Destination Korea: Abroad Study Preparation Trends Of International Students

Jeevan Khanal
Nepal Open University (Nepal)

Krishna Bista
Morgan State University (USA)

Uttam Gaulee
Morgan State University (USA)

Abstract

As a result of recent government policy, an increasing number of international students are attracted to South Korean universities (Kennedy, 2018). This mixed methods study examined how international students obtain information about the universities in South Korea, their motivations, priorities, and challenges, during their preparation for study abroad when they are in their home countries. We found that word of mouth has been the most used source (usually in the form of email or phone conversations). While university websites are used to obtain specific information such as programs for scholarships and admission guidelines, websites alone (without preceded by a personal recommendation) do not play a big role on a student's decision. Offerings of scholarships, financial aid and/or assistantships have had a positive effect in attracting students. Students are self-motivated to pursue higher education to obtain better professional opportunities. Implications of the results on admission strategies are offered at the end.

Keywords: International students, South Korea, universities, overseas study, higher education

Introduction

Neghina (2017) estimated that more than 5 million students were pursuing education outside of their home countries in 2017. This number is more than 3 times that of international student enrollment in 1990 and is expected to reach 7 million by 2022. South Korea has emerged as one of the fastest growing destinations, with 123,850 international students reported as of April 2017 (Kennedy, 2018). The foreign student enrollment in South Korea has increased more than 10 times since 2001. Just 85,000 foreign students studied in Korea in 2014 and the government has announced a new national strategy to nearly triple the country's foreign student enrolment by 2023 (ICEF Monitor, 2015). Notable is that the number of international students in South Korea by 2017 was 123,850. As a result of the government's concerted efforts to attract international students, the growth rate has jetted from 7.6% in 2015, and 4.2% in 2016 to 18.8% in 2017. An increase of 20,000 students from 2016 to 2017 shows that south Korea is on track to achieve its goal of hosting 200,000 students by 2023 (Kennedy, 2018). Figure 1 shows the number of international students from 2014 to 2017.
Foreign students account for around 2% of all higher education enrollments in South Korea. The government aims to increase the proportion to 5% in eight years (Custer, 2015). Even though students come to South Korea from all over the world, students from neighboring countries dominate the composition of foreign students. Not so surprisingly, China is the top sending country with 68,184 (55%) students followed by 14,614 (11.8%) Vietnamese students, 5,384 (4.3%) Mongolian students, and 3,828 (3%) Japanese students. 2,767 (2%) US students, and 2,716 (2%) are Uzbek students. The emerging trends show the increasing enrollment of students from Taiwan (2,195), France (1,344), Indonesia (1,334) and Malaysia (1,177) (Kennedy, 2018).

The higher education world is getting smaller as more and more students are choosing to study abroad. Students are looking at international universities to gain international experience and better professional opportunities from all over the world (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Subsequently, the percentage of international students is now considered an important factor of university ranking as evidenced by the rankings agencies such as World University Rankings, Times Higher Education, and QS World University Rankings (Bhardwa, 2017). As a result, younger universities are motivated to attract more and number of international students in order to enhance their rankings during the past 30 years. The countries most commonly known to attract international students (USA, UK, Australia), still educate the largest amounts of international students (Altbach and Knight, 2007), although numbers are rising among emerging contenders such as South Korea, China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan (Lasanowaski, 2009; Kim and Strandberg, 2013).
Despite the increasing number of international students in South Korean postsecondary education over the last decades, there are challenges related to cost of living, health care, insufficient program offerings in the English language, and prior communication (Korean Herald, 20012). There is limited information about the levels of satisfaction between what international students expected in Korean universities and what they experienced (Alewu & Cordier, 2017). The lack of information is particularly acute when it comes to how students prepare or learn about Korean college or university while they are in their home countries. There has been no study so far that has addressed the issue of study abroad preparation trends for Korean university. In fact, such knowledge would help identify potential improvement area toward getting more foreign talent in host countries. That is why this study aims to that the findings of this study will be potential to inform colleges and universities in host countries about how to best address the needs and expectation of international students who are preparing for study abroad in their home countries. The purpose of this study is to examine how international students obtain information about their chosen programs of studies while they are in their home countries; what factors motivate them to enroll at overseas universities (Korean Universities in this context); and what challenges they encounter as they prepare for the study abroad.

