

DISCRIMINATION ON CAMPUS: AN ANALYSIS OF PRACTICES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Hate speech and discriminatory harassment on campus are widespread phenomena. The presence of maltreatment on campus, as well as poor institutional capacity to provide assistance, impacts negatively on students' performance, with some deciding to drop out, some experiencing mental health issues and so on. Accordingly, institutions of higher learning have desperately tried to enact policies and procedures providing for inclusivity, as well as those penalizing maltreatment of others. Few studies look at the situation in Türkiye. Despite its apparent commitment to fighting hate speech and discriminatory harassment, the Turkish government's decision to leave the Istanbul Convention in March 2021 represented a major setback. This paper focuses on the Konya-based Necmettin Erbakan University. We used questionnaires and managed to survey the total of 537 students, about 60 % of whom were females and 40 % males. The respondents were undergraduate students attending the university. Our data point out that gender, ethnic identity and immigrant background are key drivers behind acts of offensive behaviour. While additional studies about other campuses would be beneficial, since they would provide for valuable comparisons, it is reasonable to argue that discrimination and harassment need to be tackled not only by enacting legislation but also by creating mechanisms for prevention and monitoring. However, for all this to be addressed in an effective way, Turkish universities require a proper roadmap and mechanism capable of providing solutions. With this in mind, our study sheds light on major concerns and, possibly even more relevant, provides valuable information for senior management as to what steps they could take to safeguard campuses.

Keywords: Discrimination, ethnic identity, gender equality, migrant background, Türkiye, university campus.

JEL Classification: J15, Y80, Z00

KAMPÜSLERDE AYRIMCILIK: UYGULAMALAR VE OLASI ÇÖZÜMLER

Öz

Nefret söylemi ve ayrımcılık kampüslerde yaygın olarak karşılaşılan olgulardır. Bununla birlikte, kurumsal kapasitenin yetersizliği, öğrencilerin akademik performansını olumsuz etkileyerek kimilerinin okulu bırakmasına, kimilerinin ise ruh sağlığı sorunları yaşamasına yol açmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, yükseköğretim kurumları her ne kadar kapsamlı ve cezalandırıcı politika ve prosedürler uygulamaya çalışsa da yetersiz kalmaktadır. Türkiye'de bu duruma dair çok az sayıda çalışma bulunmaktadır. Nefret söylemi ve ayrımcılıkla mücadele konusundaki açık kararlılığına rağmen, Türkiye'nin Mart 2021'de İstanbul Sözleşmesi'nden çekilme kararı, konu hakkında bir geri adım olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu çalışma, Konya Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi'ne odaklanmış olup, anket yöntemiyle toplam 537 öğrenciyi kapsayan bir araştırma gerçekleştirmiştir. Katılımcıların yaklaşık % 60'ı kadın ve %40'ı erkeklerden oluşmaktadır ve Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesinde lisans düzeyinde öğrenim gören öğrencilerdir. Araştırma bulguları cinsiyet, etnik kimlik ve göçmenliğe yönelik dışlayıcı davranışların olduğunu ve bunun ardında bazı faktörler olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Diğer üniversitelerde hem karşılaştırma yapma imkânı sunacağı hem de ilave veriler sağlayacağı için faydalı olacaktır. Ayrımcılığın yalnızca yasal düzenlemelerle değil, aynı zamanda önleme ve izleme mekanizmaları oluşturarak ele alınması gerekmektedir. Tüm bunların etkili bir şekilde ele alınabilmesi için üniversitelerin bir yol haritasına ve mekanizmalara ihtiyaçları vardır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma bazı önemli konulara açıklık getirmektedir. En önemlisi, üst yönetimin kampüsleri korumak için ne gibi adımları atabileceği konusunda değerli bilgiler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ayrımcılık, etnik kimlik, cinsiyet eşitliği, göçmenlik, Türkiye, üniversite kampüsü

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, prejudice and discrimination are universal characteristics of interaction between people. They occur due to differences in gender, social status, cultural background, education and health status, religious belief, values, and even law. In addition, conflicts between people of different ethnicities and religious denomination have increasingly established themselves as key denominators of regions, as in the case of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, Christians and Muslims in Indonesia, Muslims and Hindus in India, Turks and Kurds in Türkiye, and so on (Kenrick et al. 2009). Discriminatory behaviour implies making a distinction in favour of or against a person based on their class, belonging to a specific group, or a specific category to which they belong, rather than on their individual merit. According to the Discrimination Convention of 1958, discrimination represents “any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity and treatment in employment or occupation” (International Labour Organization 2003: 16).

