



The Ambiguous Belonging of International Students in South Korea's Higher Education System

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Abstract

This article analyzes the specific nature of South Korea's policy on the globalization of higher education, which structures the ambiguous status of international students in terms of access to the benefits of achieving academic skills, international experience, and careers. Until 2000, South Korea was a sending country for students in the international education market. However, the country has become an educational destination for international students due to strategic programs such as the Study in Korea project and the Global Korea Scholarship. A substantial portion of the students who come to South Korea engages in cultural migration, often influenced by South Korean pop music (K-pop). These students' educational experiences are greatly influenced by South Korea's international student policy and the academic environments of their universities. The South Korean government has largely achieved its goal of increasing international students, but problems involving language, employment, and culture are now emerging around global education. This article endeavors to clarify how the historical development and orientation of the South Korean government's international student policies contribute to international students' often contradictory educational experiences.

Keywords: education policy, higher education, international student, K-pop, South Korea, student mobility

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Introduction

Competition among advanced countries for top international students and skilled migrants has become so heated as to be termed the “Great Brain Race” (Wildavsky 2012; Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). The number of globally mobile students among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries totaled 3.5 million in 2016 (OECD 2018). International students provide several societal benefits, including the construction of social networks, the boosting of the financial status of educational institutions, the stimulation of national economies through consumption, and the creation of critical human assets. As the policy orientation of many OECD countries becomes aligned toward deregulation, and state funding for higher education is reduced, governments and higher education institutions increasingly see international students “as a natural solution to national skills and funding shortfalls” (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018, 232). Consequently, there is tremendous competition among OECD countries and individual universities to attract international students as a “highly sought human capital resource” (Hawthorne 2010, 12). International students are thought to have several characteristics linked to “good labor market outcomes, such as youth, advanced ability in the host-country language, recognized credentials, significant acculturation,” and training that is relevant in the host country (Hawthorne 2010, 12).

In the current global massification of higher education (Kim and Lee 2006), South Korea (hereafter Korea) is attracting international students to strengthen its national economy and global reputation, with efforts to attract these students growing every year. The number of international students doubled from 84,891 in 2014 to 160,165 in 2019. Though in 2020, the number of short-term language trainees plummeted due to tighter border restrictions during the pandemic, in general the dramatic expansion of international students has drawn considerable global attention. English-speaking countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada have traditionally been the largest host nations for international students. But the recent trend in Korea reflects the growing popularity of East Asia as a host region for international students and the resulting intra-

regional mobility in the Asia-Pacific sub-region (Kuroda et al. 2018). This situation raises questions regarding what policies and programs the Korean government and educational institutions have enacted to attract academically qualified international students and how these students can be steadily retained. The inflow and outflow of international students are affected by state policies and the host country's ability to foster an attractive environment in terms of student safety and welfare. Likewise, the mobility of international students is affected by several factors at the national, university, and individual levels. Changing patterns of global student mobility are often understood concerning the push-pull model (Lomer 2018; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Among the pull factors in Korea are its rapid economic growth, the quality of its educational infrastructure, and the global popularity of Korean pop culture. However, Korea is also notorious for a homogeneous ethnic identity (as opposed to a more open and multicultural society) and monolingualism (as opposed to multilingualism observed even in predominantly English-speaking countries). International student mobility to Korea illustrates the changing dynamics of socioeconomic and cultural connections between Korea and the sending countries and a paradigm shift in Korea's national policies on international students. Korean governmental policy seeks global recognition for economic and cultural success.

This article analyzes the specific nature of Korea's policy on the globalization of higher education, which structures international students' opportunities for attaining academic skills, global experience, and careers. Due to their fragmented nature, governmental and university policies and programs on international students in Korea have been ineffective in providing clear pathways for long-term employment, socioeconomic participation, and immigration. An increasing number of international students who come to Korea for short-term stays are fans of Korean popular culture, such as K-pop and idol groups. These students' primary purpose for coming to Korea is to learn the Korean language and explore Korean society and culture. In a context of limited migration channels for younger generations, young people utilize educational programs to achieve their desires. However, their educational experiences are greatly influenced by

Korea's international student policy and the academic environments of universities.