Research Questions
To explore the preparation trends, motivations, priorities, and challenges of study abroad preparations, this study focused on four specific research questions.

- How did international students obtain information about Korean universities, programs when they were in their countries?
- What were the motivating factors for students to study in South Korea?
- What were the priorities and major challenges students encountered while preparing to study in South Korea?
- Did students receive reliable information from the educational agents who help them prepare for their overseas study?

Literature Review

Push and Pull Factors Influencing International Students

International students chose universities in the foreign countries for a variety of reasons, including the relationship with friends, family and peer influences, cost of leaving, and availability of scholarships. These factors, ultimately impact international students’ decisions associated to study abroad. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) concluded that push factors operate within source countries and initiate a student's decision to study abroad, while the pull factors operate in the host country to attract international talent. The reputation of a university and students' choice of the country based upon popular discourses is often a more powerful factor affecting the decision of students rather than the mere attractive policy of a country (Chen, 2017).

A variety of push and pull factors have been identified in the relevant research. Push factors encompass a lack of access to local Higher Education, perceptions of better quality of overseas higher education system, availability of technology-based programs (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Phang, 2013). Pull factors includes the opportunity to learn a foreign language, the geographic proximity, the institution's reputation for quality, and a range of available programs (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Engelke, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Petruzzellis & Rommanazzi, 2010; Counsell, 2011). In the case of South Korea, push factors included information sharing among people, comparatively higher and stable accessibility, and cutting-edge educational and research facilities. While pull factors comprised foreign student projects, financial support, advertisement, and the Korean wave (Jung, 2008). The Korean wave denotes to the global popularity of South Korea’s cultural economy spreading pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies (Roll, 2018).

Motivational Factors of International Students to Study in Korean Universities

International students seeking a study abroad experience would naturally try to find an affordable option which provides a unique study abroad setting. South Korea’s distinctive blend of
age-old traditions and modern culture not only gives South Korea a unique identity of a vibrant and diverse destination for international students (SINEWS, 2016), it also is a comparatively affordable destination. Whereas international students pay over US $17,000 in the UK and over US$ 22,000 per year in the United States, South Korea, however, offers much competitive value. For example, tuition and fees at the highest ranked institution in South Korea, Seoul National University, amounts only to the US $ 6500 per year. Hence South Korea is still lower than the UK and US universities even after factoring in accommodation and study materials costs (SINEWS, 2016). The establishments of world-class universities, the integration of higher education into a more international scheme, the Brain Korea 21 project to attract the international talents and global ranking of the universities motivate the international students to choose the Korean universities (Kang, 2015). Among other motivating factors for international students to choose the Korean universities are its outstanding educational ranking, first-rate facilities, technical programs, cutting-edge research, and a rich and vibrant culture (SINEWS, 2016). For many self-funded students, however, various associated costs may still pose impediments on their ways to study abroad such as the tuition costs, VISA cost, application fees, and travel and other daily living expenses (Rounsaville, 2011).

Role of Educational Agents

Many higher education institutions in the UK, the United States, and Australia enroll international students with the assistance of special recruitment service providers known as agents or consultants (World Education Service, 2012). Spring 2018 admission guidance for international students of one of the government flagship Universities of South Korea reads, “Chonbuk National University is not linked with any domestic or overseas agent for the international students’ recruitment. No fees are charged other than the application fee KRW 80,000 when you apply” (CBNU, 2018, p.1). This shows that South Korean governments do not allow the universities to authorize any agents for recruiting international students. This unique characteristic of the Korean universities do not use the third-party agent to recruit international students seems to speak the national philosophy that international enrollments may not be only for the sake of the institution's financial gain. All higher education institutions educating international students required to follow and submit the indicators presented by the government annually showing the current status of recruiting and supervising students (Bae, 2015).

