

Transforming Small Anatolian Cities Insights from Student-Driven Urban Change in Amasya, Türkiye

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Abstract

Studentification refers to the urban transformation driven by student influx, with universities playing a pivotal role. Students boost city appeal, enrich social and cultural life, and drive real estate profitability. Students adopt local customs and engage with residents as they integrate, gaining valuable experience. In Türkiye, many cities under 750,000 have seen universities established post-2006 to stimulate local economies. Despite criticisms of these “provincial universities,” little research exists on their urban impacts. This study explores studentification in Amasya, focusing on Amasya University’s influence on urban development, socio-economic vitality, and challenges like gentrification and housing pressures. Using a participatory action research (PAR) approach, students collaborated with residents and tradespeople to explore these changes. This research involves desk studies, city visits, semi-structured interviews, and creative student-led fieldwork, along with an ongoing survey gathering broader insights from students across departments. A two-day workshop in Amasya synthesised data from stakeholders and experts, revealing the university’s positive influence on local life, though it also created housing pressures. While residents near the university appreciate economic growth and diversity, those farther away express concerns about cultural shifts and housing affordability. These preliminary findings will first inform ongoing survey results and, subsequently, contribute to a broader study involving six Anatolian cities by aiding urban planning and policy-making in effectively addressing studentification’s impacts.

Keywords

Studentification, Urban transformation, Türkiye, Amasya, University

Introduction

In recent years, the establishment of new universities in Turkey, particularly since 2006, has marked a significant shift in the landscape of higher education and its impact on smaller urban areas. With cities like Amasya now home to universities, the influence of these institutions extends beyond education, affecting local economies, social structures, and urban spaces. Amasya, a historically and culturally rich small city in the Black Sea region, represents a unique setting for examining these transformations. The city, contributing 0.02% to Turkey's GDP and showing a moderate economic performance with a GDP per capita of \$19,907, is an example of how smaller urban centres can experience both benefits and challenges due to the presence of a university (TUIK, 2022). However, the role of these institutions in smaller cities is underexplored in the literature, especially concerning the social, economic, and spatial interactions between students and local communities. .

This research examines the increasingly larger student population at Amasya University, which has impacted on the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the city. This aims to comprehensively analyze the student-driven change focusing on how the presence of students affects the economy, social dynamics, and physical infrastructure at the local level. By focusing on a smaller city rather than the more studied urban centres, the research contributes to the limited available academic insight in the understanding of "studentification" within the Turkish context.

The methodology of this paper involves the collection of qualitative data, mainly through semi-structured interviews and student-led workshops. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by students of Amasya University with the support of local tradespeople and residents in order to understand the economic, social, and physical impacts attributed to the student population sensitively. These interviews provided a spectrum of insights into how locals perceive the changes, from economic benefits, such as increased commerce in service sectors, to cultural adjustments and tensions associated with a younger, transient population. Complementing this, a workshop involving students from Amasya University was conducted, incorporating SWOT analysis and mapping techniques. This workshop allowed students to evaluate interview outcomes, reflect on their interactions with the city, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the urban landscape from a student's perspective.

Key findings show major changes in Amasya, an economic activity led by students' demands, and shifting dynamics within the community. Students and locals alike have different views of the city: though some residents view the growth of students as economically and culturally enriching, others raise concerns about the effects of housing pressures, infrastructure, and traditional values. These socio-cultural changes have brought all sorts of opinions to the fore, which underlines the city's adaptive capability. This adaptability is enabled through a 'cultural leak' between students and locals by merging traditional and new influences in ways that will help Amasya balance its historical identity with today's changes.

In all, this study contributes to the academic discourse on universities' effects in smaller cities by offering insights into student-driven urban transformation and adaptive capacity. It expands the discussion on urban sociology and planning in Turkey, while providing an understanding of socio-spatial dynamics introduced by higher education institutions in non-metropolitan settings. Therefore, the case of Amasya

provides an important model for analysing how universities can reshape smaller urban centers and fills a gap in the current literature on urban adaptation and studentification.

