

Introduction to the special issue—Global Korea Scholarship: Empirical evaluation of a non-Western scholarship program from a public diplomacy perspective

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Abstract

Most governments offer scholarships for international students as part of their public diplomacy toolbox. However, empirical assessments of these programs are relatively rare. The limited number of existing works often concern Western countries, while international student mobility programs in non-Western countries remain insufficiently researched. This special issue addresses these two gaps in the literature. All the articles utilize a unique and rich dataset of the perspectives of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) recipients about South Korea. This dataset consists of four surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 of GKS students, alumni, and pre-arrival inbound students. There are over 200 variables, most of which are about GKS recipients' cognitive and affective evaluation of Korea, their Korea-related behaviors, their perceptions of how they are treated by Koreans, their satisfaction with studying in Korea, satisfaction with university and language school, and integration into Korean society. The articles look at various aspects of GKS as a public diplomacy tool, including the determinants of positive recommendations toward Korea as a study or tourism destination, the relationship between behavioral experience, symbolic environment and communication behaviors, determinants of students' intentions to stay in the host country, gendered dynamics of the scholarship, students' perspectives on justice based on their experiences in, and beliefs about, the host country, and the determinants of students' satisfaction with life in Korea.

KEYWORDS

Asia, exchanges, Global Korea Scholarship, international student mobility, *P&P* Special Issue, public diplomacy, South Korea

**Related Articles in this Special Issue**

Istad, Felicia, Eriks Varpahovskis, Ekra Miezan, and Kadir Jun Ayhan. 2021. "Global Korea Scholarship Students: Intention to Stay in the Host Country to Work or Study after Graduation." *Politics & Policy* 49(6): 1323–1342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12436>.

Jon, Jae-Eun, and Kadir Jun Ayhan. 2021. "Satisfied or Dissatisfied: The Determinants of Global Korea Scholarship Recipients' Satisfaction with Life in Korea." *Politics & Policy* 49(6): 1391–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12437>.

Tam, Lisa, and Kadir Jun Ayhan. 2021. "Evaluations of People, Affection, and Recommendation for a Host Country: A Study of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) Recipients." *Politics & Policy* 49(6): 1292–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12438>.

Empirical assessments of public diplomacy programs in general, and student mobility programs in particular, are rare. The limited number of existing empirical works often concern Western countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, while international student mobility programs in non-Western countries remain insufficiently researched. This special issue addresses these two gaps in the literature. All the articles in this special issue utilize a unique and rich dataset of the perspectives of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) recipients about South Korea (hereafter, Korea). The data were collected with two generous grants by the Korea Foundation (Ayhan et al., 2021b). This dataset consists of four surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 of GKS students, alumni, and pre-arrival inbound students. There are over 200 variables, most of which are about GKS recipients' cognitive and affective evaluation of Korea, their Korea-related behaviors, their perceptions of how they are treated by Koreans, their satisfaction with studying in Korea, satisfaction with university and language school, and integration into Korean society.

Public diplomacy, both as a policy tool and an analytical concept, has been evolving over the last six decades. The term public diplomacy describes the communication-based activities that international or transnational actors undertake in order to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics and facilitate relationship management between domestic and foreign publics to achieve foreign policy goals (Ayhan, 2019; Gregory, 2008; Leonard & Small, 2003; Sevin, 2017; Snow, 2009a). Student mobility programs are one of the foundational elements that countries employ as part of their public diplomacy portfolio, whose hoped-for outcomes include relationship building, enhancing a positive country image, and building mutual understanding. Through student mobility programs, first-hand and direct experiences in the host country and with its people can provide foreign students with more informed perceptions and a more complex and deeper understanding of the host country (Scott-Smith, 2008; Snow, 2009b). It is not realistic to expect that students would only develop positive attitudes toward the host country. Indeed, sometimes direct experiences in a foreign country may create more negative sentiments (Hong et al., 2020; Jon & Ayhan, 2021; Tam & Ayhan, 2021; Yun & Vibber, 2012).

While student mobility programs are seen as significant public diplomacy tools, assessment of these programs is less common, with more emphasis placed on the front-end recruitment of participants and less on the ongoing or post-sojourn dimensions. The long-term nature of these programs and difficulty in establishing causation between the participants' experiences and possible outcomes make evaluation exceedingly difficult. There are problems in evaluating the long-term effects of exchange programs because of: (a) strategic preferences and approaches caused by changes in governments; (b) lack of resources; (c) challenges in measuring intangible



outcomes such as changes in attitudes; (d) third-factor influences causing difficulties in attributing an outcome to a program; and (e) the lack of established models, terminology, and methods (Banks, 2020; Sommerfeldt & Buhmann, 2019). Instead, episodes of goodwill and memories related by the participants are regarded as the main qualitative data in the absence of more rigorous data. In order to better understand the outcomes of public diplomacy programs, there is an urgent need for rigorous evaluation of international student mobility programs.