Research Method

This study used a sequential exploratory mixed method. Quantitative data received from an online survey provided comparable descriptive indicators of international students' pre-departure preparation and experiences. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews also helped us explore the dynamics of preparation strategies used by international students and the students’ overall experiences while preparing abroad study. A mixed method study is useful to "achieve alternative perspectives that are not reduced to single understanding" (Mertens, 2015, p.304). Mixed methods paradigm offers deeper, fuller, and more meaningful answers to research questions and increases the ability to take a broad view of the findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The analyzed evidence was coded and given meaning to the data by triangulation.

Participants and Procedure

The target population of this study was international students enrolled at different universities in South Korea. A link to an online survey was posted on an educational discussion forum, a social networking site, and some students organizations requesting to complete the survey. 253 responses were returned from 25 universities. Students did not receive any incentive to complete the survey. The online survey did not collect any information regarding the participants' names, addresses, and telephone numbers at the time of the survey. The survey was used to collect quantitative data and was written in English; semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. One university was selected to conduct the interviews. Phone calls and personal requests (via email and social media) were sent to the 18 international students of different countries studying in South Korea.
Fifteen of them agreed to participate in the interview. Ten of them participated in 20-minute face-to-face interviews and 5 of them agreed to a phone interview. Participants did not receive any incentive for interviews either. Face to face interviews was audiotaped but phone interviews were note kept and subsequently transcribed. The researchers analyzed the responses using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana’s (2014) descriptive code (sentence, phrases, or words) related to the major themes. This provided sensitivity to the detailed content and quality of international students; study abroad preparation and related experiences.

**Instrument and Variables**

The online questionnaire consisted of five parts; demographic questions (5 items), pre-departure preparation (5 items), motivational factors (5 items), priorities (5 items), challenges during preparation (5 items), and reasons of choosing consultancy (12 items). Students were asked to mark the degree of their experiences on a five-point Likert scale, which ranged from "Strongly Agreed" to "Strongly Disagreed". Respondents rated on scales Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Neutral=3, Disagree=4, and Strongly Disagree=5.

**Results**

**Demographic Information**

Demographic data from the online survey indicated that 2 percent of students from the sample were pursuing undergraduate degrees, 32 percent master's degrees, 61 percent doctoral degrees, and 5 percent enrolled in non-degree programs. The GPA of the majority of participants reported 3.5 or higher. 11 percent of students reported that they went to an agent or consultancy to get institutions information and 88 percent were not assisted by the agent and consultancy that they reached out to. Among the respondents, 49% were married, 47 percent were unmarried, and 4 percent did not identify their relationship status. Equal percent (18%) of respondents were in their first, second, and third semesters, while 19 percent were in the fourth semesters, 7 percent in fifth semesters, and 20 percent were in 6th or higher semesters. Qualitative data were collected from 13 graduate and 2 undergraduate students from different countries (4 females and 11 males).

**How did international students obtain information about Korean universities, programs when they were in their countries?**

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they had either spoken over the phone or had email conversations with their friends and/or relatives in Korea. 76 percent of respondents reported that they had a phone called and emailed their friends and relatives in Korea for university information. Similarly, 70 percent had emailed professors before/during the application. 74 percent of participants reported that they had visited the university’s website and programs of interest from their home countries. The only 15 percent reported they had attended study abroad seminar run by Korean Universities in their home countries. Thirty-four percent were encouraged by their parents to study in South Korea. Table 1 represents the response rate of international students regarding how they obtained information about Korean Universities

