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South Korea's Recruitment Policy of International College Students

Política de reclutamiento de estudiantes universitarios internacionales
de Corea del Sur

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Abstract

With the advancement of globalization, international student mobility has become increasingly active, significantly impacting the economic, social, and cultural spheres of host countries. Korea, with its strengths in higher education internationalization, research excellence, and rich cultural experiences, offers a competitive environment for attracting international students. However, challenges remain in providing systematic career support after graduation and improving access to essential information. This study analyzes the Korean government's international student recruitment policies and proposes strategic improvements, including expanding language accessibility, diversifying academic programs, strengthening career transition support, and enhancing global competitiveness. These policy directions not only support Korean universities in becoming inclusive and innovative global education institutions but also offer meaningful insights for other countries pursuing similar initiatives.

Keywords: international student recruitment, institutional frameworks, curriculum diversification, global competitiveness


Resumen

Con el avance de la globalización, la movilidad de estudiantes internacionales se ha intensificado, impactando significativamente las esferas económicas, sociales y culturales de los países anfitriones. Corea, gracias a su fortaleza en la internacionalización de la educación superior, la excelencia en investigación y sus ricas experiencias culturales, ofrece un entorno competitivo para atraer estudiantes extranjeros. Sin embargo, persisten desafíos en cuanto al apoyo sistemático a la carrera profesional tras la graduación y el acceso adecuado a la información esencial. Este estudio analiza las políticas del gobierno coreano para la captación de estudiantes internacionales y propone mejoras

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estratégicas, como la ampliación de la accesibilidad lingüística, la diversificación de los programas académicos, el fortalecimiento del apoyo a la transición profesional y el aumento de la competitividad global. Estas directrices no solo respaldan a las universidades coreanas en su evolución hacia instituciones educativas globales inclusivas e innovadoras, sino que también ofrecen valiosas referencias para otros países que buscan implementar iniciativas similares.

Palabras clave: reclutamiento de estudiantes internacionales, marcos institucionales, diversificación curricular, competitividad global

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INTRODUCTION

This study presents a comprehensive examination of contemporary policy measures undertaken by the South Korean government to attract international students. Section 2 delineates the definition of international students and critically evaluates the associated legal and institutional frameworks that regulate their status and integration. It further investigates the organizational structure of South Korea's higher education system and the procedural mechanisms underlying university admissions, thereby illuminating the administrative and pedagogical landscape encountered by incoming students from abroad. In addition, the chapter offers a detailed analysis of curriculum design and educational programs specifically developed to accommodate the academic and cultural needs of international learners.

Section 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the status of international students residing in South Korea. It presents detailed analyses of their countries of origin, changes in study formats (such as degree programs and exchange programs), and the distribution of students by academic discipline, offering foundational data for policy development.

Section 4 conducts a comparative analysis of the international student recruitment strategies employed by OECD countries. Through this perspective, the paper identifies key factors that influence international students' choice of destination and assesses the underlying appeal and competitiveness of South Korea's higher education system.

Section 5 concludes this study by synthesizing the preceding analyses and presenting strategic recommendations for the future direction of Korea's international student recruitment policy. The findings underline the necessity of transitioning from a quantitative expansion model to a qualitatively oriented and structurally integrated approach. Specifically, Korea must adopt a comprehensive policy framework that facilitates international students' academic success and long-term integration.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Definition and Relevant Laws. Concept of an International Student

An international student refers to a foreign national who has been granted a legal residence status to pursue studies or training in the Republic of Korea, in accordance with Article 19-4, Paragraph 1 of the Immigration Control Act. This type of residence is generally classified as educational migration, which is structurally and purposefully distinct from other forms such as labor migration or marriage migration.

Educational migration is, by nature, a voluntary and selective form of migration driven by an individual's pursuit of academic achievement and career development. It typically involves personal migration rather than family-based relocation. The decision to study abroad is influenced by factors such as the individual's academic preferences, field of study, the educational system and environment of the host country, and cultural interests. In other words, the migration of international students is considered a conscious choice based on personal values and career planning, rather than driven by economic necessity or family reunification.

From the host country's perspective, this form of migration goes beyond the mere provision of educational services. It contributes to long-term talent acquisition strategies and fosters a multicultural environment. For the individual student, studying abroad can become a significant turning point in shaping both their professional career and global identity.

Legal Provisions Related to Stay Qualifications for Study

Table 1 systematically outlines the types of stay qualifications granted to foreigners residing in the Republic of Korea for the purpose of study, along with the corresponding categories of eligible recipients for each qualification.

Table 1

Types of Residence Status for Study Purposes and Corresponding Eligible Individuals

Residence Status	Eligible Individuals
Student (D-2)	Individuals who wish to receive formal education or conduct specific research at institutions of higher education (junior college level or above) or academic research institutes.
General Trainee (D-4)	Individuals who intend to undergo education, training, or engage in research activities at institutions, companies, or organizations that meet the criteria set by the Minister of Justice. However, those who receive compensation exceeding living expenses from the training institution, or who qualify under Student (D-2) or Industrial Trainee (D-3) status, are excluded.

