

**FORMAT FOR STUDENT'S REPORT FOR
YOUNG TALENT PROGRAMME (YTP) – MARKET IMMERSION**

Please submit a progress report of not more than 5 pages in length using the following format:

Report for the period: 26 January 2016 to 9 June 2016

Type of Programme: Student Exchange Programme

City, Country of Immersion: Istanbul, Turkey

Name of University/ Company: Sabanci University

Content of Report:

(a) Tasks Accomplished

I spent a semester immersing in both Istanbul's student and local culture by participating daily in lessons and engaging in both internal and external activities such as student-based discussions, debates as well as joining on trips. Beyond the academic, I personally believe I accomplished the task of value-adding my education by adopting a broader and open-minded worldview.

(b) Experience/Knowledge/Skills Gained

Pushed into a different environment where issues of stability and security were of utmost concern in the country, my exchange programme taught me to adapt, to maintain my composure and to develop self-reliance. I ensured that I built networks and a strong rapport with my professors and peers so that I remain informed about the political climate as well as to develop genuine understanding and empathy. The power of experience itself is that it taught me to have an open-minded worldview and to choose gratitude, something I took for granted back in Singapore. Pushed into an unfamiliar environment taught me to be sensitive to the cultural and social mores of Turkey and to take calculated risks, especially when I travelled.

I am inclined to play a more active role as a global citizen after my programme where I saw hope in the political and socio-economic realities. My exchange was an opportunity for me to realise the untapped areas of research I can possibly do in future in the areas of

anthropology- beyond just Southeast Asia. My cultural knowledge was honed during my exchange and it developed my sensitivities as an individual, where my curiosities were piqued to explore further beyond just textbooks and Singapore's context.

(c) Issues Encountered and Proposed Solutions

Throughout my exchange, Turkey was unfortunately faced with a spate of attacks and bombings, one of which took place in Istanbul. The bombing incident caused a climate of fear and anxiety throughout the country and this was deeply felt on campus, where my classmates in all my modules were reluctant to talk or discuss about numerous issues ranging from terrorism and the Kurds issue. There was a drastic shift in how lessons went, where lively discussions were now replaced with a reluctance to speak honestly and openly particularly in my anthropology and political science classes. As a privileged Singaporean who has never been confronted with such a terrifying incident and coming from a learning environment in NUS where students engaged in open, even fiery, class debates and discussions, the change in environment was both shocking and humbling.

As a student who believes strongly that lessons should be thought-provocative and engaging, I made it a personal task to push the self-imposed boundaries of discussion and encouraged my classmates to engage in open, honest discussion that would benefit everyone. It was a precarious balance as I tread carefully in leading class discussions by asking provocative or 'taboo' questions, some of which I was able to ask due to my position as a perceived clueless foreigner. I received encouragement from my professor who appreciated my efforts to push the boundaries of discussion and who shared that she wished to emulate Singapore's culture of education where students were unafraid to share their opinions. I adapted to the change in environment by being receptive to the change of mood and personally developing a rapport with my classmates and professors to fully understand Turkey's socio-political position. Beyond the campus, security was also tight around Istanbul and I took extra precautionary measures by reading up to be a more informed citizen. This allowed me to build genuine empathy and understanding for the country, which I still feel for strongly today. Ironically, the bombing incident propelled my development to be a student with a more open and global worldview- moving beyond the narrow comforts of my privileged background.

(d) Summary of Observations on Overall Experience

Turkey, at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, delicately balances tradition and modernity as it inherits the remnants of the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Throughout my 5 months exchange, it was striking that Turkish citizens struggle with their identity expressing confusion and anxiety on their place in the world. Some express hope to be part of the European Union and believe that the way forward is to adopt a secular European-centric lifestyle while others cling on to cherished religious and cultural beliefs from the Turkish-Ottoman empire. Despite this constant search for identity, the people display a genuinely warm hospitality towards strangers that are truly unmatched and which I'll never forget. I have had numerous encounters with Turkish people who welcomed me into their homes, invited me for free lunch and invited me for a conversation over a cup of tea while I shop. In one instance, a shop owner expressed relief and gratitude to me for stepping into his shop for he has been struggling economically due to a lack of customers. The shopkeeper sent his prayers on me and wished me good sustenance, believing I brought blessings into his shop. This was a recurring incident for I realised after speaking to my Turkish friends that business has been poor due the lack of security in Turkey. Personally, the Turkish culture of serving tea to customers, strangers as well as people on the streets best encapsulates the country – it bursts with warmth and kindness, a contrast to the poor depiction of the country in the media.

