

# The emergence of a regional hub: comparing international student choices and experiences in South Korea

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**Abstract** As the demand for international education increases, middle-income non-English speaking countries, such as South Korea, play an increasing role in hosting the world's students. This mixed-methods study compares the different motivations and experiences of international students within and outside the East Asian region. Based on findings, this paper suggests the possibility of Korea developing its position as a regional hub for education in East Asia. It also discusses related issues such as English-Medium Instruction in Korean higher education as well as strategies for international student recruitment.

**Keywords** International student mobility · Korea · English medium instruction · International student experiences · Regional hub

## Introduction

Despite a tumultuous and uncertain global economy, international education remains in high demand. The latest data showed that there were more than 4.1 million students enrolled in institutions outside their country of citizenship in 2010, a 99 % increase since 2000, with more than half of these students coming from Asia (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2012). The destination of international students has been and continues to be predominantly English-speaking and Western European countries. The

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United States has and continues to be the lead host country for the world's students, with 17 % of the world's share, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and France, all totaling about 50 %. Although these top five countries have served as the most sought-after destinations for some time, there have been notable changes over the past decade. The US and parts of Western Europe have experienced some declines, while the Oceania and Asian regions have increased their role in international education.

According to the OECD (2011), the language of instruction appears to be among the dominant drivers in where an international student chooses to study, listing popular languages including English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish. The dominance of English-speaking countries as host destinations is well reflected in the high numbers of international student enrollments in the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Given such linguistic demands, non-English speaking countries have increased their English-speaking course offerings in hope of attracting a greater share of the world's students. Meanwhile, with the emergence of the Asian economies, there has been growing interest in studying abroad and learning the native languages in this region as well.

The OECD has also reported that regional mobility occurs at a higher rate than global mobility. In other words, students tend to study within their own region over traveling to study in more distant destinations. This trend is perhaps most evident within the European Union, supported by the Erasmus (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) Program as well as the influx of Asian students studying in nearby Australia. There is also a significant proportion of shared border education. Among all OECD countries, about 20 % of international students study in countries where they share a direct land or maritime border (OECD 2011). Such border patterns have been observed within East Asia, Western and Eastern Europe, and the Russian Federation.

There has been considerable attention on the intentions and flows of international students to developed English-speaking countries, but far less is known about international study in non-English speaking countries. Without the appeal of native English language study, several such countries have nevertheless increased its role in the international education global market for reasons that have not been well explored. While students are choosing to study in non-English language speaking countries to learn or communicate in additional foreign languages, other driving motivations have not been adequately examined or compared. Moreover, student experiences at such institutions remain mostly anecdotal.

South Korea (Korea hereafter), in many respects, is an interesting case to further understand student mobility. Chief among them, an investigation of international student mobility and experiences within the Korean context would address an important aspect of the current literature that tends to focus primarily on major study destinations such as the US, UK and Australia. In fact, with very few notable exceptions (i.e., Cantwell et al. 2009; Kondakci 2011; Li and Bray 2007), most studies have investigated the determinants of international student flows and experiences in developed English-speaking countries (i.e., Chen 2007; Lee 2010; Marginson et al. 2010; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), despite the fact that growing numbers of international students are now studying in mid-level countries like Korea.

With the preceding rationales in mind, this study aimed to examine international students' destination choices and subsequent experiences at an academic institution in Korea. To achieve these goals, the study sought to answer the following questions: (1) Why did international students choose Korea and, more specifically, the institution in Korea in which they are currently attending? (2) What are the differences in their reasons for choosing Korea and attending the institution based on their region of origin and degree program in Korea? (3) How do international students' academic experiences vary by their region of origin and degree program in Korea? As a way to more fully understand these

issues, we interviewed Chinese students, the largest international student population in the country, to ask: (4) What are the qualitative experiences of international Chinese students' choices and academic experiences in Korea?

### Choosing whether and where to study: emergence of a regional hub

Reasons for choosing to study abroad and their choices in where to study have been well described in the literature. The dominant frame to capture migration, including international education, has been largely understood as a matter of resources. The push–pull model suggests students are “pushed” out of their home country due to inadequate or inferior educational resources and are “pulled” outside their borders as they are able to obtain a better education elsewhere (Altbach 1998). These developed countries that pull students from developing countries are sometimes referred to as “core” or “central” countries, in contrast to “peripheral” countries. Since the introduction of the push–pull model, there has been much research on ways to extend and sometimes challenge this basic idea, mostly from the perspective of non-Western and developing countries. McMahon's (1992) research of push–pull across 18 countries confirmed this general trend and the dominance of economic factors but also warned, “it is neither useful nor appropriate to generalize about the Third World as a whole but to acknowledge that at different points in time and for different sets of nations explanations for the same phenomenon are unique” (p. 476). She added that beyond a simplistic unidirectional flow of students from poor to rich countries, sending countries are required to have a strong economic base and state-level affirmation for higher education for its citizens to seek education abroad.

