Recommendations for improving international study programs in South Korea: a literature review.

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The recruitment of international students (ISs) has been one of the most effective measures for offsetting declining domestic enrollments in higher education in western countries such as Australia and the UK. These declining enrollments were precipitated by changing demographics that resulted in a decline in the number of high school graduates. In recent years, South Korea has begun a similar decline, even though it is already a significant source of ISs migrating to other countries. The Korean government has sought various ways to increase the number of inbound ISs, but these efforts have been hampered by a number of issues, many of them rooted in cultural and institutional elements. This paper reviews the contemporary literature on these issues and attempt to combine the results into policy recommendations that may allow for the implementation of more sustainable IS programs. These issues and policy recommendations likely apply to the educational contexts of other countries, especially those with similar prospects for demographic change.
Keywords: South Korea, Study Programs, International Students, Higher Education

Higher education crisis in South Korea.

One of the most significant changes in the global higher education landscape has been the growing number of international students (ISs). For many universities in Europe and the US, this growing number has been a strong financial advantage (Choudaha, 2017; Altbach & Knight, 2007), especially since ISs generally are charged a higher tuition rate than native students (Marcucci & Johnstone, 2007; De Wit, 2015). This new source of income has allowed many successful host universities to expand, both domestically (Stromquist, 2007) and into other countries, usually through the establishment of overseas campuses jointly associated with foreign academic institutions (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

In addition to the increased income, burgeoning IS numbers have also served to offset declining domestic enrollments in countries like Australia and the UK (Guruz, 2011). These declining enrollments were brought about by decreasing birth rates in prior decades, a trend that once threatened the viability of universities in many western countries (Agarwal & Winkler 1985). In the last two decades, one of the largest groups of ISs compensating this trend has been from East Asian nations such as China and South Korea (Guruz, 2011; Keller, 2001; Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011).

Despite its status as a major country of origin for ISs, the irony is that South Korea is just starting to experience the negative effects of the same type of demographic shift (Byun & Kim, 2011) that once threatened the sustainability of universities in European countries (Agarwal & Winkler 1985). Similar to the situations in Australia and the UK, this demographic shift is observed best in a steadily declining number of new high school graduates, students that make up the vast majority of available candidates for enrollment in higher education. In South Korea, the number of such graduates has decreased by 14% from 2009 to 2017 (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; 2015). From 2017 to 2020, an added decrease of about 20% is expected to be followed by another 10% reduction from 2020 to 2023, as predicted by elementary and middle school enrollment data (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; 2015).

As a global phenomenon, the active recruitment of ISs, along with an immigrant-friendly immigration policy, has been shown to be one of the most effective measures for offsetting declining domestic enrollments in higher education (Choudaha, 2017; Altbach & Knight, 2007). However, unlike many European counterparts, South Korea is still a greater

exporter of ISs than recruiter in spite of recent policies relaxing immigration rules for students (Shin, 2012), thus relegating one of the most effective policy combinations to disuse despite the seriousness of the problem.

Generally speaking, ignorance has not been an issue in South Korea's seemingly contradictory approach to international study. On some levels, the Korean government has tried to encourage IS recruitment and the expansion of international programs (Palmer, & Cho, 2012; Sung, Park, & Choi, 2013). However, several significant challenges have been revealed as strong barriers to the implementation of sustainable IS programs of a sufficient size to offset declining domestic enrollment (Kim, 2016). In the context of contemporary research, most of these issues relate to IS satisfaction and continuance, with causal elements typically rooted in Korean educational culture. This paper will review the current literature on these issues and combine the results to suggest policy recommendations that may allow for a better installation of sustainable IS programs. Some of these issues are likely to be familiar components in the emerging education systems of other countries, especially those in East and Southeast Asia.

Instructor challenges.

Much of the education research studying IS experiences in South Korea uses surveys with relatively small sample sizes or interview-based approaches, affecting the reliability of some results, particularly as they are applied in representing the whole. A small number of surveys with larger samples have been employed, but these have often involved asking participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds questions with very subjective answer choices such as "normal", "average", "high", or "very high." This approach is questionable because the subjectivity may result in a lack of consistency in responses between groups (Gee, 2017; Baron, 1996) since one group's idea of what is "normal" or "average" may differ considerably from the others. The goal of the present review is not to delve into these methodological considerations, but to at least keep in mind that many of the results described in the following sections may suffer to varying degrees from these types of methodological shortcomings.

One of the topics about IS experiences in Korea that has been studied most extensively is sociocultural conflict (Kim, 2016). In many ways, contemporary Korean higher education is structured and designed with characteristics that are of a western origin (Sung & Lee, 2017). At the same time, Korean classroom culture retains many prominent Confucian aspects (Shin, 2012). Two of these aspects are an elevated level of instructor authority and a correspondingly low level of student independence. Instructor authority is sometimes observed in certain communication elements such as nonverbal immediacy. Compared to their US peers, Korean instructors have been shown to exhibit significantly lower levels of nonverbal immediacy (Park, Lee, Yun, & Kim, 2009), despite observations in various academic contexts that higher levels tend to result in more student satisfaction (Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Zhang, 2006; Jaasma & Koper, 1999).