At the same time, the long-standing debate concerning academic freedom and freedom of expression appears to have been somewhat sidelined in front of the increasingly alarming number of cases that involve hate speech and discriminatory harassment on campus (Jackson and Terrell 2007; also Bonistall Postel 2017; Covarrubias 2008; Finn 2004; Oksanen et al. 2021; Sydell and Nelson 2000). Instances of sexual harassment, as well as origin-based discrimination, including the accompanying reactions and sanctions, have stood out as particularly distressing (Aguilar and Baek 2020; Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Cai et al. 2021; Cowan and Munro 2021). This kind of misconduct is additionally worrisome in the context of gender studies warning us that “the prevalence of sexual harassment has the cumulative effect of eroding women’s commitment to careers in male-dominated areas” (Benson and Thomson 1982: 236), as well as the accounts pointing out that “the students who report [offenders] often experience bullying, blackballing, lawsuits, and are even pushed out of their programs or from academia altogether” (Bloom et al. 2021: 1665). In fact, regardless of the exact nature of negative experience, research has also demonstrated that discriminatory experiences and acts of harassment directly affect students’ confidence, mental health, and capacity to continue with their studies and eventually graduate (Daftary et al. 2020; Jackson et al. 2020; Jochman et al. 2019).

Accordingly, while insisting on diversity and mutual respect, the higher education sector has sought to establish environment free from bias, discrimination and harassment. To do so, universities have developed policies and procedures seeking to prevent unwanted incidents or, in the event of their occurrence, regulating investigation and severity of penalty. Policies and procedures are complemented with information leaflets and awareness-raising training sessions; while they are understandably aimed at possible targets, they also serve to protect respective institutions by allowing them to argue that they have done their utmost for safety and well-being of their habitat (Anitha and Lewis 2018; Humphreys and Towl 2023). Still, what we also know is that when all hell breaks loose, universities are prompt to exploit non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) to buy (often with public funds) silence and thus keep their standing in the highly competitive environment intact. As rightly summarized elsewhere, “[t]he system comes into operation to protect itself,” which means that universities think “in terms of the economic cost, of reputation management, and: ‘What happens if we lose our star professor and his grant income’” (The Guardian 2016; also Humphreys and Towl 2020; Macfarlane 2020; Tutchell and Edmonds 2020)? Such an approach exposes the paradoxical character of the matter: while encouraging students to report discrimination and/or harassment, as soon as major breaches are brought to light, universities seek to cover them up. In order to reverse this trend in the United Kingdom, where, as per a 2020 survey, “one third of universities had used NDAs to resolve student complaints, involving over 300 individual NDAs,” Ministry for Higher and Further Education has called on universities to pledge themselves “not to use NDAs in dealing with complaints of sexual misconduct, bullying, and other forms of harassment” (GOV.UK 2022).

This paper complements the existing analyses by looking at the state of affairs in Türkiye. While the country’s constitution and legal provisions contain clauses with regard to hate speech and discriminatory harassment, the Turkish government’s decision to leave the Istanbul Convention in March 2021 (inaugurated in 2011 as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) represented a major setback attracting immediate criticism both locally and internationally (Advocates for Human Rights 2021; Altan-Olcay and Oder 2021; BBC 2021). With regard to other communities, LGBT persons are found to be “extremely influenced by the problems they encounter in social environments,” and “exposed to psychological and physical pressure from their families and the social environments” (Biçmen and Bekiroğulları 2014: 232). Such attitudes cannot be considered in isolation from the academic environment, notably because of the discrepancy between the country’s official openness to welcome foreign students (either because of the

internationalization of the higher education sector or because students happen to be from war-torn countries, such as Syria) and the data suggesting that “students are discriminated against by lecturers, peers and staff in terms of their religious and political attitudes, sexual, social and cultural backgrounds” (Toker Gökçe 2013: 82; also Ergin and de Wit 2020; Nazir 2018).

In Türkiye, the academic environment is regulated and largely controlled by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). While the YÖK represents the highest authority in making decisions with regard to the functioning of universities, the latter can still create their own regulations for as long as they are in line with the YÖK’s principles (YÖK 2022). In fact, since the YÖK provides no guidance as to how to handle cases of bullying, discrimination or harassment, some universities have tried to come up with their own, internal mechanisms. The aim of this article is to investigate the prevalence and forms of hate speech and discriminatory harassment on a Turkish university campus, using Necmettin Erbakan University (NEU) as a case study. By analyzing survey data from 537 students, the study seeks to identify the main factors driving discrimination, assess its impact on students’ academic and social experiences, and propose institutional measures that can contribute to more inclusive and safer higher education environments in Türkiye.

