

REVERSE STUDENT MOBILITY FROM SOUTH KOREA TO THE UNITED STATES

By Stephanie K. Kim

ABSTRACT

Commentators have pointed to the “Trump Effect” for falling international student enrollment in the U.S. higher education sector. When taking a closer look at student mobility trends from South Korea, however, the facts and figures tell a different story. For the past two decades, South Korea has been consistently the third largest sender of international students to the United States. But the number of South Korean students who study in U.S. higher education had been steadily falling well before the more recent general declines in international student enrollment. What are the underlying causes of this concerning trend? And what are the implications for the United States when such a major contributor of international students wanes? This paper shows how internationalization efforts in the South Korean higher education sector have resulted in the reversal of domestic student outflow from South Korea to the United States that has major implications for bilateral relations between the two countries.

Key Words: *higher education, international students, South Korea*

INTRODUCTION

When Donald Trump was elected President in 2016, the U.S. higher education sector collectively gasped. Campus leaders feared that his “America First” rhetoric would discourage international students from coming to U.S. campuses. Indeed, international students are big business for the U.S. higher education sector and beyond. According to the “International Student Economic Value Tool” produced by NAFSA—a U.S. based association of international educators—that quantifies how much money and how many jobs international students bring to the United States, the 1.1 million international students in the U.S. higher education sector contributed \$41 billion and supported more than 458,000 jobs during the 2018-19 academic year.¹ But in the years that have followed the 2016 election, the Institute of International Education has reported that new international student enrollment suddenly dropped after having increased continuously for over a decade—by 3.3 percent in the 2016-17 academic year, followed by 6.6 percent in 2017-18, and then 0.9 percent in 2018-19.² To much of the U.S. higher education sector’s dismay, fears that the “Trump Effect” would dampen international student enrollment seemed to be materializing.

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Table 1. Leading Places of Origin of International Students in U.S. Higher Education (2018-19)

Rank	Country of Origin	Number of Students
1	China	369,548
2	India	202,014
3	South Korea	52,250
4	Saudi Arabia	37,080
5	Canada	26,122
6	Vietnam	24,392
7	Taiwan	23,369
8	Japan	18,105
9	Brazil	16,059
10	Mexico	15,229

Source: IIE, "International Students: Leading Places of Origin," *Open Doors Report* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2019), <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin>.

Complicating this narrative, however, is international student enrollment from South Korea. For the past two decades, South Korea has been consistently the third largest sender of international students to the United States only after China and India (Table 1), an amazing feat considering that China and India each have a population that dwarfs South Korea's. As of the 2018-19 academic year, students from South Korea enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions totaled 52,250.³ When adjusted for population, South Korea contributes over three times more students to American campuses than China and over six times more students than India. Yet the number of South Korean students in the United States has also been declining for roughly the last decade—well before the more recent general declines in international student enrollment. What are the underlying causes of this concerning trend? And what are the implications for the United States when such a major contributor of international students wanes?

This paper provides a structural analysis of higher education reforms in South Korea that have created what the author terms "reverse student mobility" in South Korean higher education.⁴ It analyzes how the country's higher education sector has enacted policies intended to attract international students as a countermeasure to the shrinking pool of domestic students. However, these seemingly international initiatives have taken on a new purpose of retaining domestic

students who may otherwise study abroad, functioning unexpectedly as a form of reverse student mobility for South Korean students who may otherwise be bound for the United States. The unexpected reversal of South Korean students who would have studied in the United States has larger implications for bilateral relations between the two countries.

