



Shifting Study-Abroad Patterns of South Korean Students

Kyuseok Kim and Edward Choi

Abstract

Fewer Koreans are now studying overseas than in the past. Behind this trend are such factors as the shrinking youth population, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising global nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, and improvements in domestic higher education. Moreover, some of these factors explain evolving patterns of outbound flows and suggest emerging markets as attractive education destinations for Korean educational consumers. The full implications of these changes remain to be fully understood.

A recent report from South Korea's ministry of education draws attention to a thought-provoking trend relating to the number of Korean students studying at foreign universities. Korean students are no longer internationally mobile in strong numbers. The drop in outbound mobility to such popular education destinations as China, Japan and the United States reflects global and domestic sociocultural and political developments that have a myriad of implications for stakeholders in the Korean government, educational consumers, and others involved in or affected by student mobility.

Chasing Excellence

Korean history of study abroad began in the late 1980s when the government relaxed travel restrictions and restrictions on receiving foreign higher education degrees. For a long time studying abroad has been the next best option for many students who for various reasons could not attend the handful of elite institutions, otherwise known as "SKY" (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University).

For these people, attending a foreign university is perceived to be beneficial in terms of career opportunities, either international or domestic. There are also students who quit the domestic system and chase comparatively more prestigious international credentials. Aspirations to attend such universities as Harvard University in the United States, Tohoku University in Japan, or Tsinghua University in China still run high among some young Koreans with strong academic backgrounds and financial resources. Such students may return to the Korean market with a competitive advantage, at least in some sectors of the labor market. It is a well-known fact that high-ranking government officials and other figures of success within Korean society hold foreign degrees.

The pursuit of foreign degrees can be explained by an "education fever" that has gripped the nation for centuries, dating back to premodern Korea (1300–1900s) or perhaps even earlier. It is thus not surprising that Korea is—alongside China and India—one of the world's top sending countries, with major destinations for Korean students being China, Japan, and the United States. According to South Korea's ministry of education, as many as 124,000 Korean postsecondary students were studying abroad in 2022. This is roughly twice more than in such countries as France, Iran, Malaysia, the United States, and Vietnam.

Dwindling Figures

The nearly fivefold increase in outbound flows of Korean students between 1991 and 2011 has reversed in recent years. In fact, the drop has been precipitous. Korea witnessed a nearly 53 percent reduction in total outbound student mobility at postsecondary level between 2011 and 2022, and once popular education destinations are no longer hosting as many Korean students as before. The United States, for instance, observed a 46 percent decline from 73,351 in 2010–2011 to 39,491 in 2020–2021. The numbers for other popular destinations are equally and, in some cases, more dramatic: A 77 percent drop in China from 73,240 in 2017 to 16,968 in 2022; a 72 percent decline in the United Kingdom from 17,310 in 2011 to 4,798 in 2022; and a decrease of 45 percent over the same time period in Japan.

The nearly fivefold increase in outbound flows of Korean students between 1991 and 2011 has reversed in recent years.

Evolving Domestic and Global Circumstances

Declining outbound student mobility is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various factors. One reason may be the shrinking youth population, which has been ongoing since the 1990s. We can observe a correlation between the parallel decline in outbound mobility by 53 percent and the overall shrinkage of the population aged six to 21 by 24 percent over the same decade. In other words, there might be proportional decreases in the number of students interested in overseas credits or degrees in relation to the decline of the entire college-bound population. And considering the falling fertility rate (as of 2022, the world's lowest at 0.76), in years to come we might observe an even stronger relationship between outbound mobility and the demographic downturn.

Other explanations—many interrelated—involve the COVID-19 pandemic, rising nationalist and xenophobic sentiments globally, emergent online education platforms like K-MOOC and the Minerva University MOOC, international branch campuses, safety concerns (e.g., mass shootings in the case of the United States), geopolitical tensions involving, for example, the United States and China, and government efforts to improve domestic higher education competence and capacity. These factors not only explain disruptions to traditional patterns of outbound student mobility, but also some underpin shifts in mobility trends. For example, factors of growing concern regarding safety issues in the United States, coupled with rising higher education costs and restrictive immigration policies introduced by the previous administration of the United States (“Trump Effect”), are likely pushing foreign students to alternative English-speaking destinations such as Australia and Canada, or even to European nations such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. These European countries were among the top study abroad destinations for Koreans in 2022.

Future Outlook

South Korea's suppressed demand for foreign higher education over the past three years will likely rebound in the postpandemic era. Early indications of this are already visible. The number of Korean students in, for instance, the United States has recovered from 39,491 in 2020–2021 to 40,755 in 2021–2022. We believe that the rebound is less suggestive of a return to enduring patterns of rising outbound mobility than reflective of “jumping back” from a temporary setback relating to COVID-19. In the future, outbound mobility flows might still fluctuate due to the aforementioned factors.

In particular, scholars have already seen that the Korean government's efforts to improve higher education quality in the country have helped dampen brain drain. These efforts, increasingly integrated into national internationalization agendas aimed at building a knowledge-based economy, have been growing in scope (more initiatives) and size (more funding) in recent years. Examples of such initiatives include Brain Korea 21 (BK21) and World Class University (WCU) project, as well as the more recent “Study Korea 3.0” plan, aimed at recruiting 300,000 foreign students over the next decade, and the Glocal University Project, primarily aimed at boosting the country's competitiveness at regional level.

What is more certain is the emergence of education destinations with stronger appeal for Koreans amid evolving global circumstances. Korean students and their families are increasingly looking at alternative locations in Australia, Canada, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, as well as at Asian countries like Singapore, which already hosts many more Korean students than before. Will these countries remain popular education destinations in the long term? Many push and pull factors are involved, so only time will tell. Moreover, there might be further developments, such as growing cross-national academic collaborations as a result of increased contact and exchanges with new and different cultures.

The scope (in terms of countries affected) and longevity of the downturn in outbound mobility are yet to be fully understood. Global circumstances are constantly in flux, and trends observed today might evolve. Also, earlier this year South Korea surpassed a milestone of 200,000 foreigners studying in the country. This number is expected to rise thanks to the already mentioned “Study Korea 3.0” plan. What does this mean for South Korea, historically known as a major sending country? Is it one step closer to fulfilling the vision of becoming a regional higher educational hub? There are a lot of questions, but

Kyuseok Kim, MBA, is a PhD student at the department of education of Korea University, South Korea. E-mail: k.s.mick.kim@gmail.com.

Edward Choi is assistant professor at Yonsei University, South Korea. E-mail: eddie.chae@gmail.com.

time will tell whether current outbound and inbound trends will continue, and whether South Korea can diversify its pool of foreign students, most of whom are currently coming from a handful of countries (such as China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam).

South Korea may be on the brink of a new horizon with opportunities with implications for intraregional student mobility patterns, as well as—to a smaller extent—for foreign markets beyond Asia. While the status of South Korea as a significant source country is likely to stay the same, at least in the short term, it will be interesting to monitor the evolving situation and, more importantly, the relations between the national idea of raising the country's higher education competitiveness, developing global circumstances, and changing consumer attitudes in South Korea toward study abroad. ▲