In terms of student mobility, Korea is unique on several fronts. First, Korea has become an educational destination for international students in the past decade after a long history of sending its students abroad to study. Notably, the reputations of many traditional destination countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, are built on the remains of empires (Lomer 2018, 310; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), colonial linkages (Walker 2014; Zheng 2014), and diplomatic influence. Korea's growing number of international students shows the rise of Asia as an educational destination. Second, as a non-English-speaking country, Korea has reversed the number of non-English-speaking students going to English-speaking countries to study. Third, international students who come to Korea engage in *cultural migration*, influenced by the popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop). This cultural migration challenges the prevalent view of study abroad as a positional good and a method of obtaining capital and career preparation, as promoted in the more overtly entrepreneurial approach of such Anglo-American countries as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

International students in Korea have non-economic motivations, such as seeking distinction and accumulating cultural currency, which may or may not translate into life advantages (Cebolla-Boado et al. 2018; Findlay et al. 2017). However, international students also follow a clear strategy to enhance their position in the marketplace and further their career goals when choosing Korea as a destination country for higher education, skill improvement, and training. Only 7.4 percent of international students graduating from Korean colleges and universities obtain jobs in Korea, despite many more having aspirations to work in the country (Lee and Ha 2015). Often, international students' motivations for studying in Korea and their experiences before arriving in Korea do not translate into a secure job—either in Korea or in their home countries. The international student policies of host governments have mixed perceptions of international students as high-quality human resources *and* as *bogus* applicants who abuse study abroad programs to engage in labor migration (Liu-Farrer 2009).

Government policy often sees international students as economic resources and suspicious migrants (D. Kim 2019) and lacks coordination between education policy, migration policy, and business.

This article aims to identify three central dilemmas international students face in Korea: the outcomes of government policies constructing these students' social conditions and experiences. In doing so, this article extensively reviews the Korean government's international student policy, existing works on international student motivations to study and their academic experiences, and international students who become undocumented workers. The Korean government has achieved its goal of increasing the number of international students in Korea over the last two decades. Still, problems involving language, employment, and motivation for study are now emerging. Stephanie Kim (2016) deals with the barriers presented by homogeneity in Korean higher education, although her research focuses more on academic staff than on students. The firm value placed on cultural homogeneity also limits job prospects and the successful settlement of international students after graduation. In this present work, we aim to clarify how the historical development and orientation of the Korean government's international student policies contribute to international students' often contradictory educational, cultural, and economic experiences in Korea.

Korea's International Student Policy

The large number of international students coming to Korea to study is a relatively recent phenomenon. The Korean government established the National Scholarship in 1967, but this program did not attract international students. Fundamental changes began to occur after implementing the "Comprehensive Measures to Expand the Number of International Students" in 2001. The broader context for the Korean government's interest in attracting international students can be found in its efforts to globalize the higher education system.

Korea's globalization of higher education emphasizes economic trade in

higher education, concern with world university rankings, and attention to the international recruitment of promising students and outstanding scholars (Ahn and Choi 2008). Policy interventions gradually become a marketization process with growing competition in the international education market and the global neoliberal economy. International education is increasingly seen as a private good instead of a public one (Findlay et al. 2017). In both traditional and newly emerging destination countries, governments and institutions have constructed specific representations of the nation and the higher education sector in the name of *branding* higher education institutions (Naidoo et al. 2014). Higher education is used as a national brand to attract prospective international students (Lomer et al. 2018). Responding to this globalization trend, the government began working to attract skilled academic personnel and faculty to strengthen the competitiveness of its colleges and universities, boost its knowledge-based economy and industrial competitiveness, and fill the need for labor in Korean society arising from the country's low fertility rate and aging population.

However, it is noteworthy that the Korean government did not plan these aggressive efforts. Rasch's research has compared Korea's and Malaysia's national models and social networks for attracting international students, arguing that these two countries, both well known for sending students abroad to study, underwent significant educational reform after the first decade of the 21st century under the pressure of globalization (Rasch 2016). Both countries joined the WTO in 1995 and then began to face pressure to satisfy the standards of a *globalized higher education*. In 1995, a significant shift in higher education policy occurred when the Korean government moved toward deregulation. Until 1995, the Korean government—more specifically, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources—maintained strict guidelines on establishing and operating higher-education institutions in terms of student quotas and school licenses (Kim and Lee 2006). However, since 1995, the Korean government has adopted market-based approaches to educational policy, aiming to make universities and colleges more autonomous and competitive. The resulting measures have included performance-based subsidies. The hierarchical market structure of Korean

universities has come to play a crucial role in matching institutions of differing reputations and quality with students of corresponding academic ability.

Another reason for the shift in Korean government policies to attract international students was the rapidly growing budget deficit. The loosening of government regulations since 1998 led to a sharp increase in the number of Korean students studying abroad. As a result, Korea experienced losses in financial expenditure for education and a *brain drain*. In other words, the imbalance between the numbers of inbound and outbound students spurred the government to action.

