

Korean Students in the United States

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Korea has an international reputation for sending undergraduate students overseas for their education. In fact, Korean international students comprise the third-largest group in the United States. Because numerous US universities rank among the world's best, Koreans generally place high value on a US degree. This emphasis on the educational background provides significant advantages to US-educated job applicants during the hiring process. Therefore, parents encourage their children to set, as their primary goal, graduation from an Ivy League school. Indeed, large corporations in Korea employ specific hiring methods for Ivy League students; they use tailored on-site recruitment and hiring strategies. Also, certain characteristics of Korean society, such as sensitivity to trends and preferential treatment for foreign-degree holders, result in the notion that studying abroad is compulsory.

To be examined are the driving forces behind Korean students' choice to study abroad, the effects of the increasing number of returning international students in Korea, and how US institutions can facilitate the educational experience of international students. Another analysis focuses on the success of

students who returned to Korea after completing their undergraduate degree in the United States. (This analysis is based in part on original interviews.)

THE KOREAN CONTEXT

Korean students choose to study in America because they want to study English, private education costs in Korea are rising, and enhanced job opportunities are available to US degree holders. In a survey asking 1,055 Koreans to name the country where they would prefer to study, the United States ranked first. This ranking can be explained by the tendency of Koreans to follow trends, the rising importance of fluency in English, and the privileged status of Korean students who study in the United States.

Korean society is sensitive to trends, which Koreans are motivated to follow. From 1994 through 2006, the period referred to as “the boom of youths studying abroad,” thousands of Korean students went to America to study English. Also, many Korean companies considered proficiency in English a requirement for employment. In addition, in 1993, President Yong Sam Kim proposed globalization as a national priority; and in 2000, the government removed restrictions on students studying abroad. The result was that the number of Korean international students rose by 36.6 percent, from 45,685 in 2000, to 75,321 in 2010. About 40 percent of classmates from Korean middle schools studied in the United States.

In the early 1990s, only a few from upper-income families in Korea studied abroad, and the status associated with having been an international student in America nearly assured these students a job at the Korean company of their choice. Observing these outcomes, middle-class parents began to view a US

degree as an investment, confident that American higher education would guarantee their children's success in Korea. However, due to the increasing number of Korean international students, returning students are losing their market competitiveness, impairing their chances for employment in Korea.

WHAT US HIGHER EDUCATION OFFERS

Earning a degree in the United States allows Korean students to interact with people from all over the world. Because the population in Korea is primarily homogenous and more Korean corporations are becoming globalized, a multicultural background is highly valued in the Korean job market. For Korean companies, the greatest strengths of international students are their facility with the English language, global outlook, acceptance of multicultural experience, creativity, and flexible thought processes. Ms. Yang, a recent graduate of Emory University, said, "Koreans perceive that US education fosters creativity and confidence because the classroom environment allows open discussions and use of flexible thinking on assignments."

As Korean corporations continue to expand their businesses into other countries, experience working with foreigners is valued more highly than any other qualification. Mr. Kim, whose undergraduate degree is from Northwestern University, said, "Companies [in Korea] value the experience of interacting with foreigners in the workplace the most, which is considered as a specialty for US international students." Therefore, students seek out universities that offer employment experience to international students.

The majority of interviewees who studied abroad regretted socializing mostly with Korean friends and choosing classes and majors that did not require

presentations, in-class essay exams, and class discussion. Most were also unaware that a university's career centers provide information and support in finding jobs abroad and choosing majors. Moreover, students found it difficult to leave their comfort zone and interact with American students. Therefore, focusing institutional resources to help students gain the most out of their US higher education is critical. Students should be encouraged to participate in classroom discussions to facilitate critical thinking, interact more with American students, and seek development services from career centers. This process would help Korean international students to take full advantage of their US education and, ultimately, provide them with increased job opportunities in Korea.

Today, Korea faces high unemployment among young adults, and the increasing number of foreign graduates makes it difficult for them to find a job. Moreover, domestic students are becoming more competitive. Thus, Korean students studying in the United States must spend their time more productively, and institutions must implement programs to help international students move closer to their career goals. The top jobs in Korea still mostly recruit people who have taken full advantage of their US higher education. Therefore, parents will continue to send their children to the United States with the hope that US education will generate significant personal and professional opportunities for them.