Internationalization Policies in South Korean Higher Education: Attracting and Managing International Students

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the decline in the school-age population in South Korea has led to several international policies aimed at attracting international students. This study aims to provide key information on the current situation of international students in South Korea and analyze and discuss the issues related to international student attraction policies in South Korea from 2003 to 2023. To fulfill the research purpose, we combined qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis to analyze government policy documents and real-time statistical data. The findings were: (1) The development of internationalization policies in South Korean higher education can be divided into three stages: the quantitative expansion period (2001-2007), the quality management period (2008-2013), and the integration management period (2014-2024); (2) The total number of international students in South Korea has grown steadily and reached 181,842 in 2023, whereas problems such as failing to meet expected growth and insufficient quality management exist; (3) Uneven distribution of international students' countries of origin, majors, and institutional locations of higher education institutions has improved to a certain extent compared with the past but is still severe. Based on the results, we provided implications for focusing on improving the quality of international students, providing policy support for Asian students, increasing the attractiveness of universities in non-capital regions, as well as science and technology majors, and promoting the system for attracting international students. We hope to present a case study from South Korea and discuss some implications for the internationalization of higher education in other Asian countries.

Keywords: Higher Education, Internationalization Policy, International Student, International Student Management, International Student Attraction

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the internationalization of higher education has become a central strategic priority for governments and institutions worldwide. The number of students studying abroad has more than tripled from approximately 2 million in 2000 to 6.8 million in 2020, reflecting the rapid globalization of tertiary education. This growth has been driven by both academic and economic imperatives: host countries seek to enhance their global competitiveness and cultural influence. At the same time, students pursue improved educational and career opportunities abroad. In particular, many Western countries (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada) have implemented comprehensive national policies, such as scholarships, streamlined visas, and international marketing, to attract international students. These efforts have yielded substantial benefits (Department of Education, 2019). International students not only diversify campuses academically and culturally, but also make significant economic contributions. For example, in 2019, international students contributed over $44 billion to the U.S. economy and £25.9 billion to the UK through tuition and living expenses. Such trends underscore the importance of internationalization as a policy investment in both educational quality and economic development (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2015). At the same time, global competition for talent has intensified: institutions and nations now vie for prestige and high-quality students in an increasingly competitive global higher education arena (Marginson, 2016; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

South Korea has emerged as a key player in this shifting landscape of international higher education. Internally, South Korea faces a demographic imperative to internationalize: the domestic college-aged population is shrinking due to ultralow birth rates, which fell to a record low fertility of 0.98 in 2018 (the lowest globally) and continue to decline. This has led to fewer university entrants and concerns about under-utilized educational capacity. Externally, South Korea aspires to enhance the global standing of its universities and to position itself as an educational hub in Asia. Beginning in the early 2000s, the government implemented proactive policies to attract foreign students, aiming to fill enrollment gaps, foster international partnerships, and enhance the country's soft power. A landmark initiative was the Study Korea Project (2004), which set an initial goal of 100,000 international students by 2012 – a target surpassed ahead of schedule. Building on this momentum, the government introduced the more ambitious Study in Korea 300K Project, aiming to enroll 300,000 international students by 2027 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2023b). These policies have been accompanied by scholarship programs (e.g., the Global Korea Scholarship), enhanced marketing efforts (tapping into the South Korean Wave of pop culture), and improved student services, all designed to make South Korea an attractive destination for global talent. As a result, the number of international students in South Korean higher education has grown exponentially, from roughly 16,000 in 2004 to over 180,000 by 2023, accounting for about 4% of total tertiary enrollments as of 2021. This influx has helped mitigate the impact of a declining domestic student population and generated significant economic gains: for instance, international students spent over 2.7 trillion KRW (approximately $2.3 billion) in South Korea in 2020 through tuition and local living expenses. Additionally, the presence of international students has promoted cultural exchange and global awareness on campuses, thereby bolstering South Korea's soft power and academic reputation (MOE, 2021). These achievements underscore the crucial role of internationalization policies in supporting South Korea's higher education sector amid demographic challenges.

However, despite considerable successes, significant challenges and imbalances have emerged in the implementation of South Korea's internationalization policies. One major concern is the uneven distribution of international students. A large majority of foreign students are concentrated in Seoul and a few metropolitan areas, while many regional universities struggle with low international enrollment (Green, 2015). This urban concentration exacerbates the gap between capital-area institutions and those in other provinces, undermining the goal of equitable development across the higher education system. There is also an imbalance in the academic fields pursued by international students: a disproportionate number enroll in

humanities and social sciences programs, whereas STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) remain underrepresented. This disciplinary skew limits the academic diversification benefits of internationalization and may reflect underlying issues such as language barriers in technical courses or labor market perceptions (Lee & Rhee, 2019). Furthermore, the academic and social integration of international students into South Korean campus life and society has proven challenging. Many students face difficulties adapting to the local academic culture and language; for example, Korean-taught programs can pose language hurdles, and teaching styles may differ from those in students' home countries. Beyond graduation, international alumni often struggle to find employment in South Korea due to factors like limited Korean language proficiency, restrictive work visa policies, and employer biases. As a result, retaining foreign talent post-graduation remains problematic (Ishikura & Tak, 2024). These challenges suggest that simply increasing numbers is insufficient; attention must also be given to the quality of the experience, support systems, and policy adjustments to ensure sustainable success. Indeed, observers have noted the need for more robust academic support, career counseling, and integration initiatives so that South Korea "not only attracts but also effectively retains" international talent in the long run (Jon & Yoo, 2021).

The above issues point to a clear knowledge and policy gap. While the growth in international student numbers and short-term economic benefits in South Korea is well documented, there is a limited understanding of how the qualitative outcomes of internationalization are unfolding. Existing studies and reports have largely focused on quantitative expansion e.g., tracking enrollment targets and financial impacts but have paid less attention to questions of academic integration, student experiences, and educational quality outcomes (Lee & Kim, 2021; Park, 2022). Moreover, the structural reasons behind uneven student distribution (by region and field) have not been comprehensively analyzed, nor have the long-term implications of South Korea's heavy reliance on certain countries (such as China) as source markets been considered. There is also a paucity of research on the effectiveness of recent policy measures intended to improve quality and support (for instance, do new scholarship programs or support centers measurably enhance international student success and satisfaction?). In short, evaluative research on South Korea's internationalization policies, particularly with regard to outcomes such as distribution equity, academic integration, and quality assurance, remains limited. This study aims to fill these gaps by systematically examining South Korea's higher education internationalization policies over the past two decades and assessing their outcomes in the aforementioned key dimensions. By doing so, the research provides insights into the sustainability and effectiveness of these policies, offering evidence-based implications for future policy directions.