Studies have noted differentiated demand, depending on the host and sending countries or regions. Li and Bray (2007) compared Chinese students studying in Hong Kong and Macau and found the core determining factors in students' choice were educational, such as “quality, facilities and resources, curriculum and program, and internationalisation” (p. 812) and economic, including “employability following graduation, and access to scholarships” (p. 812). Beyond the basic assumptions of push–pull, they also found negative push–pull factors (negative push factors were in the host country and negative pull factors in the home country, i.e., discrimination in the host country and family ties in the home country) and identified an interaction of both internal (i.e., family background, motivations) and external factors (i.e., scholarships), resulting in a two-way push–pull. With competing push and pull factors in home and host countries, the researchers provided a broadened view of researching international student flows.

Cantwell et al. (2009) further expanded on the push–pull model by distinguishing the orientations toward studying abroad, depending on students' region of origin. In the case of Mexico, while students from North America and Europe sought international study in this country for the short-term and reasons related to learning about its culture, Latin Americans were more academically oriented in choosing to study in Mexico with the intention of obtaining a degree and further study in the country. In sum, the authors concluded, “The meaning that students give to the action of studying abroad is dependent on aspects of the political economy in both the sending and receiving countries, as well as the actors understanding of these aspects, and may not be assumed as the same for all students” (p. 350).

Kondakci (2011) similarly identified different rationales for studying in a developing country. In Turkey, students from Western and economically developed countries held private rationales (i.e., experiencing a different culture) while students from economically developing countries such as the Balkans, Middle East, Caucasia and Central Asia held economic (i.e., scholarships and cost) and academic (i.e., academic quality) rationales. The

research also notes cultural, political, and historical proximity between the home and host countries as an important determinant in explaining the size and direction of flows to the countries that are not major host destinations such as Turkey. These studies suggest that the motivations and experiences in studying in nearby developing countries are likely to be different from those in studying in traditional study destinations, such as the US and UK.

Meanwhile, regional hubs are emerging in East Asia given the high demand for international education in the region. Although there seems no objective indicator to determine what constitutes a regional education hub (Knight 2011), an education hub can be defined as “a planned effort to build a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaged in cross-border education, training, knowledge production and innovation initiatives” (Knight 2011, p. 6). It is worth noting that “[t]he notion of region is central to these new developments as countries are trying to attract students primarily, but not exclusively, from the region and secondly working on raising their profile and competitiveness in their region (Knight and Morshidi 2011, p. 594).” The emergence of regional education hubs should be understood in close connection with the growing emphasis on the regionalization of higher education as well as the growth in the scope and scale of cross-border education.

Korea’s aggressive policies of attracting foreign students and scholars and its plan to develop several new Free Economic Zones to partner with foreign institutions demonstrate the country’s efforts to serve as an educational hub. Among the distinctions of regional hubs, study within the region may not always be an international student’s first choice. In the Korean context, Ahn (2009) investigated the motivation of international students to choose Korea as a study destination, revealing that they considered many countries other than Korea before making their final decisions. Their main reasons to eventually choose Korea included a positive image of Korea, geographical proximity, and more affordable living costs compared to other major study destinations like the US, UK, and Japan. Further, Knight and Morshidi (2011) investigated students’ motivations to study in Malaysia. The study indicated that the dramatic increase of international students’ enrollment at Malaysian higher education institutions (HEI hereafter) over the past few years was mainly driven by the government’s deliberate strategy to recruit international students from the region and other Islamic countries, pointing to its potential to serve as a regional hub in Southeast Asia as well as among Islamic countries.

In sum, countries that are not global host destinations, such as Korea, Malaysia, Turkey, and Mexico, can serve as regional hubs seeking a niche market rather than harboring the almost impossible task of becoming a major global host like the US or the UK. Matters of traveling convenience, lower cost, and familiar culture were some of the most frequently cited elements in past studies that could impact decisions to study nearby yet still obtain an international education.

### **Background of the study: case of Korea**

During the past twenty years, policies pertaining to student mobility in Korea have experienced distinct developments. In particular, since the early 2000s, there have been several large-scale governmental initiatives intended to substantially increase international student enrollments at Korean HEIs (Byun and Kim 2011). Its governmental policies and measures include (1) the ‘Study Korea Project’ and ‘Global Korea Scholarship Program’ to recruit more international students, (2) the ‘World Class University Project’ to ‘import’ world prominent scholars from abroad, and (3) the enactment of ‘a special act on the

establishment and operation of foreign HEIs in Free Economic Zones and Jeju Free International City' to attract foreign HEIs and research institutes. Most significantly, the Study Korea Project, launched in 2004, set the goal of recruiting 50,000 international students by 2010. One of its main objectives was to generate additional income for Korean higher education, which has suffered from both a declining domestic population of traditional college students and increasing competition with institutions abroad. Coupled with the boosting Asian student recruitment market, particularly from China, these government efforts bore substantial results. Since the early 2000s, international student enrollments at Korean colleges and universities have increased rapidly from 1,983 in 1995, to 16,832 in 2004, and 49,270 in 2007. Motivated by this success, the Korean government rolled out the second round of the Study Korea Project in 2008, seeking to further increase the global share of international students by recruiting 100,000 international students by 2012. The goal is close to being reached (89,537 in 2011) and plans currently are underway to increase the target number to 200,000 by 2020 (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) 2012).