Following the depreciation of the Korean *won* after the International Monetary Fund crisis of 1997, it became much more challenging for Korean parents to send their children abroad to study. Taking advantage of this situation, the Korean government aggressively explored ways to raise the academic level of Korean universities and persuade Korean students to remain in the country (Rasch 2016). The government pursued several initiatives to increase the research output of Korean universities. One of these initiatives was Brain Korea 21, started in 1999 to foster world-class graduate programs (Kim et al. 2014). This initiative's achievements were forming sister-school relations with foreign colleges and universities, hiring international researchers, and institutionalizing systems to measure, evaluate, and reward globalization efforts. Brain Korea 21 improved the research output of Korean universities and attracted more international students to the country. In short, the Korean government has played a central role in strengthening Korean colleges and universities (Hwang et al. 2011).

Comprehensive measures to attract more international students began with the establishment of the Study in Korea project in 2004. Under the direction of the National Institute for International Education, some changes were made to attract international students. These included the provision of dormitories, Korean culture programs, and health insurance to improve the lives of international students in Korea. The program's website (www.studyinkorea.go.kr) provides general information about studying abroad in Korea. Through connecting colleges and universities to a certification

system, the government imposes financial penalties on underperforming institutions in research, international student recruitment, and the provision of services mentioned above. The project's initial goal was to attract 50,000 international students by 2010. It successfully reached this target in 2007—three years ahead of schedule. As a result, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology established new goals of attracting 100,000 students from 2008 and 2012 and 200,000 students by 2020. To attract high-quality international students, the Ministry has expanded the scholarship program for international students, and developed additional employment opportunities for these students. If the government's targets are realized, by 2023, international students will make up approximately 5 percent of students in higher education in Korea.

In support of this goal, the Korean government has introduced various funding and policy initiatives, including easing visa restrictions for foreign graduates, increasing employment support, and expanding degree programs taught in English (Alemu and Cordier 2017). The number of international students on government scholarship increased from 1,942 in 2010 to 2,944 in 2012 and 3,175 in 2017. In 2019, this number was 2,943. The number of university-invited scholarship students decreased, from 8,091 in 2010 to 7,225 in 2017, and then increased again to 8,147 in 2019. On the other hand, the number of self-funded international students has drastically increased, from 71,843 in 2010 to 110,472 in 2017, and continues to increase to 146,247 in 2019. As of 2019, self-funded international students accounted for 91.3 percent of all international students whereas government-invited international students was 1.8 percent, university-invited scholarship students was 5.1 percent and 0.3 percent of international students received scholarship from their own governments (D. Kang 2020, 180–181).

Korean universities have also entered the fray, seeking to relieve their budget deficits by attracting international students. Although the Korean government has enacted initiatives to attract international students and played an active role in evaluating universities, the Korean higher education system relies heavily on the private sector, with private universities and colleges accounting for 95 percent of all institutions of higher education in Korea (Kim and Lee 2006). Recently, with the number of school-age

children in Korea decreasing from 9,950,000 in 2010 to 8,050,000 in 2019, Korean universities face a financial crisis (Statistics Korea 2019). A tuition freeze and abolishing admission fees have caused further financial difficulties for these institutions (Jung and Kim 2018). Because of these difficulties, universities are strengthening their efforts to attract international students, which has resulted in their steadily increasing numbers. To relieve their budget deficits, in addition to aggressively recruiting international students, these universities are enacting a range of policies to support them. According to the Study in Korea project's website (www.studyinkorea.go.kr), many Korean universities offer multiple scholarships to international students. Most universities offer scholarships to international students that cover 30–100 percent of their educational expenses depending on their grade point average.¹

The objective of the Study in Korea project is to strengthen Korea's influence within Asia. As a result, many international students targeted by national scholarship programs are from developing countries in Asia, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, which have a favorable image of Koreans and Korean culture due to the rising popularity of Korean popular culture (the so-called Korean Wave). Many scholarship initiatives have been led by the state rather than by colleges or universities. The government has tried to catch up with Western front runners by offering scholarships to students from developing countries. To attract individuals of Korean descent, in 2017, the Korean government invited over 300 students from China, Japan, Mongolia, and Vietnam. An additional 150 students were invited from Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Myanmar, the United States, and India. From 1967 to 2017, 8,199 students from 155 countries were recipients of government scholarships. After returning to their home countries, many of these students went on to work in the upper echelons of society, promoting exchanges with Korea (Ha and Kim 2018).