Given that migrant background, ethnic identity and gender emerge as the main factors associated with discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, the article focuses on how these dynamics manifest within the university setting. After outlining our methodological approach, we present the key findings and discuss their relevance for understanding the broader challenges in ensuring inclusive campus environments. In continuation, the paper considers some additional points, as well as possible solutions, which can be of interest to individual campuses as well as the Council of Higher Education⁴. Finally, the concluding section rounds off main ideas and, while being aware of possible shortcomings of the present study, serves to invite future research in the field.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to clarify what we mean by discrimination and hate speech. Discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of individuals based on socially ascribed categories (e.g. ethnicity, gender, religion, migrant status). It can take the form of explicit exclusion or result from seemingly neutral rules that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (APA, 2024; Fibbi et al., 2021). In short, discrimination is the unequal treatment of

⁴ The aim of the article is not to directly provide recommendations to institutions; however, the findings in the research might provide insights for these to change and/or implement policies to address these issues.

otherwise similar individuals who differ by one or more characteristics. Hate speech, while defined in varying ways, generally refers to expressions—verbal, written, or symbolic—that target individuals or groups based on identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. Such speech may vilify, humiliate, or incite hostility. The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, for example, defines it as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are” (UNESCO, 2024; Anderson & Barnes, 2025).

2. Method: A note on participants and methodological considerations

2.1. Procedure

The scope of our study is to determine the presence of hate speech and discriminatory harassment at Necmettin Erbakan University. In 2020, we joined the Erasmus+ project Countering Hate and Extremism on Campus: Knowledge Innovation and Training in Higher Education, which has sought to assist educators, policymakers, and student organizations, so that campuses would eventually become more inclusive, and thus “safer and better places for all” (Birmingham City University 2020). While it is fair to say that our article is somewhat inspired by the general theme of the project and the obvious absence of research concerning the situation on Turkish campuses, it is also important to underscore that the primary and secondary data used for this article are in no way related to the project, nor featured in any of its deliverables. In fact, the work on this article was made possible thanks to a separate ethical approval granted by the university’s Research Ethics Committee, which has not interfered with the Erasmus+ project in any way.

In order to ascertain the prevalence of hate and discrimination within Necmettin Erbakan University, and in order to give meaningful recommendations to address any issues, we opted for the quantitative research method. The survey was designed to specifically target university students, with a deliberate emphasis on exploring their ethnic identity, religious background, and sexual orientation. In compliance with the prerequisite of acquiring authorization from the university’s Research Ethics Committee, a formal request, accompanied by the carefully prepared questionnaire and interview protocol, was submitted. In accordance with the obtained permission, and the explicit approval of the coordinator responsible for international relations, access was granted to the list of students participating in the Erasmus foreign language examination. More specifically, with the permission of the institution, 2,689 students who had

taken the NEU foreign language exam and 319 international students were emailed; although international students tend to have a good command of Turkish language, the survey questions were prepared in both Turkish and English. The questionnaire was developed by the authors specifically for this study, drawing on previous research on campus discrimination (e.g. Halici & Kasimoglu, 2006; Boysen et al., 2009; Taner Gökçe, 2013; Dantas et al., 2022). Its structure and content were further informed by international legal frameworks and definitions of discrimination and hate speech, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (1958), and European Union equality law (2000). In this way, the survey items were grounded in both the scholarly literature and normative standards, while also being adapted to the specific Turkish higher education context..

2.2. Data Collection Tools and Participants

We collected data either electronically or face-to-face, in the period between 1 March and 30 May 2022. The decision to also engage on a face-to-face basis was twofold – to obtain a more substantial volume of data. Accordingly, we heard back from the total of 537 students (463 questionnaires were filled electronically and 74 were returned in paper form). Subsequently, the collected responses were entered into SPSS software; in this respect, frequency tables and cross-tabulation analyses have displayed the state of affairs, including any links between different variables.

We asked 21 questions in total. Two of which were of demographic nature - one on gender and the other on ethnicity. The ethnicity question was kept open-ended, since it would be impossible to list all nationalities represented at the university and because, as our results show, some students preferred to identify with specific groups such as Kurdish or Zaza.

The remaining 19 questions were multiple-choice. Eight of these focused on the experience of discrimination and harassment. Here, e.g., we deliberately asked about both the participants' own experiences and their observations of others. This dual perspective was chosen because discrimination is often underreported: some students may not feel comfortable disclosing their personal experiences, yet may be willing to comment on incidents affecting others.

Three questions targeted discrimination within the campus environment more broadly, asking whether students perceive it as common or widespread. Two questions explored attitudes towards different groups, including ethnic, migrant, gender, religious and sexual minority

groups. These items were included to capture not only students' experiences but also their orientations toward diversity, which is crucial for understanding the broader campus climate.

Finally, two questions addressed the sources of discrimination, that is what sources are causing and playing a role in the discriminative behaviour. By this we referred to factors perceived to provoke exclusionary behaviour, such as cultural and regional differences, educational background, economic inequality, or historical grievances. We also asked four questions on possible solutions and mechanisms—such as awareness-raising activities, institutional support structures, or policy measures—in order to gather student-driven suggestions for improving inclusivity on campus.