### International student enrollment trends

Accordingly, Korea has the highest reported change index in international student enrollment among OECD countries, as well as other major East Asian countries since 2000 (OECD 2012). Korea's market share in international education also rose to 1.4 %, up from 0.2 in 2000. In addition, Korea has the highest proportion of international students from neighboring countries sharing its territories with Korea compared to other OECD countries. According to OECD statistics, 79.2 % of international students came from these neighboring countries in 2010. In addition, four out of the top five sending countries for Korean HEIs in 2010 were nearby Asian countries. Approximately 80 % of international students at Korean HEIs originated from two neighboring countries, China and Japan. As Table 1 shows, this intra-regional mobility pattern seems to have been even more strengthened over the past decade. The recently launched multi-lateral college student exchange program among China, Japan, and Korea ("CAMPUS Asia"—Collective Action for Mobility Program of University Students in Asia), aiming to be an Asian version of ERASMUS, is expected to further facilitate Korea's role in this region.

A close examination of international student statistics collected annually by the Korean government demonstrate that the number of short-term and non-degree seeking students enrolled at language courses and other training courses account for 63 % of total international students in 2001 (see Table 2). This pattern has changed over the last decade. The percentage of short-term, non-degree seeking international students has decreased from 62.8 % in 2001, to 30.8 % in 2005, and to 30.3 % in 2012. Short-term international students' home countries are slightly more diverse than those of degree-seeking students. Nevertheless, (a) an absolute majority of short-term international students originated from Asian countries (88.6 % for language course and 70.0 % for other training program in 2012); and (b) this pattern has remained fairly constant since 2005 as Table 2 suggests.

Overall, the increase in the number of international students has been mainly driven by students from Asian neighboring countries over the past decade and this pattern will likely continue at least into the near future. In other words, students from the other regions of the world have basically played a negligible role despite the various efforts of the Korean government to diversify their international students' countries of origin.

An especially important factor that makes the Korean case especially intriguing is the increasing role of English at Korean HEIs. Over the past few years, English-medium

**Table 1** Trends in international student enrollment in Korea by Country

	2000	2010
Number of international students from all countries <sup>a</sup>	3,373	59,194
Market share	0.2 %	1.4 %
Top 5 Sending countries for Korean HEIs (Student numbers and the share of the total)	1. China 1,182 (35.0 %) 2. Japan 613 (18.2 %) 3. US 195 (5.8 %) 4. Russia 77 (2.3 %) 5. Viet Nam 62 (1.8 %)	1. China 45,757 (77.3 %) 2. Mongolia 2,190 (3.7 %) 3. Vietnam 1,662 (2.8 %) 4. Japan 1,147 (1.9 %), 5. US 988 (1.7 %)
Percentage of foreign students from neighboring countries <sup>b</sup>	53.2 %	79.2 %

Source: OECD (2012)

<sup>a</sup> OECD international student data tends to underrepresent the number of international students in Korea mainly due to the fact that the data only concerns regularly enrolled international students in an education program, thus excluding students in short-term exchange or non-degree programs. According to Korean data collected annually including these students in non-degree programs, the number of international students in Korean HEIs is much higher, comprising China 57,783 (69 %), Japan 3,876 (5 %), Mongolia 3,333 (4 %) out of a total of 83,842 international students in 2010

<sup>b</sup> Neighboring countries refer to the countries having land and maritime borders with host counties (China and Japan)

instruction (EMI hereafter) has been one of the fastest spreading trends observed at most Korean HEIs, albeit Korea is not an English-speaking country. Using English as the medium of communication both inside and outside the classroom not only helps to attract more international students but also significantly influences, in both positive and negative ways, international and domestic students' academic and social experiences. Some recent studies (i.e., Byun et al. 2011) on Korean universities indicated that EMI may have positive effects on students' learning outcomes in terms of improving students' overall English proficiency, despite some criticism on its implementation (i.e., the compulsory enforcement of EMI without regard to students'/instructors' language proficiency). On the other hand, Jon (2012) suggested that the use of English language could influence power dynamics among students in Korea. Korean students' strong preference to interact with international students who speak English can empower these international students, accordingly who may feel it unnecessary to master the Korean language. This dynamic in turn might lead to non-English speaking international students feeling isolated and less valued.

### Isomorphic internationalization

According to several Korean scholars (Cho and Palmer 2013; Kim 2006), one of the most salient characteristics of Korean higher education is its similar pattern of internationalization regardless of institutional diversity and missions. The reason can be attributed to the traditionally centralized influence of the Korean government over Korean HEIs and subsequently, the isomorphic pattern of institutional policies from governmental regulations. Particularly during the 2000s, Korean HEIs suffered from chronic financial shortfalls and became increasingly dependent on government-sponsored projects for financial support. Accordingly, most institutions prioritized fulfilling the indicators suggested by the government's projects for funding. Eventually, the internationalization of Korean higher

**Table 2** Trends in international student enrollment in Korea by academic program

	2001			2005			2012			Total		
	Language course	Degree program	Other training program	Total	Language course	Degree program	Other training program	Total	Language course		Degree program	Other training program
Asia	4,589	3,585	581	8,755	4,477	14,304	1,188	19,969	14,740	56,143	6,756	77,639
Africa	49	49	2	100	36	144	4	184	264	996	60	1,320
Oceania	89	46	21	156	32	76	37	145	56	202	65	323
North America	669	330	489	1,488	308	538	259	1,105	596	2,071	1,123	3,790
South America	87	114	8	209	45	148	16	209	211	372	104	687
Europe	589	212	137	938	314	367	233	914	772	805	1,542	3,119
Total	6,072	4,336	1,238	11,646	5,212	15,577	1,737	22,526	16,639	60,589	9,650	86,878
	52.1 %	37.2 %	10.6 %	100 %	23.1 %	69.2 %	7.7 %	100 %	19.2 %	69.7 %	11.1 %	100 %

Source: MEST (2013)

education moved toward its homogenization, focusing on the proportion of international students and faculty and the ratio of courses taught in English, over pursuing differentiated internationalization and development strategies.