In addition to these government efforts to attract international students, Korean corporations have implemented initiatives to attract high-quality employees throughout the Asian region. These efforts have recently

1. Study in Korea, accessed November 5, 2022, www.studyinkorea.go.kr.

accelerated, as evidenced by 73 corporations participating in a recent job fair for international students. Corporations also work with universities to support scholarships or set up their foundations to help undergraduates and graduate students (Lee et al. 2009). With efforts by the government, universities, corporations, and foundations to create a favorable educational environment, the number of international students coming to Korea is increasing.

However, government policies for international students geared toward increasing the number of international students have also led to various problems. Instead of being admitted to degree programs, many students enroll in non-degree-granting language courses as short-term visitors or study as exchange students. As of 2019, there were 100,215 international students enrolled in a degree program, which was 63 percent of the total number of international students, a 91 percent increase from 2010. On the other hand, the rate of increase for non-degree program international students for the same period was 151.4 percent. Among the international students enrolled in degree programs in 2019, 65,828 were in bachelor's programs, 23,605 in master's programs, and 10,782 in Ph.D programs (D. Kang 2020, 176). As we address below, an increasing number of international students coming to Korea enroll in language courses to acquire a work visa.

Moreover, according to 2020 statistics, 71,067 international students in Korea—or 44 percent of all international students—are from China, with the remainder mainly from Vietnam, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Japan. Clearly, students from Asian countries predominate. Among international students in degree programs, more than 60 percent major in the humanities or social sciences (D. Kang 2020, 182).

Chinese students are the largest and fastest-growing body of international students, both worldwide and in Korea (Cebolla-Boado et al. 2018). The Korean government has targeted the Korean Chinese as part of the overseas Korean population, increasing their numbers to increase international students. The type of educational program that international students enroll in varies by their home country. According to a report from the Korea Educational Development Institute, among Australian students

studying in Korea in 2018, for instance, eight were enrolled in Ph.D. programs, 28 in master's programs, 83 in bachelor's programs, 29 in language programs, and 103 in other programs (Seong-ho Park 2018). The same report indicates that most students enrolled in seasonal programs aimed at ethnic Koreans living abroad are from Japan and Australia.

Some international students were forced to discontinue their university studies because of their low Korean language proficiency. Other international students had to return to their home countries because of their inability to adjust to their academic lives or Korean society. Accordingly, scholars have called for policies beyond scholarships to include psychological, cultural, and academic support (Seong-ho Park 2013).

Since establishing a comprehensive national policy on international students (the Study in Korea project) in 2004, the Korean government's policies affecting international students have changed over time (D. Kim 2019). Initially, the government aimed to push Korean universities to internationalize and ease international student visa applications to impact the national economy rather than to positively advance educational opportunities. After the introduction of the Study in Korea advanced project in 2008, the Korean government focused more on the *quality management* of international students from 2009 to 2011 through the recruitment of the highest achieving students (specifically in the fields of information technology, the sciences, and engineering) and on establishing a stricter application process for students coming to Korea for a short period. To curb the increasing numbers of drop-outs and over-stayers among international students, in 2011, the government designed the Policy for Advancing the Recruitment and Management of International Students (Kim and Lee 2019). This policy aimed to tighten the system of monitoring international students by "assessing universities and classifying them as accredited and non-accredited universities" (D. Kim 2019, 6). The Korean government thus transferred the responsibility of monitoring international students to the universities by implementing relevant assessment criteria.

Finally, in 2019, in reaction to the decreasing number of international students as a result of a stricter visa application process, the government announced the Policy to Increase International Students. Under this new

policy, the government maintained the university accreditation system, aiming to recruit more than 200,000 students by 2023. However, it loosened the Korean language requirement for international students. The government regularly introduced new policies elaborating on the intrinsic dilemma of boosting the number of international students (D. Kim 2019).