Our study included 325 females (61%) and 208 males (39%) (4 participants did not specify their gender). While 435 (81%) stated their ethnicity as Turkish, 89 (16.6%) students – they come from 30 different ethnic backgrounds – selected Other. In addition, one participant preferred not to disclose their ethnic identity; in their view, disclosing it could have put them at risk. The total of 16 participants did not provide information about their gender or ethnicity.

When the participants in our study were asked as to whether they had witnessed the exclusion of others, 53.8% of them gave a positive response and 45.6% stated they had not witnessed any form of exclusion. When asked as to whether they had been excluded themselves, 20.5% said 'yes' and 73.4% said 'no' (33 participants left the question blank).

Based on these results, it can be claimed that discrimination does represent a problem on campuses and therefore requires a closer look. In our study, we are keen to understand what kinds of discrimination exist. The questions we asked took into consideration several aspects, including gender, ethnic identity, immigration status, religious denomination, and sexual orientation. The reason for distinguishing ethnicity and immigration instead of opting for one category has to do with the unique situation in Türkiye. The Turkish state has a long history of hosting ethnic minorities, as in the case of Kurdish community; however, given the latest developments in the Middle East, a vast number of immigrants settled in Türkiye, which triggered one of the main disputes within the society. With this in mind, we deemed it appropriate to ask two separate questions.

Before discussing our findings, we felt it necessary to investigate the sources of discrimination. This allows us to understand why and how discriminatory views and acts are adopted by the society in general. The next section handles our findings which are expected to shed light about the extent of hate speech and discriminatory harassment on campus, as well as about the

dominant areas of concern when thinking about the broader society, including the position of future generations.

3. Findings

3.1. Discrimination: what are the sources of information?

A total of 537 participants answered the multi-choice question as to where individuals are likely to get information about discrimination. As shown in Table 1, the most common sources include family, friends, and colleagues, followed by social media and television, while newspapers and books are in the third place. Besides, 2.3% opted for sources of other nature. Other sources of information usually imply getting ideas from social or non-governmental organizations, from lecturers and other students, or from private institutions promoting various curricula for out-of-school students.

Table 1: Sources of information about discrimination

Source of Information	N	%
Family/friends/colleagues	322	35.6
From newspaper / book	62	6.9
TV / internet news	186	20.6
Social media	313	34.6
Other	21	2.3
Total	904	100

As for the reasons seen to provoke prejudice and harassment, the ranking from high to low is as follows: regional culture and thought difference (36.9%), difference in education level (16.7%), membership in the community (16.3%), historical reasons (9.8%), individual's own experience (9.6%), economical differences (8.7%), and other (1.9%). The role of culture, traditions, and school education – all are key for individuals participating in the socialization process – always has an intense effect.

When asked about the effects of discrimination on campus, the participants in our study prioritized its capacity to restrict communication between different groups (36.8%), to adversely affect the social and academic performance of the discriminated group (34.2%), to negatively impact on building a harmonious campus (28.4%), and other (0.6%). This result suggests that almost all the participants are aware of the fact that hate speech and discriminatory harassment are harmful. When asked as to how the situation could be improved, the participants

recommended organizing activities that increase interaction between different groups (41.0%), hosting talks and regular lectures on the subject (26.8%), and having more media coverage (19.8%). In addition to these, 11% of the respondents stated the need for political decisions, and 1.4% would have some other suggestions.

3.2. Reasons for discrimination

In our survey, the possible reasons for exclusion, hate speech, and discriminatory behaviour included the categories of gender, ethnic identity, migrant background, religion, sexual orientation, and other. Overall, 23.8% of the participants stated that others were excluded because of their ethnic identity, while 20.9% stated that they were excluded because of their migrant background. For themselves, 21.9% of the participants stated that they were discriminated because of their ethnic identity and 25% because of their migrant background.

Table 2: Reasons for discrimination

	For what reasons were others discriminated?		For what reasons were you discriminated?	
	N	%	N	%
Gender	53	11.9	18	14.1
Ethnic identity	106	23.8	28	21.9
Immigration	93	20.9	32	25.0
Sexual orientation	69	15.5	6	4.7
Religion	59	13.3	17	13.3
Other	65	14.6	27	21.1
Total	445	100	128	100

Given that discrimination of nearly half of the participants is due to their ethnic identity and migrant background, these two aspects reflect a major phenomenon within a university setting (and are of utmost relevance externally, as well). As shown in Table 2, students also feel discriminated because of their gender and religion. What is somewhat striking is the divergence of rates when compared to the other identities. When asked as to whether other or they themselves have experienced any form of discrimination, the rate is similar. In other words, their witnessing of discrimination of others and of themselves have similar outcomes; however, when asked about discrimination based on sexual orientation, the numbers diverge. This might be due to the fact that students find it easier to talk about others' experience than their own.