Laws Related to Entry, Departure, and Domestic Stay

The Immigration Control Act of the Republic of Korea regulates matters concerning the entry, departure, and stay of international students within the country. Specifically, the Act outlines the issuance of visas and procedures for entry based on the student's residence status (Chapter 3 of the Act), provisions for domestic stay, activities, and departure (Chapter 4), as well as foreign resident registration procedures (Chapter 5).

The legal foundation governing the entry and residence of international students is institutionally defined by the Immigration Control Act. This legislation comprehensively addresses the entire process of admission and residence management for foreign students in Korea, providing a normative framework for the granting of residence status, visa issuance, registration, and permitted activities.

In detail, Chapter 3 of the Act specifies the visa issuance procedures and entry requirements according to the type of student residence status. Chapter 4 governs matters such as extensions of stay, changes in the scope of activities, departures, and deportation. Chapter 5 covers the procedures and obligations related to foreigner registration, offering the administrative basis necessary for international students to maintain legal status during their stay. Therefore, the Immigration Control Act functions not merely as a regulatory framework for immigration, but as a structured and institutionalized mechanism for managing educational migrants in Korea. It plays a crucial role in ensuring the legal legitimacy and administrative coherence of policies concerning international students.

Higher Education Act

The Higher Education Act serves as the fundamental legislation for ensuring the operation and quality assurance of higher education in the Republic of Korea. It provides the legal basis for the institutional requirements and procedures associated with international students' admission to higher education institutions. In particular, the Act stipulates the eligibility criteria for admission to universities and graduate schools for foreign nationals, including application procedures and academic competency standards. Through these provisions, the Act systematically structures access to higher education for international students.

This legislative framework enables educational institutions, as host entities, to balance autonomy with public responsibility, while fostering both equity between domestic and international students and the assurance of academic standards. It also regulates key aspects of academic administration for international students, such as registration, course management, and degree conferral.

Additionally, the Higher Education Act establishes an institutional foundation to ensure that international students receive equal and stable learning rights within Korea's higher education system. A closer analysis of these provisions reveals that attracting international students is not merely aimed at increasing enrollment, but is deeply connected with broader policy goals such as the internationalization of higher education and enhancing diversity within the academic ecosystem.

University System in the Republic of Korea

Duration of Study

Article 2 of the Higher Education Act defines the types of higher education institutions in Korea, thereby establishing the institutional structure of the national higher education system. By specifying the various forms of educational institutions that can offer higher education, the provision ensures a multi-layered education system that can respond to diverse learning demands.

Specifically, under Article 2, higher education institutions are classified into the following categories: Universities focusing on academic disciplines, Industrial universities emphasizing practical skills and industrial training, Colleges of education for training educators, Junior colleges specializing in technical and vocational education, Distance-learning universities designed to overcome temporal and spatial constraints—further categorized into broadcasting universities, correspondence universities, broadcasting correspondence universities, and cyber universities. Additionally, technical colleges and various other schools established for special purposes are included.

These classifications demonstrate the institutionalization of a higher education system that reflects academic, industrial, and social diversity rather than a single uniform model. Clearly defining the categories of institutions also fosters a structured environment where learners, including international students, can select educational paths aligned with their specific goals and fields (refer to <Table 2>).

Undergraduate and Graduate Curricula

The Higher Education Act and its Enforcement Decree prescribe the legally recognized duration of study for each type of higher education institution, reflecting their unique characteristics and educational objectives. These legal standards are considered core mechanisms for ensuring education quality and academic rigor within Korea's structured higher education system.

Key regulations include:

Article 31: Bachelor's programs at general universities require 4 years, with the exception of 6 years for specialized fields such as medicine, dentistry, Korean medicine, and veterinary medicine.

Articles 38 & 42(2): Colleges of education and industrial universities are set at 4 years.

Articles 48(1), 53(2), and 53(3): Junior colleges offer programs of 2 or 3 years, depending on the major.

Enforcement Decree Articles 25 & 57: Specific and flexible criteria are provided for cyber universities, technical colleges, and distance-learning institutions, accommodating the unique characteristics and demands of non-face-to-face education.

These duration requirements serve as benchmarks for degree conferment and curriculum development, supporting mutual recognition of academic programs at home and abroad, systematization of credit acquisition, and the establishment of academic standards for international students. In particular, for foreign students, the duration of study is directly linked to visa validity and residence permits, making these provisions especially important for maintaining lawful academic continuity in Korea.

Table 2

Standard Duration of Study by Institution Type

Types of schools	Duration of study	Legal basis or Relevant legislation
University	-Four years. However, in the case of medical, oriental medicine, dental, veterinary, and pharmacy schools (excluding Korean herbal medicine), it is six years.	-Article 31, Paragraph 1 of the Higher Education Act -Article 25 of the Enforcement Decree of the Higher Education Act
Industrial University	-No restrictions	-Article 38 of the Higher Education Act
College of Education	-Four years	-Article 42, Paragraph 2 of the Higher Education Act
Junior College or Technical College	-Two years. However, for departments such as nursing, radiology, clinical pathology, physical therapy, dental laboratory technology, dental hygiene, occupational therapy, fisheries, and those designated by institutions and schools, the duration is three years	-Article 31, Paragraph 1 of the Higher Education Act and Article 57 of the Enforcement Decree of Higher Education Act
Distance Learning University	-Associate degree program: 2 years -Bachelor's degree program: 4 years**	-Article 53, Paragraph 2 of the Higher Education Act
Technical University	-Associate degree program: 2 years -Bachelor's degree program: 4 years	-Article 56 of the Higher Education Act
Graduate School	-Master's degree program: At least 2 years -Doctoral degree program: At least 2 years -Integrated master's and doctoral program: At least 4 years, provided that the total period includes the combined required coursework years for both programs	-Article 31 of the Higher Education Act

