30 minutes. The interview questions used for this study were relevant to the processes, the benefits and expectations of the international students (e.g. "Can you evaluate your participation in the leisure time activities which were organized within this study; regarding to the following questions; (a) Do you think your active participation in the leisure time activities have impacts on your social adaptation? (b) What are your expectations from the university in terms of leisure activities?"). The interviews were conducted after the leisure activities at the at the participants' convenience and at different times where the environment is available for recording of the interview. All the interviews were transcribed, coded and then analysed. The questions were directed to each participant in a standard tone using same words to recall the same meanings. The interviews were audio recorded with consent by using available software (italk) and the files were later downloaded to a secure computer for transcription purposes. Later the participants were asked to read the transcripts to confirm that their views were accurate, well documented, and not distorted.

4. Data Analysis

A qualitative data analysis was conducted through axial coding. "NVivo 11 Pro for Windows" was used to determine the frequency of thematic words and as a means for organizing data. NVivo is one of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) developed by QSR International. This software allowed the researcher to make a qualitative inquiry, through coding, sorting and retrieval of data. It also helped to design coding with shaping and modelling. Coding involves the desegregation of textual data into segments, examining the data similarities and differences, and grouping together conceptually similar data in the respective nodes (Wong, 2008). Models are an essential way to describe and explore relationships in qualitative research and NVivo provides a *Modeler* designated for visual exploration and explanation of relationships between various nodes and documents. The visualisations of the relationships of the active leisure experiences of the international students were explained in two models emerged from the data analysis in Nvivo. The textual data of this study is interview transcripts. Data analysis in qualitative research is defined as the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, observation notes, or other non-textual materials that the researcher accumulates to increase the understanding of the phenomenon (Kaefer et al., 2015). The process of analysing of the qualitative data of this study predominantly involved coding the data. Basically it involved making sense of huge amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, followed by identifying significant patterns, and finally drawing meaning from data and subsequently building a logical chain of evidence.
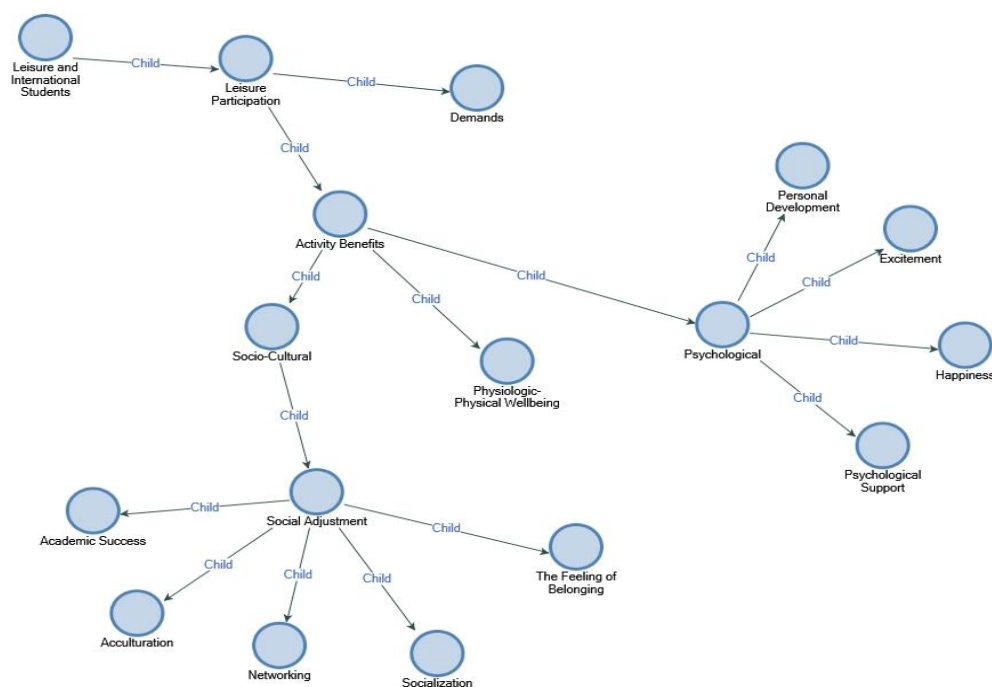
All the interviews were transcribed, coded and then analysed. After the analysis of the interviews, the data was coded by two different experts and overlapping themes were grouped. The first phase of the coding was data-driven and, identifying themes and issues as they emerged from the data. The patterns (codes) emerged from this phase were: "acculturation (multiculturalism)", "socialization", "sense of belonging", "academic success" ,"friendship- network"; "psychologic support", "excitement", "happiness", "personal development" ,"physical well-being " ,"diverse activities", "participation in decision making processes", "joint activities", "promotion", "sustainability", "social activities", and "publication support" codes.