South Korea has become a top 15 country in most global indices, including GDP, military, diplomatic networks, technological innovation, exports, and cultural product exports, among others. The country began its international scholarship programs in 1967 (see Table 1 for details). The South Korean government recently upgraded its international scholarship program, the GKS, and now regards it as an official public diplomacy tool (Ayhan et al., 2021a; Chŏngwadae, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012). Whether the GKS' public diplomacy-related assumptions hold, and what needs to be improved for these public diplomacy objectives to be realized, requires an in-depth evaluation of the GKS program.

The GKS program serves as a flagship public diplomacy educational exchange of the government of Korea. Like the Fulbright Program of the United States, GKS meets the criteria of a flagship because it involves multiple programs and actors that are operated by several organizations serving diverse populations, most from developing countries, with different needs in Korea and abroad (Zhu, 2021). It constitutes a substantial public good investment with predominantly graduate-level, fully funded scholarships on offer over several years. It is unique in that it is a non-Western East Asian model of the type of flagship exchange programs like the Fulbright. Yet the latter has received much greater attention in the public diplomacy and educational exchange literature (Bettie, 2020; Johnson, 2017). The National Institute for International Education Development (NIIED) administers the program in cooperation with applicant recruitment and outreach on two tracks: one educational at the university and one public policy at the embassy. In 2021, the Korean government aimed to invite 1278 international students from 154 regions who wished to pursue a graduate-level degree (master's or doctoral) or research in Korea, a substantive investment in the individual and the economic and social development of the country.

The purpose of the program is similar to the Fulbright program where the majority of the recipients are international, and the emphasis is on building binational and global mutual understanding. GKS is designed to provide international students with opportunities to study at higher educational institutions in Korea pursuing graduate-level degrees. The aim is to enhance international education exchange and deepen mutual friendship between Korea and participating countries. We believe that our data analysis in this special issue upholds the aspirational mission of this program statement. Our data survey show that 88% of the GKS alumni maintain ties with Korean friends, 78% with Korean acquaintances, and 72% with their professors. Earlier research by Snow (1992) determined that multicultural social networks, along with pre-academic orientation programs, were the best predictors of success for Fulbright international participants. Since over 60% of the GKS recipients surveyed had never experienced living abroad before coming to Korea, this underscores a need for more cultural and academic pre-orientation training to reinforce successful integration into the host culture and successful reentry into their home countries. The public policy potential at the level of ideas and innovation exchange is strong since the students coming from developing countries may not have the same exchange opportunities at home. A global pay-it-forward is enacted when these young scholars return home. The expectation is that they will contribute to the development of their own countries as a result of the Korean people's investment in their success.

Just as with the flagship government-sponsored educational exchange program of the United States, GKS is not strictly about deepening friendships or professional success over the long term. We recognize that not all individual experiences are the same or even positive. A more transparent, frank, and objective evaluation of this flagship student mobility program is needed if the overarching purpose is to shine light on the global credibility and "face" of

TABLE 1 Number of GKS students from 1967 to 2017

Year	'67~'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	Total
Number of students	1104	133	745	504	696	400	422	827	887	838	871	692	803	873	1320	11,115
Number of countries	79	54	87	97	105	96	95	137	131	131	143	135	139	138	134	156

Source: NIIED's response to authors' inquiry via Korean government's Open Info service on June 25, 2021.



Korea's international prestige at home and abroad. At a public policy level, success among individual participants spells the potential for longer term success within various layers of programmatic involvement—from the academic hosts, to the NIIED institutional coordinators, to the embassy-level specialists who identify ideal candidates. Even the citizens of Korea, as its main sponsors, should care about the success of the program. The participants in GKS are potential citizen ambassadors not only for the program, they are also cultural mediators between their host and home countries. As such, the results of these datasets constitute just the beginning of follow-on research and further evaluation of the state and nonstate actors—public and private, domestic and international institutions—involved in the success of this program that carries so much weight for strengthening foreign policy and nation branding image goals of the Korean government.

Research on evaluating and analyzing Korea's scholarship programs using a public diplomacy framework is very sparse and limited in scope. The public diplomacy implications of international student exchanges in Korea, in particular, have received little attention. Only a handful of studies examine international education in Korea through a public diplomacy framework (Hong et al., 2020; Lee, 2012, 2015; Yun, 2014, 2015; Yun & Vibber, 2012). However, since these studies focused mainly on self-funded students who are not selected by the Korean government as scholarship recipients, the public diplomacy outcomes remain unclear in these cases.