Admission Qualifications

The entry requirements and academic administration system for higher education in the Republic of Korea are clearly institutionalized through the Higher Education Act and its Enforcement Decree. These serve as key legal foundations for ensuring fairness in educational opportunities and maintaining the quality of education.

Article 33(1) of the Higher Education Act stipulates the qualifications for university admission, granting eligibility to individuals who have graduated from high school or possess an equivalent or higher academic background. This provision ensures basic accessibility to higher education while establishing standardized criteria for evaluating academic levels on a national basis.

Furthermore, applicants to specific types of institutions—such as technical colleges or distance-learning universities—may be required to have prior work experience in industry (as set forth in Article

57 of the Higher Education Act and Article 65 of its Enforcement Decree). These career experience requirements reflect the vocational nature of such programs and are designed to integrate theory and practice in a more applied educational framework.

In addition, qualifications for integrated bachelor's and master's programs and graduate school admission are defined in Articles 33(2) to (4). These provisions structure the academic prerequisites and eligible applicant categories for each degree level. Particularly for integrated programs, even currently enrolled students may enter if they meet certain criteria, promoting flexible academic pathways and the early cultivation of talent.

Language Proficiency Requirements: TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean)

Most Korean universities require international applicants to meet certain language proficiency standards, typically by submitting scores from the TOPIK or English proficiency exams such as TOEFL, TOEIC, or TEPS. In particular, students applying to programs in the humanities are often expected to hold a TOPIK Level 3 or higher, with a growing number of institutions now requiring Level 4 or above. These benchmarks serve as crucial indicators of a student's academic readiness and capacity to comprehend the curriculum.

The TOPIK is an official assessment designed to evaluate the Korean language skills of individuals who do not speak Korean as their native language, including overseas Koreans. Administered six times a year both domestically and internationally, the exam is overseen by the National Institute for International Education (NIIED), a government agency under the Ministry of Education.

Academic Calendar

Article 20 of the Higher Education Act and Article 10 of its Enforcement Decree prescribe the temporal structure of academic operations. In Korea, the academic year begins on March 1 and ends in late February of the following year. While most institutions operate on a two-semester system, some specialized programs may adopt a three- or four-semester format.

Each institution determines the detailed operation of semesters independently through its own academic regulations. This system reflects a dual aim to maintain consistency and regularity at the national level while ensuring institutional autonomy and diversity.

These standardized rules regarding admission, academic progress, and degree conferment form the foundation for a recognized academic accreditation system, both domestically and internationally. They also play a crucial role in ensuring the reliability of admissions and academic administration for international students.

University Admission Procedures

The Higher Education Act systematically defines access to higher education institutions in Korea and the entry requirements for each degree program level, thereby securing fairness in education and maintaining academic standards. Article 33 distinguishes eligibility by degree level as follows: First, admission to a bachelor's degree program at a university is granted to individuals who have graduated from high school or possess an equivalent level of academic qualification. Article 33, Paragraph 1 of the Higher Education Act establishes the fundamental criteria for entry into higher education.

For undergraduate programs, admission is granted to individuals who have completed high school or hold an equivalent academic qualification (Article 33, Paragraph 1). This provision establishes the fundamental entry standard for higher education.

For combined bachelor's and master's programs, in addition to holding the same level of academic background, currently enrolled students may be admitted if they meet certain academic performance standards set forth in the institution's internal regulations (Article 33, Paragraph 2). This allows for flexible academic growth pathways and early identification of talented students.

Meanwhile, entry requirements for graduate level master's degree programs and integrated master's and doctoral programs are based on possession of a bachelor's degree. For doctoral programs, a master's degree or an equivalent academic qualification is required (see Article 33, Paragraphs 3 and 4, respectively). These multi-tiered requirements ensure academic depth and coherence at each stage of higher education.

Additionally, the enrollment quota for international students is established separately from that of domestic students, in accordance with Article 32 of the Higher Education Act and the Enforcement Decree, Article 29(2)-6, 7 and Article 30(7)-1. This distinction reflects a policy intention to manage international student recruitment as part of a national strategy, while ensuring that the educational opportunities of domestic students are not adversely affected.

Moreover, universities and graduate schools are granted autonomy not only in setting enrollment quotas but also in determining admission procedures, application materials, and screening methods. This structure allows each institution to establish its own admissions system for international students in line with its specialization strategies and goals for internationalization.