1. Town-Gown Relations in Transition

1.1. Exploring Student-Driven Urban Change: A Review of Existing Perspectives

Universities are multi-dimensional systems expected to contribute to the integrated development of urban areas that encompass social, economic, and environmental dimensions. They are recognized as catalysts for socio-economic growth, and transform the cultural and demographic fabric of their host cities (Akengin and Kaykı, 2013; Erilli, 2018; Gürsoy, 2018; Huggins and Cooke, 1997; Işık, 2008; Öztürk, Torun and Özkök, 2011). The presence of universities triggers transformation through the behaviour of students, academic staff, and administrative personnel, who introduce new consumption patterns and daily life practices that reshape the social, economic, and spatial fabric of cities.

Studies in international literature often focus on the concept of studentification (Smith, 2005)—urban transformation driven by the influx of students, which mainly impacts housing demand, retail, and services. Key factors for a city to accommodate students discussed in the literature include housing availability, transportation, and essential services (Ateş & Tunçel, 2023; Harris, 1943). Local governance plays a crucial role in integrating universities with urban development (Glasson, 2003; van den Berg & Russo, 2004).

In national literature, the emphasis has largely been on the economic impacts of universities. Studies (Akçakanat, Çarıkçı, and Dulupçu, 2010; Arslan, 2014; Gürsoy and Erjem, 2019) often examine how student expenditures benefit the local economy, particularly through housing and services. For instance, Akçakanat, Çarıkçı, and Dulupçu (2010) discuss the positive effects on employment and housing markets. These studies commonly use surveys and economic impact analysis, but they tend to overlook the broader spatial and social dimensions. The spatial transformation introduced by universities, such as infrastructure development and land use changes, is underexplored.

From a social perspective, universities foster cultural diversity and social interaction, and reshape cities' socio-cultural landscapes (Bourdieu, 1984; Tüysüz, 2020). Students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds create new social spaces in cities, and enrich local culture and diversity. Koh and Harris (2020) emphasise universities as key sites for such interactions, especially for students transitioning into adulthood. Through integration into urban life, students adopt local customs, contribute to local culture, and form lasting relationships with the cities they inhabit. Although some studies have explored the social contributions of universities, few systematically examine how universities reshape urban spaces. While Akengin and Kaykı (2013), Arlı (2013), and Keçeli (2016) examined socio-spatial impacts, they mainly focused on student numbers and quality of life indicators. The interaction between students and the urban environment remains an underexplored area in both national and international studies.

Discussions on land use and spatial impacts remain relatively underdeveloped in the literature. Limited studies by Abar and Karaaslan (2013) and Çalışkan and Sarış (2008) have used multiple correspondence analysis and surveys to explore how universities affect urban planning. However, these studies often fail to fully capture how universities reshape cities through their demand for housing, services, and infrastructure.

Both international and national literature highlight the need for more comprehensive approaches to studying universities' roles in urban development. While economic impacts are well-documented, the social and spatial dimensions require deeper exploration, particularly in Türkiye. This project aims to address this gap by providing a holistic framework to analyse the diverse impacts of universities on urban transformation.

1.2. Multi-Dimensional Impacts of Universities in Türkiye: The Case of Amasya

In Türkiye, the rapid expansion of universities, particularly after the 2006 reforms, has significantly influenced both urban development and local economies, especially in small and medium-sized cities. Many cities with populations under 750,000 established universities as part of a national strategy to boost regional development. Although these universities contribute only 0.00% to 0.02% of Türkiye's GDP (TUIK, 2022), their local economic and socio-cultural impacts are substantial.

Amasya, the case study area of this research, exemplifies this dynamic by contributing 0.02% to the national GDP with a total GDP of \$6.7 billion in 2022 (TUIK, 2022). Its GDP per capita stands at \$19,907, moderate compared to other cities with universities founded post-2006, where GDP per capita ranges from \$5,000 to \$20,000 (TUIK, 2022). However, Amasya's local economy, particularly in education, housing, and services, has experienced significant growth due to the presence of students. Yet, preliminary results of the ongoing surveys with Amasya University students within this research show that despite this growth, 72% find shopping options inadequate, and 69% feel a lack of suitable social spaces. This highlights a gap between economic growth and the city's ability to meet the social and cultural needs of its student population.