This converging trend can be understood as “coercive isomorphism,” which “results from both formal and in-formal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p 150). In relation to this study, internationalization in most the Korean HEIs has been implemented by means of expanding international students and faculty as well as EMI courses (Byun and Kim 2011; Cho and Palmer 2013). This pattern, in turn, continues to be reinforced by the government’s HEI financing and a domestic news publication that ranks institutions based on these internationalization indicators (Joongang Daily Newspaper Education Development Institute 2013).

## Methods

In order to more effectively fulfill the aforementioned research objectives and to further explore international students’ experiences in Korea, this institutional case study is based on one Korean university which has been especially aggressive in recruiting international students and in implementing the EMI policy over the past decade. Considering the preceding background of Korean higher education towards isomorphic internationalization, the case institution can be considered as a “representative or typical case” (Yin 2009, p.48) rather than an idiosyncratic and isolated case. In other words, although the study is not intended to be generalizable to all international students in the country, the possibility of applying the study findings to other institutions in Korea can be considered high.

This institutional case study employed concurrent nested mixed methods for its research design, relying primarily on the quantitative data (Creswell 2009). The benefits of this strategy are to “gain broader perspectives as a result of using the different methods as opposed to using the predominant method alone...[and] used to describe an aspect of the study that cannot be quantifiable” (p. 249). Following a concurrent nested strategy, the collection and analysis of the quantitative data and qualitative data occurred simultaneously. The two methods were integrated during the interpretation phase of the study.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at a private university in Seoul, Korea. This private university, as one of the top universities in Korea, is well known for its determined efforts to internationalize itself. For example, the number of inter-university agreements signed by this university and its partner institutions abroad has almost doubled within only 5-year period, from 257 in 2005 to 525 in 2010, notably due to the increase in new agreements with HEIs in Japan (43) and China (24). To promote EMI, the university mandated that all professors hired on or after 2003 must teach classes in English. In addition, its number of international students enrolled in regular degree-granting academic programs doubled from 411 in 2007 to 956 in 2010, and those in exchange non-degree-granting programs increased from 154 in 2004 to 895 in 2010. Among international students who were enrolled in regular degree-granting undergraduate or graduate programs, 473 (49.5 %) came from China in 2010. This proportion is relatively lower than the composition of the Chinese international student population in Korea [74 % (MEST 2011)]. Primary reasons are due to institutional efforts to diversify its international student population as well as the institution’s relatively high prestige, resulting in a disproportionate number of degree-seeking students.



## Data

Quantitative data collection involved an online survey in two languages, English and Chinese, considering the large Chinese international student population at the institution. Survey participants were recruited with assistance from the Office of International Affairs at the institution. Staff at the OIA contacted international students who attended the institution in Fall 2010 and could be reached by email. A total of 425 responded to the survey, resulting in a 30 % response rate. The survey instrument was based on a previously published study on international students in another non-developed country, Mexico (Cantwell et al. 2009). The survey was modified to address issues particular to the Korean context and pilot tested. The survey included 57 questions about reasons they chose Korea and the institution, the levels of satisfaction and difficulties in their academic and social life, including discrimination, self-rated learning outcomes, future plan, and background information.

Survey participants consisted of 159 males, 200 females, and 66 with no responses on gender. By their region of origin, those from East Asia comprised 53.6 % of the population (see Table 3), and China was the top sender (156; 36.7 %). Among those who indicated their degree program at an institution, 48.9 % of them were enrolled in a graduate program (see Table 4). While Asian students concentrated on a graduate program (53.5 %), students from North America and Europe ranged from no degree to graduate programs (47.8 and 37 %, respectively). The majority of respondents reported being able to read, write, and speak at least the basic level of Korean and advanced English (see Table 5).

In an effort to more fully understand the choices and experiences that cannot be well captured in a survey, we also included a qualitative component to supplement the survey

**Table 3** International students' region of origin

East Asia	Asia (other)	North America/Europe	Other	Total
178	50	94	10	332

**Table 4** International students' level (type) of study

Non-degree	Undergraduate	Graduate	Other	Total
88	85	172	7	365

East Asia includes China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan

**Table 5** International students' level of Korean language and English

	Level of Korean language		Level of English	
	N	%	N	%
Only a few phrases	56	15.6	21	5.8
Read, write and speak basic Korean/English	171	47.8	105	29.2
Read, write and speak advanced Korean/English	131	36.6	233	64.9
Total	358	100	359	100

analyses. We purposely focused our sample on Chinese undergraduate students. This decision to limit this population of interviewees was based on their high representation in Korean higher education as well as at the case institution. A Korean-Chinese graduate student fluent in the Chinese language conducted the interviews. We believed that the option of being able to share one's experiences in one's native language would yield more in-depth data than communicating in one's second or third language. Twenty interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling. Among them, 8 were males, and 12 were females; 4 studied in humanities, 11 in social sciences, and 5 in science and engineering. They also included 4 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 8 juniors, and 3 seniors. The majority of them showed an advanced level of Korean according to their Korean language proficiency tests, but indicated mixed levels of English (3 at the basic, 12 at the mid, and 5 at the advanced levels). A semi-structured interview approach was used, and the interview protocol included reasons they chose Korea and the institution, the process, their academic and social experiences, and the impact of their experience in Korea on their lives.