Educational Programs for International Students

Regular Degree Programs

Regular degree programs refer to formal academic courses offered within Korea's higher education system, leading to degrees such as bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. For international students to enroll in these programs, they must meet the same academic requirements as domestic students, such as completion of the previous level of education or an equivalent qualification, and satisfy the admission standards set by the institution. These requirements are legally stipulated by Article 33 of the Higher Education Act and its related enforcement decrees.

To be admitted to a university (bachelor's program) in Korea, an applicant must have completed high school or possess an equivalent educational background, as recognized by law. This standard applies equally to domestic and international students, reflecting the principle of educational fairness and accessibility. However, based on the type and purpose of establishment of the institution, exceptions to eligibility may apply for international students. Article 52 of the Higher Education Act restricts admission eligibility to distance universities (e.g., open universities, correspondence universities, cyber universities) and generally excludes foreign students from enrollment.

Distance universities primarily designate domestic residents as their main beneficiaries. This institutional decision is based on the judgment that the structure of their educational programs and academic management systems cannot fully accommodate the learning conditions and constraints faced by foreign nationals. However, cyber universities, which fall under the category of remote universities, do permit the admission of international students²

Even so, such admissions are granted selectively, reflecting each cyber university's founding purpose and operational characteristics. For example, Seoul Cyber University, Hanyang Cyber University, and

² There have been institutional changes concerning the admission of international students to cyber universities. In particular, a partial amendment to the Regulations on the Establishment and Operation of Cyber Universities came into effect on May 21, 2024.

Sejong Cyber University operate separate admission tracks for international students. Common requirements include both parents must be foreign nationals or overseas Koreans; the applicant must have completed (or be expected to complete) high school or equivalent education; and the applicant must either pass the university's entrance evaluation or hold at least Level 2 or 3 on the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK). Some cyber universities accept international applicants only for specific majors or require them to complete Korean language courses.

In principle, distance universities under the Higher Education Act may restrict the admission of international students. However, in practice, there has been a growing number of cases where universities, exercising their autonomy, establish separate admission tracks for foreign applicants and permit enrollment. This trend may be interpreted as a reflection of institutional flexibility in response to the internationalization of higher education and the expanding demand for online learning.

Consequently, while international students are, in principle, eligible for admission to regular degree programs, the scope of admission permitted varies depending on the type of higher education institution and is specifically regulated by the Higher Education Act and other relevant legislation. This constitutes an institutional factor that must be taken into account when international students formulate their academic plans.

Short-Term Programs

Short-term academic programs refer to learning opportunities where foreign students enroll in part of a regular degree program for a limited period (e.g., one or two semesters, or summer/winter sessions), without pursuing a full degree. These programs are institutional tools designed to expand academic exchange and meet the temporary educational needs of international students. Compared to full-time degree programs, short-term programs offer more flexibility in admission procedures, credit policies, and duration.

Typically, participation is based on academic exchange agreements between Korean institutions and universities in the students' home countries. Such agreements provide legal and procedural frameworks for student exchanges, including streamlined admission processes, mutual credit recognition, tuition waivers, and scholarship support.

Students who complete short-term programs may be granted academic credit at their home institutions, and such recognition is considered part of international credit transfer systems or credit exchange agreements. These arrangements enhance the global connectivity of higher education and promote learner mobility. At the same time, they are assessed as contributing to the diversification of strategies among higher education institutions in the host country, Korea, to strengthen global competitiveness and expand their capacity to attract international students.

In conclusion, short-term academic programs function not merely as brief educational residencies but as a form of educational migration grounded in international cooperation. Moreover, they serve as a policy instrument that facilitates not only the academic exploration of individual international students but also the substantive expansion of intergovernmental collaboration in higher education.

Korean Language Training Programs

Korean language training programs are non-degree educational courses designed specifically for foreigners to acquire structured Korean language skills. These programs are typically offered by language institutes affiliated with Korean universities or organized by public agencies. They serve as foundational language education infrastructure for easing linguistic barriers, enhancing academic and social adaptability, and facilitating a smooth educational migration process.

Institutionally, Korean language training programs are categorized into long-term courses (typically lasting 10 weeks or more) and short-term courses (generally 4 weeks or less), depending on the educational purpose and duration. Learners may selectively participate based on individual needs and residency conditions.

Long-term courses are primarily aimed at international students engaged in mission-oriented academic training or those preparing to enter degree programs, focusing on the integrated development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

In contrast, short-term courses are tailored to individuals engaged in tourism, short-term visits, seasonal academic sessions, or brief educational stays. These programs center on foundational communication skills or culture-linked Korean language learning, offering language instruction aligned with experiential or practical engagement."

Admission procedures for Korean language programs differ from those of regular academic programs. They are typically conducted under D-4 (language training) visa status and can be applied to freely or through a linked admission process for perspective degree programs. Some countries' students may also receive scholarships through programs like the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS).

In essence, Korean language programs play a vital role at the initial stage of international students' transition into Korean education. They enhance linguistic proficiency and cultural adaptability, laying a crucial foundation for successful academic achievement and broader integration into Korean society.

CURRENT STATUS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Current Status of International Students in Korea

The trend of international student statistics from 2005 to 2024 serves as a key indicator demonstrating the qualitative and quantitative advancement of Korea's higher education internationalization. During this period, the number of international students enrolled in both degree and non-degree programs increased significantly. This can be attributed to a combination of factors, including national-level policies to attract international students, efforts by universities to enhance global competitiveness, and the expansion of Korean language education infrastructure.