SOUTH KOREAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS

South Korea is often heralded for its rapid economic advancement alongside its rapid advances in educational attainment. Before the Korean War, most South Koreans did not even complete primary school, but today, South Korea has the most educated youth population in the world with over 70 percent of the country's 25 to 34-year-olds having completed tertiary education.⁵ But South Korea is also a case study of educational extremes. The country's high pressure culture around education has created a predatory shadow education market of cram schools and private tutors that adds significant nonformal education costs that are financed by private households.⁶ The country's high pressure culture around educational attainment has also fostered a widespread culture of study abroad, with families across the class spectrum sending their children overseas across all levels of education in order for them to gain a competitive edge upon return.⁷

It is this markedly high cost of education that is often blamed for the country's incredibly low fertility rate, as potential parents weigh the future costs that raising children will bring. Indeed, the country has been experiencing a falling fertility rate in tandem with its achievements in educational attainment. Following the baby boom during the years immediately following the Korean War in the 1950s, the fertility rate declined dramatically so that by the early 1980s it had already dropped well below the population replacement level.⁸ And in 2019, South Korea clocked in the lowest fertility rate in the world at just 0.92—less than one birth per woman.⁹

These extreme demographic trends are part and parcel of the country's high levels of educational attainment and have resulted in a shrinking youth population from which South Korean colleges and universities can recruit. Higher education institutions of all stripes began to see plateauing and then decreasing numbers of new incoming students. In 2000, there were 819,779 new incoming students across the South Korean higher education sector, but in 2019, there were only 635,068 new incoming students¹⁰—a reduction of 22 percent. Schools in provincial areas outside of the Seoul metropolitan region face a much more acute student shortage, and many have closed or merged due to financial pressures.

INTERNATIONALIZATION REFORMS IN SOUTH KOREAN HIGHER EDUCATION

As a direct response to the domestic student shortage, the South Korean government introduced a series of policies throughout the 2000s and 2010s intended to internationalize the country's higher education sector. These policies underscored the need for South Korean universities to improve institutional quality as a means to attract more international students and make up for domestic student shortfalls.¹¹ Since their implementation, they have dramatically changed the academic culture of South Korean universities in a number of profound ways.

The first internationalization policy was the Study Korea Project. Launched in 2004, it was initiated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and actively targeted international student enrollment in South Korean universities through government scholarships, sought improvements in their living conditions, and focused on administrative support capabilities and services for these students. The goal was, and is, to establish South Korea as the education hub of Northeast Asia.

One direct result of this policy was the spectacular growth in English-mediated instruction across South Korean universities. Top universities that benefitted the most from increased international student enrollment began to offer a larger proportion of their classes in English in order to better accommodate them on their campuses.¹² Today, top private universities such as Korea University and Yonsei University offer a third of their classes in English, while notable STEM universities such as the Pohang University of Science and Technology and the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology offer nearly all of their classes in English.

The second policy was the Brain Korea 21 (BK21) Project. Its objective was to internationalize the research capacity of South Korean universities. Funded by the National Research Foundation from 1999 to 2012, the project provided resources to a selection of elite universities with the aim of nurturing and catapulting at least ten to world class status. The project measured success primarily by quantifying the number of publications in indexed journals and focused particularly on global rankings as proof of institutional performance.¹³

A cumulative effect of both the Study Korea and BK21 Projects is a hiring preference across South Korean universities for faculty with advanced English-language capabilities. South Korean universities have begun to require that newly hired professors teach at least some of their classes in English, and measure faculty productivity by a results-oriented evaluative system that prioritizes publications in English-language journals.¹⁴ This has effectively institutionalized a hiring incentive for faculty who not only possess advanced English-language capabilities but who have received advanced degrees from institutions in English-speaking countries, in most cases, the United States.¹⁵

The third policy was the World Class University Project. In operation from 2008 to 2013, it was a large-scale initiative for the internationalization of research and academic staff. It was, in essence, a higher education subsidy program that invited overseas scholars in possession of advanced research capacities to South Korean universities as a way of "importing" overseas scholars on a large scale.¹⁶ The primary motivation of this project was to counterbalance the outflow of prominent scholars from South Korea and to increase the global rankings of South Korean universities.