The significance of this research is multi-fold. Practically, it delivers an evidence-based evaluation of South Korea's internationalization efforts, informing national policymakers and university leaders about what has worked and what challenges persist. The findings can guide adjustments to current policies (for example, strategies to better support regional universities or STEM programs, or initiatives to improve post-graduation retention of foreign talent). More broadly, South Korea's experience offers a valuable case study for other countries in Asia and beyond that are pursuing internationalization in higher education. Many Asian nations face similar pressures of shifting demographics or aspire to increase their global academic profile (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Understanding South Korea's policy trajectory – its achievements and pitfalls – can provide lessons and transferable insights for other regions in policy evaluation and institutional development. At the theoretical level, this study contributes to the literature on international higher education by linking policy measures to outcome variables (student distribution, integration, and quality) in a single-country context, thus enriching comparative perspectives on how national strategies translate into institutional realities. Accordingly, this paper is guided by the following research questions:

(1) **Policy Trajectory**: What has been the development trajectory of internationalization policies in South Korean higher education from the early 2000s to the present? In particular, what are the

major phases of policy effort and their characteristics?

(2) **Current Outcomes and Issues**: What are the current patterns and issues in South Korea's higher education internationalization, specifically regarding the number of international students and their distribution by country of origin, field of study, and institutional location? What challenges emerge in terms of academic integration and quality management?

(3) **Future Implications**: What are the implications of these findings for future policymaking in South Korea and for broader research on higher education internationalization in similar contexts?

2. Literature Review

Conceptualizing Internationalization

Internationalization in higher education has been widely defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004). This definition, adopted at the institutional, sector, and national levels, highlights that internationalization is a multi-dimensional process affecting curriculum, research, student mobility, and organizational policies. Scholars have identified various rationales driving this process. Knight (2015) noted that key motivations include economic imperatives (e.g., revenue generation and workforce development), cultural and social enrichment, and the strategic goal of enhancing global competitiveness. Altbach and Knight (2007) similarly argued that universities internationalize to gain commercial benefits, knowledge exchange, and prestige, as well as to better prepare students for a globalized world. The presence of international students on campus is seen as enriching the academic environment by fostering cross-cultural perspectives and a global exchange of ideas. At the national policy level, attracting international students can help offset demographic declines and generate economic benefits for the education sector and local economies (Knight, 2015; OECD, 2023). Indeed, the fees and living expenses of international students often substantially exceed those of domestic students, providing a crucial source of income for institutions, especially where public funding is constrained. As a result of these factors, many countries have mainstreamed internationalization into their higher education policies. However, the literature also cautions that internationalization is not without challenges. Altbach (2012) and Knight (2015) note that rapid internationalization can introduce risk factors, such as dilution of academic quality, cultural tensions, and inequities, which may potentially undermine the educational experience if not properly managed. This has led to an increasing emphasis on quality assurance and strategic oversight as integral components of internationalization efforts (Brandenburg et al., 2019). Furthermore, from a global perspective, internationalization is occurring in a competitive context: institutions compete for globally mobile students and high rankings, while nations compete for talent and influence. Marginson (2016) describes this as a dual competition among universities (for status and resources) and among states (for human capital and soft power) in the global field of higher education. These theoretical and contextual insights underscore that effective internationalization policy must balance growth with quality, and expansion with considerations of equity and sustainability. Building on this foundation, the following review examines three core outcome dimensions highlighted in the literature – international student distribution, academic integration, and quality assurance – which will inform the conceptual framework of this study as it analyzes South Korea's case.

International Student Distribution

One important outcome of internationalization policies is the distribution of international students, both in terms of their origin and the dispersion across various destinations and programs. Globally, the flow of international students has expanded dramatically, but it is unevenly distributed across regions. A majority of internationally mobile students originate from Asia, and they tend to concentrate in a relatively small number of host countries. According to UNESCO data, students from Asia and Oceania comprise about

half of the world's international student population, with China, India, and other large Asian countries being major senders of students abroad (Jung-Mee, 2024). On the destination side, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada have traditionally dominated as hosts, together attracting a large proportion of all foreign students (often due to English-language advantages and established reputations). However, in recent years, there has been a notable shift as East Asian nations have become increasingly significant players in the global higher education landscape (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). China and Japan, for instance, have rapidly expanded their international student enrollments, and South Korea has joined the top tier of host countries. By the early 2020s, South Korea ranked among the top 10 OECD countries for international student enrollment growth, reflecting its active recruitment efforts (OECD, 2023).

In the South Korean context, the distribution of international students has shown both achievements and persistent imbalances. On the one hand, South Korea has successfully grown its international student body from a very small base into one of the largest in Asia over the past two decades. This growth initially relied heavily on a few source countries: China has long been the dominant country of origin for international students in South Korea, at times accounting for more than half of all foreign students in the country (Chang, 2019). Such heavy reliance on a single country poses a risk; for example, geopolitical or economic changes in China could directly impact South Korea's international enrollments. Recognizing this, South Korean policies in the 2010s aimed to diversify source countries, with some success. The proportion of students from other countries such as Vietnam, Nepal, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia has increased in recent years, gradually reducing (though not eliminating) the over-concentration of Chinese students. South Korea's Global Korea Scholarship and bilateral partnership programs have targeted a broader range of countries in Asia and beyond, contributing to this diversification (Song & Kim, 2022).

Another aspect of distribution is the institutional and geographical spread of international students within South Korea. Here, a significant imbalance remains: a large majority of international students are enrolled in universities located in Seoul and the surrounding capital region, whereas universities in smaller cities and rural areas attract relatively few international students. Recent data indicate that over 70% of all international students in South Korea study in the Seoul metropolitan area. This centralization reflects the overall domestic prestige hierarchy of South Korean higher education – Seoul's universities, especially top-tier institutions, are more internationally recognized and have more resources for recruitment. The government has introduced incentives and regional university development programs to encourage better distribution (for example, special funding for campuses in provincial areas to build international dormitories and marketing consortia). Yet, policy effectiveness has been limited so far. Studies report that many regional universities continue to struggle to attract foreign students, in part due to perceptions of lower institutional rankings and fewer urban amenities (Kim, 2024; Istad et al., 2021). This uneven distribution is a policy concern because it can exacerbate inequalities between institutions and does not fully utilize the capacity of non-capital-region universities. In summary, the literature on student distribution suggests that while South Korea has achieved notable growth in international enrollments, ensuring a more balanced distribution across countries of origin, fields of study, and campus locations remains an ongoing challenge. These distributional outcomes are a crucial metric for evaluating the impact of internationalization policies, as they relate to the goals of diversification and equitable development in the higher education system.

Academic Integration of International Students

Another core theme in the literature is the academic and social integration of international students, essentially, how well international students adapt and succeed in their host academic environment. Successful integration is considered both an outcome and a facilitator of internationalization: when international students are effectively integrated, they are more likely to have positive academic experiences, complete their studies, and contribute to the host institution's intellectual community (Tinto, 1998; Glass et al., 2014). Conversely, poor integration can lead to student dissatisfaction, high dropout rates, or

underutilization of the skills that international students bring to the institution. Research consistently highlights several integration challenges that international students face across different countries. These include language barriers, differences in academic culture and teaching styles, limited interaction with domestic peers, and inadequate support services (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Andrade, 2006). For non-English-speaking host nations like South Korea, language is often the primary barrier: although many universities offer courses in English, a significant portion of instruction and campus life operates in Korean, which can impede international students' classroom participation and socialization unless they attain a high level of Korean proficiency.