Economic impacts of universities are often viewed through the lens of student expenditures. In cities like Burdur and Erzincan, student spending on housing and local goods stimulates business growth and employment (Gürsoy, 2018). Amasya also benefits from increased spending, but this economic boost coincides with rising rents and gentrification, leading to socio-spatial tensions. Arslan (2014) and Kaşlı and Serel (2008) noted that housing markets in university cities, like Amasya, struggle to balance growing student demand with affordability, creating pressures on long-term residents. This pattern reshapes neighbourhoods both physically and socially.

Beyond economics, universities like Amasya University have sparked significant social and cultural changes. Akengin and Kaykı (2013) discuss how universities enrich cities by fostering cultural activities, events, and increased social engagement. However, tensions between students and long-term residents often emerge, particularly concerning the availability of affordable housing and cultural shifts (Ergun, 2014). Preliminary results of the ongoing survey with Amasya University students showed that 60% of respondents do not plan to remain in Amasya after graduation by referring to limited job opportunities and a lack of cultural vibrancy.

Furthermore, the socio-spatial impact of universities extends to infrastructure and urban planning. These cities often struggle to keep pace with their rapidly growing student populations. Sankır and Sankır (2017) highlighted housing shortages and inadequate social services in smaller cities. In these cities, urban infrastructure, such as public spaces and transportation, has not evolved to match the city's needs, leading to issues like traffic congestion. Abar and Karaaslan (2013) emphasise that these small-sized cities experience unplanned urban growth, leading to reactive measures rather than proactive, strategic urban planning.

In conclusion, universities in Türkiye, especially the ones in smaller cities such as Amasya, usually have a significant contribution to strengthening local economies and social structures. However, their impact on urban development processes has been less investigated by concerning socio-spatial and cultural transformations. For this reason, this research aims to encompass these aspects from many different perspectives and contains comprehensive analysis about the impacts.

2. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design to capture the complex and layered impact of the student population on Amasya's socio-economic and spatial landscape. It was undertaken by following a methodology in two main steps: (1) semi-structured interviews and (2) a student-led workshop comprising mapping activities and discussions with various actors. Such methods, put together, ensure an in-depth analysis of local perspectives and student-driven urban analyses that helped gain a better understanding of the adaptive processes of this city.

First, semi-structured interview question sets were created to obtain negative and positive views about the impacts of the student population in Amasya. For this, 20 students from the Architecture Faculty at Amasya University volunteered for the interviews. Between May 7–20, 2024, each student interviewed a tradesperson and a resident locally, which amounts to 20 tradespeople and 20 residents in the sample. The interview recordings were transcribed and processed by using OpenAI's Whisper API, which provides an accurate textual dataset and streamlines transcription tasks for qualitative research. The transcriptions were then analysed using OpenAI's Qualitative Analysis Tools, which enabled systematic coding, thematic identification, and categorization of key ideas across responses (OpenAI, n.d.).

The second step involved a workshop, held on May 25-26, 2024, with the same group of volunteer students, including faculty academicians, municipality representatives, and experts in urban planning. The workshop was organized in such a way as to extend insights from the interviews through participatory mapping activities. Students were to map some of the core elements of Amasya's urban structure, such as transport and land use patterns, by integrating interview findings into their personal observations and experiences. Then, in groups of three students, they presented their SWOT analyses-the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the city. The outcome was discussed in a concluding discussion led by the faculty members and experts in planning, which allowed reflection and synthesis of critical observations.

A comparative analysis was finally conducted by combining the results from the interviews with those of the workshop. It focused on the spatial aspects identified through the mapping and SWOT outputs by comparing these against the local perspectives from the interviews. These multiple levels collectively provided a broad frame for Amasya's adaptive capacity and its socio-spatial dynamic in relation to its student population by offering important insights for the study of small cities being influenced by higher-education institutions.

