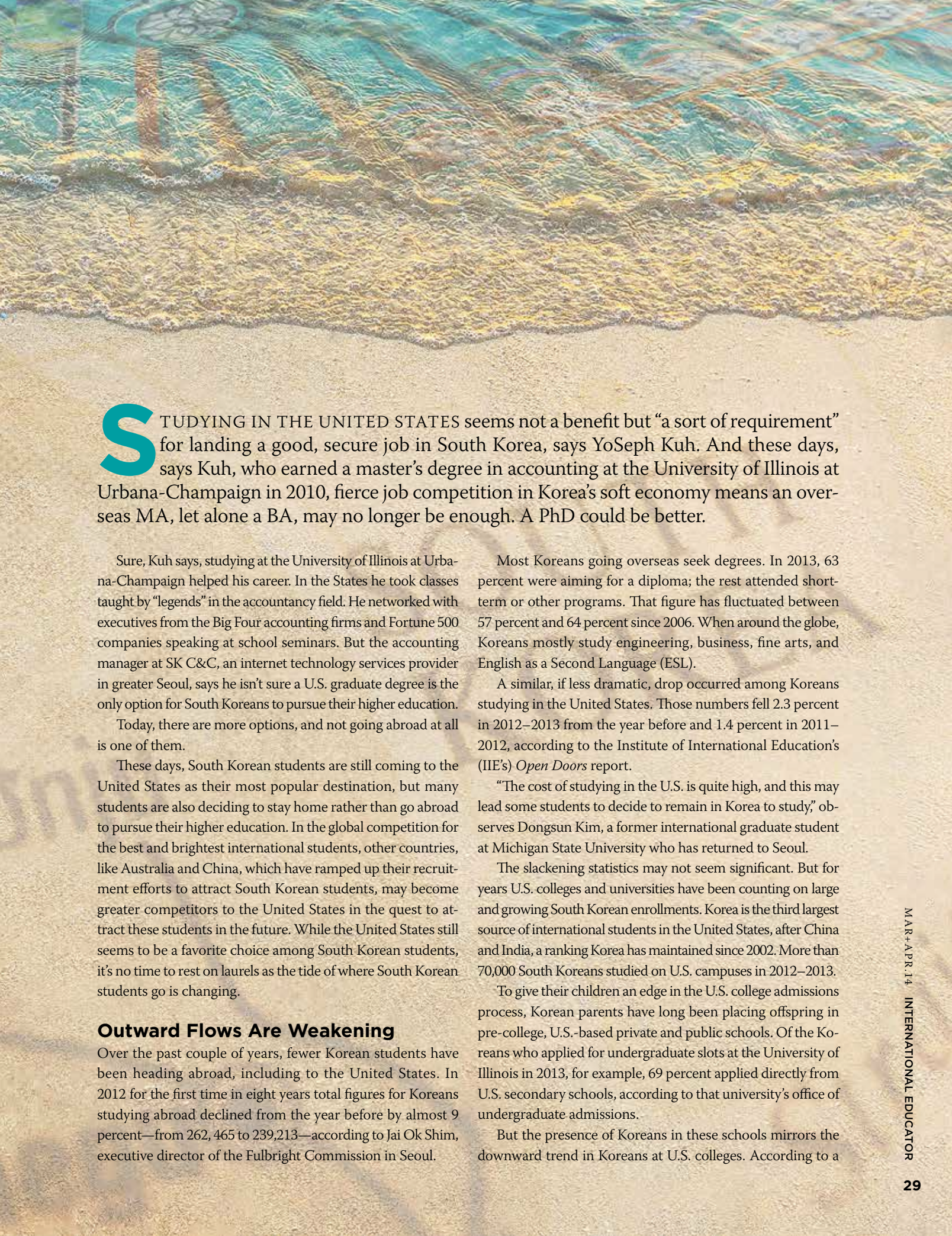


New, cheaper options and a glut of foreign-educated returnees color South Koreans' decisions about where and whether to study abroad.