The second phase of the coding was model-driven, based on the concepts relevant to group cohesion, such as two models emerged from the codes. These are; (leisure) activity benefits consisting three primary categories, such as socio-cultural, psychological and physiological benefits of active leisure participation. This relationship was illustrated in Model 1, and (students') demands (from the university regarding leisure activities) which were visualized in Model 2. The sub-themes emerged from the data analysis were also illustrated just under the primary categories in Model1.

The coding categories used in this study were perspectives held by participants, participants' experiences about the activities that they actively participated in and their relationships with other participants. The differences and similarities of codes of two experts were evaluated using Cohen kappa formula. Coherence among encoders was r= 0.80 as result of reliability calculation. Calculated values show that there is coherence among rates at good level.

5. Discussion of the Results

In an effort to enhance understanding of key aspects relating to the leisure participation gains and students' expectations from the university in respect to the leisure activities, a semi-structured follow-up interview questions served to further investigate their lived experiences. After an examination of these initial responses, the researcher decided on the themes that emerged from the responses provided. From these data, interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 23 of the original participants. Based on an analysis of participant responses, two primary models was formed. Model 1 represents the activity benefits and Model 2 represents students' demands. Under Model 1 three primary categories emerged. These are; "psychological benefits" and "physiological benefits". The "socio-cultural benefits" primary category was followed by a sub-theme. As such, "social adjustment" was an outcome of "socio-cultural" benefits of leisure participation.

Model 1. Themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis of the students' thoughts and perceptions regarding their gains obtained from the leisure participation

5.1 Socio-Cultural Benefits Category

Under "socio-cultural benefits" category the students have mentioned their perceptions and ideas expressing that participation in the leisure activities supported their social adjustment to the university and to the new environment. They also expressed that with the help of those activities they could easily form new networks and learned new forms of behavioral models from their new friends and that this helped them go through an easier adaptation period by enjoying the time with new friends. Main codes emerged under this category were; "acculturation (multiculturalism)", "socialization", "sense of belonging", "academic success" ,"friendship- network" .

Acculturation: The participants have expressed that they formed new dialogues through the activity participation and thus an interaction with other students have occured and they learned the new culture. Those perceptions of students express acculturation concept. Participant 3 and participant 5 expressed their thoughts as follows;

…….one can meet new people and learn new cultures and enjoy themselves (P5).

….it is good to learn a new, different culture, learning a new language is like "a language is a human, two language two language two human", and learning a new culture makes one person more wise, it effects positively on social adjustment for academic and psychological reasons and changes from one person to the othe r(P3).

Socialization: The students have mentioned that participation in leisure time activities helped them to develop social skills. Thus it is concluded that participation in leisure activities supports socialization which is essential in the adaptation period. One of the participants stated that; *It was a very positive experience, I enjoyed my time. Normally we have lessons from nine in the morning till three in the afternoon. After the school we come to the dormitory. We are always busy with our mobilephones, and if we have homework we do the homeworks, so we become a bit lazy- so these activities showed us the World outside the dormitory and school (P6).*

Sense of Belonging: It was previously mentioned that loneliness, social constancy and sense of belonging are among the main problems that international students face with. Through the participation in leisure time activities students expresses that they feel better and their sense of belonging to the university strenghtens.

Since we are away from our families, the internationa Office and helped us to feel at home with these activities(P7).