**Table 1. Sources of Information for Destination Korea**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How they obtained information</th>
<th>Respondents Rate agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They had the phone called and emailed their friends and their relatives</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They emailed professor before/ during the application</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They had visited the university website</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They were encouraged by parents</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They had attended study abroad seminar</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pearson co-relation indicated the very strong correlations between the students who
reported “I emailed my friends/relatives in Korea for university information” and “I emailed university advisors/professors before/during the application” ($r=0.965$, $p<0.01$). Thus, the international students who got the information from their friends and relatives were likely to have sent email inquiries to their future supervising professor. It indicated that their friends or families studying in Korea were the referral to the professor for admission. There is also the positive relationship between the participants who reported "I was well prepared to pursue further education at Korean university" and "I checked college/university website and programs of my interests" ($r=0.5296$, $p<0.01$).

Findings from the semi structured-interview confirmed the quantitative findings of how international students received information about Korean Universities. All but one ($n=13$) interviewees said that their friends, relatives, and professors were the primary resources for searching the programs of interest. One graduate student from Nepal who had started their journey from undergraduate level confirmed that pastors and his recommendations are the first and very reliable information sources.

Participant1: We used to go to church every Saturday. The pastor of the church was very positive about our study. He has a good relationship with the president of the one University of South Korea. He arranged the scholarship and admission to the university for me. I came to know the name of the university and went to the website to know the location and other information after admission.

A recent Ph.D. graduate student from Bangladesh said he was in the UK for a master's degree. Suddenly his college was closed due to some legal issues. One of his friends studying at a South Korean university suggested him to come to Korea for further study. He recommended him to one professor.

I went to the UK for further study. My college was banned by the British government. Either I have to admit to another college or I had to leave the United Kingdom. I contacted my friend who was a former student at one of the University of South Korea. He suggested me to study here and search and recommended the professor to me. After that, I emailed the professor for further admission process. My parents were quite unhappy with this decision. I convinced them later saying it is easy to effort the tuition fee and living expenses in South Korea.

In interviews, participants from India, Vietnam, and Iran reported that their relatives, friends, and parents encouraged them to study in South Korea.

Participant 1: My sister is studying here, and she encourages me to admit here for the master and doctoral course. She contacted the professor to supervise me. When he agreed, we forwarded the admission process.

Participant 2: My friend who was a former student here recommended me for the scholarship to his professor. I received the scholarship.....

Participant 3: I met the professor in the international seminar held in Iran. He encourages me to study in South Korea. I have completed my Ph.D. under his supervision. Now I am a post-doc fellow.

What were the motivating factors for students to study in South Korea?

85 percent of international students reported that they wanted to study in South Korea for a better professional career and job promotion. Approximately 75 percent of participants reported that finances (e.g., fellowship, assistantship, scholarships or other financial support) were the motivational factor in choosing to pursue higher education in South Korea and in its counterparts. Only 36 percent noted that they decided to study at their own expenses. Nearly 58 percent reported that their friends influenced their interest to study in South Korea. Only 9 percent of students reported that their government provided support to study in South Korea. Table 2 represents the motivational factors of international students to study South Korea and the rate of their responses.

Table 2: Factors influencing Students' choice of study destination
Motivational Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents Rate agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For better professional career and job promotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship, assistantship, scholarships or financial support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their friends influence them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They decided to study at their own expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their Government Provide them Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings from the semi structured-interview established the quantitative findings that better professional career and job promotion motivated them to study in South Korea. International students made the decision to study abroad for better professional career and job promotions. One student from Cambodia stated:

*The reason why I decided to study here (name of university), my expectation is because this university is a well-ranked university in the world. I think it is easy for a professional career when you graduated from a prestigious university.*

A participant from Laos reported that the scholarships were the main reasons for their interest in South Korea.