Studies focusing on South Korea confirm that language and cultural adjustment issues are prevalent. Many international students, especially those enrolled in Korean-medium programs, report difficulties in understanding lectures or expressing themselves academically in Korean (Lee, 2017). In addition, pedagogical differences, such as more hierarchical student-teacher relationships or a heavy emphasis on exams in Korea, may contrast with international students' prior educational experiences, requiring adjustment. Social integration on campus is another concern, as Jon et al. (2014) found that international students in Korea often form separate social groups, interacting more with fellow internationals or co-nationals than with Korean students, partly due to communication barriers and mutual unfamiliarity. This can limit the extent of intercultural exchange that internationalization is supposed to foster. Moreover, support services (like academic advising, counseling, language support, and career services) play a critical role in integration. South Korean universities have expanded such services (for example, setting up international student offices and Korean language centers). Still, the quality and staffing of these services vary, and not all students are aware of or utilize them effectively (Park & Bae, 2019).

A particularly salient issue in South Korea is the post-graduation integration of international students, which extends the academic experience into the labor market. Many international graduates express a desire to work in South Korea or otherwise leverage their Korean education; however, they often encounter difficulties transitioning to employment. Factors include stringent immigration regulations (e.g., work visa quotas and conditions), employers' preferences for local graduates or those with Korean language fluency, and limited professional networks available to foreigners (Ishikura & Tak, 2024). Consequently, a significant number of international alumni either return to their home country or move to a third country for work, representing a loss of talent that South Korea had trained. This outcome raises concerns about the long-term effectiveness of internationalization: attracting international students is less beneficial if they do not integrate into the society or economy after graduation. Recent policy discussions in Korea have therefore started to emphasize not just attraction but also retention, suggesting that integration support needs to extend into career development and alumni engagement (MOE, 2023c).

Overall, the literature suggests that while South Korea's internationalization policies have increased enrollment, ensuring the academic success and integration of these students remains a work in progress. There is evidence that insufficient integration can undermine the educational outcomes of internationalization. For instance, if international students struggle academically or feel socially isolated, this can lead to lower satisfaction and higher attrition rates (Kim & Shin, 2022). On the other hand, success stories are also noted, such as international students who do achieve high levels of Korean proficiency and act as cultural bridges on campus, or programs that effectively facilitate cross-cultural teamwork and mentorship. These highlight the potential when integration is supported. Importantly, Jon and Yoo (2021) argue that strong integration and support systems are crucial for converting initial recruitment into long-term talent retention. They stress that host countries must invest in "not only attracting but also retaining" international students by addressing their academic and personal development needs. In evaluating policy outcomes, this study will therefore pay special attention to integration-related aspects (e.g., student support services, language training programs, and employment pathways) as indicators of the quality and inclusiveness of South Korea's internationalization process.

Quality Assurance in Internationalization

The expansion of internationalization in higher education invariably raises the question of quality assurance. As institutions increase international enrollment and cross-border activities, maintaining academic standards and providing a high-quality educational experience become paramount concerns. The literature emphasizes that quality assurance is both a driver and a necessary complement to internationalization. On one hand, being able to demonstrate high quality (through international accreditation, rankings, etc.) is crucial for universities to attract international students. On the other hand, the rapid influx of international students can strain resources and, if unmanaged, potentially compromise quality in areas such as admissions standards, instructional quality, or student services (Altbach, 2012; Knight, 2015). Quality assurance in the context of internationalization thus involves implementing policies and mechanisms to monitor and enhance the educational conditions under which internationalization occurs, ensuring that growth does not come at the expense of academic rigor or student support.

Globally, various approaches have been adopted to safeguard quality amid internationalization. For example, many countries have established guidelines or accreditation standards for programs that cater to international students, and some have specific quality audit schemes that focus on international education. The OECD and UNESCO have also promoted frameworks to support quality in cross-border higher education, emphasizing the importance of transparency, recognition of qualifications, and student protection (OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 2019). A notable initiative was the International Education Quality Assurance System (IEQAS) developed in South Korea in 2011. In response to early signs of quality problems (such as reports of some institutions admitting inadequately prepared foreign students or providing insufficient support), the South Korean government introduced IEQAS to evaluate and certify universities on their capacity to manage international students. Under this system, institutions are assessed on criteria including academic support, language assistance, student services, and regulatory compliance. Universities that fail to meet the basic quality standards can face penalties such as restrictions on recruiting international students or loss of eligibility for certain government programs. The implementation of IEQAS had a noticeable impact: in the immediate years following its introduction, the total number of international students in South Korea actually declined slightly (2011–2014), as some lower-tier institutions reduced intakes or lost their international student visa sponsorship due to not meeting standards. This period is interpreted as a transitional phase from a quantity-driven expansion to a quality-controlled growth model. By tightening oversight, the policy aimed to eliminate diploma mills and improve the overall educational environment for international students. Subsequent data suggest that after this adjustment period, growth resumed on a more sustainable footing, accompanied by improvements such as higher average language proficiency of incoming students and better student satisfaction scores (KEDI, 2020).

Ensuring quality also involves providing ongoing support and conducting regular evaluations. Knight (2015) emphasizes that internationalization should be seen as "an ongoing process of integrating" global dimensions, which inherently requires continuous quality review and enhancement. This means institutions must regularly assess outcomes (academic performance of international students, graduation rates, feedback on services) and use those assessments to inform policy updates. In South Korea, beyond IEQAS, other quality-related measures have included raising admissions criteria for international applicants, expanding Korean language training (through pre-college language institutes), and increasing funding for improving dormitories and advising services for international students (MOE, 2018). The South Korean Ministry of Education also publishes annual monitoring reports on international student enrollment and institutional compliance, adding a layer of public accountability. From a research perspective, quality assurance is considered a critical factor in the long-term success of internationalization strategies: it helps maintain the reputation of the host country's education system and ensures that the benefits of internationalization (academic, cultural, and economic) are realized without degrading educational standards (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], 2015). Studies in Europe and Asia have

found that students are more likely to choose and remain in destinations that are perceived to have robust educational quality and support (Chen & Zimitat, 2006). Therefore, a key indicator of effective policy is how well quality is upheld and improved as internationalization scales up.

In summary, the previous studies suggested that deliberate quality assurance mechanisms must accompany internationalization policies. South Korea's case exemplifies this principle: after an initial phase of rapid expansion, policy focus shifted toward consolidation and quality improvement, recognizing that uncontrolled growth could be counterproductive. The integration of a quality assurance regime (like IEQAS) into the national internationalization strategy reflects an effort to institutionalize high standards and build trust in South Korean higher education globally. This literature review has highlighted three outcome dimensions – distribution, integration, and quality – that are central to understanding the impact of internationalization policies. These dimensions are interrelated: for instance, uneven student distribution can affect integration (e.g., if most international students cluster at a few universities, those institutions face greater pressure on support services), and quality assurance efforts can influence distribution (e.g., enforcement of standards might temporarily reduce quantity, as seen in 2011–2014). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for evaluating internationalization policies in South Korean higher education.