Specifically, the number of international students enrolled in degree programs (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral) increased approximately tenfold, from 13,418 in 1999 to 124,803 in 2022. Furthermore, the number continued to rise, reaching 145,778 in 2024. This not only reflects a quantitative expansion but also indicates a growing demand among international learners for Korea's trusted and capable higher education institutions.

Meanwhile, the number of international students in non-degree programs (such as language training and exchange programs) increased from 6,949 in 2005 to 42,089 in 2022, and further to 63,184 in 2024. This upward trend suggests that the modes of international student entry are diversifying, with a rise in short-term language and exchange programs, reflecting Korea's evolving, flexible educational migration pathways.

Overall, between 2005 and 2024, the number of international students enrolled in degree programs increased by approximately 142,366, while those enrolled in non-degree programs rose by about 56,235. These figures not only reflect Korea's strengthened status as a global destination for international students but also demonstrate a gradual enhancement of institutional and educational capacity to accommodate foreign learners (see Table 3).

Furthermore, the increase in international student enrollment cannot be solely attributed to changes at the institutional level. It is the result of a confluence of multifaceted factors, including proactive student recruitment policies by the Ministry of Education, the easing of visa regulations, the expansion of the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program, and the rise in national prestige stemming from the spread of Korean pop culture.

Table 3

Current Status of International Students in Korea by Year and Program Type (Unit: person)

Classification	Total	Degree Program				Non-Degree Program		
		Sub-total	Associate degree · bachelor degree	Master's degree	Doctoral degree	Sub-total	language trainees	other trainees
1999	3,418	3,418	1,792	1,233	393	0	0	0
2000	3,980	3,980	2,103	1,381	496	0	0	0
2005	22,526	15,577	9,835	4,023	1,719	6,949	5,212	1,737
2010	83,842	60,000	43,709	12,480	3,811	23,842	17,064	6,778
2015	91,332	55,739	32,972	16,441	6,326	35,593	22,178	13,415
2020	153,695	113,003	74,851	24,996	13,156	40,692	32,315	8,377
2021	152,281	120,018	80,597	25,169	14,252	32,263	23,442	8,821
2022	166,892	124,803	80,988	26,923	16,892	42,089	27,194	14,895
2024	208,962	145,778	93,624	33,860	18,294	63,184	48,924	14,260

Note: 1) International students in Korea refer to foreign students enrolled at higher education institutions in Korea. 2) The number of international students includes those enrolled in both degree and non-degree programs across all higher education institutions. 3) The category "Other trainees" under non-degree programs includes students in joint programs, exchange students, visiting students, and other types of trainees. From 2014 onward, students in joint programs have been separately classified under "Other trainees" in non-degree programs.

Source: Ministry of Education & Korean Educational Development Institute (2019, 2022, 2024). Education Statistics Service (<https://moe.go.kr>, <https://kess.kedi.re.kr>).

Distribution of International Students by Country of Origin

The distribution of international students by country of origin from 2007 to 2024 statistically highlights the gradual diversification of the international student population in the internationalization of higher education in Korea. China continues to account for the largest proportion of students (72,020 in 2024, or 34.5percent of the total). However, compared to 33,650 students in 2007 (68.3percent), although the absolute number has more than doubled, its proportion has decreased to nearly half. This indicates that while China remains the primary source of international students, the share of students from other countries has been increasing at a faster rate.

As of 2024, following China, the highest numbers of international students in Korea came from Vietnam (56,003), Mongolia (12,317), Uzbekistan (12,025), Japan (5,250), and the United States (3,179). This

trend reflects a general rise in study abroad demand from small to mid-sized Asian countries as well as from Western nations. In particular, the sharp increase in students from

Vietnam and Central Asia can be attributed to structural factors such as deepening educational cooperation with Korea, the global spread of Korean pop culture, and the growing appeal of industry-linked vocational education programs.

This trend of diversification in the students' countries of origin aligns with Korea's policy goals to expand global academic networks and promote international diversity within its academic ecosystem. As such, it serves as important foundational data for developing future strategies for international student support, as well as culturally and linguistically tailored educational services.

Table 4

Number of International Students by Country (2018–2024) (Unit: people, Percent)

Country	China	Vietnam	Uzbekistan	Mongolia	Japan	U.S.A	other	Total
2018	68,537	27,061	5,496	6,768	3,977	2,746	27,620	142,205
Percent	48.2	19.0	3.9	4.8	2.8	1.9	19.4	100.0
2019	71,067	37,426	7,492	7,381	4,392	2,915	29,492	160,165
Percent	44.4	23.4	4.7	4.6	2.7	1.8	18.4	100.0
2020	67,030	38,337	9,104	6,842	3,174	1,827	27,381	153,695
Percent	43.6	24.9	5.9	4.5	2.1	1.2	17.8	100.0
2021	67,348	35,843	8,242	6,028	3,818	2,218	28,784	152,281
Percent	44.2	23.5	5.4%	4.0	2.5	1.5	18.9	100.0
2022	67,439	37,940	8,608	7,348	5,733	3,369	36,455	166,892
Percent	40.4	22.7	5.2	4.4	3.4	2.0	21.8	100.0
2023	68,065	43,361	10,409	10,375	5,850	3,214	40,568	181,842
Percent	37.4	23.8	5.7	5.7	3.2	1.8	22.3	100.0
2024	72,020	56,003	12,025	12,317	5,250	3,179	48,168	208,962
Percent	34.5	26.8	5.8	5.9	2.5	1.5	23.1	100.0

Note: Only countries with 1,000 or more students are included.