When asked about their own reaction to the acts of hate speech and discriminatory harassment, 79.1% of the participants (of the total of 316 who experienced such incidents) stated that there was generally no reaction in the given situation. When asked about their own reaction to somebody else being subjected to such acts, 58.7% of the participants stated that they tried to help, and 41.3% of them kept silent. The cross-tabulated analysis involving gender, ethnic identity, and reaction to the situation, suggests that females and foreigners are more likely to keep silent than other categories.

When 121 participants, who stated to have been harassed, were asked about its nature, 40.5% noted that they were verbally abused, 35.5% of them were abused both verbally and institutionally, and 19% only institutionally. In terms of their reaction, 59 kept silent, 69 shared their experience with their friends, five talked to their professor, and one informed the police.

3.3. Findings based on Chi-Square test of independence for gender and ethnicity categories

In this study, we also applied different types of categorizations to understand the perceptions of the various groups based on their different backgrounds. These revealed interesting results since these showed that there are differences based on particularly the ethnic backgrounds of the participants. In this section, we highlighted certain questions which particularly revealed interesting findings in terms of discrimination. Thus, we included the related questions and tables presenting the statistics. Because the findings reveal that the main problematic area seems to be ethnicity in the local context, we grouped the answers based on the ethnic background. Therefore, the ethnic structure of the local context needs to be briefly explained. Because of the internationalization policy of Türkiye and the university, many international students attend Turkish universities, some of which are from Turkic-speaking countries in Central Asia. However, despite cultural and linguistic similarities, they can often be physically different and have a different accent even when speaking Turkish. A further aspect that needs to be highlighted is that we included “Kurdish and Zaza” because the respondents preferred to call themselves either Kurdish or Zaza. For the Turkish speaking part, this might not be a significant difference because if there is a bias against them, these two groups are considered the same.

Since we asked categorical questions designed to reveal the main lines of the subject in general, we preferred Chi-Square Independence Tests to understand the relationships between these categories. The categories used in the analysis were constructed as gender, Female (N=208), Male (N=325) and the student's own ethnicity definition. Gender was coded as GNDR. Considering that many different answers were given to the open-ended question about ethnicity,

answers were coded/grouped under the titles "citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and define themselves as Turks" (N=444), "Foreign citizens and people of Turkish origin" (N=18), "Citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and those who define themselves as Kurds or Zazas" (N=8) and "Citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and others of non-Turkic origin" (N=55). However, due to the relatively low number of the group of "those who define themselves as Kurdish and Zaza", it was concluded that statistical analysis would be more meaningful by including this group in other groups in different ways. Thus, we analysed the relationships between the categories with the three distinctions.

In the first distinction, two categories were created and "those who are citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and identify themselves as Turks" and "those who are citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and define themselves as Kurds or Zazas" were grouped as citizens of the Republic of Türkiye (N=452). In the other category, "Foreign citizens and people of Turkic origin" and "others who are not citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and not of Turkic origin" (N=73) were separately grouped. This distinction is coded as TRKKRT_FRGN.

In the second distinction, "Citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and those who define themselves as Turks" and "Foreign citizens and people of Turkic origin" (N=462) were grouped in one group, "Citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and those who identify themselves as Kurds or Zazas" and "non-citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and others of non-Turkic origin" (N=63) were grouped in a separate group and two categories were created and coded as TRK_KRTFRGN.

The third distinction determined "Citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and those who define themselves as Turks" (N=444) as one group; "Foreign citizens and people of Turkic origin" (N=18) were determined as the second group, and "citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and defined themselves as Kurds or Zaza" and "non-citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and others of non-Turkic origin" (N=63) were determined as the third group and coded as TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN.

Accordingly, the responses to the questions about discrimination are reported below mentioning the Chi-Square, df, p-value and the Cramer's V value-indicating the effect size- (for the interpretation of V value, see Lee 2016: 560). Since too many cross-tables were produced, these tables were not included in the text. We provided thus the percentages related to the categories when interpreting the statistics.

3.3.1. Have you been discriminated against?

The number of students who experienced discrimination was found to be N=110. Answers given to the question according to gender and ethnicity based on Chi-Square statistics are given in table 3.

Table 3: Have you been discriminated against?

Category	Chi-Square	Df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	0.875	1	0.350	0.042
TRKKRT_FRGN	6.827	1	0.009**	0.117
TRK_KRTFRGN	4.737	1	0.030*	0.098
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	6.681	2	0.035*	0.116

In this question, it is seen that there is no difference between the level of discrimination of male and female students in terms of gender ($p>0.05$). On the other hand, while citizens of the Republic of Türkiye (including Kurds and Zazas) declare that they are discriminated against less, this rate is significantly higher for foreign students ($P<0.01$). Shifting Turkic and Kurdish origin to different categories reduces the level of significance but remains significant ($p<0.05$). Effect sizes appear to be low for relationships in all categories. From this, it can be concluded that the level of discrimination in all foreign students in Türkiye, even if they are of Turkic origin, is higher than the citizens of the Republic of Türkiye. While the level of discrimination against females is expected to be higher than in males, this situation is not supported statistically.