3. Results

3.1. Community Perspectives: Insights from Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews conducted by the volunteer students of Faculty of Architecture at Amasya University showed significant outcomes in terms of impacts of university students to the socio-economic,

socio-cultural and physical fabric of the Amasya city. Socio-economic impacts were perceived significant from both demographic groups. Local tradespeople, especially those operating in the service sector, note that the influx of students has favoured commercial activity, providing a steady increase in sales. For many tradespeople, the student population translates directly into revenue, with one interviewee stating:

“Students mean direct cash flow for tradesmen, so the benefit is great” (T1-IOD).

Increasing number of cafes and social spaces around the city is one visible outcome, with establishments multiplying in both number and scope to meet student demand:

“Cafes have increased. There were cafes before, but they were neither this many nor this widespread” (T1-IOD).

This economic stimulus is not only limited to direct sales but also generates new job opportunities, as observed by local residents who recognize the positive impact on employment and local business diversity. The presence of students has prompted the opening of new businesses catering specifically to their needs, leading to an expanded job market within the city:

“Dormitories were established, local businesses profited. Many businesses catering to the university opened. A lot of people found new job opportunities” (R1-IP).

Together, these perspectives reflect how the university has become a key aspect in Amasya’s economic landscape, driving growth in both commercial transactions and employment, thus enriching the local economy.

The university has also brought socio-cultural change to Amasya by making the social environment of the city more heterogeneous and open. This had reflection on different kinds of responses from the community. To the local tradespeople, this impact is very positive, since they see more tolerance and openness in their social interaction, which they associate with students who come into their town. Even the social behaviors have changed, and one of the trades-people says:

“This situation has also changed our perspective, people have become more polite” (T13-IBK)

Moreover, tradespeople appreciate the role of the university in boosting the quality of demographics in the city and facilitating cultural integration, adding to the cosmopolitan environment:

“The university increases the quality of the demographic structure in the city and provides cultural integration” (T5-IAG).

In contrast, local residents hold more complex views on the university’s socio-cultural influence. While some residents appreciate the city’s new modern face with a student population, others express concern about the erosion of traditional values. For certain residents, the diverse cultural influx associated with the student population is seen as a threat to Amasya’s conservative identity and spiritual values:

“By bringing the culture of 81 provinces here, they ruined Amasya's spiritual values and the level of morality has declined” (L1-IP).

Yet, others perceive the university's presence as a positive force for social change, gradually normalising ideas that previously may not have been accepted in the community:

"Amasya is a conservative city, but thanks to the university, certain ideas have started to become normalised" (L5-HH).

These perspectives underscore the dual impact of the university, as it facilitates cultural integration and openness while simultaneously challenging deeply held values and sparking a nuanced discourse on tradition and modernity in Amasya.

The physical effects brought different views to the eyes of local tradespeople and residents in terms of improvements and challenges to the infrastructure of the university. For example, local tradespeople mentioned that the increasing number of students has burdened the demand for housing, mainly due to the scarcity of state-provided dormitories, therefore, a rise in the need for private accommodation was felt:

"The insufficiency of the state dormitories increases the demand for housing" (T1-IOD).

This has driven up rental prices and, over time, increased competition for housing among both locals and students. Besides housing, the tradespeople report that the transportation infrastructure has also suffered. In this respect, one stated:

"It has caused a housing problem and transportation issues have worsened over the years" (T5-IAG).

The local residents give a wider perspective to the physical changes by appreciating the positive infrastructural development in light of resource pressures. With the university, new building complexes, including cafes and social spaces for student life have been constructed in the city. These developments added to the social and recreational infrastructure of the city, which makes it more lively. The expansion of public transportation, including an increase in the number of taxis has increased the accessibility for all:

"The university added to the infrastructure of Amasya; the roads and public transportation became better" (L1-IP).

The increase in cafes and social venues reflects also the tendency of the town to adapt to its younger population with one resident notes that:

"The number of cafes and social venues has gone up, and there has also been an increase in the number of taxis" (L18-SA).

Together, these views reveal the university's role in the physical transformation of Amasya and how it balances infrastructural benefits with increased demands on housing and transit systems.

3.2. Student Perspectives: Insights from the Workshop

In the research, a student workshop was organized to include students directly into the assessment of Amasya's urban dynamics. It is a participative methodology that gives students the ability to engage

themselves with the city by using a mental mapping technique to analyze main issues in land use, transportation, distribution of the population, relationships between the regions, and the main set of plans/ projects distribution inside the city (Figure 1).