Drivers:
- Demographic Pressure
- Globalization Imperative
- Soft Power & Economic Goals

Policy Phases:
- Quantitative Expansion
- Quality Control
- Integration Sustaininability

Mechanisms:
- Scholarship – Visa Reforms
- QA & IEQAS – Support Services

Expected Outcomes:
- Enrollment – Distribution Balance
- Student Integration – Quality & Reputation

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

3. Methodology

We adopted a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative policy analysis and quantitative data analysis to examine the strategic intentions behind South Korea's international student recruitment policies and to evaluate their outcomes and trends over the past two decades. The analytical framework combines qualitative interpretation of policy developments with empirical assessments of structural changes in the international student population. Figure 2 provides an overview of the research process, outlining the sequential stages of analysis.
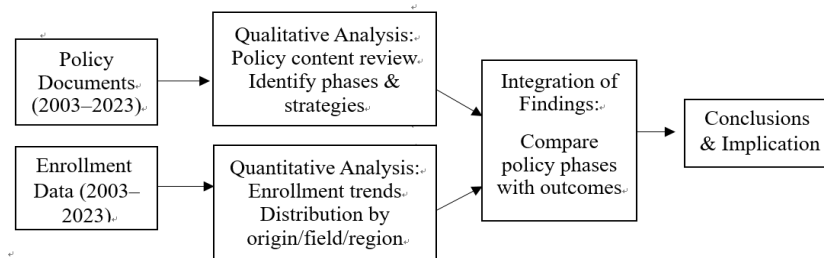
Figure 2: Research Procedure

First, major policy documents and national strategic plans (2003–2023) were collected and subjected to qualitative content analysis in order to identify the evolution of government strategies and objectives for internationalization. For the qualitative analysis, we systematically reviewed major policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and related government agencies between 2003 and 2023. Based on the classification proposed by KEDI (2020), the evolution of international student policy in South Korea was divided into three major phases: the Expansion Period (2003–2007), the Quality Management Period (2008–2013), and the Integration Management Period (2014–2023). Representative policies within each phase were analyzed to trace shifts in policy goals, measures, and governance logic.

For the quantitative analysis, both linear trend analysis and chi-square tests were employed to assess changes in the composition of international students by nationality, major, and institutional location. Due to differences in data coverage across variables, the units of analysis were adjusted accordingly. Specifically, data on student majors were only available from 2013 to 2023, and were therefore analyzed on an annual basis to capture year-on-year trends. In contrast, data on student nationality and institutional location covered the full 2003–2023 period, making them suitable for aggregated analysis by policy phase. To ensure consistency, policy phase boundaries were marked in all relevant figures, and the results were interpreted in reference to the corresponding policy contexts. This approach ensured that variation in analytical units did not compromise the study's overall alignment with its core objective, which was to evaluate the policy-driven transformation of South Korea's international student landscape.

Finally, we collected all the statistical data from authoritative sources, primarily the MOE and the KEDI website. Policy information was retrieved from the official MOE website and the KEDI website. At the same time, statistical data related to international students were obtained from multiple official statistical documents publicly available on the MOE's website. Although these documents were published by the MOE, the underlying data were originally compiled and provided by the KEDI. Specifically, statistical data for the period from 2003 to 2014 were obtained from a comprehensive dataset, while data for 2015 and subsequent years were sourced from annually published datasets. Therefore, we extracted and integrated the official data from each year into a unified dataset for descriptive and inferential analysis.

However, several limitations of the dataset should be noted. First, data on students' majors were not available prior to 2013. Second, the dataset focused on macro-level demographic indicators and did not include qualitative dimensions such as student satisfaction or career trajectories. Third, the absence of institution-level data limited the ability to assess differential policy effects in finer detail. Despite these limitations, the integrated use of document analysis and statistical modeling provides a systematic and policy-sensitive understanding of the evolution of South Korea's higher education internationalization strategy, offering a valuable reference for future policy design and comparative research.

4. Findings

The Development of International Student Policies in South Korea

In the early 21st century, the South Korean government began to make significant efforts to enhance the appeal of universities to international students. From 2003 through 2023, the policies formulated by the South Korean government to attract and manage international students can be roughly divided into three different stages: the expansion period (2003-2007), the quality management period (2008-2013), and the integration management period (2014-2023) (KEDI, 2020). Distinct policy priorities and instruments characterized each stage.

During the expansion period, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MOEHRD) officially launched the *Study Korea Project* in 2004 with the goal of attracting 50,000 international students by 2010. It was built upon the earlier comprehensive plan introduced in 2000 to expand the recruitment of international students and was adjusted in 2005. In addition to increasing the number of international students, *the Study Korea Project also aimed to establish South Korea as a higher education hub in Northeast Asia, expand overseas internship opportunities, and enhance the country's* international influence. To achieve this vision, South Korean government dedicated to strategic tasks including the expansion and reform of international student invitation programs, the establishment and activation of overseas networks, promotion of studying in Korea, improvements to academic and living conditions, dissemination of Korean language and culture, and the construction of an efficient administrative support system (MOEHRD, 2004). In parallel, the Ministry of Justice unveiled complementary institutional measures. To manage international students more efficiently, the language training visa was unveiled in 2004. In 2005, the *Immigration Act* was implemented, clarifying the obligation of managing international students in higher education institutions (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

In the quality management period, the policy priority shifted from merely expanding the number of international students to enhancing the quality of education and strengthening institutional management capacity. In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology announced the *Study Korea Project Development Plan*, revising the original *Study Korea Project* target upward to 100,000 international students by 2012 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST], 2008a). It emphasized quantitative growth and identified strategic goals such as diversifying countries of origin, improving educational and support services, expanding academic programs, and strengthening post-graduation career pathways. A comprehensive set of policy instruments, ranging from financial subsidies and regulatory reforms to university-industry cooperation, was deployed to lay the foundation for establishing South Korea as a regional hub for international education. This period marked a critical shift in South Korea's governance logic, from enrollment-centered expansionism toward quality-oriented and performance-driven coordination. The role of the state in international student policy has become more prominent, shifting beyond institutional autonomy to a model characterized by centralized oversight, multi-stakeholder engagement, and outcome-based management. It is notable that international education policies during this period were increasingly integrated with national demographic and economic strategies, reflecting the institutionalization of internationalization as a long-term national agenda. To strengthen the institutional foundations for this transition, the government introduced policy measures in 2009 to reinforce universities' accountability in managing international students and enhance student support services.