Source: Ministry of Education & Korean Educational Development Institute (2019, 2022, 2024). Education Statistics Service

Trends by Type of Study Among International Students

Table 5 analyzes the trends in the types of study pursued by international students, offering insight into how the influx of international students within Korean higher education is being reshaped in economic and policy contexts. A comparison between 2023 and 2024 especially reveals notable changes, such as increasing institutional autonomy in attracting students and evolving support strategies at both the government and university levels.

The number of self-financed students rose from 164,910 in 2023 to 193,131 in 2024, an increase of approximately 17.1%. This indicates a growing proportion of international students financing their own education, reflecting a shift in the composition of the overall international student population.

The number of government-invited scholarship recipients (e.g. GKS) saw only a slight increase up by 53 students from 2023, reaching 4,467 in 2024 but remains stable, serving as part of Korea's strategy to attract global talent and enhance national image.

Meanwhile, students funded by their home governments totaled 604 in 2024 more than double the previous year's figure (an increase of 307). This trend may be attributed to expanded educational and diplomatic cooperation with Korea, especially among developing countries aiming to strengthen their talent development efforts. It can also be seen as a tangible outcome of Korea's educational diplomacy.

In contrast, the number of university-invited scholarship recipients decreased from 7,563 in 2023 to 6,559 in 2024, a drop of 1,004. This decline may reflect tightening university finances, adjustments in institutional scholarship policies, or a shift in student recruitment strategies. In some cases, it may also signal university-level restructuring to enhance educational service quality while managing international student enrollment more selectively.

Table 5

Number of International Students by Type of Study Abroad (Unit: people, Percent)

Type of Study Abroad	2024(A)	2023(B)	Change (in numbers) (A-B)	Percent
Self-Financed Students	193,131	164,910	28,221	92.4
Government-Initiated Scholarship Recipients	4,467	4,414	53	3.1
University-Initiated Scholarship Recipients	6,559	7,563	-1,004	3.1
Students Dispatched by Their Home Governments	604	297	307	0.3
Others	4,201	4,658	-457	2.0
Total	208,962	181,842	27,120	100.0

Note: The proportion of self-financed students was 86.3 percent in 2015 and 87.0 percent in 2016.

Source: Ministry of Education & Korean Educational Development Institute (2022, 2024). Education Statistics Yearbook

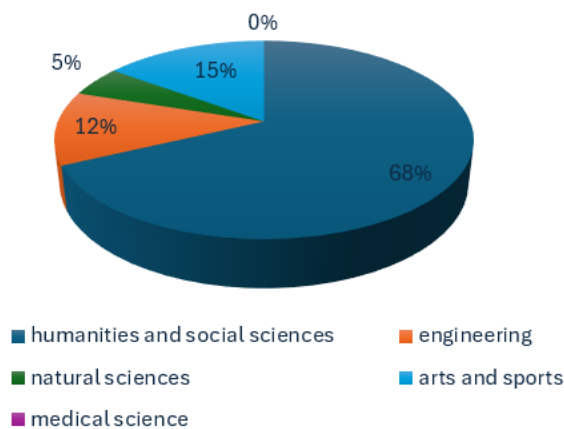
Number of International Students by Academic Major

As of 2023, the distribution of international students by academic major serves as a key indicator of the structural concentration and academic preferences within Korea's higher education system. Notably, students majoring in the humanities and social sciences account for 68.0 percent of the total, representing an overwhelming majority. This indicates that international students tend to favor theory-driven fields such as language, culture, business, economics, and international relations. These disciplines are relatively language-dependent and are closely linked to Korea's cultural assets (such as K-content) and the growing global demand for public policy and business studies.

By contrast, arts and sports account for 15.0 percent, engineering for 12.0 percent, and natural sciences for 5.0 percent, which shows that the number of international students in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is relatively low (see [Figure 1]).

Graphic 1

Number of international students by academic major



Note: Based on the proportion of international students enrolled in four-year universities nationwide.

Source: Ministry of Education & Korean Educational Development Institute (2019, 2022, 2024). Education Statistics Service.

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AND THE APPEAL OF GLOBAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Key Drivers of International Student Mobility in Major Host Countries

Despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, international student mobility has continued to expand, particularly within the higher education sector. Over the past several decades, this growth has been both steady and substantial. For instance, the number of international students enrolled across the 38 OECD member countries was approximately 3 million in 2014. By 2022, this figure had surpassed 4.6 million, reflecting a growth rate of nearly 50.0 percent.