### Data analyses

For the quantitative analyses, descriptive and regression analyses were conducted to rate and compare international students' destination choices and satisfaction with their academic experiences. Our regression analyses focused on the extent to which their region of origin and degree program influenced their ratings. Dependent variables were produced by exploratory factor analysis using relevant survey items (see Table 6). Two of the three sets of dependent variables were international students' reasons for choosing Korea and the specific Korean institution. The third set of dependent variables was the level of satisfaction with the academic experience.

Independent variables included (a) international students' regions of origin and degree programs at the Korean institution, (b) priority of Korea and the Korean institution in choosing a study abroad destination, and (c) demographic background variables. Variables for the regions of origin and the degree programs were included as dummy variables, using North America/Europe and no degree program as reference groups, respectively. Variables related to the application were also added as dummy variables, which asked whether a student applied for institutions in countries other than Korea and the home country, and whether the institution was their first choice. Demographic variables involved previous experiences of studying abroad, having acquaintances in Korea, parents' level of education, and gender. Descriptive findings of independent variables were provided in Table 7.

Based on the results from the quantitative analyses, individual interviews were examined to further understand and elaborate on the study findings. Interviews were transcribed into Chinese and then translated into Korean by bilingual students, fluent in both Chinese and Korean and with past experiences living in China. The researchers then translated the Korean transcripts into English, analyzing the data through the Nvivo 9 program. Given the exploratory nature of this study, interview data was coded inductively using open coding, creating a code list based on preliminary findings and then modified upon ongoing analyses.

**Table 6** Dependent variables used in regression analyses

	Factor loadings	Cronbach alpha
Reasons for choosing Korea (N = 365)		
Accessibility		
Easy visa	.817	.711
Close	.769	
Lower living cost	.678	
Public safety	.499	
Korean culture and knowledge		
Learn/practice Korean language	.817	.642
Experience Korean culture	.798	
Academic research about Korea	.616	
Practical opportunity and guidance		
Scholarship opportunity	.812	.435
Work opportunity	.644	
Teacher/counselor's advice	.497	
Personal connection		
Family in Korea	.856	.572
Korean heritage	.704	
Friend in Korea	.605	
Reasons for choosing the institution (N = 391)		
Targeted institution/program		
Teacher/counselor's recommendation	.684	.548
Unique academic program	.641	
Particular program in interest	.564	
Financial and research opportunities		
Financial assistance	.831	.623
Research opportunity	.623	
Better educational cost	.548	
Academic environment		
Ethnic/cultural diversity	.786	.367
Courses are provided in English	.623	
Better quality of higher education	.505	
Satisfaction with academic experience (N = 147)		
Administrative support and facilities		
Academic resource	.862	.831
Quality of university facilities	.823	
Academic support service	.672	
Scientific research/laboratory equipment	.653	
English availability		
Course availability in English language	.840	.798
English speaking ability of faculty	.838	
English speaking ability of staff	.719	

**Table 6** continued

	Factor loadings	Cronbach alpha
Financial and academic support		
Items for reasons for choosing Korea and the institution used the scale measuring the degree of importance (1–4); items for academic satisfaction used the scale measuring its level (1–5)		
Scholarship/grants/other financial aid	.857	.739
Educational cost	.832	
Faculty advisors (professor)	.517	
Transferring courses from other universities	.495	

**Table 7** Description of independent variables used in regression analyses

	N	%	Total
Region			
N. America/Europe	94	28.3	
East Asia	163	49.1	
Asia (Other)	65	19.6	
Other region	10	3.0	332
Degree			
Undergraduate	85	24.1	
Graduate	172	48.9	
Short-term programs	88	25	352
Application (other)			
Yes	215	51.2	
No	205	48.8	420
First choice institution			
Yes	303	71.6	
No	120	28.4	423
Prior study abroad			
Yes	72	20.4	
No	281	79.6	353
Acquaintances in Korea			
Yes	145	40.8	
No	210	59.2	355
Gender			
Male	159	44.3	
Female	200	55.7	355
Parents' level of education (year)			
	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
	13.4	6	18
			349

## Findings

### Choosing Korea: unmet expectations

The mean scores for students' responses across individual items showed that 'to learn and practice the Korean language (2.81)' and 'to experience Korean culture (2.77)' were the most important reasons for choosing to study in Korea. 'Scholarship opportunity' (2.69) was the next most important reason, followed by 'better job opportunities outside home country with academic experience abroad (2.60)' and 'better job opportunities in my home country with academic experience abroad (2.60)' (Scale 1–4; 4 = most important, 1 = least important).