In 2010, the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) was formally integrated into the national strategic framework (MEST, 2008b). As a flagship initiative for promoting South Korea's national brand, the GKS program operates on a dual-track model: providing targeted support for academically outstanding students and emerging global leaders. The program serves as both a mechanism for talent attraction and a vehicle for expanding public diplomacy and soft power. The GKS system offers support for both degree-seeking

students and short-term exchange participants including overseas Koreans and is structured as a comprehensive 'selection–support–return' cycle. It includes pre-arrival orientation, in-country services (language training, counseling, and community engagement), and post-graduation alumni networking, illustrating South Korea's transition from a provider of international education to a global talent governance hub. To build upon and expand these efforts, the MEST launched the Study Korea 2020 Project in 2012(MEST, 2012). The initiative set an ambitious goal of attracting 200,000 international students by 2020, formally embedding international student policy into South Korea's national strategic planning. The project promoted a shift from passive recruitment to full-cycle management, outlining key reforms that included expanding the GKS budget, enhancing housing and employment support, and strengthening South Korea's global education promotion platforms. By foregrounding "talent-centered" and "network-oriented" goals, the Study Korea 2020 Project signaled a new stage in South Korea's international education policy, which focused on structural optimization and national branding. Accordingly, the expansion of the GKS system and the launch of the Study Korea 2020 Project marked a transition from structural adjustment to systemic governance. It also reflected the deepening of South Korea's governance logic centered on state-led coordination, multi-level performance monitoring, and the institutionalization of global talent networks.

During the integration management period (2014–2023), South Korea's international student policy underwent a comprehensive shift toward quality-centered governance and institutional system building. In response to the evolving global education landscape, the government launched new initiatives in 2014–2015 to enhance the country's attractiveness to international students. However, the overemphasis on quantitative expansion led to lower admission requirements for universities. As a result, an increasing number of international students faced academic difficulties, leading to higher dropout rates and instances of illegal employment. These challenges highlighted the limitations of expansion-driven governance logic and prompted the state to reorient its international education policy framework. To address these concerns, the Ministry of Education introduced the International Education Quality Assurance System (IEQAS) in 2011, formally institutionalizing quality monitoring within the international education sector. IEQAS evaluates universities' capacity to manage international students and imposes restrictions on institutions that fail to meet basic standards (KEDI, 2020). Following the implementation of this system, the number of international students declined between 2011 and 2014, indicating a transitional phase from quantity-driven to quality-controlled governance.

Considering these developments, the government extended the original Study Korea 2020 Project to 2023 and subsequently proposed a more ambitious national strategy under the Study Korea 300K Project. This new initiative aims to attract 300,000 international students by 2027, positioning South Korea as a global hub for higher education. The policy framework emphasizes a shift from "input-focused" to "outcome-oriented" governance, outlining several core strategies, including enhancing the integration of higher education and industry, strengthening international partnerships, improving the competitiveness of regional universities, and nurturing global talent in high-tech and emerging fields (MOE, 2023b). Additionally, the project promotes an inter-ministerial governance model to enhance institutional access to visa, employment, and residency services for international students. Overall, from 2003 to 2023, the number of international students in South Korea has steadily increased, signaling a transition from experimental initiatives to a comprehensive, state-led governance system. This trajectory reflects South Korea's sustained commitment to higher education internationalization and its strategic intention to expand global influence through international talent attraction.

Table 1: The Development of International Student Policies in South Korea (2003-2023)

Era	Year	Development of International Student Policies
Expansion Period (2003~2007)	2004	· Implementation of 'Study Korea' Project, aiming at attracting 50,000 foreign students by 2010 · Enactment of the language training visa
	2005	· Implementation of the Immigration Act
Quality Management Period (2008-2013)	2008	· Implementation of the 'Study Korea Project Development Plan', aiming at attracting 100,000 foreign students by 2012 · Establishment of Guidelines for Standard Business Processing for International Students and Language Students
	2009	· Release of Measures to Reinforce the University's Responsibility for the Management of International Students · Release of Improvement Measures for Managing Support for International Students
	2010	· Implementation of Global Korea Scholarship
	2012	· Launch of 'Study Korea 2020' Project, aiming at attracting 200,000 foreign students by 2020
Integration Management Period (2014-2023)	2014	· Release of Strategy for International Student Attraction and Retention
	2015	· Release of Strategy for Expanding the Attraction of International Students · Extending the goal of the 'Study Korea 2020' Project to 2023
	2023	· Implementation of 'Study Korea 300K' Project, aiming at attracting 300,000 foreign students by 2027

Source: Korea Educational Development Institute (2020). *A study on the analysis of universities' recruitment and management practices for international students.*

Current Situation and Issues of International Students in South Korea (2003-2023)

a. Current Situation of International Students in *South Korea*

Over the past two decades, the number of international students enrolled in South Korean higher education institutions has steadily increased. The number of international students in South Korea increased from 12,314 in 2003 to 181,842 in 2023, reflecting significant growth and highlighting South Korea's growing appeal in the global education market.

Between 2003 and 2011, the number of international students in South Korea increased substantially. This period coincided with South Korea's active efforts to expand its global influence and promote the internationalization of its education system. In 2004, the number of international students increased from 12,314 in 2003 to 16,832. Although this growth trend declined slightly in 2012, it still demonstrated a continuous upward trend, indicating that the attractiveness of South Korean universities remains high. In 2014, the South Korean government's strategy for attracting and retaining international students led to a rapid increase in the number of international students in South Korea, which exceeded 100,000 by 2016. Although the number of international students decreased from 2020 to 2021 due to the impact of COVID-19, it rebounded immediately after the pandemic and reached 181,842 in 2023.

Overall, the number of international students in South Korea has grown steadily from 2003 to 2023. This trend also reflects South Korea's efforts to expand its global influence and promote the internationalization of universities.
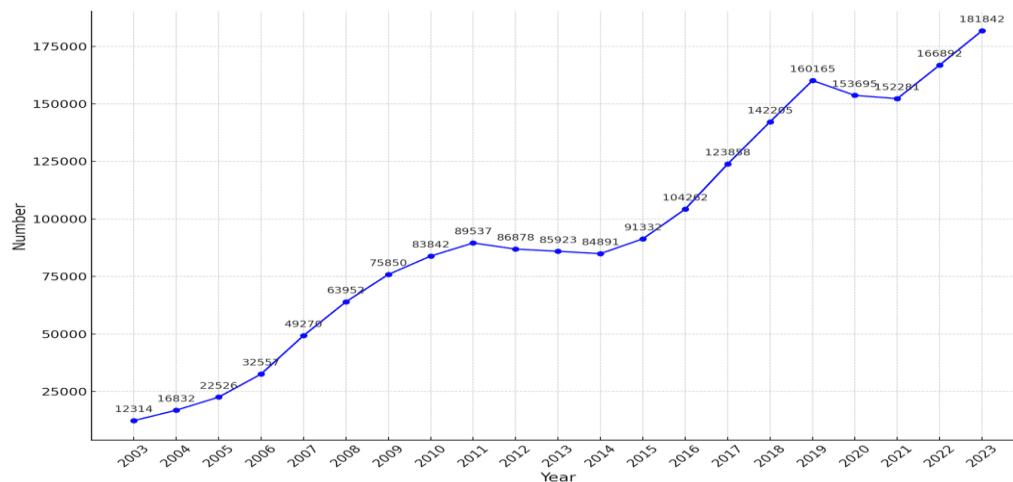
Figure 3: Number of International Students in HEIs in South Korea (2003-2023)
Source: Korea Educational Development Institute. (2023).