3.3.2. How have you been discriminated against?

The answers of the students who stated that they were discriminated against in some way in this question were grouped into three categories as “I was Exposed to Verbal Discrimination (N=49), I Was Exposed to Both Verbal and Operational Discrimination (N=43) and I Was Only Exposed to Operational Discrimination (N=25)”.

Table 4: How have you been discriminated against?

Category	Chi-Square	df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	0.610	2	0.737	0.072
TRKKRT_FRGN	2.660	2	0.264	0.153
TRK_KRTFRGN	9.024	2	0.011*	0.281
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	11.839	4	0.019*	0.228

When viewed by gender, it is seen that both groups are equally exposed to all three types of discrimination at similar rates. From the point of ethnicity, it is understood that there is no difference in the type of discrimination between Turks and Kurds who are citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and all foreigners ($p>0.05$), and that they are exposed to similar discrimination in every category - mostly verbally. On the other hand, the type of discrimination also changed when those who stated their origin as Kurdish and Zaza were transferred to the group of foreign students; also, the percentage of “Only Verbal Discrimination” (from 53 to 59 Percent) and “Only Operational Discrimination” (from 20 to 32 Percent) increased significantly when Kurdish and Zaza students were transferred to the other group (on the other hand, the rate of “Exposure to Both Verbal and Operational Discrimination” decreased (from 27 to 9 percent). The rate of exposure to both verbal and operational discrimination was higher in foreigners of Turkic origin than in other groups ($p<0.05$). It can be said that the level of effect size is close to moderate in the groups with a significant relationship ($V=0.281$ and $V=0.228$).

3.3.3. Is discrimination common on campus?

The answers given by the students to this question are in three categories: Yes ($N=110$), No ($N=229$) and No Idea ($N=193$).

Table 5: Is discrimination common on campus

Category	Chi-Square	Df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	0.078	2	0.962	0.012
TRKKRT_FRGN	4.889	2	0.087	0.099
TRK_KRTFRGN	4.295	2	0.117	0.092
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	10.663	4	0.031*	0.103

Although the effect size on this question was low ($V=0.103$), foreign students of Turkic origin believed that there was widespread discrimination on campus with a slightly higher and significantly higher percentage than other groups ($p<0.05$). There is no difference in this regard in terms of gender ($p>0.05$).

3.3.4. Who is most discriminated against?

When students were asked about their opinions about which groups were discriminated against the most, the various answers were collected in five categories. Thus, they were grouped as "No one is discriminated against" ($N=137$), "Turkish citizens are discriminated against" ($N=57$),

"Immigrants are discriminated against" (N=127), "People of different genders are discriminated against" (N=82) and "Those of different ethnicities are discriminated against" (N=83).

Table 6: Most discriminated groups

Category	Chi-Square	df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	1.901	4	0.754	0.063
TRKKRT_FRGN	60.411	4	0.000**	0.356
TRK_KRTFRGN	33.295	4	0.000**	0.264
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	50.710	8	0.000**	0.231

The answers to this question display that males and females do not differ proportionally, and generally give similar answers for all types of discrimination. However, in terms of ethnicity, it is seen that the citizens of the Republic of Türkiye usually believe that "No one is discriminated against" for all kinds of categories, while the students of other countries think that immigrants are discriminated against ($p < 0.01$). The effect size is also high ($V = 0.356$).

3.3.5. Do you have friends from different groups?

While N=136 of the students did not have friends from different groups, N=380 did have friends from different groups.

Table 7: Friends from different groups

Category	Chi-Square	df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	4.011	1	0.045*	0.088
TRKKRT_FRGN	8.178	1	0.004**	0.127
TRK_KRTFRGN	10.005	1	0.002**	0.140
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	11.371	2	0.003**	0.150

Although we need to highlight the low effect size, from the gender perspective female students have statistically significantly fewer friends from different groups ($p < 0.05$), and in terms of ethnicity, the rate of friendship with different groups is significantly lower in students who are citizens of the Republic of Türkiye ($p < 0.01$). This might be due to the fact that Turkish students have less contact with different groups and thus distance themselves.

3.3.6. Do you have any prejudice against other groups?

The answers were as following: "I am definitely biased" (N=12), "I am partially biased" (N=151) and "I have no prejudice" (N=351).

Table 8: Prejudice against

Category	Chi-Square	df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	1.862	2	0.394	0.060
TRKKRT_FRGN	8.743	2	0.013*	0.132
TRK_KRTFRGN	6.183	2	0.045*	0.111
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	7.988	4	0.092	0.089

In the three-group version of gender and ethnicity, each category revealed similar proportions of responses, with no significant differences. However, in cases where ethnicity is grouped into two categories, it is seen that -though with low effect size- the rate of "partially prejudiced" of the citizens of the Republic of Türkiye is significantly higher than that of foreign students ($p<0.05$).