Although there have been several studies focusing on Korean government scholarship recipients, these studies primarily focus on the Korean language-learning and cultural adaptation process (Han et al., 2011; Kim, 2015). In addition, the bulk of the existing literature on Korean scholarship programs has been published solely in the Korean language and has not been widely available in international fora. There is therefore a clear need to systematically analyze Korean government scholarship programs as public diplomacy tools and enrich the discussion on student mobility programs as public diplomacy tools using the case of a non-Western country (cf. Gilboa, 2008).

Against this background, the contributors in this special issue aim to evaluate the GKS program using a public diplomacy framework. The GKS uses South Korean taxpayer's money to finance foreign student education in South Korea. As such, it requires careful evaluation to justify public spending and outcomes in line with public diplomacy objectives. We believe our dataset (Ayhan et al., 2021b) will contribute significantly to the evaluation of the GKS from a public diplomacy perspective. Yet, this special issue is only initiating early steps in this evaluation, along with a few other previously published papers using this dataset (Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Ayhan et al., 2021a; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020). We hope that this special issue will increase interest in further evaluations of the GKS and, farther afield, other government-sponsored international student mobility programs as well as underline their significance as policy and nation branding tools. Furthermore, the findings in the articles will contribute to our understanding of international student mobility programs in the non-West and, in general, from a public diplomacy perspective.

In this special issue of *Politics & Policy*, the authors, who come from diverse backgrounds both in terms of disciplines and nationality, all used our dataset (Ayhan et al., 2021b) to uncover insights from GKS at the intersection of public diplomacy and international student mobility programs, that will be both informative for Korean and other policy makers as well as contributing to the wider scholarship field.

In the first article, Tam and Ayhan (2021) explore the determinants of positive recommendations toward Korea as a study or tourism destination. In addition to looking at whether or not GKS recipient attitudes toward Korea affect recommendation behavior, the authors also assess if direct experiences in Korea influence attitudes toward the host country and recommendation behavior. Their analysis of student self-perceptions of how they are treated by local people as an antecedent to compare home and host country people is hypothesized to

act as an antecedent for general attitudes toward Korea. Findings reveal support for the oft-acknowledged, but empirically less researched, relationship that direct experiences in the host country have a positive relationship with the attitudes toward and behaviors related to the host country. This finding signals to policy makers that positive outcomes of international student mobility programs should not be taken for granted. Positive outcomes are dependent upon the positive experiences of international students and other sojourners. Here, policy makers can affect those experiences to some extent with policies that enable a more international student-friendly environment beginning with the academic settings where they spend most of their time while in the host country.

Perez and others (2021) identify GKS recipients not as a single monolithic group of educational exchange grantees but rather as members of four different publics—ambassadorial, advocational, accusational, and adversarial—thus building on Tam and Kim's (2019) taxonomy of foreign publics. The ambassadorial and advocational publics are more likely to engage in more positive megaphoning behavior about Korea and recommend Korea to others as a study or travel destination, while the latter two publics engage in more negative megaphoning behavior about Korea. Future research should be encouraged to identify other characteristics, including demographics, of these four segments to address the causes of becoming an accusational or adversarial public. This can inform policy makers to build tailored policies to minimize the segments of accusational or adversarial publics.

Istad and others (2021) examine the talent retention potential of the GKS program. On the one hand, these programs aim to nurture international opinion leaders or social agents who return to become influential in their home countries and bridge the host and home countries (Scott-Smith, 2008; Snow, 2020). On the other hand, retaining skilled talents has become a significant value added of these programs (Gopal, 2016). Istad and others analyze the motivating determinants of GKS students to stay in Korea after the end of their program. They find that the most important determinants of student intention to stay in the country to work or study after graduation are academic satisfaction, social adjustment into, and interactions with, the Korean society, and satisfaction with life in South Korea. Satisfaction with extracurricular activities and with financial support of the scholarship do not have a significant relationship. The findings show no significant intentional differences among various demographic groups to stay in the country. These findings point to the importance of academic institutions and interactions with the host society if one objective of the GKS, or other scholarship programs, is talent retention.

Lee and Snow (2021) build on Ayhan and others' (2021a) study which found significant differences between male and female GKS students in terms of their cognitive and affective evaluation of Korea. This exploratory study finds that female students perceive being more negatively treated by Korean people due to their gender/sex when compared to male students, which in turn is a significant determinant of student attitudes toward the country. Another finding here is a correlation between perceived negative treatment due to gender/sex and perceived negative treatment due to nationality. They also identify a correlation between discrimination perception and the ability to spend more time with those with whom they can speak Korean rather than their native language or English. These findings hint that gendered negative experiences are more significant for those students who probably do not speak English well and do not know people with whom they can socialize or speak their native language. Lee and Snow's study thus justifies the need to dig deeper into the gendered dynamics of international student mobility both in Korea and other study-abroad destinations.