Under the auspices of this program, scholars were invited to establish new academic programs across South Korean universities, particularly in key growth-generating STEM fields. They were also recruited as full-time professors to

conduct research and teaching activities within existing programs. Distinguished senior scholars were also recruited as visiting researchers and lecturers. Since its implementation, the initiative more than doubled the number of foreign faculty across the South Korean higher sector over the five-year period in which it operated.¹⁷

Most recently, the Brain Korea 21 Plus Project that ran from 2013 to 2019 combined the goals and strategies of the BK21 and World Class University Projects but with the aim of improving research on a qualitative rather than quantitative scale by strengthening graduate education within South Korean universities. Early evaluations of the project indicate that it has increased graduate students' academic performance and research output.¹⁸

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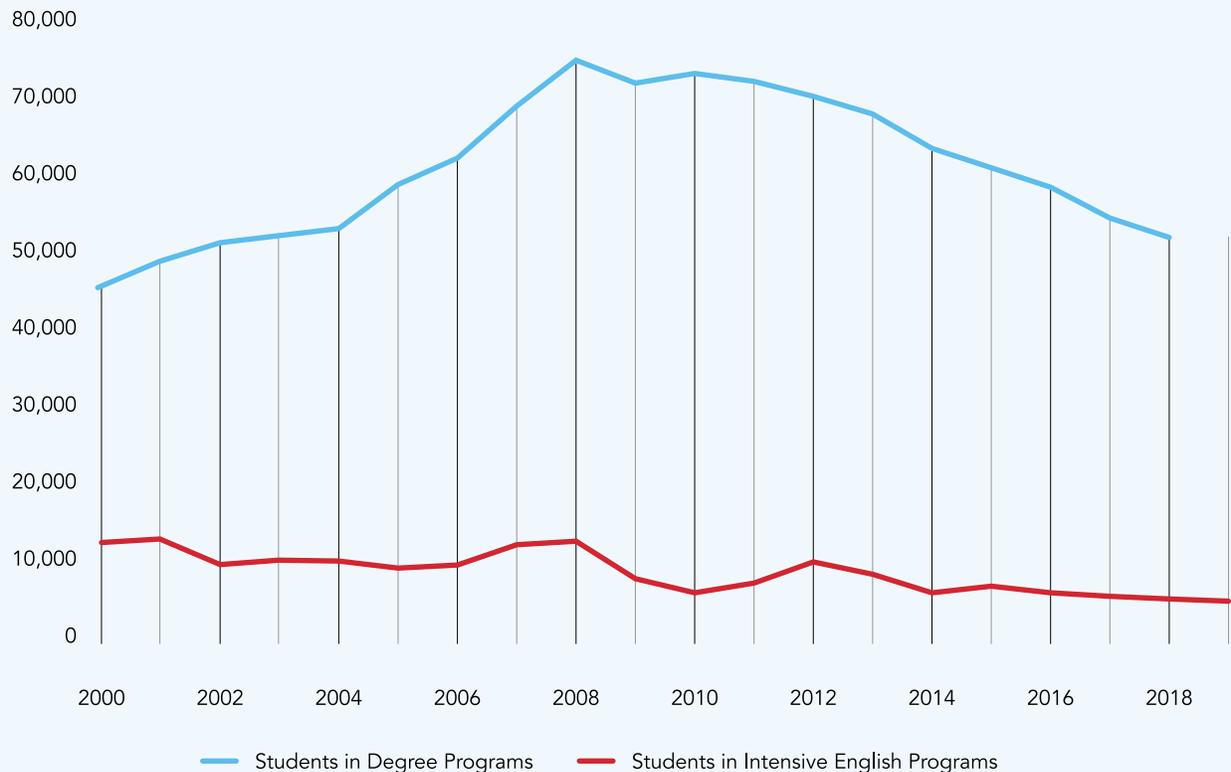
Internationalization policies in the South Korean higher education sector have certainly resulted in impressive growth in international student enrollment, beginning with under 4,000 students in degree-granting programs in 2000 and growing to over 100,000 students in 2019.¹⁹ A high percentage of these students are from other Asian countries, particularly China and, increasingly, Vietnam. But it is important to highlight that degree-seeking international students account for only 3 percent of total enrollment in South Korean higher education. Nonetheless, with the growth of English-mediated instruction, hiring preference for faculty with advanced English-language capabilities and foreign degrees, and influx of foreign faculty, South Korean universities have created distinctly international campus settings that supposedly cater to international students. But what purpose do they actually serve if international students account for only a small percentage of enrollment across the South Korean higher education sector?