Academic Success: The students explained that during the leisure activities they were relieved from stress and thus could better concentrate in their lessons and exams.

……adjustment can be one of the ways for academic success, if we do not adapt we can not become successful (K20).

Networking: The conception that the students have mentioned as "grouping" is confirming the description of Ward et al.(2005) " joining in new friendship networks and developing new networks are the main determiners of social interaction and social adjustment"

……we make new friends, this is good for me (P8).

……….in oder not to get bored , spor and these activities are necessary. If people with different nationalities are combined in them it is better, because we can make new friend in that way and can learn Turkish (P19).

5.2 Psychological Benefits Category

The participants used common expressions under the psychological benefits category. These codes emerged as; "excitement", "happiness", "psychological support" and "personal development".

Excitement: Participants expressed their feelings of excitement by participating those activities.

…..because when we get there, we played Orienteering game, there were flags and we had to compete with each other, we played respecting the game rules, I was so excited, and a bit stressfull. We played in pairs, and this caused some complication, sometimes I directed my friend and sometimes he directed me towards another way. You have to run after your pair(P20).

…..it was so good, because during the race you have to be active physically and I was not active recemntly so I was a bit lazy (P1).

Happiness: There was no doubt that almost all of the participants enjoyed their time and activities contributed to their sense of happiness

……leisure activities were so joyful that we were physically active and enjoyed ourselves(K2).

….I was so motivated and very happy. We could happily study our lessons after those activities(P5).

Psychological support: Participants reported that they felt psychological support from the university by taking place in the leisure activities.

………social adjustment effect evey phase of our life. If we do not participate in such activities our mood becomes negative. We can not concentrate on our responsibilities even on our life.(P16)

If one can join some activities like those, one can feel more active, you know what is going on out there in life.(P19)

Personal Development: Participants stated that the activities contributed to their social learning within a new environment. Consequently, it is understood that learning new skills supports personal development in this population and makes their free time more meaningful.

….one can not learn everything only by attending to a school, or joining in lessons, but must spend time with such kind of events and activities in order to acquire new perspectives and develop ourselves (P18).

… for me personal development is vital, it does not mean that being very successful academically is everything instead if we can not communicate with the people outside there, araound us, it does not mean anything. One should learn how to act in front of others, in the society. To give an example, a person is successful in the school but after the graduation starts working in a company but can not communicate with colleaques then being successful at the university does not bring anything to you. For a better social adjustment one should give importance to the relationships with others (P6)
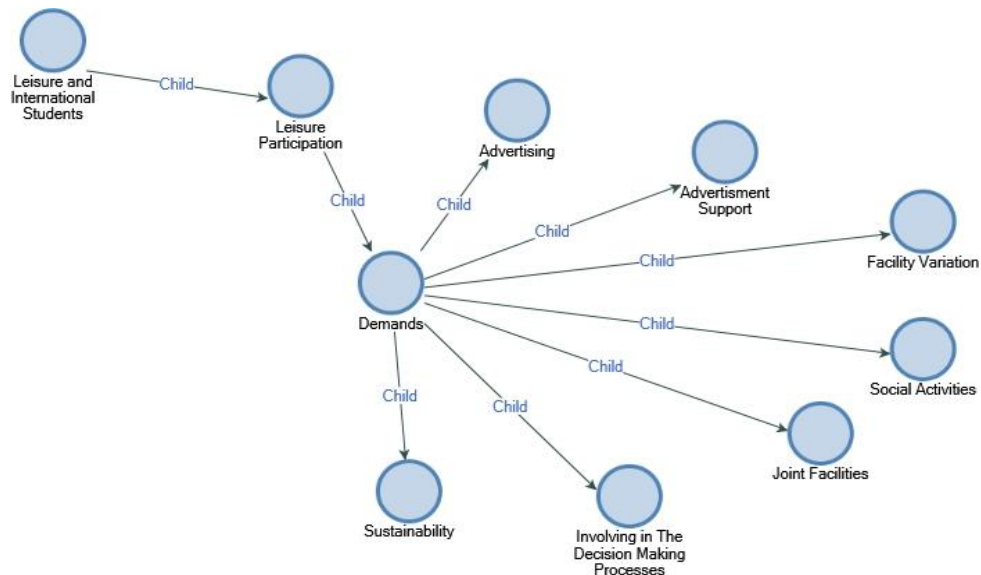
5.3 Physological Benefits Category

Physical benefits: Under the main theme of "physical benefits" participants have pointed out that since not having been sporting for long time, they felt physically well by attending the sportive and physical leisure time activities.