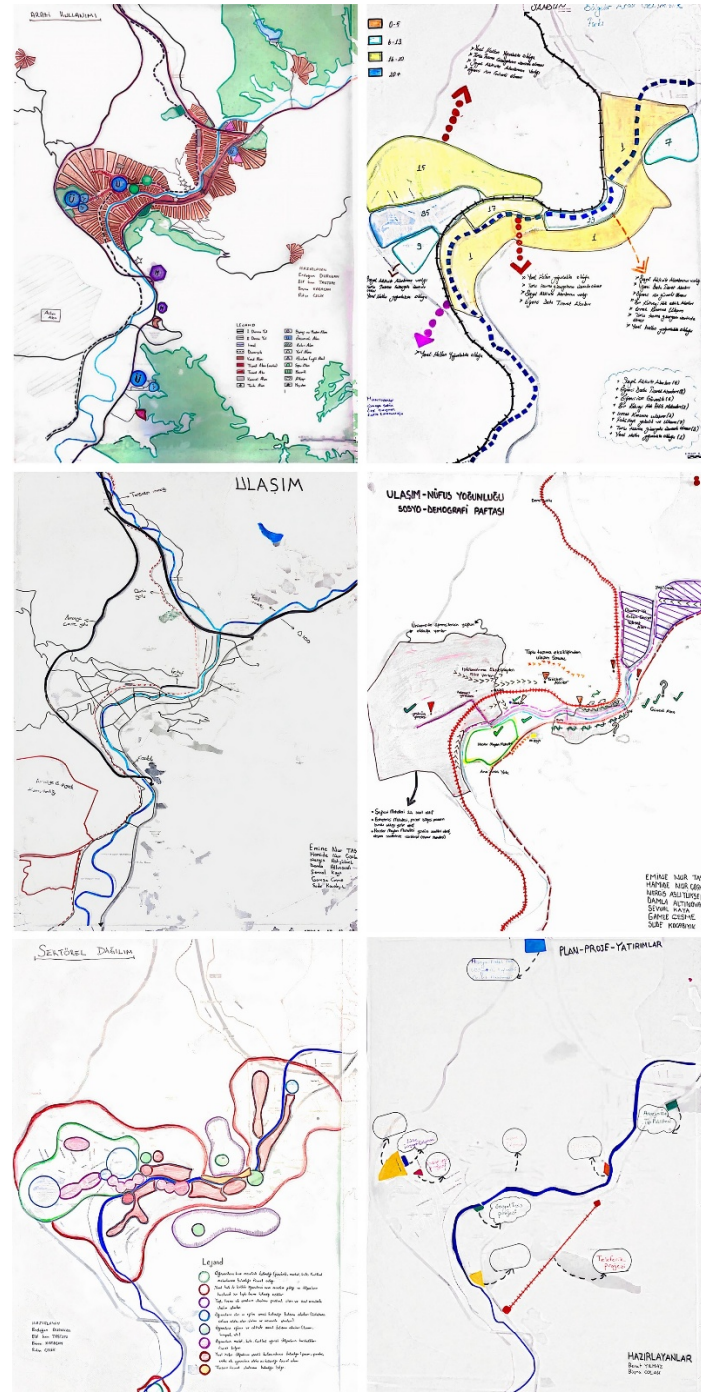


Figure 1. Student workshop outcomes: mental mapping on land-use, inter-region relationship, transportation, socio-demographic distribution, sectoral distribution, distribution of plans and projects, respectively) (Created by participant students).

Through this hands-on approach, the workshop aimed to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world urban challenges, offering students a role in shaping their environment. The workshop provided valuable insights into Amasya's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats from the perspective of students (Figure 2). Students' findings reflected their understanding of the city's physical layout and socio-spatial challenges, particularly the relationship between the university and the city.