Acquiring Linguistic Diversity or Lacking Proficiency in Any One Language

Alemu and Cordier (2017) have argued that Korea stands out as a newly emerging destination country for international students. Although English-speaking nations still attract enormous numbers of international students in higher education, Korea has positioned itself as a non-English-speaking destination in the region (Jon et al. 2014). The globalization of higher education has spawned the dilemma of deciding on the dominant language of instruction. The Korean government, for its part, has pursued a policy of internationalization by demanding that Korean universities hire more professors from abroad and increase their English-medium instruction (EMI) (Cho and Palmer 2013). As shown in Fabricius et al., this goal is not automatically achieved despite the underlying premise that mobility across borders enhances the quality of higher education by exposing students to “linguistic pluralism and generating intercultural understanding” (2017, 579). With the homogeneity of linguistic resources, it is rare for students to manifest linguistic pluralism. Language can be a severe barrier to instruction and research in Korean universities. For international students from Asia studying at Korean universities, many cannot learn in Korean. Nor do they have the opportunity to speak in English. Following the government’s university guidelines, a minimal level of Korean language proficiency is required for international students coming to Korea for a degree program. Initially, the Ministry of Education required international students to score at Level 3 or higher on the Test of Proficiency in Korean upon admission and Level 4 or higher by graduation (Oh 2017, 3). In 2016, the admission requirement was reduced from Level 3 to Level 2, meaning that previously

ineligible students could now apply to these programs. Even then, some students can be exempted from this language requirement under a special admissions process. Not surprisingly, as a result many students do not possess adequate Korean language proficiency upon graduation. According to one report, 48.7 percent of international Ph.D. students who graduated from Korean universities indicated the language problem as a barrier to employment in Korea, with engineering and natural science majors sensing greater difficulties than other majors (Min et al. 2020, 120).

Encouraging the use of English as the primary language of instruction is an important policy. Since 2004, more institutions have come on board with additional government support for universities adopting EMI (Kim et al. 2014). EMI policy mandates that “English be used as a medium of interaction in all university sectors, including administration, research, and education” (Kim et al. 2014, 442), thus enabling international students and faculty to participate in the intellectual community. Korean universities have launched EMI to provide a second-language environment in the classroom and attract more international students. In 2011, 30 percent of all classes in universities in Seoul, and 10 percent of courses in universities in the rest of Korea, were taught in English (Kim et al. 2014).

However, with more than 90 percent of international students in Korea coming from the Asia region, including China, Vietnam, and Mongolia, English in Korean classrooms does not necessarily help them with their academic goals. With English conceptualized as a lingua franca in global communication, many students strive to achieve competency in this language, regardless of their education. Few Korean or Asian students in Korean universities use English in their everyday lives. However, with English *belonging* to neither of these groups, they use English to communicate among themselves. Nonetheless, even though English has become the de facto lingua franca, Kim et al.’s research show that these students have very different attitudes towards English as a language of instruction (Kim et al. 2014). Compared with their Korean classmates in EMI classes, international students whose native language is not English still have greater confidence in English. In contrast, Korean students show a marked hesitancy in engaging in activities or interacting with international

students in EMI programs.

International students find themselves stuck between a policy requiring them to have a certain level of Korean language proficiency to enter Korean universities and another policy that encourages English as the language of instruction in Korean higher education. The Ministry of Education's globalization policy for Korean universities thus raises many questions about which language should be predominant in diverse educational arenas, such as university classrooms and research labs. Many international students who come to Korea have a strong desire to go beyond a rudimentary level of Korean to master the language. However, this goal is not easy to accomplish in the absence of an immersive Korean language environment. Other students hope to learn and produce research in English, acquiring what they believe to be a global asset that is more valuable than Korean.

Again, the Korean government requires that international students admitted to a degree program have a certain level of Korean language proficiency. However, when they enter the university, many of their classes are conducted in English, putting them in the ambiguous position of needing to use Korean and English to achieve their career goals. Rather than attaining fluency in both languages, many international students fail to reach a satisfactory reading, writing, and speaking level in the Korean language. Korean universities are developing special programs to attract self-funded, middle-class students from China, who often find it challenging to study Korean or English. Previous work has documented generally low levels of interaction between Korean students and (primarily Asian-born) international students at Korean universities (Harrison and Peacock 2013).

Many Korean students and international students, especially those from China and other Asian countries, are fluent in neither Korean nor English in the classroom setting. International students' lack of fluency in Korean or English also becomes a problem when they apply for jobs in Korea or their home country.

Difficulties Finding Long-term Employment

Studying abroad has become a means for students to signal their cosmopolitanism to prospective employers in the increasingly global workplace (Fong 2011). Accordingly, many international students regard their education in Korea as an asset when they apply to large Korean conglomerates, such as Samsung and LG. Klassen and Menges (2020) surveyed 217 foreigners currently working in Korea who had experience studying at a Korean college or university and conducted in-depth interviews with nine respondents. The respondents' main reasons for working in Korea were to earn money and experience a new culture. Those respondents whose primary reason for working in Korea was to learn a new culture showed a significantly higher level of satisfaction with their work situation than those with other motivations for working in Korea. More than 75 percent of the survey respondents considered staying in Korea longer than they had initially planned. Employment satisfaction was the most significant factor in their plans to extend their stay.