*I am from Laos and got the scholarship to study here. I did not know about the scholarship program. One of my friends informs me about the program. The education here is of high quality. My relatives and parents encourage and support me too. Korean government scholarship is provided for the different nationals and I was looking for the scholarship. This is the best opportunity for me.*

A student from South America reported that they enrolled in Korean universities because of the mutual scholarship programs between their government and the university. For example, a student from Guatemala said

*There is a mutual understanding agreement between a Korean university and Guatemala government. The Korean university provides us the living expenses and our government provides us the two-way air tickets.*

A few other comments are worth reporting. Participants also reported that they tried other countries for scholarship but could not get. A student majoring in engineering from Nepal said:

*I applied to Australia for abroad study. It is very difficult to get the scholarship there at the master level. My cousin who has completed the Ph.D. in engineering and now in Post-doc fellow here talked with a professor here. Professor agreed to provide the scholarship in his lab. I thought it is a great experience for me here. That's why I am here*.

What were the priorities and major challenges students encountered during preparation?

**Priorities**

Approximately 75 percent of participants reported that finances (e.g., fellowship, assistantship, scholarships or other financial support) were the top priority in choosing to pursue higher education in South Korea. Exactly, six in ten (60%) participants reported that their choice of program was based primarily on their interest and had affected where they applied for the admission. Approximately half of the participants reported that the reputation of universities were important factors in their choice of which university to attend. Only 12 percent of students reported that the location of the university or college was the importance for them while preparing to study in South Korea. Very few participants (3%) reported that an on-campus job had been a factor. Table 3 represents the rate of respondents regarding priorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities</th>
<th>Respondents Rate agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their choice of program</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of universities</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the university</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The priorities showed by the survey were supported by the qualitative findings. International students want to cross the border to become different, whether through learning skill, through graduating with a degree, or simply through growing up. They have certain priorities before leaving their country. As one student from Mongolia put it,

*There are a lot of differences between living here and there. The tuition fees and living expenses are very high here. Our parents can't support fully. So we have to manage expenses on our own. It's very difficult for us. That's why our first priorities are financial support or scholarship or fellowship.*

The lack of international course offerings relevant to students’ fields of study and finding the programs or course of students’ choice might be barriers to greater enrollment in universities. They also placed the high priority on programs of their choice. Students from Peru expressed:

*I have considered the course first. International trade is the subject of my interest and it is available here as well as the university is reputed. I got the financial support here that’s why I am here....*

**Challenges**

Similarly, 53 percent of international students reported that findings the right university and program was the most difficult aspect of preparing to study in South Korea. International students also reported following challenges: preparing the required materials for the application (33%), an equal number of international students (27%) understanding the application process (e.g., letter of recommendation and Universities admission process) and Visa preparation for Korea. Few international students (23%) reported the difficulties for preparation of standardized tests (e.g., IELTS/TOEFL/TOPIC). Table 4 represents the rate of respondents regarding the major challenges students encountered during preparation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Respondents Rate agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Findings on the right university and program</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing the required materials for application</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the application process</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visa preparation</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of standardized tests</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

International students were asked to describe the most challenging steps in preparing to study abroad. Students reported that finding the right university and program was the most difficult aspect for preparing to study at South Korean Universities. Maximum (12 out of 14) international students reported that their family, friends studying in South Korean universities recommended the programs of their choice or arranged contact with the supervising professor for facilitation of the admission process and scholarship application. International students from a different country reported that another difficulty was that they could not get complete information about programs from the universities to become the website of the university which is in the English language has limited information. They found that they had to depend on their Korean friends or a person who is good in the Korean language to register the course and to complete the application process. A graduate student from India said:

*I found contacting the reliable person for admission or contacting the professor for guidance and finding the programs for the university from the website is really hard. My sister who is studying here arranged my admission...I sent the required documents from my countries. Documents preparation for a visa is not difficult when you are admitted and have a scholarship.*

A graduate student from Bangladesh said that finding the supervising professor was a major challenge:

*It is difficult to find the appropriate course and university through the website of the university if your relatives or friends are not here. We need the name of supervising professors, name in
admission form for graduate study. Filling the application form is not a difficult task. I sent these forms to my friends who arrange my admission. Just had submitted my application to the international office.

Did students receive reliable information from the educational agents who help them prepare for their overseas study?