Comparing response factors by students' region of origin produced varied results in choosing Korea. As shown in Table 8, students from East Asia chose Korea for its accessibility compared to those from North America and Europe when all other variables were controlled. The items that comprised of accessibility to Korea as a study abroad destination included geographical proximity to their home country, lower cost of living, easier visa and application procedures, and public safety.

Similarly, students visiting Korea for short-term programs chose Korea generally for their interest in Korea compared to students seeking graduate degrees. In other words, short-term study students (more than half of whom came from North America and Europe) chose Korea for learning and practicing the Korean language, experiencing the Korean culture, and conducting academic research about Korea. Females also preferred Korea in terms of their interest in the country over males. On the other hand, graduate students chose Korea for financial and directed reasons such as scholarship opportunities, work opportunities, and their teacher's advice when compared to short-term visiting students while controlling for other variables. In addition, international students who had applied for institutions outside

**Table 8** Reasons for choosing Korea by international students' background characteristics: multiple regression results with standardized beta coefficients

	Accessibility	Korean culture and knowledge	Practical opportunity and guidance	Personal connection
<b>Region</b>				
East Asia	.48***	-.02	-.08	-.14
Asia (other)	.19**	.03	.08	-.11
Other region	.03	-.01	.09	-.08
<b>Degree</b>				
Undergraduate	.12	-.05	.14	-.10
Graduate	-.04	-.19**	.44***	-.003
Application (other)	-.06	-.17**	.02	-.11*
Parents' level of education	.02	-.03	-.05	.02
Prior study abroad	-.11*	.94	.02	.03
Acquaintances in Korea	.06	.03	.02	.35***
Gender (female)	.08	.13*	.003	-.06
$R^2$	.53	.29	.41	.42

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Korea were less likely to show interest in Korea or have social connections in Korea or be of Korean heritage.

Overall, Asian students from all regions prioritized the financial and practical aspects of studying in Korea, such as obtaining a visa, proximity to home country, living cost, and safety concerns than those from Western countries. Graduate students reported less interested in Korean culture and language but more attracted to Korea for financial and other incentives than non-degree seeking students.

Similarly, Chinese students explained in their interviews that geographic proximity to home, cultural familiarity, lower cost of living, and easier visa processes influenced their decision to study in Korea. For example, those who also considered Japan for their destination choice said that Korea was cheaper and issued more visas than Japan. Some also indicated that friends and family members living and studying in Korea contributed to their decision.

I already had an older sister in Korea. Not only is it close to China with cultural similarity, it costs less than studying abroad in Europe and the U.S. This is why I chose Korea (Female, Social science, 1st year).

Other reasons included the language or specific majors. They preferred the Korean language or wanted to learn a foreign language other than English. In some cases, they could not obtain sufficient English scores to study in English-speaking countries nor sufficient test results to attend their preferred universities in China.

Several students, however, mentioned unmet expectations related to their motivations to study in Korea, such as improving their Korean and not necessarily learning English. Their primary intentions to become more fluent in Korean were often unfulfilled. They felt that the Korean university overemphasized English; therefore, they could have studied abroad in English-speaking countries instead.

Even though I take courses in English, I use Korean in daily life and interactions with friends. Thus I need much practice to enhance my colloquial Korean. I can quickly be good at reading and listening in Korean, but not at talking in it. Another reason I would not choose Korea for study abroad is that Koreans emphasize English too much. Their mother tongue is Korean language but English is regarded more important than Korean here. Then what is the meaning of my having come to Korea? (#14 Female, Social science, 3rd year)

Those who planned to continue their studies after graduation indicated plans to further their education in English-speaking countries. One Chinese business major student who considered Australia but chose Korea said:

I thought that I don't need to learn English while I am in Korea. But in reality, English was more important than Korean. In my department, 80–90 % of courses are taught in English. All four academic major classes are taught in English. I think you rather had better go to English-speaking countries such as New Zealand and Australia (#19, Male, engineering, 3rd year).

This finding appears to be related to the emphasis of EMI at Korean HEIs including this specific institution. This finding will be explained further in the next section.

**Table 9** Reasons for choosing the institution by international students' background characteristics: multiple regression results with standardized beta coefficients

	Targeted institution/ program	Financial and research opportunities	Academic environment
Region			
East Asia	.41***	.06	.08
Asia (other)	.16**	.13*	.18**
Other region	.04	.07	.15**
Degree			
Undergraduate	.02	.06	-.05
Graduate	.06	.49***	.19**
Application (other)	-.12*	.07	.07
First choice institution	.17**	-.13**	-.04
Parents' level of education	-.04	-.07	-.12*
Prior study abroad	.001	-.02	.04
Acquaintances in Korea	.09	.11*	.15**
Gender (female)	.05	.004	.03
$R^2$	.46	.54	.32

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ;\*  $p < .05$ 

### Choosing the Korean institution

Regarding their institutional choice, international students overall indicated that 'courses taught in English (2.69),' 'better quality of higher education program compared to home country (2.49),' and 'financial assistance offered (2.47)' as their primary reasons. They also answered that they were fairly satisfied with 'academic resources (i.e. library) (4.20),' 'quality of university facilities (4.13)' and 'quality of teaching staff (3.97)' (Extremely dissatisfied = 1; Extremely satisfied = 5).