The answer lies within the decreasing trend of South Korean students going abroad. Indeed, it is important to consider two parallel trends of student mobility since the implementation of internationalization reforms in the South Korean higher education sector. Alongside the increase in the number of international students in South Korea, there was also a decrease in the number of South Korean students going abroad. The total number of South Korean students going abroad at the tertiary level peaked in 2011, but that number has been steadily declining since.²⁰ Honing in more specifically to the United States, the number of

degree-seeking South Korean students in U.S. colleges and universities peaked at just over 75,000 students in the 2008-09 academic year but has declined by 30 percent as of the 2018-19 academic year.²¹ The enrollment drop happened much sooner and more sharply for South Korean students enrolled in intensive English programs in the United States; that number peaked at just over 13,000 students in 2008 but declined by a breathtaking 60 percent by 2019 (Figure 1).²²

What this means is that internationalization reforms do not just function to attract international students to South Korea; they also effectively function to retain South Korean students who may otherwise study abroad, particularly for students bound for the United States. With the proliferation of English-mediated instruction, internationalized curricula, and internationally trained domestic faculty as well as foreign faculty, South Korean universities have created distinctly international campus settings that also cater to South Korean students who seek international education opportunities. For example, while the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology offers 80 percent of its classes in English, international students account for less than 10 percent of its enrollment; in effect, the university has created an English-language learning environment for primarily South Korean students. Even campus settings designed explicitly for international students, such as the specialized international colleges housed inside South Korean universities, all still enroll a majority South Korean student body. But because South Korean universities have implemented internationalization reforms that follow international standards, they also effectively offer domestic alternatives to studying abroad for South Korean students who seek out that learning experience.

Indeed, South Korean universities are providing international education opportunities at home²³ and drawing in "glocal" students who are characterized by their desire "to earn the social prestige and career edge offered by foreign education without having to go very far from home."²⁴ It is precisely this globally-minded but locally bound population that South Korean universities capitalize on as they implement internationalization reforms and transform their campuses to increasingly resemble American ones. This dynamic can be understood as reverse student mobility—that internationalization reforms in a sending country's higher education sector have a more substantial effect on the reversal of domestic student outflow than they do on the increase of international student inflow. In short,

Figure 1. International Students from South Korea in U.S. Higher Education (2000-2019)


Source: IIE, "Fast Facts," *Open Doors Report* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2001-2019), https://opendoorsdata.org/fast_facts/fast-facts-2019/; IIE, "Intensive English Programs: Leading Places of Origin," *Open Doors Report* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2001-2020), <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/intensive-english-programs/leading-places-of-origin/>.

internationalization reforms in the South Korean higher education sector have resulted in the reversal of South Korean student mobility that has contributed significantly to the declining number of South Korean students in the United States.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS

Reverse student mobility from South Korea to the United States has larger implications for bilateral relations between the two countries. As longtime allies, the two countries rely on strong people-to-people connections that are fostered through cross-border education. With the reduction of students from one of the largest contributors to the U.S. higher education sector, however, the United States is less in a position to win the hearts and minds of people from a country of significant geopolitical importance.

Indeed, while the United States has historically enjoyed an unrivaled position as the leading destination country for South Korean students, the continuing declines from South Korean students going to the United States are perhaps an early indicator of shifting priorities among the country's youth that could foretell shifting geopolitical alliances in the near future.

For example, the number of South Korean students going abroad to China has been steadily increasing even as the overall number of South Korean students going abroad has been declining. As of 2018, there were 50,600 students from South Korea studying in China.²⁵ While most South Korean students enrolled in Chinese universities are there for language study rather than degree programs, South Korea is nonetheless the largest contributor of international students to the Chinese higher education sector. Such a trend points to the emerging bilateral relationship between

South Korea and China, as each country contributes the largest number of international students to their respective higher education sectors. It also reflects broader trends across international higher education where universities in the United States are competing for international students not just with other universities in the United States but also with universities in emerging host country destinations across Asia.²⁶

But the United States is still the preferred destination for most students from South Korea, particularly for degree-seeking students. And there are a number of measures that U.S. policymakers can take to ensure that this continues to be the case, and to address the phenomenon of reverse student mobility from South Korea to the United States.

