

DISRUPTIONS AND NEW PATHWAYS INTO STUDENT MOBILITY

How South Korea's Soft Power Reversed Global Student Mobility

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South Korea has rapidly emerged as a top destination for international students, reversing long-standing patterns of outbound mobility. Fueled by the global reach of K-Culture, this transformation reflects a unique soft power strategy that differs from those of its regional neighbors. While Japan's cultural influence remains rooted in long-established media forms and China emphasizes economic and political investment, South Korea's strength lies in its ability to convert popular culture into educational aspiration.

South Korea's surge in cultural influence has triggered a pivotal redirection of global student flows. This reputational momentum, driven by the global rise of K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cinema, is now reshaping the geography of mobility in higher education.

South Korea's ability to convert cultural fascination into educational aspiration sets it apart in East Asia. Many students initially arrive intrigued by Korean culture but ultimately decide where and what to study based on practical factors like academic quality, affordability, and career prospects. A strategic shift is needed, from broad cultural promotion to tailored institutional and policy responses. As global mobility patterns become more diversified and competitive, South Korea's case shows that visibility must be matched with infrastructure, segmentation, and sustained engagement to realize long-term gains in internationalization.

Emergence of South Korea

Ten years ago, South Korea was not among the top global destinations for inbound enrollment. However, by 2024, it had become one. Crucially, this reversal of roles from perennial sender to confident receiver has been sustained since the 2021-2022 academic year, when the number of outgoing South Korean students (166,892) outnumbered the incoming international students to South Korea (124,320). The OECD International Migration Outlook 2024 shows that, among the 20 largest nationalities enrolled in OECD tertiary education systems, South Korea alone reduced the number of its own citizens studying abroad between 2014 and 2022.

Inbound enrollment from countries such as Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam has expanded at double-digit rates, while arrivals from China and India have remained stable. This is interesting in itself, but perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the dynamics involve not just attraction but also

retention of these students. The underlying message is that South Korea's higher education sector is maturing, building its capacity to both retain its talent and attract new international learners. A shrinking domestic youth cohort, a weaker Korean currency, rising confidence in local universities, and waning public faith in overseas degrees all play a role. These combined forces require the country to stay aware of the importance of having a national strategy to convert cultural influence into actual socioeconomic gains.

Soft Power as Catalyst

Global student mobility is no longer dominated by just a few countries. Today, students consider a wider range of destinations, and Seoul is now competing regionally not only with cities like Tokyo, Kyoto, Beijing, and Shanghai but also with English-speaking hubs such as Singapore and Hong Kong. South Korea's soft power is the catalyst. Pop bands like BTS or Blackpink and shows like Squid Game command digital fandom economies worth billions, Han Kang's 2024 Nobel Prize signals literary prestige, and K-beauty, webtoons, and e-sports turn casual viewers into language learners. In the Korean context, global engagement with K-culture frequently serves as an entry point, sparking interest in Korean language and culture studies, which in turn motivates short-term study abroad experiences and, for some, culminates in the pursuit of full-degree programs in South Korea.

Compared to its regional neighbors, South Korea's soft power strategy is distinctively youth-driven and digitally immersive. In contrast, Japan's cultural influence is rooted in traditional media, which continues to attract global fans but is less integrated into national education branding, while China emphasizes state-led initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, Belt and Road educational diplomacy, and government scholarships to promote its language and values. South Korea diverges from both. It relies on organically globalized pop culture and fandoms

to drive bottom-up interest in its language, lifestyle and, ultimately, its education system. This grassroots cultural diffusion has proven particularly effective in converting curiosity into academic aspirations among younger generations. In brief, the old cultural structure in Asia may be shifting. While anime and manga in Japan still sustain a loyal global audience, South Korea's Hallyu 3.0 era matches that reach and, critically, converts it effectively into academic interest.

The numbers bear this out. Growing from 26,000 two decades ago, the number of individuals taking the Test of Proficiency in Korean has surpassed 430,000 annually as of 2024, and the government plans to double the number of overseas seats by 2025. Simultaneously, international enrollment reached almost 210,000 in 2024, a tenfold increase over 20 years, sufficient to propel South Korea into the global top 10 destinations. Inbound growth tracks the rhythm of cultural milestones: rapper Psy's viral breakout more than a decade ago, the ascent of HYBE Corporation's supergroups, Oscar-winning cinema, and the global binge of K-dramas on streaming platforms. In other words, culture leads the way, while policies and institutional quality tend to follow.

One Size Will Not Fit All

Although the growth to date has been impressive, relying on broad cultural appeal alone would be shortsighted. International students are not a homogeneous bloc. Their goals span certificate programs, semester-long credit mobility and full degrees; their decision criteria differ accordingly. For short-term or exchange students, experiential immersion and lifestyle—areas where soft power resonates most—often top the list. Prospective degree-seekers, by contrast, probe deeper. They are interested in research reputation, employability pathways, poststudy work rights, and long-term living conditions. For instance, for advanced learners in artificial intelligence or biomedical engineering, K-pop charm is mere background noise, compared with grants, labs, and career pipelines.

There is, therefore, a need for segmentation. South Korean universities should profile themselves internationally by motivation and design tailored value propositions. For degree-mobility candidates, institutions can spotlight R&D intensity, plus industry partnerships in semiconductors, batteries, gaming and creative content. Flagship campuses already channel students into internships opportunities; scaling such pipelines could convert soft-power curiosity into career-anchored commitment. For credit-mobility or certificate seekers, the priority is access and flexibility: short, stackable modules that embed cultural content, fieldwork in K-culture industries, and

transferable credits recognized by home universities. Curricular innovation is equally important. Embedding Korean cultural studies across business, media, design, and data programs would allow students to integrate fandom with formal learning, rather than treat it as a side excursion.

Converting Attention into Long-Term Commitment

Government policy must complete the loop. The Study Korea 300K initiative targets 300,000 international students by 2027, yet enrollment targets without student success levers risk being aspirational slogans. Immigration, labor, and startup agencies should coordinate to grant international graduates easier paths to hands-on experiences, entrepreneurship visas and, eventually, permanent residency. Without such lock-in mechanisms, the magnet of soft power may draw students in, only for administrative hurdles to push them back out.

A Multipolar Future for Global Higher Education

For the wider global higher education landscape, South Korea's pivot signals a structural rebalancing of mobility that compels every stakeholder to reassess long-held assumptions. Crucially, South Korea's rise is remarkable because, unlike English-speaking destinations, it does not share a lingua-franca advantage with most prospective students, underscoring the depth of its cultural pull.

South Korea stands at an inflection point. Arguably, it is the first non-Western OECD member to reverse its historic outbound mobility tide and sustain a net inbound surplus, demonstrating that cultural capital and persistent globalization efforts manifested in the growing number of English-taught classes can reroute global talent flows when policy and institutional ecosystems are aligned. Nonetheless, it should be considered that such reversal is also driven by internal societal forces, coupled with a plummeting youth population and stagnant economy.

With coordinated action, segment-specific recruitment, culture-embedded curricula, and visas that translate study into work, the country can secure its position as a vibrant, innovative hub for higher learning. The global spotlight is on Korea. With the understanding that its cultural impact will have long-term consequences, shaping future educational demand as K-influenced youth around the world decide where to study, the task for South Korea now is to forge lasting enrollment and alumni networks before the momentum fades.

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