

BEING A UNIVERSITY STUDENT IN A SMALL CITY: STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF RIZE/TURKEY

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ABSTRACT: *Universities face a competitive environment all around the world. In Turkey, the number of universities has been increasing in the last decade which means attracting qualified students is ever more critical. There are many studies concerning the students' perception of their host universities. In addition to universities, host city itself also plays a crucial role in term of students' overall satisfaction of their university life. Therefore, this study aims to identify the attributes of the host university city, assess students' satisfaction with the key attributes of the city, and get students' ideas how to make the city more attractive to university students. This study is done in Rize which is considered to be a small city in Turkey. A focus study was conducted with 53 sophomore students who study Business Administration or Economics at Recep Tayyip Erdogan University. The findings indicate that the students perceive accommodation, socializing, cost of living and safety as the most important attributes of their host university city.*

Keywords: destination image, host university city, perceptions university students, small city, Rize, Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan University.

Introduction: University students who study in a city other than their hometown are temporary residents of the host university cities. These young adults constitute a significant population both socially and economically. They also shape the city where they study (Allinson, 2006). Recognizing their importance, some cities actively integrate student culture as part of their city brand identity (Insch and Sun, 2013: 178).

Universities seek the adequacy of their services so that they are provided based on criteria that meet the requirements and demands of their prospective students. However, it's usually the location of the university that affects the choice rather than the university itself. Physical, social and cultural elements of a city influence students' choice of where to study (Cubillo et al., 2006).

In Turkey there are 81 provinces; 109 public universities and 70 private (foundation) universities. In big cities, there is more than one university; in small cities, there is at least one public university. Therefore, the competition in the higher education market has made the search and adoption of strategies for prospect students vital. Both universities and the cities are trying to attract the attention of successful university students. The city and the university are interdependent; growth of the university is beneficial to the city; the growth of the city is also beneficial to the university.

Rize is one of the small provinces of Turkey located in the north-east in Black Sea Region. The city is built on a narrow strip of flat land between the sea and the mountains behind. It is a quiet city with very little entertainment. Rize University was founded in 2006 and renamed after the current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2012. Being new and located in a small city, attracting qualified students and academics is university's biggest challenge. The university is growing with its new faculties, departments and activity centers. The city is also growing in terms of its transportation systems and hospitals. However, the city still does not meet the expectations of university students.

The aim of this study is to identify the attributes of the host university city, assess students' satisfaction with the key attributes of the city, and get students' ideas how to make the city more attractive to university students.

The Importance of Host University City: University cities benefit from their highly educated, youthful populations, with greater diversity and cosmopolitanism than non-university cities of similar size and location (Monaghan, 2008). Many cities all around the world have been implementing marketing campaigns in order to

develop a distinctive image (*Petruzzelis and Romanazzi, 2010*) for the purpose of attracting qualified students on both national and international levels. For example, Birmingham's five universities teamed up through the "Student Birmingham" campaign which aimed to raise the profile of the city as a student destination. The Hauge also launched a campaign to attract more international students as part of its goal "to become a large-scale internationally orientated knowledge area by 2020". Therefore, identifying which elements are most relevant to students is the first step in developing an effective marketing campaign to university students' needs and satisfaction attract students and to maximize their satisfaction with their host city during the course of their study (*Insch and Sun, 2013: 179*).

There are some big cities in Turkey such as Istanbul (the most attractive), Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, Konya, Eskisehir, Bursa and Trabzon. Students try to do their best at the university entrance exam to go to a university located in big cities. Parents however, are hesitant to send their children away to big cities because cost of living is much higher in big cities. In the decision making process of the students, the city name plays a greater role than the university name in Turkey. The universities in big cities already have quite a number of qualified students; however the ones in small cities try much harder to attract qualified students and academics.

Rize is one of the smallest provinces of Turkey on the Black Sea coast built in an area where the bright green tea bushes cover entire mountainsides. It is considered to be a conservative, safe and quiet city. Despite growing in terms of its transportation, restaurants and new buildings, Rize offers very little to university students. The venues for cinemas, theaters and entertainment are limited, there isn't a shopping mall, and there is no night life. So it's the challenge of universities located in small cities such as Rize to attract these students. Since the foundation of the university in Rize (2006), the students have been bringing their social vibrancy to the city. The city is also growing together with the university.