The Changing Tide of South Korean Student Flows

BY KYNA RUBIN



STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES seems not a benefit but “a sort of requirement” for landing a good, secure job in South Korea, says YoSeph Kuh. And these days, says Kuh, who earned a master’s degree in accounting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2010, fierce job competition in Korea’s soft economy means an overseas MA, let alone a BA, may no longer be enough. A PhD could be better.

Sure, Kuh says, studying at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign helped his career. In the States he took classes taught by “legends” in the accountancy field. He networked with executives from the Big Four accounting firms and Fortune 500 companies speaking at school seminars. But the accounting manager at SK C&C, an internet technology services provider in greater Seoul, says he isn’t sure a U.S. graduate degree is the only option for South Koreans to pursue their higher education.

Today, there are more options, and not going abroad at all is one of them.

These days, South Korean students are still coming to the United States as their most popular destination, but many students are also deciding to stay home rather than go abroad to pursue their higher education. In the global competition for the best and brightest international students, other countries, like Australia and China, which have ramped up their recruitment efforts to attract South Korean students, may become greater competitors to the United States in the quest to attract these students in the future. While the United States still seems to be a favorite choice among South Korean students, it’s no time to rest on laurels as the tide of where South Korean students go is changing.

Outward Flows Are Weakening

Over the past couple of years, fewer Korean students have been heading abroad, including to the United States. In 2012 for the first time in eight years total figures for Koreans studying abroad declined from the year before by almost 9 percent—from 262,465 to 239,213—according to Jai Ok Shim, executive director of the Fulbright Commission in Seoul.

Most Koreans going overseas seek degrees. In 2013, 63 percent were aiming for a diploma; the rest attended short-term or other programs. That figure has fluctuated between 57 percent and 64 percent since 2006. When around the globe, Koreans mostly study engineering, business, fine arts, and English as a Second Language (ESL).

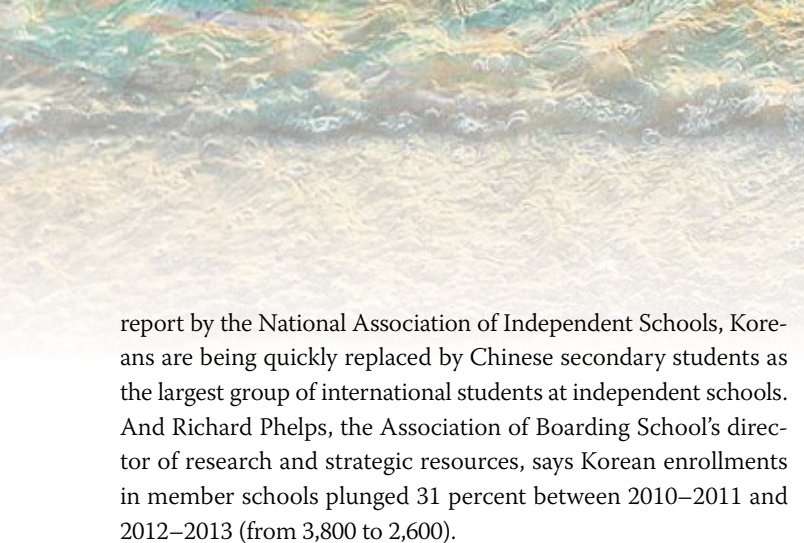
A similar, if less dramatic, drop occurred among Koreans studying in the United States. Those numbers fell 2.3 percent in 2012–2013 from the year before and 1.4 percent in 2011–2012, according to the Institute of International Education’s (IIE’s) *Open Doors* report.

“The cost of studying in the U.S. is quite high, and this may lead some students to decide to remain in Korea to study,” observes Dongsun Kim, a former international graduate student at Michigan State University who has returned to Seoul.

The slackening statistics may not seem significant. But for years U.S. colleges and universities have been counting on large and growing South Korean enrollments. Korea is the third largest source of international students in the United States, after China and India, a ranking Korea has maintained since 2002. More than 70,000 South Koreans studied on U.S. campuses in 2012–2013.