Hong and others (2021) apply Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice—namely, redistribution (economic justice), recognition (cultural justice), and representation (political justice)—to GKS student experiences in and beliefs about Korea. Their mixed study finds quantitative differences between different demographic groups in terms of their beliefs about justice and diversity in Korea and exemplifies these differences with students' own words



related to these topics. In a similar vein to Lee and Snow (2021), they find that women students evaluate Korea significantly more negatively in these dimensions. In terms of ethnicity, they find Asian and Caucasian students to be more critical of Korea in terms of justice and diversity, while black students are more generous in their evaluations. Hong and others' article reminds us that international student mobility is not always a rosy experience, but can be multifaceted due to gendered, racial, and economic-related dynamics that affect everyday student experiences in the host country.

Last, but not least, Jon and Ayhan (2021) look at the determinants' of GKS recipients satisfaction with life in Korea, which Tam and Ayhan (2021) and Istad and others (2021) in this special issue suggested as important for students' host country-related behaviors. They find that GKS student beliefs about, and attitudes toward, the host country, frequency of social interactions in the local language, and perceived discrimination based on nationality or religion influence GKS recipient satisfaction with life in the host country. In line with Lee and Snow's (2021) article in this special issue, they find female students to be less satisfied than male students, while the same is true for students from developing countries compared to students from developed countries, as well as natural sciences or engineering students compared to arts, humanities, or social sciences students. Their study also uncovers the reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction among GKS students in their own words. They find interactions with local people and university experiences to be both a source of satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction depending on the sentiments associated with the experiences in question.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO POLICY AND THE SCHOLARSHIP

The articles in this special issue point to the diverse and segmented outcomes of the GKS program. In short, the experiences, attitudes, behavior, and evaluations of individual scholarship recipients are not universal (see also Mawer, 2017). Nevertheless, student social interactions at host universities, in particular, and within the Korean society, in general, play significant roles in their satisfaction with their experiences as well as their positive evaluation of and positive behaviors related to Korea. In turn, the articles in this special issue emphasize the importance of not taking positive outcomes of international student mobility for granted. In that light, the findings provide rich data that can inform GKS policy-making interventions in the program to improve the experiences of GKS students while they are in the country as well as after they return home. These studies collectively point to the need to maintain open lines of communication among all stakeholders involved in the successful maintenance of the GKS program, including the graduate alumni who serve as the lifelong face of the program. The research for this special issue reinforces the need to better understand the motivations and intentions of the recipients and what factors either threaten or lend support to various outcomes. Establishing more social interaction with host nationals suggests more successful mobility outcomes while negative outcomes (like perceived discrimination across gender/sex lines) need further investigation, particularly as student mobility programs become more feminized with growing female participation.

The GKS program is a legacy and flagship scholarship program of the government of Korea—the policy implications of which go well beyond the GKS program and extend into the politics and policy arenas of nation branding and global economic competitiveness. The students who participate in the program form “global publics” who have direct experiences in the Korean host country. The assessment of their experiences that are measured here serves to enhance or detract from the country profile of Korea in the global economy and in global civic society. Interactions with host nationals, other scholarship recipients, and native student populations make their overall evaluation of the host country more informative to those policy makers and program officials who are already committed to the overall success of the GKS.

Deeper analysis of the student evaluations of the host country through interviews and ongoing check-ins, as well as follow-up studies with alumni, can help policy makers identify any weaknesses that require redress, not only at a communication level (e.g., strategic or nation branding campaigns) but also at the policy advancement level (e.g., improving a foreign-friendly infrastructure for better direct experiences). While we recognize that most of these students and other foreigners' daily experiences are beyond the Korean government's control, weak points can be addressed by improving the student intercultural and international environment in various settings from the university to the language school, in their accommodations, or at the immigration office. All of these settings are touch points of human interaction that move the needle forward or backward in levels of satisfaction with the host country environment. This, too, requires further and deeper drill assessments of GKS student needs and the causes of their satisfactions and dissatisfactions. Valuing the individual contributions these scholarship recipients make to Korean society, as well as their honest assessments toward program improvement, offer longer term potential for the creation of a community of GKS program advocates and ambassadors who are more likely elevate the public diplomacy and foreign policy goals associated with this global education public good.

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