Recent work suggests that these Confucian classroom elements are unique enough that they tend not to be adopted by foreign teachers working in Korea, even by teachers who have been living in Korea for extended periods of time (Ghazarian & Youhne, 2015). Other distinguishing features that differentiate Confucian and western classroom culture were also observed in recent work comparing the classroom behavior of Korean students and their Dutch peers (van de Grift, Chun, Maulana, Lee, & Helms-Lorenz, 2017). This work, which consisted of observations of 375 Korean and 289 Dutch teachers, concluded that Dutch instructors were more adept at "creating safe and stimulating" learning environments while Korean ones were better at "teaching learning strategies". This result reinforces the idea that a Confucian classroom culture emphasizes instructor dominance because the Korean instructors not only conveyed content to their students but also dictated the methods with which the students were expected to learn (Shin, 2012).

Despite their elevated levels of authority, Korean instructors have also been shown to suffer from "protective vulnerability" (Song, 2016). A specific cultural expectation characterizes this vulnerability: the expectation that any teacher should be a master of their subject. This expectation generates a cultural pressure that

punishes teachers by shaming them for not knowing something in their area of expertise. This creativity are discouraged since they might expose limitations in instructor knowledge (Song, 2016). This discouragement has been seen to occur via an active pathway as well as a passive one. In the active pathway, instructors may directly admonish students for questioning something they said. In the passive pathway, instructors do not directly rebuke students; instead, a general atmosphere of obedience is maintained such that students accept that teachers are not to be questioned. Sometimes this may be enforced by other stakeholders in the class, such as senior classmates, who act as enforcers of the unspoken rule (Song, 2016).

Regardless of the nature of the pathway, this type of discouragement is likely to affect ISs more than domestic students, particularly when the ISs come from a culture without such strict classroom hierarchies. When coupled with teachers who exhibit conscious or unconscious racially-discriminating attitudes towards certain ethnic groups, high levels of instructor authority and the expectations for student obedience likely work to marginalize ISs (Choi & Kim, 2014). At the very least, these expectations discourage ISs from asking questions and receiving the academic feedback they need, especially in situations where the ISs do not understand the material as well as their domestic peers (Kim, 2016).

Domestic student challenges.

Sociocultural conflicts with instructors are, of course, not the only type of interpersonal interaction that must be considered. Interactions with domestic peers (DPs) are another key issue identified as a barrier to IS satisfaction and learning (Chung, Jung, & Lee, 2017). In a number of contexts, both academic and occupational, foreigners living in Korea have suffered high levels of cultural prejudice (Kang, 2010). In academic settings, Korean DPs have frequently exhibited a low overall desire for inclusiveness as well as a general lack of cultural sensitivity, negatively affecting both the experiences of ISs studying in Korea (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017) as well as the experiences of Korean-born students of multicultural heritage (Kang, 2010). This overall lack of societal inclusiveness can also be observed in the underdevelopment of Korean special

fear of shame sometimes results in classroom environments where student questions and education programs, both at the primary and secondary levels (Kim, 2013).

As is the case in most other countries, Korean cultural prejudice is unevenly distributed and unevenly targeted. Historically, Koreans have regarded people from China and Japan as less foreign, both because of shared culture and physical similarities (Jon, 2012). Interestingly, Korean attitudes towards Chinese appear to have taken a turn for the negative in recent years, both with respect to world affairs and ISs (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017). This negative feeling appears to be noticeably held among many Korean DPs, who regard Chinese ISs as being uncooperative, impolite, and aloof. This is in conspicuous contrast to more positively held views demonstrated a few years earlier (Jon, 2012). These differences may, of course, result from recent geopolitical changes in the relationship between China and South Korea as well as some unfortunate, highly publicized incidents between Chinese and Korean citizens occurring on Korean soil (Hwang, 2017).

According to the latest education research, the attitudes of Korean DPs may have shifted so much that ISs from western countries are now treated with less discrimination than some Asian ISs (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017). This work corroborates the idea that an "English divide" exists among Korean students (Shin, 2016). In the context of international study, this divide describes the notion that Korean DPs are most likely to socialize first with Korean-speaking ISs and then with English-speaking ones, inadvertently marginalizing ISs from countries with less exposure to English. The bulk of this work has focused on the interaction of Korean DPs with Chinese ISs (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017) so it remains to be seen how much these observations transfer to interactions with other ISs.

Psychology research from the US has shown that Chinese ISs studying in the US are susceptible to feelings of isolation, suggestive of a more global issue not confined to the Korean context (Park et al., 2017). Language barriers are known to have a serious impact on academic performance, acculturation, and social interactions (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006; Zimmermann, 1995), likely amplifying the causes and consequences of IS isolation. Recent work has demonstrated that the

amount of intercultural interaction can have a direct influence on course continuance (Shahijan, Rezaei, & Amin, 2016). Another study has shown that ISs who exhibit an understanding or appreciation of the Korean language or culture are more likely to gain favor with Korean DPs, likely counteracting some of the negative aspects of isolation (Jon, 2012).