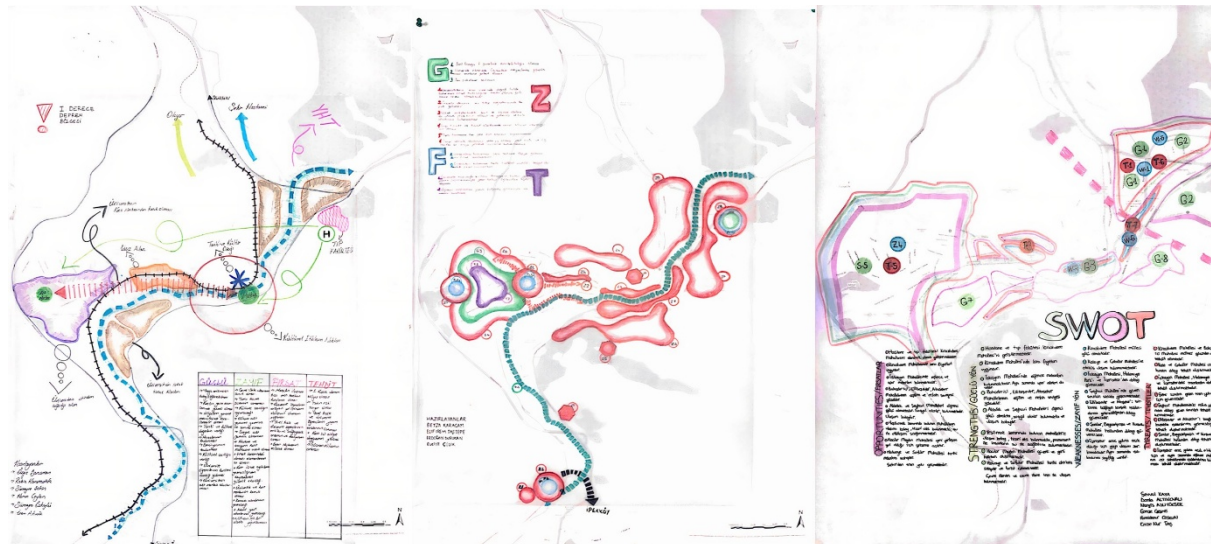


Figure 2. Student workshop outcomes: SWOT analysis (From left to right: S1, S2 and S3, created by the participant students).

The SWOT analysis revealed both strengths and weaknesses, and highlighted Amasya's historical and cultural value, pedestrian accessibility, and the vitality of the university sub-center, including Şeyhçui and Akbilek Neighbourhoods as key strengths (Table 1). The relationship between the city and the river was also seen as a major asset for urban accessibility and aesthetics. However, weaknesses included inadequate public transportation, insufficient intercity connections, and a lack of social facilities for students. Many students pointed out the disconnection between the university and the city centre, which further contributes to these challenges.

In terms of opportunities, students emphasised Amasya's potential to leverage its historical and cultural heritage for economic growth and to position the university as a focal point for cultural and academic activities (Table 2). However, threats included unplanned urban expansion, environmental degradation, and economic disparities between neighbourhoods, which pose significant challenges to sustainable development of the city.

Table 1. Perceived strengths and weaknesses of Amasya from the mental maps of participant students (Summarised by the authors).

	Factors Stated In Mappings	S1	S2	S3
Strengths	Historical and cultural value	X	X	
	Relationship between water and the city	X		X

	Pedestrian access to focal points	x	x	x
	Cultural diversity/ variety	x		
	Cultural flexibility/adaptability	x		
	Economic accessibility	x		
	Safety in residential streets		x	
	Airport/ Air transportation		x	
	Vitality of university sub-center		x	
	Adequacy of social facilities			x
	Accessibility to housing			x
	Train station			x
Weaknesses	Inadequacy of intercity transportation		x	
	Inadequacy of public transportation facilities	x	x	x
	Cultural diversity/ variety (adaptation problems)		x	
	Inadequacy of social facilities		x	
	Insecurity within the central area	x	x	x
	Lack of connection between the university and the city		x	

Table 2. Perceived opportunities and threads of Amasya from the mental maps of participant students (Summarised by the authors).