By their region of origin, however, reasons for choosing the institution were mixed as shown in Table 9. Asian students in general regarded the targeted institution or program more important than those from North America and Europe when other variables were held constant in the model. Other Asian students, excluding those from East Asia, also tended to choose the institution based on financial and research opportunities as well as on the academic environment (e.g. diversity, EMI, and quality at the institution). Similarly, graduate students considered these aspects of studying at the institution more important than short-term exchange students. Furthermore, those with personal connections in Korea were also more interested in financial and research opportunities as well as academic environment compared to those who did not.

In addition, those who had applied for institutions in countries other than Korea and their home country regarded the targeted institution or program less important than those who only applied to Korea. Those who chose the current institution as their first choice indicated that their teacher or counselor's advice and a specific educational program at the institution influenced their decision to attend the institution compared to those who did not choose the institution as their first choice. However, financial and research opportunities were less important for these students.

As shown in Table 9, East Asian students more heavily considered the educational aspects in choosing the institution such as academic programs, compared to those from North America and Europe. With regard to EMI, however, East Asian students indicated it was a

less important reason for choosing the institution compared to students from the Western countries, when a separate regression was conducted using EMI as a dependent variable ( $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ ). Chinese students expressed mixed experiences with EMI, which was not their primary reason for choosing the institution compared to North American and European students as shown in Table 9. Many interviewees showed satisfaction with EMI for its quality and fit with their major but some expressed their dissatisfaction and difficulty with EMI for their own lack of English ability or that of their professors.

[The most difficult part at this university is] English. I initially decided to learn Korean because I wanted to learn a language other than English. At other universities, you only need to take 2 EMI courses, but here you need to take an IELTS too. Moreover, students at this university are as excellent as those at Tsinghua University, and they are very good at English (#17 Female, humanities, 3rd year).

You need some level of English test scores to graduate this university. But now for me taking an exam for my academic major course is a problem. My English is not that good and it gives me hard time studying. All the textbooks are in English. It usually takes us [international students] time three times more than Korean students to study one course. The problem is that even when we studied three times more in terms of time, our test results are much lower than those by Korean students (#19 Male, engineering, 3rd year).

Of course, I prefer courses taught in Korean. Because I can understand mostly anything in Korean, I can be fully immersed in the content of a class or its atmosphere. I cannot often understand an EMI course because professors' pronunciation in English is weird. Korean students also agree with it. But we cannot help it. Some professors are good, but it still gives me weird feelings. If I cannot really understand it at all, I study it by myself. Then there is no meaning of taking this class (#20 Female, social science, 3rd year).

In addition, the Chinese students explained in the interviews that the institution's reputation and their previous language study at the same institution were the leading reasons for choosing the institution. Many of these students were already familiar with the surrounding areas in town, which helped to ease their adjustment to a new area, and had previous knowledge that the case institution was one of the top universities in the country. They also indicated their appreciation of the university's unique culture of strong camaraderie among students, which fostered their sense of belonging to the institution.

### Academic experiences

International students were generally satisfied with their academic experiences at the institution. Their highest levels of satisfaction were in the following areas: 'academic resources (4.2),' 'quality of university facilities (4.13),' and 'quality of professors and instructors (3.97),' while lower levels of satisfaction were in 'educational cost (3.27),' 'English ability of staff (3.45)' and 'transfer of credits (3.52)' (Scale 1–5; Extremely dissatisfied = 1, Extremely satisfied = 5).

As shown in Table 10, students from Asian countries, in particular from East Asian countries, tended to feel less satisfied with the institution's financial and academic support, including scholarship, educational cost, advisors, and transferring credits compared to students from North America and Europe when other independent variables were controlled. Chinese students explained in their interviews that they experienced difficulty



**Table 10** Satisfaction with academic experience by international students' background characteristics: multiple regression results with standardized beta coefficients

	Administrative support and facilities <sup>a</sup>	English availability <sup>a</sup>	Financial and academic support
<b>Region</b>			
East Asia	.29**	.11	-.23*
Asia (other)	.13	-.08	.04
Other region	.10	-.04	.08
<b>Degree</b>			
Undergraduate	-.13	-.09	-.17
Graduate	-.03	-.20	.15
Application (other)	-.06	-.05	-.02
First choice institution	.05	.16*	.11
Parents' level of education	.05	.001	-.06
Prior study abroad	.01	.03	.04
Gender (female)	-.08	.05	.09
$R^2$	.26	.30	.45

<sup>a</sup> Model fit was not significant;  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ;  
 \*  $p < .05$

competing with Korean students for scholarships due to disadvantages in Korean or English language capability compared to Korean students.

Despite some areas of discontent, the Chinese interviewees expressed overall satisfaction with the quality of education at their institution, including students, faculty, and teaching. They felt that the institution had high expectations for their students, thus pushing them to study harder than they normally would. Overall, they considered their Korean experiences beneficial for their education.

My institution has been already internationalized. Facilities and faculty are all good. This is a really good institution. Their education is far more excellent than those in my country. If you don't like a university or a major you are studying in my country, it can be a good choice to come here. Also if you don't like Chinese way of education, this university can be really a good choice (#16 Female, Social science, 3rd year).

It involves discussion and presentations a lot. They provide students with ample opportunities to express their thoughts. It enables interactions between faculty and students rather than professors lecturing and students simply memorizing them. I also believe that professors need to know how much students understand and students deliver their opinions to professors. I think this is the true process for college students to study and continue it (#11 Female, Social science, 1st year).