This upward trend is attributable to a multifaceted set of structural factors, including the globalization of education, demographic shifts, government-level policy initiatives aimed at attracting foreign students, the expansion of transnational academic networks, and the increased accessibility of higher education through digital and blended learning formats. These elements collectively underline the evolving dynamics that drive international student flows and shape the competitiveness of national education systems in the global arena.

Economic Disparities and Their Impact on International Student Mobility

Economic disparity remains one of the most significant determinants influencing patterns of international student mobility. Students from low-income countries often face substantial financial barriers that restrict access to overseas education, while students from economically advanced nations enjoy greater opportunities to study abroad. This inequality is reflected in global enrollment statistics: nearly two-thirds of internationally mobile students originate from high-income or upper-middle-income countries. In certain cases—such as Croatia, Colombia, Denmark, Austria, Spain, and Switzerland—this proportion exceeds 90.0 percent, highlighting the extent to which economic privilege facilitates mobility.

Conversely, host nations such as Australia, Canada, France, Latvia, Poland, and Türkiye report lower proportions of students from high-income countries, indicating a stronger commitment to welcoming students from economically disadvantaged regions. This pattern suggests that national economic conditions not only shape outbound student mobility but also influence the inclusivity of host country policies.

To address these imbalances and promote equitable access to international education, several host countries have implemented targeted policy measures. These include the provision of affordable tuition rates, dedicated scholarship programs aimed at students from developing nations, and bilateral academic cooperation agreements designed to streamline student exchanges with specific global regions. Collectively, these initiatives contribute to diversifying international student populations and fostering more inclusive global academic networks.

The Quality of Higher Education and the Appeal of Advanced Academic Pathways

The quality and specialization of higher education, particularly in STEM fields—science,

technology, engineering, and mathematics—serve as vital catalysts for international student mobility at the graduate level. Doctoral programs in these disciplines offer rigorous academic environments that support cutting-edge research, cross-border collaboration, and technological innovation. Given the global nature of contemporary scientific challenges, STEM research increasingly relies on the international exchange of expertise and talent.

The distribution of international students by degree level highlights this demand for advanced academic engagement. Empirical data from OECD member countries illustrates a clear gradient: international students constitute approximately 5.0% of bachelor's enrollees, 15.0% of master's candidates, and 25.0% of those pursuing doctoral degrees. This upward trajectory underscores the appeal of graduate education as a pathway for professional advancement, access to world-class research infrastructure, and integration into global academic networks.

Such trends affirm that higher education institutions, particularly those with strong doctoral programs are perceived as hubs for academic excellence and innovation. These environments not only attract talent but also contribute significantly to global scientific progress through collaborative knowledge production.

Strategic Attributes of Attractive Education Systems for International Students

Education systems that successfully attract international students are characterized by a complex interplay of interrelated factors, including institutional prestige, medium of instruction, cultural integration, research excellence, and favorable post-graduation employment pathways. Among these variables, the language of instruction particularly, the adoption of English, has emerged as a decisive element in shaping global student mobility trends.

The recent expansion of English-taught programs across European Union (EU) member states represents more than a linguistic adaptation; it signals a strategic recalibration of higher education policy. This expansion reflects a multifaceted effort to bolster international competitiveness, facilitate academic exchange, elevate research productivity, stimulate economic growth through educational exports, and enhance institutional quality. As such, language policy serves as a catalyst for structural reform and innovation within national education frameworks.

To maintain momentum and relevance within an increasingly globalized academic landscape, countries must pursue strategic reforms that align with evolving demands in international education. These may

include diversifying program offerings, strengthening transnational academic partnerships, enhancing quality assurance mechanisms, and integrating global employability metrics into curriculum design.

Internationalization of Higher Education and the Role of Institutional Prestige

The internationalization of higher education is significantly influenced by the global prestige of academic institutions. Universities that possess strong international reputations are well-positioned to attract high-achieving students from across the world. This institutional prestige is cultivated through a range of interdependent factors, including robust research output, the academic excellence of faculty members, global visibility in scholarly publications, and the demonstrable success of alumni in various professional spheres.

Universities that consistently rank highly in global league tables such as QS World University Rankings or Times Higher Education are often perceived as offering superior academic value, extensive cross-border academic networks, and enhanced career prospects. These attributes not only shape student choices but also contribute to the broader competitiveness of national education systems within the global academic landscape.

As such, strategic investments in faculty development, international research collaborations, and graduate outcomes are essential for institutions seeking to strengthen their global profile and amplify their appeal to internationally mobile students.

Research Capacity, Global Collaboration, and the Strategic Role of English-Medium Instruction

Language serves as a fundamental determinant of academic accessibility and plays a crucial role in shaping international students' learning experiences and adaptive capacity within host institutions. The increasing adoption of English-taught programs across European Union (EU) countries reflects a strategic shift aimed at reducing linguistic barriers and expanding educational access for a globally diverse student body.

As English remains the dominant medium of international discourse particularly, in the domains of science, technology, and business, its integration into higher education significantly enhances the global competitiveness of universities. Institutions offering English-medium instruction are better positioned to attract international talent, foster transnational research partnerships, and participate in cross-border academic networks.