To give their children an edge in the U.S. college admissions process, Korean parents have long been placing offspring in pre-college, U.S.-based private and public schools. Of the Koreans who applied for undergraduate slots at the University of Illinois in 2013, for example, 69 percent applied directly from U.S. secondary schools, according to that university’s office of undergraduate admissions.

But the presence of Koreans in these schools mirrors the downward trend in Koreans at U.S. colleges. According to a



YoSeph Kuh, who studied at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, feels a U.S. graduate degree may not be the only option for South Koreans to pursue their higher education today. He now works in Seoul, Korea.

report by the National Association of Independent Schools, Koreans are being quickly replaced by Chinese secondary students as the largest group of international students at independent schools. And Richard Phelps, the Association of Boarding School's director of research and strategic resources, says Korean enrollments in member schools plunged 31 percent between 2010–2011 and 2012–2013 (from 3,800 to 2,600).

The good news for U.S. institutions is that the United States remains Korean families' preferred study abroad destination. In 2012, 30.7 percent of Koreans studied in the United States, compared with 26.3 percent in China, 8.6 percent in Canada, 8.4 percent in Japan, and 7.2 percent in Australia, according to the Fulbright Commission in Seoul. The U.S. share of the pie has held fairly steady since 2010. In 2010 29.8 percent of Korean students abroad studied in the United States—a slice that shrunk to 27.5 percent in 2011 before rising above 30 percent in 2012. Fulbright Commission figures, from the South Korean Ministry of Education (MOE), show slightly shrinking pie portions for the United Kingdom and Japan, and a swelling slice for Canada—5.6 to 8.6 percent—between 2010 and 2012.

In the eyes of one Korean observer, however, the decrease in South Korean enrollments in U.S. institutions suggests that U.S. educators should not be overly complacent. ESL programs, in particular, take Korean students for granted, says Seunghwan Lee, president of the Korean Association of International Educators, or KAIE. These programs have stopped promoting to South Koreans, which may help explain the enrollment slump, he says.

Certainly, multiple factors are at play in study abroad decisions for today's Koreans.

Why the Falling Numbers?

Affordability looms large. The creaky economy, “not favorable at this time,” according to the Fulbright Commission's Shim, has eroded Korea's middle class. Slow income growth and increasing family debt due to the high costs of housing and private education (the latter, *de rigueur* among a population disaffected with the nation's public education system) have pushed more than half of middle-class families into what a 2013 McKinsey report calls “a growing ‘poor middle-income’ cohort.”¹

In an economy where the lifetime earnings of a private college graduate lag those of a high school graduate entering directly into employment, as the McKinsey study reports, it is no wonder that some families are asking whether educating their children anywhere abroad is worth it.² The Korean public is already concerned enough about the high costs of a domestic college degree.

To what extent has competition from other English-speaking countries affected Korea's dip in students coming to U.S. campuses? Australia has launched a major ad campaign to attract international students, says Shim, and many students visit that country for work opportunities after graduation. Other nations too, she adds, are

stepping up recruitment by increasing scholarships and student services. A 2011 survey conducted by Australian Education International of students from six Asian countries including South Korea showed that students rate Australia's visa process and waiting time as far smoother and swifter than those of the United States.

With 3.6 percent of Australia's international students coming from South Korea, or 8,770 students, Korea ranked sixth among top sending countries to Australia in 2011, according to IIE. These figures are up a bit since 2007, when 3.1 percent of international students, or about 6,370, were Korean.

But because of cost, some Korean non-degree seekers studying English are looking beyond the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The Philippines and Malta, for instance—where English is the second national language, and tuition, living expenses, and airfare are much lower than in other English-speaking nations—have become popular destinations, says Lee. In the Philippines, says Lee, English programs offer eight hours of instruction a day—double typical daily U.S. ESL program hours at less cost. Recently the Philippines has also been attracting growing numbers of Chinese and Japanese students to study English, he adds.

However, studying elsewhere in Asia (China aside—see next page) “is not a trend” for South Koreans, says Lee, and the numbers are small. Between 2010 and 2011, for instance, the share of South Koreans studying in the Philippines went from 1.1 to 1.2 percent, or to 3,238 students, based on Ministry of Education data from the Fulbright Commission.