Only 12 percent of international students reported that they went to an agent or consultancies to get college information. The remaining 88 percent of international students did not visit the agent and consultancy. Instead, 86 percent of international students skipped the questions regarding the educational agents or educational consultancy that asked, “Why did you go to agent/educational consultancy while you were preparing for your study in Korea?”

Students reported during the telephone interview that even the prestigious Korean government scholarship is not well known in their home country. Some of them got information about the scholarship from their friends who were studying in Korea. A graduate student from Nepal said:

> I came to know the Korean Government Scholarship programs (KGSP) from my brother. My brother who was studying here in South Korea prepares my application. I applied with the recommendation letter from the professor which was arranged by my brother.

A Ph.D. student from Nepal who has started his journey from undergraduate level claimed that:

> I have been here for 9 years. I met many international students around the world, as far as I know, no one came here through agents. I did not find the person at this university who came here without connection, contact, and recommendation from their friends, relatives, mentors, and seniors…

But one student from India reported that he applied and contacted the professor himself.

> I came to know from one of my friends studying here that there is a good opportunity for international students for further study. I have started to find the universities and emailed for the admission. I emailed more than 100 universities. I got the responses from three universities with a scholarship.

He further stated that

> There are many consultancies in India which are not representatives and agent of universities. They just take the service charge for helping the students to admit to the universities....

Majority International students mentioned that they didn't use the service and guidance of agents or educational consultancy. Few international students who used the services expressed concern over false information. Two undergraduate students from Nepal reported that they were misguided by the consultancies.

> We are told that the class will be provided in English Medium. The part-time job is easily available. But the condition is just the opposite. Classes are conducted in the Korean language and getting a part-time job is difficult.

Discussion

Our finding revealed that one of the most used sources by the students when they are in the home country, is word of mouth. International students gathered the most information on universities and programs through their friends and relatives via phone call or other electronic communication. They trusted the information provided by the people who are in the host country as reliable and accurate. Interpersonal sources of information, such as student's references group friends, family, former students, and professors are also very important sources of information (Murray, 1991). This finding is also similar to the finding of Eder et al. (2010) and Simoesand Soares (2010) that the interpersonal sources are one of the major sources that student used in their decision-making process for study abroad. The findings revealed that the former teachers and students were equally important and first most relevant sources to gather the information for the decision-making process. Tan (2016) also revealed that selecting the current institution was mostly because of family and friends recommendations. Simoes and Soares (2010) listed former students and teachers as the second most relevant sources of information. Students confirmed that they had visited the website of universities after recommendations from friends, family member, former teachers, and students.
Numerous factors influenced international student's choice of abroad study but the better professional career, job promotions and financial supports like fellowship, assistantship, and scholarships are appeared to be key motivational factors. Most of the students (85%) are self-motivated to pursue a higher degree in South Korea in the hope of obtaining a better professional career and job promotion. These findings corroborated what Franklin (2010) and Stroud, (2010) had arrived at: Students and their parents believe studying abroad enhances career prospects in terms of securing better professional future, reviving job offers, and accelerating career progression. International degree will benefit international students by providing opportunities for making career changes, promotions prospects and the ability to earn higher salaries. There is a strong perception among international students that study abroad will enable them to attain higher levels of position and salaries, which relate to their desire for the job and improved lifestyle (Blackburn, 2011). Findings indicated that funding is another key factor that leads to student participation in study abroad. While this factor is not new to the field of international education, the prioritization of students on funding represents a potential new area of focus. More funding and staffing are the key elements to address the problem of low international student participation rates in institutions (Loberg, 2012).

More than 75 percent of study participants received scholarships, fellowships or assistantships from the university they attended. Lasanowski (2009) and Kolster (2014) indicated that international students are motivated to study in South Korea due to the availability of scholarships and the quality of education.