3.3.7. Is the support of the university sufficient?

To the question of whether the university's support for those who are discriminated against is sufficient, the following answers were given: "I have no idea" (N=240), "Inadequate (N=239) and "Sufficient" (N=33).

Table 9: Support of the university administration

Category	Chi-Square	Df	p-value	Cramer's V
GNDR	11.116	2	0.004**	0.148
TRKKRT_FRGN	0.190	2	0.909	0.019
TRK_KRTFRGN	0.208	2	0.901	0.020
TRK_TURKI_KRTFRGN	1.530	4	0.821	0.039

While the answers did not differ in terms of ethnicity, there was a significant difference in terms of gender, with a relatively low effect size ($p<0.01$). While a high proportion of male students say they have no opinion on this issue, the rate of female students is significantly higher stating that support is insufficient. As shown in table 3, there is no statistical difference between males and females to whether they have been discriminated against. It is interesting to see that although female students do not have a higher rate in discrimination, they feel the need for more support from the university. Further studies could provide more detail on what type of support females demand.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that discrimination on campus is not only about reported incidents but also about how students perceive support, report experiences, and interpret the campus climate. While a high proportion of male students stated that they had no opinion, female students were significantly more likely to consider existing support insufficient. This suggests that female students, despite not experiencing higher rates of discrimination, may feel more vulnerable or less supported by the university environment. Such a perception gap underscores the importance of addressing not only the prevalence of discrimination but also the adequacy and visibility of institutional support mechanisms.

When asked about harassment, the results show that participants were most commonly subjected to verbal abuse, either alone or in combination with institutional harassment. Reactions to such incidents varied: almost half of the affected students remained silent, while others confided in friends, very few approached professors, and only one respondent reported to the police. This pattern points to limited trust in formal reporting channels, which is consistent with research indicating that victims of harassment often choose informal coping strategies. Silence was particularly notable among female and foreign students. This reinforces the intersectional nature of vulnerability and highlights the need for targeted support measures for groups that are both more likely to experience discrimination and less likely to report it.

An additional finding relates to how students responded when asked about their own experiences of discrimination compared to those of others. The results suggest that students may find it easier to report discrimination when describing the experiences of peers rather than themselves, especially concerning sensitive issues such as sexual orientation. This pattern may reflect reluctance to disclose personal experiences due to stigma, fear of repercussions, or internalized pressures, but it also demonstrates that peer observation can be a valuable source of information on campus climate.

Participants also displayed a high degree of awareness of the harmful nature of discrimination and hate speech. When asked about solutions, they proposed a range of concrete and practical measures, emphasizing interpersonal and educational initiatives over political or institutional decisions. Organizing activities that increase interaction between groups, hosting talks and regular lectures, and expanding media coverage were among the most frequently suggested approaches. This preference for grassroots and dialogue-based solutions may reflect students' perception that change in campus culture is best achieved through awareness and engagement rather than through top-down policy shifts alone.

At the same time, students' responses also reflected broader societal influences. Factors such as family upbringing, prevailing cultural and linguistic attitudes, government policies, and the pervasive role of digital and social media emerged as significant contextual elements. While family remains a primary site of socialization, as previous scholarship has shown (Aydın, 2016), new media platforms increasingly shape perceptions and attitudes, often more immediately than traditional sources such as books or newspapers. These societal dynamics inevitably filter into campus life and may both reproduce and challenge discriminatory practices.

Taken together, these findings underline that discrimination and hate speech on campus cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social and cultural context. They also demonstrate that the challenges students face are not limited to overt acts of harassment but extend to underreporting, perceptions of insufficient support, and the silences of those most vulnerable.

5. A way forward

In our respondents' view, ethnicity and migrant background are the most vulnerable categories in terms of hate speech and discriminatory harassment, followed by gender-based maltreatment. Comparing the answers of those who witnessed harassment with those who experienced it themselves confirms that these three categories remain the main targets at NEU. Other, less prominent, reasons for exclusion included age, disability, political views, physical appearance, or difficulties in socializing; in addition, factors such as academic success, financial situation, and interpersonal skills were mentioned as contributing to exclusion.

It is worth noting that some local students expressed the view that, due to the growing influx of migrants and related policies, their own needs were neglected. In fact, 11.7% of respondents stated that it was the native population that experienced the most exclusion. While this perception is debatable, it should serve as a warning for authorities to office inter-community relations closely. Negative attitudes toward foreigners appear linked to rapid socioeconomic changes, including job losses, pressure on public services, rising housing costs, as well as acts of terrorism and fast-track naturalization policies that have fueled suspicion and fear. Given the feeling among some locals of becoming "second-class citizens," the risk of radicalization and unrest cannot be ignored. Local authorities therefore need support to conduct regular qualitative and quantitative research to track such developments and provide timely interventions.