Several also complimented the local Korean students' academic efforts and abilities, as well as their commitment to both hard work and play in college life.

In comparison to short-term exchange students, an undergraduate student expressed some dissatisfaction that international undergraduate students feel less cared by the institution compared to other international, particularly exchange students.

There is a student club on campus to help international students. But it is only for exchange students. Students like us, who attend the undergraduate program

throughout four years at our own expenses, do not receive much benefit. When we register for courses, they only tell me what to do like they tell Korean students, but no more than that. Many of us experienced difficulty in the beginning. It was really cumbersome to ask around other Chinese students and so on (#17 Female, humanities, 3rd year).

## Discussion

As the demand for international education increases, middle-income non-English speaking countries, such as Korea, will continue to play an increasing role in hosting the world's students. This study is among the few to quantitatively examine the different motivations and experiences of international students coming from different regions of the world to Korea. Among the key findings based on the case institution, students from Asia sought to study in Korea and the specific university for educational, economic and other utilitarian reasons compared to students from North America and Europe. For instance, Asian students who enrolled mostly at long-term degree programs as degree-seeking students tended to be more concerned about the financial and practical aspects of studying in Korea, such as its easier visa process, geographical proximity, lower living cost and safety; and educational aspects of choosing the institution such as its unique academic programs.

Accordingly, Korean institutions may consider international students' different interests and motivations by their countries and regions of origin in their international student recruitment strategies. For example, universities seeking to attract students from North America and Europe and those on short-term exchange programs, may benefit from advertising programs that focus on experiencing the Korean culture and tourism. For Asian students, especially from China, and those seeking regular degree programs, institutions could emphasize information on financial support and living costs, such as scholarships, part-time jobs, and on campus and internship opportunities. For Asian students at the case institution, teachers' or counselors' recommendation played an important role in choosing the institution in Korea. Prior experiences on campus, such as learning Korean as a non-degree student, had also contributed to their decision to continue their studies as a degree-seeking student at the same institution. Therefore, Korean institutions could develop this academic pathway as a means to recruit from its existing pool of international students on short-term programs.

In this regard, the possibility of Korea, a mid-level country, developing its position as a regional hub can also be strengthened. Findings based on the case institution showed that the majority of international students came from Asia and indicated academic programs and accessibility as important reasons for choosing Korea and the institution. Although the findings are limited to international students in one university, this distinction is consistent with previous research in the case of Mexico (Cantwell et al. 2009) and Turkey (Kondakci 2011), which also differentiated motivations by regions and countries of origin. Therefore, emerging regional hubs, such as Korea, can serve as alternatives in students' academic mobility, particularly for neighboring countries. There may be certainly niche roles for a "mid-level" country like Korea to serve as a regional hub for other developing or less-developed countries in the region, taking advantage of lower costs for living and education, as well as the geographical and cultural proximity between home and host countries. However, as Takenaka and Tsuchida (2010) indicated in their study with international students in Japan, Korea, like Japan, may at best be international students' second or third

choice after English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, and Australia. How to address this issue would be an important policy concern as an increased number of international students may not necessarily contribute to Korea's intentions to secure top global talents. In sum, "the question of global mobility cannot be explained solely by income disparities, geographical/cultural proximity or immigration policies, but also by how education institutions play a mediating role....Education also serves as a key sorting mechanism of who moves (can move) where, who stays where, and why (Takenaka and Tsuchida 2010)."

What makes the Korean case even more nuanced than past research on international students in Western countries is the growing emphasis of EMI by Korean HEIs as a strategy to recruit more international students. Based on the findings of this study, for the vast majority of international students in the Korean institution, who are Chinese students, the targeted institution and academic program mattered. The availability of EMI and even financial aid were not major draws for East Asians compared to those from North America and Europe. Moreover, many Chinese students did not perceive EMI courses very favorably. Although these students generally felt that they received a good quality education at their host institution, EMI courses were often seen as obstacles to their educational goals. Several commented that if they wanted to learn English, they would have studied in an English-speaking country. This finding suggests that Korean institutions that pursue EMI for the sole purposes of international student recruitment may not necessarily be best serving their main market, Chinese students. Therefore, the case institution and other Korean HEIs may need to evaluate who takes EMI courses and revisit the intended goals of the EMI policy, considering that the majority of international students come from non-English speaking countries. The institution could improve its support services for EMI as well. For example, courses taught in both English and Korean could be offered, allowing students to select classes according to their preferred language—English or Korean, academic major, and career plan. Additional opportunities to learn Korean academic language and to obtain tutorial assistance for EMI courses also need to be considered.

Future research should further examine the role of regional hubs and the varied experiences of international students from nearby and far away countries. This possibility may be the most promising niche for middle-income countries seeking to serve as host destinations for the world's students. Future studies should especially pay attention to ways that they can best serve their most pressing markets, rather than pursuing international students from distant regions at the expense of the needs of students from nearby countries, who tend to have different educational goals. Students from poorer regions often struggle with the cost of living in wealthier countries and as such, research on financial support in better servicing and attracting these students is needed. In closing, regional hubs will continue to grow as international education is expected to increase and diversify. The extent to which these hubs will focus on the regional over the global remains yet to be seen.

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