Research Process: A focus study was conducted with 53 sophomore students who study Business Administration or Economics at Recep Tayyip Erdogan University in Rize/Turkey. These students were born and raised in the cities other than Rize.

The answers to the following questions were discussed with the students:

- Why did you choose to study in Rize?
- Which attributes of Rize are appealing and unappealing to you?
- Do you have any suggestions to improve your satisfaction with Rize?

City attributes were taken from *Insch and Sun's study (2013: 183)* and asked about Rize to the students. These are: accommodation, accessibility, appeal and vibrancy, cultural scene, community assets, public transport, natural environment, personal and public safety, shopping and dining, socializing and sense of community and sports activities.

Despite the lack of trains, sea transportation, undergrounds or buses, majority of the students find public transport convenient since it's a small city and minibuses are quite efficient. There are so many dormitory options at reasonable prices. The nearest airport is one hour away in Trabzon.

The students complain about the city's design, appeal, vibrancy and energy. They also complain about the behaviors of local people. Despite so many shopping and dining options, they prefer going to Trabzon (the nearest city) to buy clothes and spend their leisure time. They find natural environment (the sea and the mountains) quite interesting. The city is also advantageous in terms of personal and public safety. Rize is a city where the crime rate is quite low. The students can go trekking, swimming and do various kinds of sports both in the city and at the campus.

When all the advantages and disadvantages are taken into consideration, students have a happy life at the university in Rize. However, they look forward to going back to their hometown after graduation. They spend their holidays in their hometown. They are usually absent in the first two weeks of academic year and they get away from the city whenever they have the chance.

The students usually apply for "Farabi Program" which is a scholarship that gives them the chance to study one year at a different university in Turkey. The ones with good English and high academic scores also apply for "Erasmus Program" which is a scholarship to study in Europe for one semester or year.

16 students have at least one relative in Rize and 37 students chose Rize to study because they couldn't score enough -at the university entrance exam- to study in big cities. Majority of the students say that they like the university because of its qualified professors and program; however they will not recommend it because Rize is not an appealing city for university students.

There are so many suggestions in order to make the city more appealing. First they say they need a good movie theater and shopping mall since the city is rainy most of the days of the year. There should be festivals and

concerts attracting the university students. There should be parks (where they can do sports and go on a picnic) and recreation centers (bowling, karting, etc.) in the city center. A seminar should be given to the local people especially the tradesmen how to be more polite to the students.

Results: Higher education institutions have always contributed to the social and cultural development of the places in which they are located (*Chatterton and Goddard, 2000: 47*) and universities are increasingly recognized as playing a key role in regional development (*Charles, 2006: 117*). From the focus group study with 53 university students (coming from different cities) studying at Recep Tayyip Erdogan University in Rize, it can be concluded that Rize is not an appealing city for prospective university students. Therefore, Rize should aim to fulfill the needs and desires of current students, since satisfied students are more likely to attract new students through positive word-of-mouth (*Gruber et al., 2010*).

There should be a group of students that represent the university and students' expectations from the city. The administration of the university and the city council of Rize should meet with this group and listen to the needs of the students and take actions together. General idea is that being a university student in a big city is more advantageous than a small city. Small cities have their own advantages such as safety and cost of living. Rize is a city that has a great potential to offer a lot to both university students and tourists. There should be more research how to make the best of its potential.

At Recep Tayyip Erdogan University there are 15.000 students. This focus study was done with 53 students. The results from their responses can give an idea how to improve the city and university; however do not represent the whole university students' ideas. For future studies, questionnaires should be done with the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior university students. Moreover, the same study can be conducted again with the same students over the years to analyze the progress of the satisfaction levels of the students. In addition, attracting qualified and dedicated academics is also a critical issue for the small universities so this should also be studied in the future. Questionnaires can be done with the academics coming from different cities. Adaptation process and sense of belonging are important issues that should be taken into consideration. Attracting qualified students and academics to the university will both improve the cultural, social and economic welfare of the universities and small cities.

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