Approximately 70 international students acquire the E-7 (Foreign National of Special Ability) visa to stay in Korea. At present, the most significant hurdle facing international students in Korea is the difficulty of entering the domestic job market. Only 100 of 10,000 international students in 2013 who graduated from Korean colleges and universities made this transition. A Ministry of Education report asserted that only 7.4 percent of international students graduating from Korean colleges and universities secured jobs in Korea (Lee and Ha 2015). The lack of institutional support for high-performing international students seeking stable jobs in Korea presents a barrier to attracting students to Korea. Accordingly, it is necessary to strengthen the connection between government policies for international students and the needs of employees in various industries. The Global Korea Scholarship program should be linked to post-graduation employment options. At present, foreigners face a two-year deadline after graduation to find employment in Korea. The current national policy for international students in Korea allows these students to get a job while studying, obtain a work visa, and find employment after graduation. However, the strict

imposition of complicated rules and regulations in the labor market presents problems.

Korean companies have voiced various difficulties in employing foreigners beyond issues of language and communication. Considering Korean college graduates as more efficient and productive in the workplace, compared with foreign graduates of Korean higher education institutions, especially in departments requiring teamwork and cooperation, Korean companies tend to see limited use for international students beyond efforts to become globalized (J. Kang 2013).

Moreover, Korean companies are often intimidated by the amount of administrative work required to hire a foreigner, including the paperwork for a work visa—the opportunity for international students to intern in a Korean company before graduation is a very recent development. The government has implemented numerous programs to support hiring a skilled global workforce, but the results remain poor. There is a need to decrease the amount of administrative work required and increase the companies' freedom and flexibility in hiring foreign workers. The government introduced the combined work-study visa to grant skilled foreigners and international students the opportunity for employment and even residence in 2016, but its scope is minimal. Increasing the ability of these migrants' family members to acquire work visas would also increase international students' motivation to live and work in Korea. In comparison, both the United Kingdom and Australia are more generous in providing employment opportunities to international students and their partners.

However, public opinion about foreigners working in Korea remains mixed. Although mid-range projections show a continuing labor shortage because of Korea's low birth rate, this may not apply to people in the highly educated labor market. Well-educated young people and experienced retirees also seek employment opportunities, leaving less room for foreigners. In addition, Korea is generally a homogenous society with little experience with foreign immigrants. Furthermore, there are many reasons that international students who secure a job in Korea may not remain permanently, including problems with acquiring a work permit or permanent residency, complicated procedures surrounding naturalization,

and communication barriers (Klassen and Menges 2020). Only 40 percent of colleges and universities in Korea have implemented the Ministry of Education-administered Test of Proficiency in Korean. As mentioned above, in 2016, the level of language proficiency required for incoming students was reduced from Level 3 to Level 2, making it possible for students with a lower level of Korean language ability to gain admission to Korean colleges and universities. Moreover, for international students entering through a special admissions process, the language requirement is waived altogether. Accordingly, there is a strong need for the government to support Korean language programs, including company-administered programs, to support the ongoing training of international employees.

Scholarship programs for foreigners also need to be expanded in size and scope to provide more opportunities for studying in Korea. Just over 30 percent of international students cite finances as the most critical barrier to studying in Korea (Lee and Ha 2015, 41). There is also a need to expand student exchange programs and invitational workshops providing students from targeted countries with opportunities to gain a greater understanding of Korea and motivate them to study there. Also critical is the need for a central office responsible for recruiting and retaining international students. Currently, there is cooperation between the Ministries of Justice; Commerce, Industry, and Energy; Labor; and Education, with the Ministry of Education often in charge. However, one central body in charge of communication between these ministries would attract and manage international students.

Moreover, accessing the Comprehensive Korean Study Abroad System, responsible for distributing information on international study in Korea, needs to be simplified. This information is currently offered in only 11 languages. The online visa application system (HuNet Korea) also needs to be improved. As international students settle as migrants after graduating, social integration and minority rights going beyond the narrow confines of international student policy become essential issues.

Cultural and Economic Migration through Academic Channels

Desires for academic achievement and career development are not the only factors responsible for the recent increase in international students coming to Korea. Non-academic motivations include the growing popularity of Korean popular culture among global youth, which leads to their desire for short-term employment. In the inflow of international students, the most rapidly growing segments are those coming for short-term language study, training, or exchange programs.