…..*while racing in the leisure activities here, in orienteering for example, it was a bit weary because we were not physically active untill then, but since we run now I feel fit and energitic now, it was good. It was very beneficial (P1)*

....this gave me an opportunity to be more active(P3)

Under the "demands" model seven subsequent codes were emerged. These codes are; "different/diverse activities", "participation in decision making processes", "joint activities", "promotion", "sustainibility", "social activities", and "publication support". The themes regarding to the demands and expectations of international students from the university are presented in Model 2.

Model 2. Demands and expectations of international students from the university regarding leisure activities

After the qualitative data analysis, it is found out that, international students have expectations and demands from the university with respect to leisure activities.

Advertis*ing* **…….***More information about the activity programmes could be done, on website of the university or on Facebook may be (P1)* **Advertising support;** students reported that they need support from the university for the cultural and national activities of country groups. International students' clubs or groups organize some activities, culture nights, fairs or locate stand across the campuses for cultural promotion. Students stated that they need printing and promotion support from the university for those activities. Participants reported that they require **facility (activity) variation** ….*different activities could be done and more often, once in a month for example, I would voluntarily join and bring my friends too* (P23) **Social Activities**: Most of the participants stated that activities that create environments for social networking, integration and communication would be more beneficial. ……*we are looking for more social activities that international students are invited (P8)* **Joint facilities (activities):** In order to create a more integrated and natural environment for networking the universities should bring together international students with native students. Participants mentioned about their expectations to join in more joint activities. ……*more activities should be organized, not only for international students but for all students in the university (P2)……...my expectation is that I would like to see more Turkish students and other nationalities and make new friends from them (P3)* Students also stated that they would like to be included in the **decision making processes** for the activity planning. *....if I were working in the international office I would invite the international students to the office and would ask for their ideas about the programmes that I organize. May be I would establish a committee from them and give them responsibilities in the planning so that they would feel at home and would contribute to the decisions (p17).* The **sustainability** of the activities was one of the most stated view of the students. They expect the university to continue organizing such activities. ……*I want you go on what you are doing, with more various activities, once a month or once in two months (p7).*

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has attempted to contribute to what is known about international students and the use of leisure as means of

benefits for social adjustment of this student population. Much of what exists in the current literature was supported here. For example, academic needs, having social interaction with other students, staff and administration in the university, taking part in the campus activities, keeping psychological and physical wellbeing and sense of belonging to the university emerged as issues of social adjustment for the international students at higher education. Leisure participation is a promising tool to create socially accommodating environments for this population. However, how active leisure participation effect international students has not been studied extensively in qualitative studies. There were several aspects of this study that were unique and deserve the attention of universities interested in better serving their international student population. First the notion of activity type is an essential element. Creating leisure choices for international as social support for social adjustment should be kept in mind in the planning process. Participants expressed that they enjoyed their time in outdoor activities, such as Orienteering and Trekking. They also expressed that learning cultural and social aspects within the activities (e.g. Time Travel) which better served for social adjustment.

As a result, it has been understood that leisure time activities have impact not only for social adjustment of the international students but also have impact on psychological and physiological benefits when they actively participated in those activities. And besides those benefits, the study results showed that the international students have demands and expectations from the university in respect to leisure time activities. Recommendations concluded from this study are two-fold. Given the scope of this study, the primary recommendation calls for the efforts to extend the leisure time activities for international students by taking their needs into account and by involving them into the decision making processes. Such an effort would increase the leisure participation of the students and the programs would better serve those students. In addition, a recommendation is also made to include recreation and sport professionals into the planning processes and collaborate with all the units within the university serving for international students. This would enhance the sustainability of the events.

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