Furthermore, the proliferation of English-taught programs directly contributes to the strengthening of national research ecosystems. By enabling international students to engage in collaborative research initiatives, host countries benefit from a more diversified pool of intellectual capital. English instruction also facilitates scholarly publication in internationally recognized academic journals, thereby amplifying research visibility and impact within the global academic community.

Cultural Integration and Its Role in Shaping the International Student Experience

Higher education extends beyond academic instruction; it also encompasses a rich array of cultural experiences that contribute significantly to students' personal growth and global awareness. The integration of cultural elements within the educational environment enhances the appeal of host institutions by fostering intercultural exchange, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging among international students.

Countries where English is the primary language of communication such as the United States and the United Kingdom naturally hold a linguistic advantage in attracting international students. This inherent accessibility facilitates smoother academic engagement and cultural assimilation. However, non-

English speaking countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland have strategically expanded their international appeal by offering degree programs taught in English. These initiatives not only broaden educational access but also reflect a conscious effort to cultivate culturally vibrant and globally connected learning environments.

A well-integrated educational setting that combines linguistic accessibility with meaningful cultural exposure plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall student experience. It enhances academic outcomes, supports social integration, and strengthens the global reputation of institutions as inclusive and culturally responsive destinations for higher education.

Research Capacity, Innovation Ecosystems, and Global Academic Appeal

The research capacity of universities plays a pivotal role in attracting international students, particularly those seeking advanced academic engagement and career-oriented training in innovation-driven fields. Institutions with well-funded research infrastructure—such as specialized laboratories, interdisciplinary research centers, and high-tech innovation hubs provide international students with access to state-of-the-art facilities and immersive research opportunities.

These environments foster academic excellence by enabling students to participate in cutting-edge research projects, collaborate with globally recognized scholars, and contribute to the development of novel technologies. Such experiences not only enhance students' academic profiles but also cultivate essential skills such as critical inquiry, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary thinking that are highly valued across industrial, technological, and professional sectors.

Moreover, universities embedded within national innovation ecosystems often maintain strategic partnerships with government agencies, industry leaders, and international research consortia. These alliances facilitate student involvement in real-world research applications, increase exposure to commercialization pathways, and boost employability in globally competitive markets.

As international students increasingly seek institutions that bridge research excellence with career outcomes, countries and universities that prioritize technological innovation and academic-industry collaboration remain at the forefront of global higher education attractiveness.

Post-Graduation Employment Prospects and Strategic Economic Considerations

Post-graduation employment opportunities represent a critical consideration for internationally mobile students, with many viewing career outcomes as a primary motivator when selecting a study destination. Advanced economies have bolstered their appeal by implementing policies that facilitate long-term employability for international graduates, including post-study work visa schemes and educational programs that are closely aligned with labor market demands. These initiatives extend the value proposition of international education beyond academic credentials, providing tangible pathways for career development and economic integration.

In response to the evolving dynamics of the global education market, numerous European Union (EU) member states have strategically expanded English-medium instruction while enhancing both academic rigor and cultural inclusivity. This approach has effectively diversified educational offerings and improved the structural attractiveness of national systems to a broader spectrum of international students. Moreover, the integration of employability-focused programs and industry partnerships ensures that graduates are equipped with relevant competencies for the global workforce.

The EU's model offers instructive insights for Korean higher education institutions seeking to elevate their international standing. To remain competitive in the global academic landscape, Korean universities must adopt a comprehensive strategy encompassing the expansion of English-taught

programs, targeted policy reforms to support graduate employability, and stronger engagement in global research collaborations.

Such measures will not only increase institutional visibility but also generate meaningful economic benefits through enhanced student mobility and global partnerships.

By aligning educational goals with labor market demands and international quality standards, Korean universities can position themselves as premier destinations within the increasingly interconnected ecosystem of global higher education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an in-depth evaluation of South Korea's policies for attracting international students, highlighting both institutional strengths and areas for strategic improvement. By examining the legal frameworks, administrative structures, admissions protocols, and curricular designs that shape the international student experience, the research outlines the operational landscape of Korean higher education in a global context.

Analysis of student mobility patterns—disaggregated by country of origin, study format, and academic discipline—offers key insights into the practical outcomes and limitations of current policies. A particularly significant finding is the pivotal role played by the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), which serves as both an academic benchmark and a barrier to broader inclusivity.

Benchmarking Korea's strategies against those employed in OECD countries reveals areas of strong performance—including internationalization efforts, research infrastructure, and cultural engagement—alongside ongoing challenges in post-graduation career support and institutional transparency.

For international students, success depends on access to language certification, financial aid, and reliable institutional information. In response, Korea has expanded student support services, helping not only to facilitate academic achievement but also to promote mutual cultural exchange and sustainable partnerships with students' home countries.

Looking ahead, South Korea has the potential to become a global leader in higher education. Realizing this ambition will require a multi-pronged policy strategy focused on dismantling linguistic and administrative barriers, diversifying curricula, enhancing career development pathways, and implementing student-centered reforms aligned with global best practices.

Ultimately, long-term commitment to evidence-driven policymaking will be critical in enabling Korean universities to evolve into inclusive, globally competitive institutions that meet the needs of a rapidly changing international academic landscape.

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