First and foremost, U.S. policymakers should prioritize the strategic importance of South Korea as a major contributor of international students to the U.S. higher education sector as an essential component of its long-term foreign policy strategy. This means creating and expanding programs that promote the unique strengths of the U.S. higher education sector to meet South Korean students' evolving needs. With international education opportunities at home to choose from, South Korean students are making more cost-conscious decisions about studying abroad. But many South Korean students are not as familiar with the broad range and diversity of institution types and degree programs in the United States or the differentiated application requirements and costs associated with them. For example, community colleges in the United States can offer South Korean students a less expensive study abroad pathway, often without the burden of test scores, while also opening up transfer possibilities into four-year colleges and universities. Highlighting the range and diversity of the U.S. higher education sector through targeted promotion campaigns, in conjunction with organizations such as EducationUSA, will ensure that South Korean students have the right information to make informed decisions about studying abroad in the United States. Furthermore, these promotion campaigns should serve not just students but also parents and high school guidance counselors, who are often just as influential in South Korean students' college selection process.

Policymakers should also recognize the importance of strengthening the U.S. student visa system to maintain incoming student flows from South Korea. In particular, it is essential that U.S. policymakers ensure that the Optional Practical Training (OPT) visa—which allows a temporary

employment period during which an international student who graduates from a U.S. degree program can legally work in the United States—remains a viable option. As the South Korean job market becomes more saturated with U.S. university degree holders, new students seek out “value add” options that combine education and work experience during and following their degree programs, particularly for those studying abroad at the graduate level. The OPT visa encourages more South Korean students to study in the United States because it allows those students to return home not only with a degree from a U.S. higher education institution but also with coveted work experience in the United States. This visa is vital for ensuring that the United States continues to be an attractive destination for degree-seeking students from South Korea and beyond.

U.S. policymakers should also prioritize the strategic importance of South Korea as a study abroad destination for American students. Such two-way flows of students are vital to strengthening people-to-people ties and further encourages incoming student mobility from South Korea. This means creating and expanding programs that encourage American students to go abroad beyond conventionally popular destinations in Western Europe and to learn Korean language and culture. Prestigious scholarship programs like the Fulbright Student Program and Boren Awards for International Study do just that, as does Title VI of the Higher Education Act, but additional programs that encourage a wider population of American students to study in South Korea are also necessary. For example, targeted scholarship programs that fund underrepresented minority students to study in South Korea and other destinations of strategic importance to U.S. foreign policy would help to do so. Furthermore, as nontraditional student populations who attend school part-time and work full-time grow across the U.S. higher education sector, programs must also meet their particular needs. For example, Pell Grants and other federal aid programs could be allowed for the funding of summer and short-term study abroad.

CONCLUSION

While the Trump Effect may have dampened international student enrollment in the United States, trends from South Korea paint a more complicated picture. The South Korean higher education sector has adopted a series of aggressive internationalization reforms over the last two decades, and this has unexpectedly begun to reverse the flow of South

Korea students headed to the United States. Indeed, the reversal of South Korean student flows has less to do with American politics and more to do with the proliferation of attractive international education options at home. This is what the author terms as reverse student mobility—that internationalization reforms in a sending country's higher education sector have a more substantial effect on the reversal of domestic student outflow than they do on the increase of international student inflow. Furthermore, while the full impact of COVID-19 is unclear at this time, reverse student mobility will be profoundly magnified as conditions for going abroad become more difficult.

But there is a lot that U.S. policymakers can do to address reverse student mobility from South Korea to the United States. U.S. policymakers must prioritize international

student mobility between South Korea and the United States as an essential component to U.S. foreign policy that has broader geopolitical implications. More specifically, U.S. policymakers can create and expand programs that promote the U.S. higher education sector to South Korean students, strengthen visa programs that allow South Korean students to study and work in the United States, and increase the diversity of American students who study abroad in South Korea. This work can ensure that South Korea remains a major contributor of international students to the U.S. higher education sector. It will also strengthen the alliance between the two countries through vital people-to-people connections.

ENDNOTES

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