In a survey of 873 students, Alemu and Cordier reported that 31 percent stated a desire to explore new cultures and experiences as their primary motivation for choosing a Korean university. Other factors included the reputation of specific study programs (25%), Korean culture (19%), and financial reasons such as scholarship opportunities (14%) (Alemu and Cordier 2017, 57).

The Korean Wave influenced the choice of international students from Asia to study in Korea. One survey indicates that 51.7 percent of respondents decided to come to Korea because they were big fans of Korean pop culture (Korea Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2012). In a newspaper article entitled “K-pop Craze Stirs Fan Migration,” Hyun-kyung Kang writes that “K-pop migrants, albeit their exact ratio is hard to quantify, are behind the changing demographics on campuses” (H. Kang 2018). According to Kang, the number of French students in Korea soared from 100 in 2009 to 1,344 in 2018 after a series of K-pop concerts in Paris featuring SM Entertainment bands in 2012 and Psy’s “Gangnam Style” tour in 2014.

Park and et al. analyze the impact of Korean pop culture on attracting international students to Korean HEIs using panel data from 21 countries where Korean broadcasting content had been exported the most and reducing the sense of emotional distance between Korea and their home country (Altbach 1998). These trends challenge the previous pattern of student mobility, premised on the subordination of *peripheral* Asia to Western *center*. This change in perception can be seen as occurring not because of an improvement in the quality of Korea’s higher education system

but rather because of the geographical mobility of the rapidly growing body of Korean Wave fans. Instead of enrolling in undergraduate- or graduate-level degree programs at Korean universities, these individuals tend to engage in short-term, non-degree programs that allow international mobility, such as language classes or exchanges. This type of cultural mobility is seen among Asian and non-Asian students.

However, it is uncertain whether Korean Wave fans' study abroad experiences in Korea create a more profound sense of belonging. As discussed above, government policies designed to attract international students to Korea have had many side effects. Among students coming to Korea to study, there are signs of *anti-Korea*. According to a Korean Education Development Institute study, 82 percent of Chinese students studying in Korea displayed this sentiment (Seo et al. 2012). However, the Korean government's Study in Korea project aims to create a sense of faithful attachment to Korea among future Asian leaders, which has not always been achieved. Experiences of racial discrimination, cultural disdain, little social interaction with Korean students, and poor academic instruction lead to a sense of alienation and resentment among some international students. Especially students who came to Korea because of their passion for Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop, perceive a gap between the fantasy of Korea and its everyday reality.

Another issue is the increasing number of international students in Korea who are overstaying their visas. According to the Commissioner of the Korea Immigration Service, in 2018, approximately 4,500 people had abandoned language study programs and remained in Korea as undocumented migrants. According to the Ministry of Justice, the number of undocumented migrants entering as international students is increasing. Universities in non-urban areas find it challenging to fill their classes with Korean students and recruit international students to offset their growing financial deficits (*Seoul Newspaper*, April 28, 2017). However, these universities are not constantly vigilant in screening applicants, who sometimes enroll to become undocumented workers. The universities' methods of recruiting students through private agencies and educational brokers (Sidhu 2019), instead of finding them directly and interviewing

them, is another reason for the increase in undocumented students. In September 2018, 11,760 undocumented international students were enrolled in Korean universities—an increase of 6,601 students, or 69.3 percent, from the previous year. Four thousand five hundred seventy-six students became undocumented (*Ohmynews*, October 9, 2018). International students who enter on short-term D-4 visas for language study sometimes quit after finding a job. The D-4 visa allows students to engage in 20 hours of part-time work per week after receiving six months of language instruction and to remain in Korea for up to two years. However, if they find a better paying job during or after their training, they become undocumented. The so-called undocumented worker-student becomes a significant issue for Korea's Ministry of Justice and universities whose financial solvency depends on international students. Some universities even try to attract international students by promising to help them find illegal employment upon graduation.

An example of this was “H” University, whose Institute of International Education recruited about 500 students from Vietnam from June to December 2019 by promising illegal work (*Money Today*, April 26, 2019). As mentioned above, Korea's Ministry of Education introduced a strict quality verification system in 2011 through its Policy for Advancing the Recruitment and Management of International Students. If less than 1 percent of a university's students become undocumented, the institution enjoys a simplified International Education Quality Assurance System. If more than 10 percent of a university's students become undocumented, the government suspends visa issuance for that institution. Put simply, universities that do not keep track of their international students and send back those who become undocumented cannot recruit them. The image of international students from developing countries in Asia and Africa has been damaged by *fake international students* enrolling in Korean language institutes solely to earn money. Problems with unpaid wages and other issues have also begun to emerge, with these students being seen as an essential source of cheap labor by some local businesses and factories.

