

Multicultural Education in Korean Higher Education: A Case Study for Advancing Global Citizenship in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

In 2023, South Korea launched the “300K Project,” an initiative aiming to attract 300,000 international students to Korean universities by 2027. While this project has boosted the number of students remarkably, the long-term impacts on students choosing to study in South Korea still remained. Without a strong emphasis on multicultural education, stakeholders risk undermining international students’ ability to effectively integrate, succeed academically, and develop essential competencies. This gap may not only hinder their educational experience but also impede their capacity to cultivate global citizenship skills and thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. By employing James A. Banks’ framework on multicultural education theory, this research aims to assess how knowledge about multicultural education has been integrated and disseminated in Korean higher institutions through the lenses of international students and explore how this can support them in Korean universities. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research incorporates surveys of 150 international students from different universities who have already had at least 6 months living and learning in South Korea. After that, the research employed in-depth interviews with a number of students to delve deeper into their lived experiences, noticing some challenges including language barriers, cultural adaptation struggles, and the inconsistent provision of multicultural support. This case study provides valuable insights for other developing nations, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, as they navigate similar efforts to balance expanding international enrollment with the cultivation of inclusive, globally connected academic environments for students from all over the world.

Keywords: multicultural education, global citizenship, higher education, Korean education policy, international students

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, South Korea has emerged as a leading destination for international students, especially from Asia, due to strategic government initiatives and a strong emphasis on higher education internationalization. The “Study Korea 300K” project epitomizes Korea’s ambition to host 300,000 international students by 2027. As of 2023, Korea has already attracted 181,842 students, representing 60.6% of its target, with 89.27% of them coming from Asian countries. Among these, students from Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and China make up a significant share (Kim, 2023). However, while access has expanded, concerns persist around the qualitative dimensions of this multicultural education. Language barriers, cultural adjustment, and unilateral policy approaches have led to dropout rates and feelings of isolation.