	Factors Stated In Mappings	S1	S2	S3
Opportunities	Historical-cultural attraction center	x		x

	University campus as a new focal area	x	x	
	Increasing cultural events with the university	x	x	x
	Railway as an essential transportation mode		x	x
	Employment opportunities for university students		x	
	Accessible housing for university students			x
Threads	Unplanned expansion of the urban macroform	x		
	Lack of communication between the university and the city	x	x	x
	Economic differences between neighborhoods	x		
	Destruction of green areas	x		
	Social insecurity within the train station	x		x
	Uncontrolled increase in the immigrant population	x	x	x
	Need for urban transformation		x	
	Need for planning regulations about flood risk		x	
	Insecurity caused by lack of lighting in residential areas			x

One of the key insights from the workshop was the lack of integration between the university and the city. Students observed that the university operates in isolation, limiting its potential to contribute to Amasya's socio-cultural life. This disconnect was linked to accessibility challenges, as public and intercity transport systems were seen as inadequate, impacting both the student population and the broader community. Regarding land use, students highlighted the unplanned expansion of the urban macroform and the urgent need for better coordination in infrastructure projects. The increasing demand for housing driven by the student population was another key issue. Although the university sub-center has developed, students noted that social facilities remain insufficient, which reflects concerns raised in the semi-structured interviews.

When considering the workshop outcomes with the semi-structured interviews together, several parallels and differences emerge. Both highlight the significant economic impact of students on Amasya's local

economy. It is agreed by local tradespeople and participants of workshops that students enhance the housing and service sectors, hence accelerating business and providing employment opportunities. For example, the increase in cafes and social spots identified by the local business also reflects the view of students that there is development in the growth of the university sub-center.

However, whereas both groups identified the economic benefit, socio-cultural and physical impacts were perceived differently by each group. The cultural effect of the university was seen to be very different by local residents, with some believing it had a positive effect, while others felt it was damaging to Amasya's traditional values. Students, however, perceived the university to create cultural tolerance and increase the diversity of cultural activities. This generational divide is illustrative of differing attitudes toward the perception of the university's role in reshaping the city's social fabric.

4. Conclusion

This study provides significant insights into the transformative role that universities play in smaller cities with respect to the case of Amasya. Among its key findings is that students and locals have different conceptions regarding the changing character of Amasya. There is a distinction in the student conceptions, which express that their presence enriches this city, since it contributes to the existing diversity and dynamism. In contrast, locals are more ambivalent. While some welcome the economic and cultural vibrancy brought by the presence of students, others worry about erosion of traditional values and urban mores. Such divergent perceptions point to the socio-cultural changes accompanying university-related urban transformation.

The socio-cultural change that took place in Amasya underlines different ideas concerning the impact of students on local life. Among them, local tradespeople are inclined to consider the growth of students as positive since it gives a greater driving force to the local economic life. Demand for goods, services, and housing created by these students has stimulated the service industry and helped the local traders by providing jobs. This economic benefit creates a generally positive disposition from tradespeople, distinctly different from residents who do not have an economic benefit from the presence of students.

What we have called "cultural leak" further underscores the adaptive capacity of Amasya to such changes in a process whereby students and locals interactively affect each other's social behaviors, cultural norms, and urban lifestyles. In this interaction, a mixture of traditional and modern influences develops which essentially helps the city adapt, changing yet retaining its core cultural entity. This cultural leak has allowed Amasya to embrace new cultural dynamics introduced by students without fully losing its traditional character, providing a model of adaptive resilience in small cities with growing university populations.

This study serves as a pilot for exploring the impacts of universities in small Turkish cities, and offers preliminary insights into Amasya's spatial, socio-cultural and economic shifts as a framework for further research. While this research in Amasya is still ongoing (October 2024), initial findings highlight important dynamics, and survey efforts are still underway with students from multiple departments at Amasya University. Following the conclusion of the Amasya study, the same multi-dimensional, participatory methodology will be applied to other selected small Turkish cities hosting universities. By conducting

similar analyses, we aim to identify both common patterns and unique characteristics in each setting, and contribute to a broader understanding of student-driven urban transformation across diverse regions in Türkiye. Ultimately, these findings will inform urban planning and policy, and aid in the management of the complex dynamics of university-induced urban change in Türkiye's small cities.

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