Some have argued that the government's policies are excessively restrictive when it comes to the economic activity of international students.

According to this perspective, loosening policies and allowing these students to work to cover their living expenses would be a more effective method of managing them. With minimal opportunities to work in Korea, young people from developing countries use language study to find jobs. Some Korean universities in non-urban areas are encouraging this behavior to relieve their budget deficits.

Conclusion

The Korean government's internationalization policy has been central to increasing international students in Korea (Cho and Palmer 2013). The increase in international students has not always translated into improvements in education, social status, or economic opportunities. The Korean government is expending great effort to attract high-achieving students. The government has expanded the Global Korea Scholarship program and employment opportunities to improve international students' living conditions. The National Institute for International Education became responsible for providing international students with Korean culture programs, dormitories, and health insurance. The government attempts to control underperforming universities by instituting a certification program for host universities and coupling international students' management with funding.

However, international students in Korea experience a vague sense of belonging because of language, employment, and cultural issues. Many international students cannot express themselves academically in any language, caught between the Korean language proficiency requirement and classes conducted in English. Many international students from Asian countries feel incredibly inadequate in both languages.

Additionally, few graduating international students find steady work in the Korean labor market. The lack of institutional support for obtaining stable employment is likely to be a barrier to attracting high-performing international students. Like many other countries, Australia increasingly attempts to recruit international students as skilled migrants by closely

aligning its immigration policy with its global education policy (Ziguras and Law 2006). In contrast, the Korean government does not offer the *two-step* process to attract international students as skilled migrants through categories designed to bring in and retain skilled workers (Hawthorne 2010). In short, Korea is losing the global *skills race*.

It seems necessary for Korean universities to provide more personalized job placement opportunities to international students, and to arm them with more robust Korean language skills and a better understanding of Korean business culture (Min et al. 2020, 189). Foreign workers have reported difficulties with understanding traditional particular situational sentiment (also known as *nunchi*), vertical relationships, and the impatience of Koreans (Seo 2018). The desire to learn about Korean business culture while in school before getting a job needs to be satisfied.

On another note, negative perceptions toward some Asian countries originating in lower-class immigrant workers and international marriage—mostly brides—needs policy attention. The low images of these countries among Koreans could be an obstacle to encouraging this group of students to take a job in Korea. In particular, since the main reason students from ASEAN countries come to study in Korea is the availability of scholarships (Yoon et al. 2017, 23), government and universities would need to consider expanding the scholarship to fulfill the gap.

However, it is important to note that Korean students are unwilling to accept international students if those international students infringe upon their potential benefits, such as good grades, for example, due to their poor work quality in a group setting (W. Kang 2016) or by taking away their scholarship opportunities. The acceptance of international students among Korean students may deteriorate if Korean students perceive international students as competition for scarce resources. Although it is hard to resolve this problem in the short term, the government should consider expanding scholarship opportunities for both groups and universities should implement a more precise learning evaluation system. The overall situation indicates a need for better collaboration between the education industry and the Ministry of Labor in coordinating policy for international students. However, the number of international students coming to Korea through

language study to work in labor-intensive and low-paying jobs continues to increase. These students become economic migrants while serving to solve the financial crisis of Korean universities in non-urban areas. Many international students entering Korea thus take on the characteristics of temporary economic migrants. The Korean government's dilemma is how to use its international study policies to attract high-quality workers while restricting the number of undocumented migrants abusing its international study programs to enter the country.

The overall situation is becoming more complicated due to the many restrictions created by COVID-19. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Korean universities to recruit foreign students. A majority of Chinese students who enrolled in Korean universities and their guardians are not satisfied with online classes and have concerns over the general lack of actual learning opportunities (Feng and Park 2020). More customized study environments, such as reinforcing self-directed study, culturally driven learning support systems, and psychological consultation available in the mother language, could help increase the mobility of post COVID-19 international students (Feng and Park 2020; Kim et al. 2021).

Korean universities need to overcome their ethnocentrism and embrace a more tolerant and multilingual environment. Affecting these changes will allow educational mobility to promote cultural exchanges, encourage friendlier relations between Korea and other countries, and ensure Korean universities' financial viability. Considering the trends of an aging society and a low birth rate in Korea, a skilled migrant workforce with a deep understanding of the country is an invaluable resource.

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