Turkey is struggling economically and faces numerous domestic and global problems such as the Kurds rights and integration issue as well as the site of terrorist threats. Admittedly, security within the country can be improved but the resilience of the people and their determination to move forward is something I greatly admire and appreciate. I experienced this first-hand after the Istanbul bombings in March 2016 where my university as well as the people on the streets looked out for everyone, even foreigners. I was advised to take alternative routes and avoid places the Turkish people predicted were the next bomb sites. There was heightened concern and I felt a genuine solidarity that I've never felt before. Overall, the lifestyle of Turkey is one that is laidback even as one can see the emerging traces of competitive capitalism in Istanbul. The culture speaks of an eclectic blend of East and West, Islamic and European, traditional and modern. My exchange programme was a truly unique one where I felt both foreign and at home.

Singapore companies can emulate Turkey's culture of building genuine rapport with people. Across most shops in Turkey and among both shop owners and customers, the

culture of inviting to tea and sharing a genuine conversation based on curiosities exist. This is admirable as while competition do exist, Turkey is centred on extending a warm hospitality that is unmatched. Further, both Singapore companies and universities can emulate the value of adopting a comfortable pace of life where self-development and the family is of priority. I am amazed that my Turkish friends pick up numerous skills ranging from music, to hand crafts, to writing literature – all learnt by themselves. There is a strong emphasis of giving space to grow and explore on their own especially before university. My Turkish schoolmates are often baffled that Singaporeans are constantly in a rush and live through their lives like ticking a checklist. While Singaporeans pride ourselves on efficiency and a thriving economy, Turkey offers powerful lessons on the necessity of, simply, being invested and present in the moment.

(e) IE YTP Funding

The funding greatly helped me in my pursuit of knowledge and experience beyond the campus, something I was hitherto not able to do due to limited personal finances. I was able to embark on trips with my Turkish schoolmates within Turkey, where my travels gave me the opportunity to witness another socio-cultural dimension beyond the touristy Istanbul. Contrary to the belief that travel is purely for leisure, it was this funding that was a great asset to my personal development where I developed a heightened sense of empathy and personal reflection as I interacted with many different people who expressed varied views and hopes for Turkey, a country struggling not just with its economy but identity. My weekend trips within Turkey allowed me to put my home comforts into perspective and pushed me into independence where I was left with no choice but to be adaptable, open-minded and confident when I faced challenges as I travelled. This included the language barrier and miscommunication where I was told off by a man for lacking etiquette and knowledge of Turkish customs. It is in such instances as these which is both thought and emotionally provocative that I truly learn to evaluate my worldview and judgement. I travelled with a few PhD students from Sabanci University with the funding and not only developed strong rapport and understanding of Turkey, but it planted a drive within me to pursue my post-graduate studies. More than anything, my travels planted a firm determination to actively contribute as a privileged, global citizen once I graduate. There are bigger, more important issues that needs to be tackled such as poverty.

In terms of career goals, the funding was an opportunity for me to realise that my interest and focus is on the field of culture and history. As a Malay Studies major specialising in global currents and intellectual thought in the field of history, politics and religion, travelling around Turkey provided the best learning experience to discover and observe first-hand these overlapping issues. I also wish to start an organisation, local or overseas, that focuses on inter-civilizational dialogue and exchange, bearing in mind after my experience after the bombing attacks (mentioned in section C). Overall, the funding was a launchpad for me to be exposed to many aspects of cultural, religious and political diversity that offers both tangible and personal lessons that I would not be able to acquire simply by attending formal lessons.