Study abroad decisions come down to perceptions of cost, value, and prestige. Living expenses in the United Kingdom are even higher than in the United States, says Ji Hong Hwang, who received a BA in urban and regional planning from the University of Illinois in 2012 and is now back in Korea. Australia doesn't have many prestigious universities, she feels, explaining why “everyone” she knows studies in the United States.

For Jisun Bang, the United Kingdom was her first choice, but she ended up choosing to study in Australia because of the option to immigrate. In 2012 Bang earned a master's in translation and interpreting from Macquarie University. “Translator was in the category for permanent residency when I entered,” she says. Soon after her arrival, it was removed from the list. She now works in an

English school in Seoul teaching IELTS test prep, an industry, she says, where “a degree from a commonwealth university is a plus.”

Koreans with means key their overseas study choices to perceptions of employers’ preferences. Between two job candidates from equally reputable schools in the United States and Australia or Canada, Korean businesses prefer the one from the United States, says Dongsun Kim, a 2011 graduate of Michigan State University’s master’s program in hospitality business management who describes her family’s economic status as “upper class.”

China’s Pull

The newest, greatest competitor at the moment isn’t other English-speaking countries, but China—Korean students’ second top study abroad destination after the United States. The number of Korean students flocking across the Yellow Sea to China grew more than three-fold between 2001 and 2012, from 16,000 to almost 63,000, according to *Wall Street Journal* statistics.

“China is Korea’s largest trading partner,” says Korea International School chairman Sunshik Min. “Parents and students think that Chinese language will become more important, although not as important as English.” Min’s friends, he says, send their kids to China after they’ve studied in the United States.

In fact, because of burgeoning business ties to China, Korean companies already want employees who speak both English and Chinese. “Korean companies being launched in China are vigorously recruiting Korean students who have very good Chinese speaking abilities and have completed a degree program [there],” says Shim.

If boosting career prospects by studying in China weren’t incentive enough for Korean youth, China offers further perks. It’s a cheaper option than study in the West. Its geographic proximity to South Korea gives some families “a sense of security,” says Shim. These factors, together with the nations’ shared cultural underpinnings, make it “kind of easy” for Koreans to study in China, notes Lee.

Speaking a second language like Chinese on top of English, a nearly ubiquitous skill among Korea’s educated class, is minimally needed to be competitive, affirms MSU graduate Dongsun Kim, now a marketer for Best Western Premier Gangnam Hotel in Seoul.

Furthering the tide of Korean students to China are the flourishing exchange programs between Korean and Chinese universities, says Lee, who observes that U.S. institutions seem less interested in creating such ties, presumably because of uneven flows. (Demand among U.S. students to study in Korea is weak in comparison—see sidebar.)

Korean Employers Sometimes Shy Away From Foreign-Trained Hires

A final but noteworthy factor that does not escape young people’s calculus in their decisions about education is this: some Korean employers prefer local-educated workers.

University of Illinois alumna Hwang, now living in Seoul with her parents while job hunting, says that students who studied in the United States “tend to be unable to understand Korean culture as deeply” as those who remained home for college. Further, Korean employers perceive returnees from abroad as being more expensive hires because of the costly tuition they shelled out for their U.S. education, she says. Many big Korean companies prefer local students “because they are just as smart” as foreign-trained workers and are less likely to change jobs, she says.

Many local schools offer job placement assistance and training for the Korean work environment. For instance, home-bred students learn about Korean corporate culture, training that their U.S.-educated counterparts lack, according to Shim. “Many students who have never studied abroad are able to communicate proficiently in English and some employers believe that locally educated students adjust better to the Korean work environment.”



The number of Korean students flocking across the Yellow Sea to China grew more than three-fold between 2001 and 2012, from 16,000 to almost 63,000.

Like most East Asian families, Koreans cherish local networking as a means to professional success. Parents often fret that studying overseas will prevent their children from developing personal networks that will benefit their futures, according to the *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

Does Hwang feel that study abroad might have penalized her job prospects? “For the short term, it could have,” she says. “But I believe what I’ve experienced during study abroad will eventually benefit me.”