When asked about the existence of hate speech and discriminatory behaviour at NEU, 40.8% of participants gave a negative response, 37.7% had no opinion, and only 21.5% responded positively. Yet 54.1% of respondents stated that they had witnessed discrimination on campus.

This discrepancy suggests that many students do not perceive discrimination as a general feature of campus life if they have not experienced it personally. Further in-depth research is needed to examine this gap more closely. While individual campuses should take responsibility, it would be appropriate for YÖK to use its authority to encourage universities to examine the presence and impact of hate speech and discrimination systematically. Such an approach would enable comparative analysis and the identification of good practice across the higher education sector.

Regarding institutional support, 36.1% of students stated that there was no office or organization at NEU that could provide assistance, 57% said they had no idea, and only 6.8% believed such an office existed. When asked whether the university's support was sufficient, 46.7% responded "yes," 46.9% said "I have no idea," and 6.4% said "no." Finally, 69.1% considered the establishment of a support centre necessary, while 6.7% saw it as unnecessary and 24.1% were undecided. These results confirm that no such office currently exists, yet also highlight both misinformation—since some participants believed such a body was already in place—and uncertainty, as almost half of respondents consistently selected "I have no idea." This lack of awareness is striking and should encourage NEU management to establish an office of institutional equality. At the same time, YÖK should consider revising its broader approach to promoting equality and inclusivity across the higher education sector.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to understand the extent of hate speech and discriminatory harassment on campus in a Turkish higher education setting, with Necmettin Erbakan University serving as a case study. As different scholarly accounts point out, the presence of maltreatment on campus, as well as poor institutional capacity to provide assistance, impacts negatively on students' performance, with some deciding to drop out of their studies, some experiencing mental health issues and so on.

In our study, while we focused on several aspects, two issues stand out: ethnic identity and migrant background. Although the Turkish state has always had various religious and ethnic minorities, two groups are mainly discussed in public. The first concerns the Kurdish community, which is the biggest minority group in the country, and whose innocent members have been exposed to abusive behaviour because of the Kurdish movement and its connection with the PKK. The second group is a more recent one, and it concerns the presence of Syrian migrants, who fled civil war and sought protection in various cities in Türkiye. Since ethnic

background seems to be a problematic area in terms of discrimination, we included a section in which we displayed the relationship between ethnic background and discrimination by grouping participants into categories. Here, findings revealed that ethnic minorities experience discrimination and believe that there is a problem of discrimination, whereas Turkish citizens with a Turkish ethnic background often disagree with this. Nevertheless, further studies could be carried out in order to understand the problem from different angles.

Hate speech and discriminatory harassment are not necessarily limited to the dominant communities; their spill-over effect can easily affect other nationalities that are present on Turkish campuses. According to our findings, a further problematic area involves gender-based exclusion. Even though Türkiye has gone a long way seeking to provide equal opportunities for both sexes, including the passing of laws and provision of educational opportunities (sometimes with quotas to balance inequalities), the representation of females remains very low, especially in higher positions.

While additional studies about other campuses would be beneficial, since they would provide for valuable comparisons, it is reasonable to argue that discrimination and harassment need to be tackled not only by enacting legislation but also by creating mechanisms for prevention and monitoring. In 2022, the Turkish National Agency, which is established in accordance with EU standards and is in charge of promotion, monitoring and implementation of Erasmus+ programs, has demanded from higher education institutions to appoint an inclusion officer. Such an appointment makes even more sense in light of individual universities' efforts to improve their rankings and engage in high-profile international partnerships (Türkiye Bursları 2022). However, for all this to be addressed in an effective way, Turkish universities require a proper roadmap and mechanism capable of providing solutions.

As stated, our research aimed to understand the problem from a general perspective. However, it revealed that there is room for more and detailed studies. One aspect that could be further studied is the actors of discrimination, e.g. on campus. This would help policy makers to implement mechanisms and provide solutions in the relevant areas. Furthermore, the study revealed that in the Turkish context problems around ethnicity are the most prevalent. New studies could elaborate on ethnicity-based discrimination and how they affect students and also staff on campus. At the same time, more data could be gathered (both qualitative and quantitative) on the ethnic identities and appearances of participants and how these relate to the level of discrimination they experience.

It needs to be pointed out that this study has several limitations. First, the survey was conducted in a single university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, although the questionnaire included both self-experiences and observed discrimination, the data are still based on self-reporting, which may be affected by underreporting or other factors. Third, while we attempted to capture multiple dimensions of discrimination, the survey design could not explore the full depth of intersectional experiences (e.g. overlapping gender, ethnic, and class factors). Therefore, future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative, multi-campus studies across different regions of Türkiye, incorporating qualitative interviews to deepen understanding of lived experiences, and applying longitudinal designs to track changes in campus climate over time. Further research could also examine in detail why students are reluctant to use formal reporting channels and how institutional trust can be strengthened.

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