b. International Students in South Korea by Country of Origin
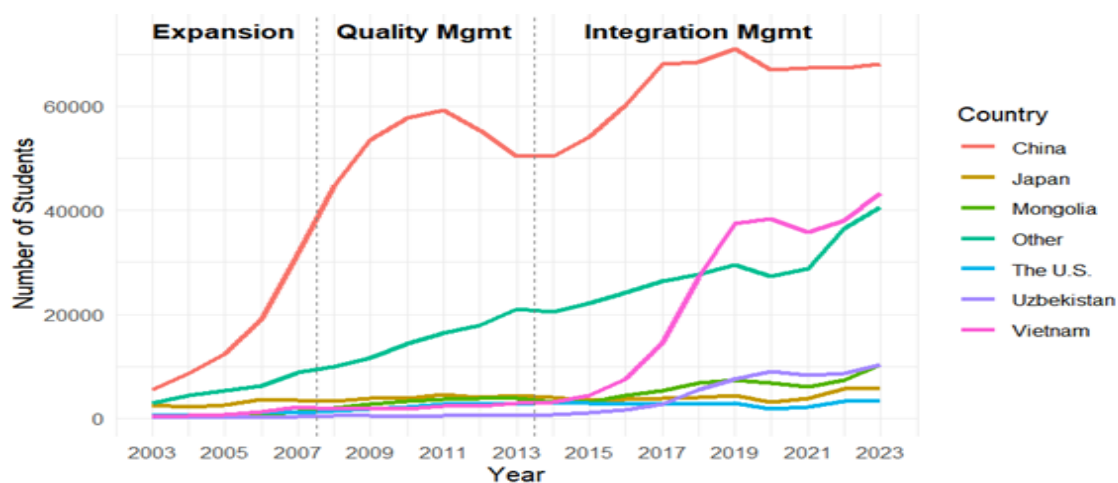

Figure 4: Trend of International Students by Country of Origin
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2003–2023)

Figure 4 illustrates the trends in international student numbers from six major countries between 2003 and 2023. During the expansion period (2003–2007), China showed a sharp increase and became the dominant source of international students. Following the launch of the 'Study Korea' project in 2004, policies such as large-scale admissions expansion, visa reforms, and overseas promotion networks contributed to a rapid rise in Chinese student enrollment.

During the quality management period (2008–2013), China maintained its leading position, but its growth rate began to slow. In the meantime, Asian countries such as Vietnam and Uzbekistan started to show noticeable increases. It reflects the South Korean government's efforts to diversify the origins of students, particularly through the 2008 'Study Korea Development Plan' and the expansion of the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS). These measures enhanced the inflow of students from emerging countries.

During the integration management period (2014–2023), Vietnam's student numbers rose significantly, narrowing the gap with China. Steady increases were also observed for Uzbekistan and Mongolia. These

changes align with policies such as the 'Study Korea 2020', 'Study Korea300K' Project and the implementation of IEQAS, which emphasized structural reform, institutional accountability, and enhanced student services. Collectively, these initiatives marked a transition from a quantity-driven approach to one focused on quality and diversity.

To further assess the statistical significance of these trends, we conducted linear regression analyses for each of the six major countries. In this analysis, the independent variable was the year, and the dependent variable was the annual number of international students from each country. Table 2 showed that China had the highest annual increase (slope = 3,031, $p < .001$), followed by Vietnam (slope = 2,232, $p < .001$), establishing both countries as the leading contributors to South Korea's international student population. In addition, Uzbekistan (slope = 502, $p < .001$), Mongolia (slope = 420, $p < .001$), Japan (slope = 100, $p < .001$), and the United States (slope = 117, $p < .001$) also exhibited statistically significant growth.

In terms of structural proportion (Figure 5), China accounted for nearly 70% of international students in 2008, but this share declined to approximately 45% by 2023. In contrast, Vietnam's proportion increased from less than 3% in 2003 to 29% in 2023, while Uzbekistan's share grew from under 1% to over 7%. Additionally, Japan, the U.S., and Mongolia have remained relatively stable, while other countries have continued to account for a considerable proportion. These shifts clearly indicate a transition from a China-dominated structure to a more balanced and diversified composition, reflecting the South Korean government's effective governance in realigning the international student landscape over successive policy phases.
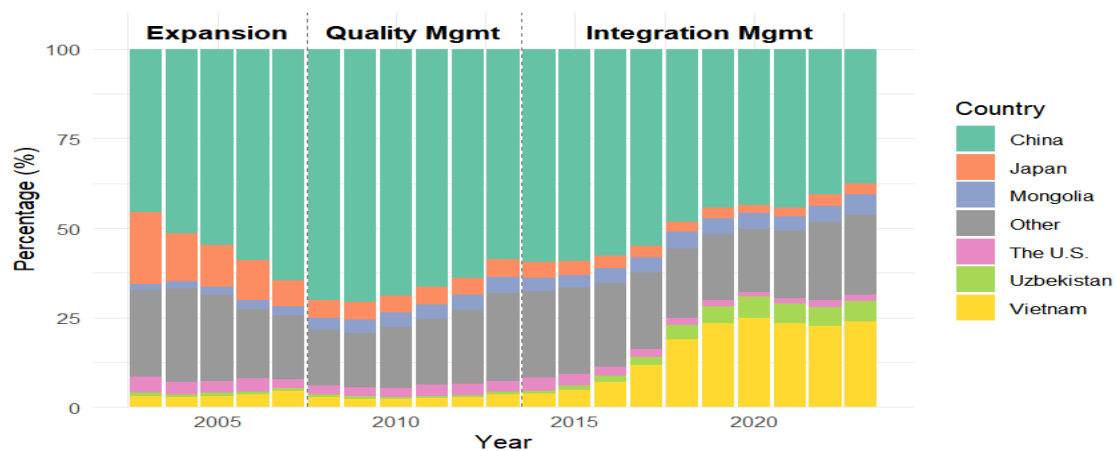

Figure 5: Proportion of International Students by Country (2003–2023)
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2003–2023)

c. International Students in South Korea by Major

Figure 6 illustrates changes in the distribution of international students across majors from 2013 to 2023. Due to data limitations, this section covers only the integration management period. Humanities and social sciences remained the most popular fields throughout this period. However, the number of students in STEM and the arts grew significantly. In particular, enrollment in engineering increased from fewer than 10,000 in 2013 to over 18,000 in 2023.