Institutional challenges.

In addition to sociocultural conflicts, many issues have also been identified (Shin, 2012) in the institutional implementation of international programs by host universities (HUs). Chief among these has been a frequent disconnect between the advertised language of an international program and the actual language used in its classes (Choi & Kim, 2014). Another problem has been IS support systems endowed with little or no foreign language support, making them inaccessible to ISs with minimal competence in Korean (Choi & Kim, 2014). Even in some classes correctly taught in a foreign language, Korean students have been observed receiving supplemental materials in Korean, putting their IS peers at a perceived—and sometimes real—academic disadvantage (Choi & Kim, 2014).

Some of these HU issues can be traced directly to questionable admissions procedures that recruit ISs who speak little or no Korean into programs requiring some level of competence (Palmer & Cho, 2012). Such practices are surprisingly commonplace in Korea as they help universities meet various IS quotas established to raise a university's prestige so that it may be labeled a "globalized institution" (Sung, Park, & Choi, 2013). Some of these quotas tie in directly to formulas used by the government to award incentives designed to promote globalized education or improve cultural diversity, two areas of reform actively targeted by the Korean government in recent years (Palmer & Cho, 2012).

Why ISs come to South Korea.

All studies the author is aware of which examine the motivations of ISs in South Korea have employed samples dominated or composed exclusively of Chinese ISs. This finding is not surprising since Chinese ISs do, in fact, comprise the majority (about 54%) of all ISs in Korea (Shen, 2017), followed in distance by Vietnamese (7%)

and Mongolian (4%) ISs. Several key motivations have been identified from this work focusing on Chinese ISs. The first is a major student concern for the value of both awarded degrees and future employment prospects (Lee, 2017), elements known to be influential even outside of the Korean IS context (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chirkov, Safdar, De Guzman, & Playford, 2008). Parental influence is another strong motivator, particularly in convincing students that Korea is a more advanced country, worthy of studying in (Lee, 2013). The relatively low-cost tuition compared to that of US or European HUs was another significant motivator (Lee, 2013).

Despite some popular beliefs to the contrary, the "romantic choice" of viewing Korea as an attractive romantic destination (because of recent Korean Wave or Hanryu influence) was found to be of minimal importance in HU choice (Lee, 2013). The idea that Korean education was superior to options in one's home country and the absence of a desired field of study in one's home country were both identified as significantly less critical motivators (Lee, 2017).

Program and university branding has been another factor shown to affect IS continuance and satisfaction (Shahijan, Rezaei, & Amin, 2016). Work in other cultural contexts has demonstrated that branding can affect an IS's perception of the quality of a host university, subsequently influencing enrollment or re-enrollment intentions (De Jong, Schnusenberg, & Goel, 2010; Henthorne, Miller, & Hudson, 2001). Since most of this work has focused on enrollment intention, it remains to be seen how much branding and marketing strategies can influence other student outcomes such as learning gains and acculturation. Nevertheless, the power and influence of branding as a recruitment tool should not be overlooked.

Policy recommendations.

Given the body of literature discussed in this review, a few ideas present themselves as obvious policy recommendations. From the perspective of instruction and classroom management, Korean teachers need more training to raise awareness about the unique issues facing the ISs in their

classes (Choi & Kim, 2014). This training should facilitate better integration of ISs into the university community and provide better support for their academic and social needs (Chung, Jung, & Lee, 2017).

The employment of more foreign instructors is a useful and essential tool in bridging the gap between native university staff with low competence in foreign languages and ISs lacking competence in Korean and English. Not only can these foreign teachers expand the number of classes offered in a foreign language, simultaneously expanding the repertoire of IS recruitment opportunities, but they can be engaged as advisers and mentors in the academic lives of ISs. This is a crucial step in helping to facilitate a better understanding between ISs and Korean staff, allowing for a stronger IS voice in requesting needed reforms such as the preferential treatment of Korean DPs by Korean teachers (Choi & Kim, 2014).

A similar training or orientation program for Korean DPs is also likely to enhance inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity in the larger academic community. As mentioned in earlier sections, some amount of research has already demonstrated the efficacy of shared experiences in helping to promote better IS acculturation (Shahijan, Rezaei, & Amin, 2016; Jon, 2012). Host universities can support this process by investing in more multicultural activities or programs that encourage cross-cultural dialogue and study. Although such programs may have limited success in reversing negative opinions brought about by geopolitical events (Hwang, 2017), similar techniques have been shown in other academic contexts to improve cultural tolerance significantly (Engberg, 2004). Given the seriousness of the higher education crisis in Korea, an aggressive program of national academic cultural reform is highly advised.

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