The Branch Campus Option

One in-between-option for Korean students is foreign university branch campuses in Korea. Stony Brook University (SUNY) is the first overseas university to open on the Songdo Global University campus, a new, ambitious education hub in the Incheon Free Economic Zone, 45 minutes by car from Seoul.

Korean authorities approached Stony Brook for the project, and are providing five years of operating support as well as buildings and equipment. Stony Brook is responsible for attracting students, hiring faculty, and setting the academics, says W. Brent Lindquist, a Stony Brook professor of applied mathematics and statistics who was deputy provost in charge of setting up the Korea operation, SUNY Korea.

What Takes U.S. Students to Korea?

IT'S TRUE—Seoul is not Tokyo or Beijing, says recent University of Southern California grad Alyssa Min. But that was a plus for her. Tokyo's cost of living is much higher than Seoul's, and she was wary of Beijing's pollution and overcrowding. Instead, she spent spring 2013 studying at Yonsei University, one of Korea's top private institutions.

"Seoul's charms are multi-layered and not so obvious at first sight," she says. Yonsei University lies in a university district full of cafes, bars, and restaurants where life "never got boring." Yonsei offered her a fine business program with quantitative classes that had not been part of her international relations major back home. Her Yonsei classes, most taught in fluent English by professors with overseas PhDs, were regular offerings not watered down for study abroad students. "The quality of teaching was high, as were the expectations and workload," she says. Alyssa Min also loved Yonsei's school spirit, "which rivals that of USC" and brought together local and foreign students "in a meaningful way."

Like 80 percent of USC students choosing study abroad in Korea, Min is Korean-American. Her head-start with the Korean language and the desire to experience Korea as a college student (she'd lived there before) boosted her interest in going.

The other 20 percent of USC students who select Korea are non-heritage students. They study business or language, says USC study abroad adviser Trista Beard, "to make themselves more marketable and perhaps work in East Asia." Many do internships in Korea, which, unlike Japan, has a history of such programs and more of an English-speaking corporate environment, says Beard. One USC student worked in Samsung's marketing division, for instance.

Korea is not a top destination for U.S. college students. Only 60 of the 2,000 USC students who study abroad go to Korea, according to Beard. By contrast, 75 travel to Japan and 140 to China. But USC sees a lot of room for growth in its Korea programs. Seoul has a handful of very good universities that are interested in innovative programs, says Beard. Schools there are working on consortiums and on short-term programs that combine courses with internships. Some Korean universities are trying to break down what Beard calls the "walls of separation" between study abroad and local students, whereby visiting students stay on one end of campus and Korean speakers on the other.

Of the international students in South Korea—nearly 86,000 in 2013, according to South Korea's Ministry of Education data—a whopping 58 percent were from China. A relatively small fraction—3 percent, or almost 2,700 students—were from the United States. However, the number of U.S. students on Korean campuses in 2011–2012 rose 8.4 percent from the previous year, according to *Open Doors*.

Historically, the Chinese and Japanese languages have attracted more students than has Korean within U.S. academe. Interest in learning Korean was sparked by the start of the Korean War in 1950, Yale University Professor Kim Seung-ja told the JoongAng Daily in 2013. Korean language courses ceased at Yale in 1961 and didn't resume until 1990. The 1988 Seoul Olympics, Korea's recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the current worldwide craze for Hallyu, or the Korean pop culture wave, have revitalized that interest, she said. Ninety U.S. universities and sixty high schools teach Korean language, according to JoongAng Daily.

Alyssa Min is now working part-time for Samsung in Frankfurt, Germany. A semester in Korea allowed her to improve her Korean language skills and complete an internship, both of which upped her job prospects, she feels.



Bukchon is a unique and noted place in Seoul, Korea, where one can find the trace of traditional life of the ancestors through the Korean traditional houses, alleys and the activities of artisans.