Our findings indicated that 57 percent of participants were influenced by their friends to study in Korea. This shows that the international students who were studying in South Korea emphasized that the destination met all the anticipated criteria and that they had good experiences, were satisfied and were willing to recommend the destination to their friends and relatives. The findings are similar to the findings of other researchers such as Alemu and Cordier (2017) that shows satisfaction in academic and education quality, satisfaction in living arrangements, with food, socializing with foreigners contributing the overall satisfaction of international students studying abroad. Positive interactions with the members of the host culture are likely to improve one's feelings of well-being and satisfaction (Sam & Berry, 2010).

The data illustrate that the availability of financial support was consideration of the top priorities of students' decision-making processes when deciding on where to study. The shreds of evidence supported that the majority of the student's second top priority is the program of their choice. Many students accepted that the reputation of the university was no less important for them. According to Clancy and Goastellec(2007), the universal pattern is that the lower the reputations of the university, the less selective the admission criteria are or, conversely, more reputed universities operate more selective admissions policies. The selectivity has become an increasingly important brand differentiator for many universities in a globally competitive marketplace. Ehrenberg (2005) showed that rankings and reputation of the university are especially important for high ability and second-generation students.

It is worth noting that a majority of students in this study perceived that finding the right university and program is a more challenging part. More than one-third of participants reported preparing the required materials for application more challenging than visa preparation, preparation of standardized tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, or TOPIC), and understanding the application process for admission. The selectivity was valued as a measure for identifying a university that will be a good academic fit for international students. Very few participants received support from the educational agent in finding the college, preparing application materials and visa application. Participants who went to agent or consultancy reported negative experiences in terms of the quality of the information when they arrived in South Korea regarding the part-time job availability and language of instruction. International students are motivated by a range of factor which can potentially influence their decision to study overseas (Ssekasi, Mushibwe & Caldwell, 2014). Students should be very careful about the marketing gimmicks that offer admission without a promise. This is of particular importance for Korea because most of the Korean universities do not have their agents inside or outside the country.
Consultancies often times may create dodgy university scams that create a student’s enrolment grey market that misleads and misinform (Dabhadkar, 2013). These pieces of information can be problematic if they do not correspond to the standards and prospects of the university they are seeking to study at (Rae & Woodier-Harris, 2012).

The implication of the Study

There are several implications for policymakers, administrators, and individuals involved in international student affairs. This study suggests that when having a better understanding of students’ higher education preparation and decision-making trends, universities administrators and faculties can recognize students’ needs and improve the quality of university resources. University resources include admission and recruitment materials, and services that address the concerns of the international students on their universities. This study also suggests that some preparation needs to be made by the government and university that will orient international students before their arrival.

For example, administrators, policymakers, and international students’ advisor should deepen their understanding of the challenges faced by international students as they prepare for study abroad. International students need resources available to them from their home country during their decision-making process in order to develop their programs related to admission, enrollment, and retention. However, our findings confirm that there is a lack of publicity effectively marketing government-sponsored scholarship programs or university scholarship programs of the Korean government. Even promotional materials often leave out important details about the universities and their cutting-edge research facilities and relevant scheme to international students such as the availability of scholarships. International talents are primarily concerned with finding the reputed university, safe place, right programs, and financial support to study and work. Because international students generally cannot visit the overseas university for more information, this study found that most of the students have depended solely on their friends and relatives who have or have been studying in South Korea. This implies that video testimonials of student representatives from various countries could be a useful resource for those who do not have their friends or relatives already in South Korea.

Even though our findings are based on limited data and self-reported perceptions of students enrolled in 25 different universities, these insights can be useful for policy makers, administrators for designing their marketing approach. Some useful strategies could be to organize pre-departure orientations in various countries of origin. Future studies could use a more heterogeneous sample for a deeper understanding of the complex needs and challenges of international students while they are in the process of seeking information and making the decision on study abroad. To sum up, what became apparent to us is that strategic alignment of promotional materials directly addressing the prospective students’ preparation challenges could turn South Korea to be an off-the-beaten-path bucket list among international students in the next few years.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