To further verify the statistical significance of the observed trends, we conducted annual linear regression analyses for six major academic fields. The year served as the independent variable, and the annual number of international students in each field was used as the dependent variable. The results show that the humanities and social Sciences exhibited the highest annual growth rate (slope = 5,888, $p < .001$), followed

by arts and physical Education (slope = 1,599, p < .001) and engineering (slope = 965, p < .001). These findings suggested that while student preferences continue to favor the humanities, technology and creativity-oriented fields have shown steady expansion during the integration management period. While natural sciences demonstrated significant growth (slope = 380, p < .001), language courses did not reach statistical significance (slope = 1,459, R² = 0.271), which may be partially attributed to entry restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, medicine showed no statistically significant trend (p > .05), with unclear growth and a low degree of model fit.

This trend corresponds to policy developments during the integration period. The South Korean government promoted links between higher education and high-tech industries, expanded GKS coverage, and encouraged international enrollment in emerging fields of study. These efforts aimed to move beyond numerical expansion and strengthen post-graduation outcomes. The rising popularity of applied fields reflects both employment considerations and the influence of policies supporting career-relevant programs.
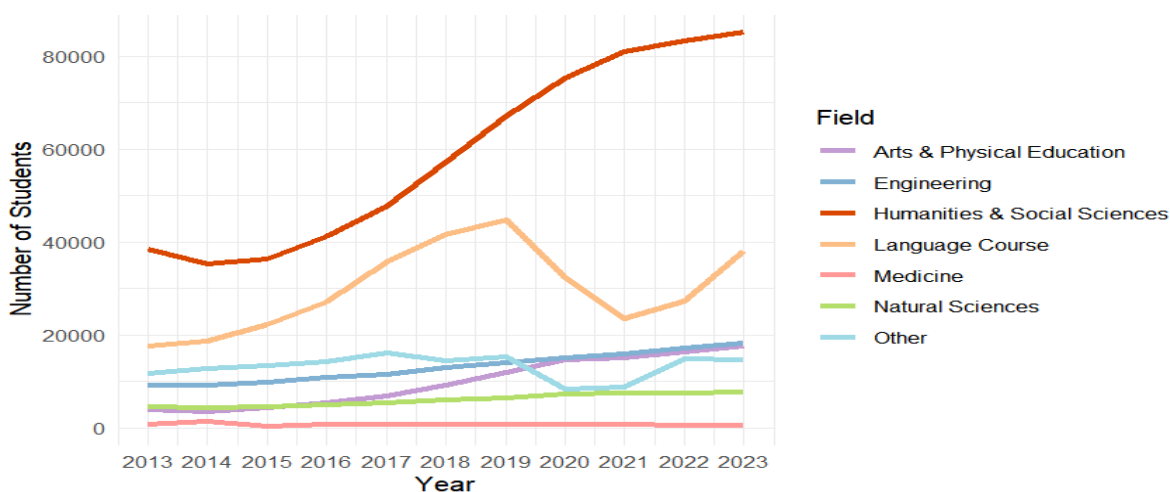

Figure 6: Trend of International Students by Major
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2013–2023)

In addition to overall growth trends, the proportional structure of international students by major has also undergone notable changes. Figure 7 illustrates the relative proportion of each major between 2013 and 2023. While the humanities & social sciences consistently maintained the largest proportion throughout the period, their dominance has gradually declined over time. In contrast, language courses experienced an increase in share before 2018, followed by a sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been some recovery in recent years, the proportion has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Technology-oriented fields, such as engineering and the natural sciences, have demonstrated a steady upward trend. At the same time, arts and physical education have shown a slight increase since 2018, contributing to a more diversified structure.

Moreover, the proportion of other majors has steadily decreased since 2013, suggesting a structural shift away from ancillary domains toward core academic areas. Overall, the trend indicates that South Korea's international student composition has evolved from a humanities-centered structure toward a more functionally differentiated and application-oriented disciplinary landscape.
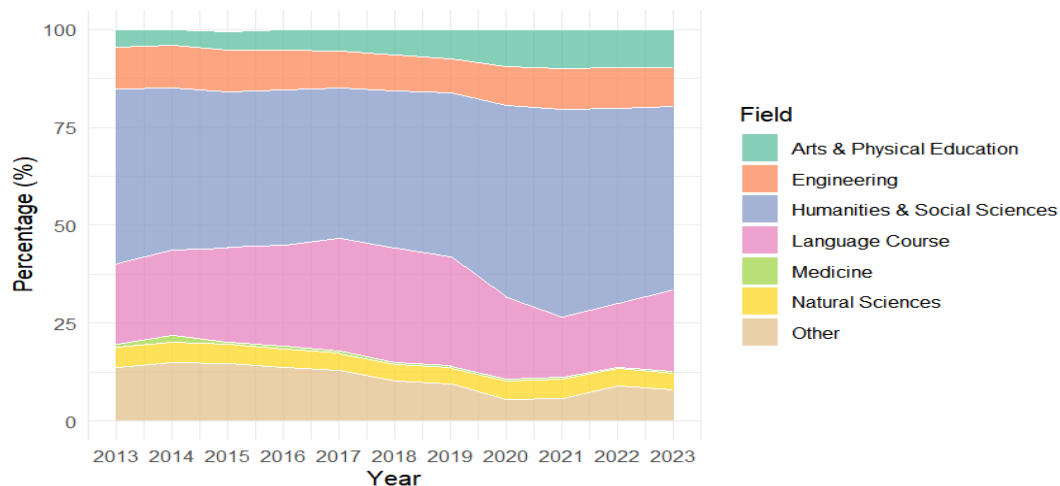
Figure 7: Proportion of International Students by Major (2013–2023)
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2013–2023)

d. International Students in South Korea by Locations of Higher Education Institutions

Figures 8 and 9 show the trends in the number and the proportional distribution of international students between capital and non-capital regions in South Korea from 2003 to 2023. The findings revealed a clear pattern of spatial concentration, closely aligned with the evolution of national policy phases.

During the expansion period (2003–2007), non-capital regional institutions enrolled a slightly higher number, with their proportion exceeding 55%. It reflected the early objectives of the 'Study Korea' project, which emphasized quantitative expansion and encouraged regional participation in international student recruitment.

During the Quality Management Period (2008–2013), capital regional institutions experienced a notable increase in international student enrollment, eventually surpassing their non-capital counterparts around 2011. Advantages in infrastructure, resource concentration, and employment support systems drove this shift. Government initiatives, such as the GKS and national branding strategies, have increasingly targeted high-ranking universities, most of which are located in the capital area, thereby reinforcing their competitive edge.