Modeled in part on similar hubs in Singapore and the Middle East, Songdo Global University will house select programs from institutions around the world. SUNY Korea currently enrolls 126 students, 96 of whom are from Korea (the rest are mostly from elsewhere in Asia, with 10 students from the United States), says Lindquist. The program fully opened in March 2012 and offers a range of degrees in technology systems management and computer science, with other programs in the pipeline. The academic building the Koreans constructed holds 2,000 students, says Lindquist. The current quota SUNY Korea has set for itself—a more practical number, he says—is 880, with annual entry of 50 undergraduate students, who are required to spend one year on Stony Brook’s home campus. Projected enrollments for graduate programs are variable, he says.

In 2014 other foreign programs will join SUNY Korea on the Songdo campus: George Mason University will offer public policy management degrees; Belgium’s Ghent University, environmental engineering. Next up are the University of Utah, awaiting Ministry of Education approval (humanities and social sciences), and Russia’s St. Petersburg State Conservatory, which has signed a memorandum of understanding with Korea.

If cost is a factor for Korean student decisions about where to earn a degree, SUNY Korea is not inexpensive. Tuition and fees equal those paid by international students on Stony Brook’s New York state campus, says Lindquist. So far, satellite programs offered by foreign universities in Korea aren’t siphoning off large numbers of students who would otherwise enroll in stateside institutions.

Getting on the Right Side of the English Divide

Despite the forces drawing Korean students toward non-U.S. destinations or keeping them home, millions of Korean parents still engage in a deep-seated obsession to teach their offspring English to position them for entry into a prestigious university.

Koreans’ English craze is tied to the nation’s dramatic economic transformation from a poor nation in the 1960s to an Asian tiger and the world’s sixth largest exporter—of memory chips, mobile phones, ships, and autos. Korea’s GDP is largely dependent on international trade, and English is the common tongue of global business.

As a condition for assistance during the economic crisis of the late 1990s, the International Monetary Fund required that Korea open its education, banking, and other markets to foreign entities, says Min. Who did foreign companies want to hire in Korea? Bilingual employees, he says, sparking the practice among even local Korean firms of requiring applicants to submit their English scores from the Test of English for International Communication, or TOEIC. That exam is an ETS-developed gauge used first in Japan and now throughout Asia and elsewhere.

Today Korean universities, according to Hwang, require high TOEFL scores to graduate. And an “English divide” determines monetary success, says Min, who has a doctorate in business administration from Harvard. “If you speak English, your income is higher than if you don’t, and if your English is good, your starting salary is higher.”

English as a Proxy for Success

Korean families’ push for their children to learn English—and attend a school like Harvard—fits into a larger obsession with education reflected in national statistics: 71 percent of Korean high school graduates attended college in 2012. Korean pupils spend 220 days a year in school (compared with 180 in the United States). Based on international test scores, Korea has one of the best K–12 education systems in the world. Yet parents spend an inordinate amount of income on private after-school and weekend tutoring, which they feel is needed to supplement the rote-style, highly regimented public school curriculum. Counting time in *hagwon*, or cram schools, Korean children spend an average of 13 hours a day studying.

Despite a weak economy and skyrocketing household debt, Korean families spent \$20 billion on private education (half of government education spending), or 2 percent of Korea’s GDP, in 2012, according to data Min presented at a Harvard talk in October 2013. That makes education the nation’s largest spending area, outshining defense expenditures, which are second, he says. Of monthly family outlays for private education, the greatest portion, \$73, goes toward English classes (math is second, at \$68).

“Korean parents are sacrificing their lives to educate their children,” says Min. (Parents’ financial burdens across the board, and the severe pressure placed on young people to enter a good college contribute, in part, to Korea’s suicide rates—the highest in the world, according to McKinsey.³)

The English frenzy begins at an early age. In the 1990s, says Min, Koreans grew concerned that the nation needed to bolster its English proficiency. Then President Kim Young-sam pressed the MOE to offer English to younger children, and to this day English, says Min, is required and tested from third grade through graduate school.

Korean parents’ response to the third-grade English launch, he says, was, “I have to start my kids earlier than other kids.” Min, who runs a large company specializing in English-language education, says his business was the first in Korea to create an English-language kindergarten program in the early 1990s. That program uses U.S.-style teaching to prepare children for the more flexible thinking and learning they will encounter, and be expected to succeed at, years later in a Western college classroom.

Beating out even those who can afford private, Korea-based, English-taught kindergartens are so-called “goose families.” These are better off households that migrate, like geese, to the United States so their child can secure footing on a good college campus by getting an

on-site U.S. K–12 education. Typically, mom accompanies the child for years while dad remains in Korea. Some 300,000 fathers are living alone while their wives and children reside abroad for pre-college education, according to a 2013 article in Korea's *Joongang Daily*.

Why Not Stay Home for College?

Middle-class financial woes and a saturated job market for foreign-trained college graduates seem to dictate that Korean students stay put. And those for whom an overseas degree is financially impossible, do. But Korean families with the means to send their children abroad for higher education are still motivated to do that. Why?

Korea's universities are not among the world's top tier of academic institutions and don't produce Nobel Prize winners, says Min. "Korea is a latecomer to advanced studies in science and technology," he says. Government spending for Korean universities accounts for less than 23 percent of total university revenue, according to World Education News and Reviews (WENR), compared with an average of 78 percent in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

The decrease in South Korean enrollments in U.S. institutions suggests that U.S. educators should not be overly complacent. ESL programs, in particular, take Korean students for granted, says Seunghwan Lee, president of the Korean Association of International Educators.

Parents are acutely aware that neither private nor public higher education in Korea fosters creativity, based on Korean press reports. Options for attending Korea's few top schools are reduced or cut off for students who fail to excel in Korea's national university entrance exam. And rapid expansion in access to higher education has produced parental concern about school quality, according to WENR.

Recent proposed education reforms seem promising on paper. The Korean government is providing more scholarships, and in 2013 it restricted annual tuition increases to 4.7 percent, compared with 5 percent a year earlier, according to ICEF Monitor. Some Korean universities plan to offer online courses. Seoul National University, for example, will stream free lectures on YouTube. ICEF reports that vocational schools, a more popular option for Koreans in light of the

weak market for college graduates, will undergo curriculum changes that include increased hands-on training. A third of vocational high school graduates secured jobs in 2012, reducing the number who went on to college.

Change Slow in Coming

Of the 12 educational reforms under discussion in 2013, two relate to higher education, says María Galindo, commercial officer at the U.S. Embassy Seoul. The first reform would reintegrate core subjects that had been divided into separate (liberal arts and science and engineering) tracks on the college entrance exam. The second—more a rule change than a reform, says commercial specialist Young Hee Koo—would grant Korean colleges greater budget autonomy. Neither proposed change, however, will affect the number of Koreans studying abroad, says Koo. All of the reforms "are a work in progress," says Galindo, requiring National Assembly approval; many remain in standing committees.

Change, in any event, does not come easily to the Korean education system. The MOE adopted some of the measures U.S. colleges use to review applications, says Min. "But it stopped pushing the changes, as parents and students complained the system was more complicated than the old one using just grades and standardized test scores."

In a nation where K–12 textbooks, curriculum, and hiring decisions are government controlled, by the time college rolls around, Korean students desire more choice, according to Min. (Even private schools have little autonomy on these matters, says Min, because of the state subsidies they receive, and few private schools are willing to rock the government boat that supports them.) For families with the means—and those with few means but strong will—sending children to an environment where they will learn how to speak English rather than merely excel in English testing affects decisionmaking. As well, Korean students are attracted to the diverse education and social milieu a country like the United States has to offer, says Hwang.

As long as Koreans see domestic higher education as under par, they will continue to consider overseas options for their children. But if, in 10 to 20 years, Korean universities make it onto the world's list of top schools, as Min suggests could happen, decisions about study abroad might look very different. **IE**

KYNA RUBIN is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon. Her last article for *IE* was "Far From Home" about helping Chinese students integrate into U.S. campus culture in the May/June 2013 issue.

(ENDNOTES)

1 Choi, Wonsik, et al, *Beyond Korean Style: Shaping a New Growth Formula*, McKinsey & Company, April 2013. Report available online at http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/asia-pacific/beyond_korean_style

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.