The trend intensified during the integration management period (2014–2023). As shown in Figure 8, the proportion of international students in capital regional universities rose to 58% by 2023, with total enrollment exceeding 100,000 students. The chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 1227.5$, $p < .001$) in Table 4 confirmed a statistically significant association between policy phase and spatial distribution. Particularly, the implementation of the IEQAS limited the enrollment capacity of non-capital regional institutions that failed to meet certification standards, accelerating the shift of international student flows toward universities in the capital region.
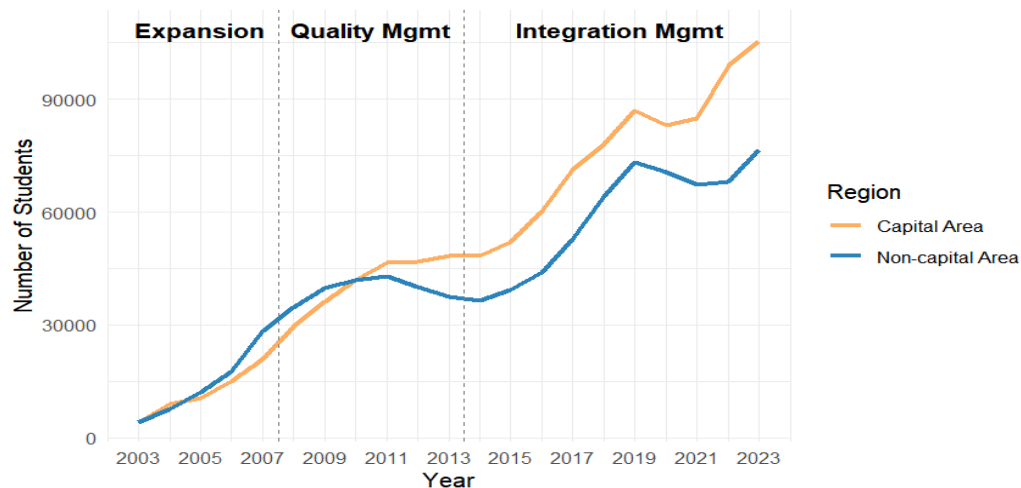
Figure 8: Trend of International Students by Institutional Location
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2003–2023)
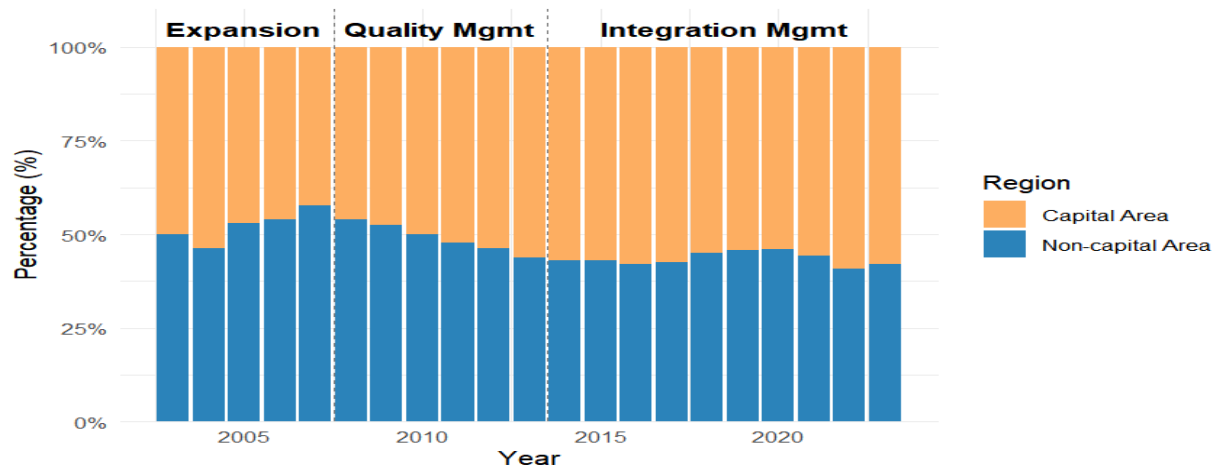

Figure 9: Proportion of International Students by Institutional Location (2003–2023)
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Ministry of Education (2003–2023)

In sum, South Korea's international student spatial distribution has transitioned from an initially balanced regional model to a highly centralized structure. It is evident in both the proportional differences and growth patterns, reflecting a broader transformation in governance logic from quantity-driven expansion to quality-focused consolidation. As policy mechanisms continue to evolve, spatial concentration has emerged as a key factor influencing the institutional choices of international students.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Over the past two decades, South Korea has made significant efforts to attract international students, resulting in a steady increase in the number of international students. Additionally, the international student management system has evolved gradually from a policy experiment stage in the early 2000s to a relatively structured institutional governance system by 2023. The government's international education policy evolved through three distinct stages: the expansion period (2003-2007), the quality management period (2008-2013), and the integration management period (2014-2023). Each period was marked by a shift in

focus from increasing student numbers to strengthening institutional accountability, enhancing educational quality, and aligning with national development strategies.

We analyzed statistical data on international students in South Korea from 2003 to 2023, categorizing them by country of origin, major, and institutional location. The results demonstrated that while Chinese students have remained the dominant group, the increasing presence of students from Vietnam, Uzbekistan, and other Asian countries reflects a growing diversification in international student demographics. The distribution of majors has also shifted from a humanities-centered structure to a more balanced one that includes engineering and the natural sciences. Spatially, international students are increasingly concentrated in the capital region, indicating a growing preference for metropolitan institutions.

However, while the policy of attracting international students has achieved notable successes, several issues have also been exposed. First, the government's ambitious "Study Korea 2020" initiative fell short of its target due to quality control issues, with only 181,842 international students in 2023. Second, while there has been some improvement in the distribution of students by country of origin, major, and institutional location, the concentration of Chinese students and humanities majors remains high. Third, non-capital regional universities continue to struggle to compete with capital regional institutions, suggesting structural disparities in higher education capacity and attractiveness.

Based on the above research results, the following implications are suggested. First, to ensure the quality of international students, universities should formulate more rigorous admission standards to ensure that international students possess a high level of academic background, language proficiency, and comprehensive ability. Additionally, it is recommended that the language proficiency requirements for international students be strengthened and that interviews be conducted for majors with higher academic standards.

Second, the government should provide exceptional policy support for Asian international students to further enhance the international appeal of South Korean higher education institutions. According to the current situation, Asian students account for the highest proportion. It is necessary for the South Korean government to expand this advantage to achieve the expected goal of attracting more than 300,000 international students by 2027. With the increase in international students from Vietnam and Uzbekistan, the South Korean government can establish scholarship programs and provide living subsidies for international students from Central and Southeast Asia to alleviate their financial burden.

Lastly, the government should actively enhance the international appeal of non-capital regional universities and attract students from engineering and natural sciences. To enhance the academic and employment competitiveness of non-capital regional universities, the government should encourage local universities to collaborate with enterprises and local communities. Additionally, the government could encourage international students to pursue engineering or natural science majors by introducing foreign professors, increasing the number of English-taught courses, enhancing scientific research facilities, and establishing scholarships.

In conclusion, the internationalization of South Korean higher education has entered a critical stage. While numerical expansion has largely succeeded, the next decade must focus on improving quality, fostering diversity, and reducing structural imbalances to solidify South Korea's position as a global education hub.

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