Figure 1: Number of International Students in South Korea by Year¹

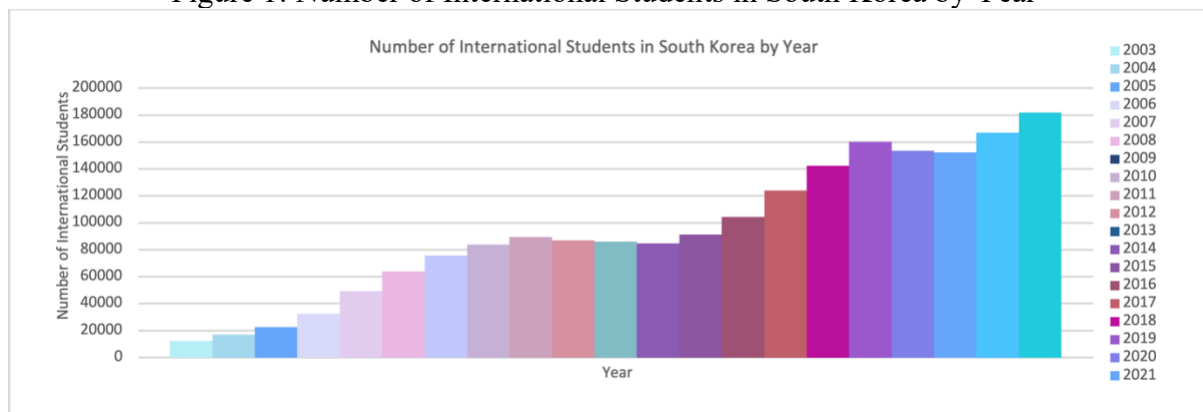
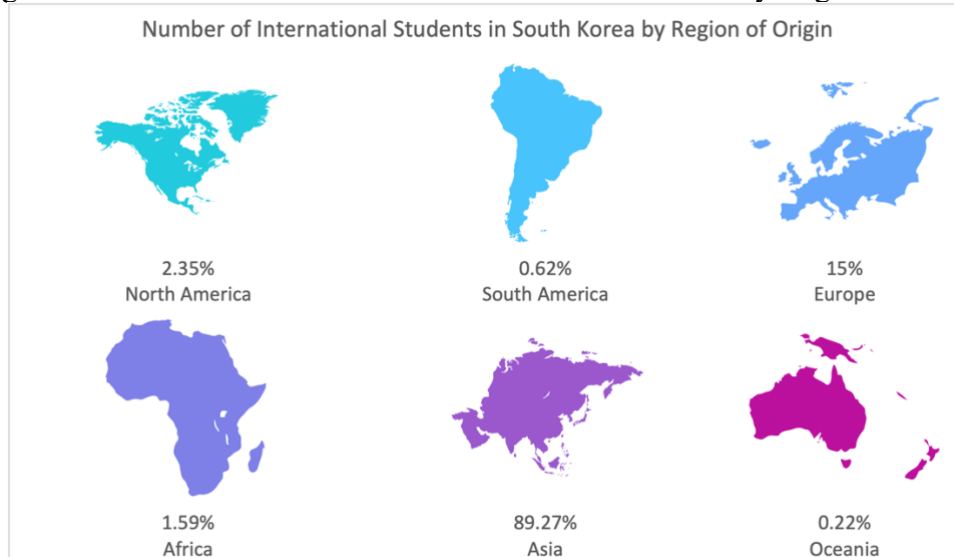
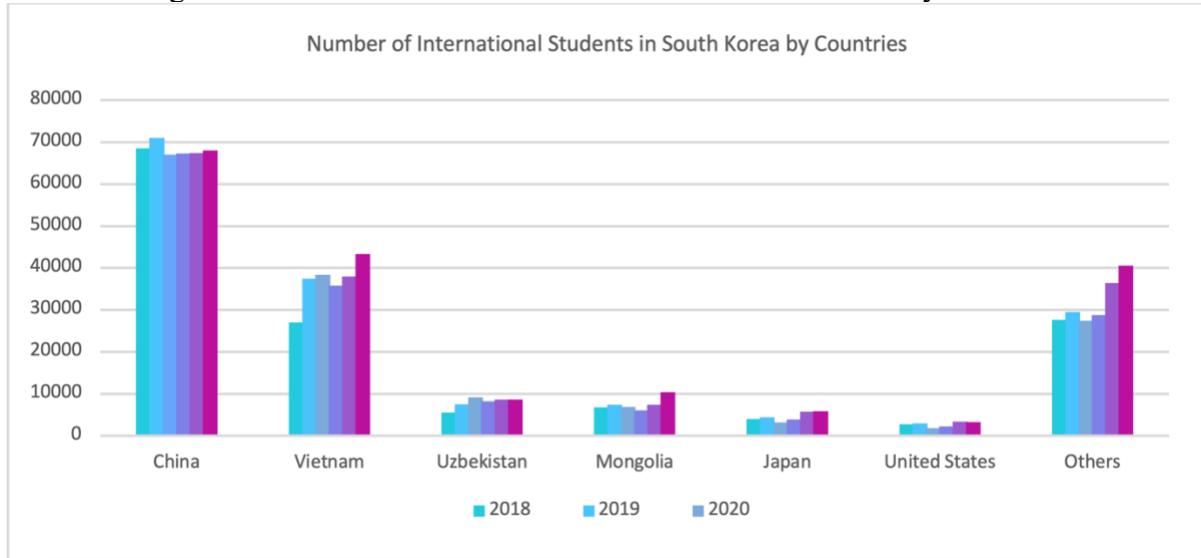


Figure 2: Number of International Students in South Korea by Region of Origin



¹ Up until 2003, the survey on foreign students only included those enrolled in junior colleges, four-year universities, and graduate schools. Starting from 2004, the scope was expanded to include all foreign students enrolled in junior colleges, four-year universities, graduate schools, online universities, and various schools.

Figure 3: Number of International Students in South Korea by Countries



The prevailing concept of multicultural education in Korea tends to focus on understanding other cultures (Chang, 2012). Also, multicultural education is basically targeted on a small group of minorities (Chang, 2012). Therefore, multicultural education targeted at the Korean public should be as equally important as the newly arrived migrants (Shen, 2019). The curriculum should address race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, and class.

Foundational works outline multicultural education not merely as an additive process of including diverse cultural elements, but as a transformative pedagogical framework that reorients curricula, teaching practices, and institutional policies to foster empathy, critical awareness, and social justice (Banks, 1993; Sleeter, 2014). Global citizenship education further extends this framework by emphasizing the development of engaged, critically informed citizens who understand the complex interdependencies among economic, social, environmental, and political systems (Cantón & Garcia, 2018; Goren & Yemini, 2017). These perspectives offer a rich theoretical base from which to consider the practices implemented in higher education systems, including those in Korea and throughout Southeast Asia.

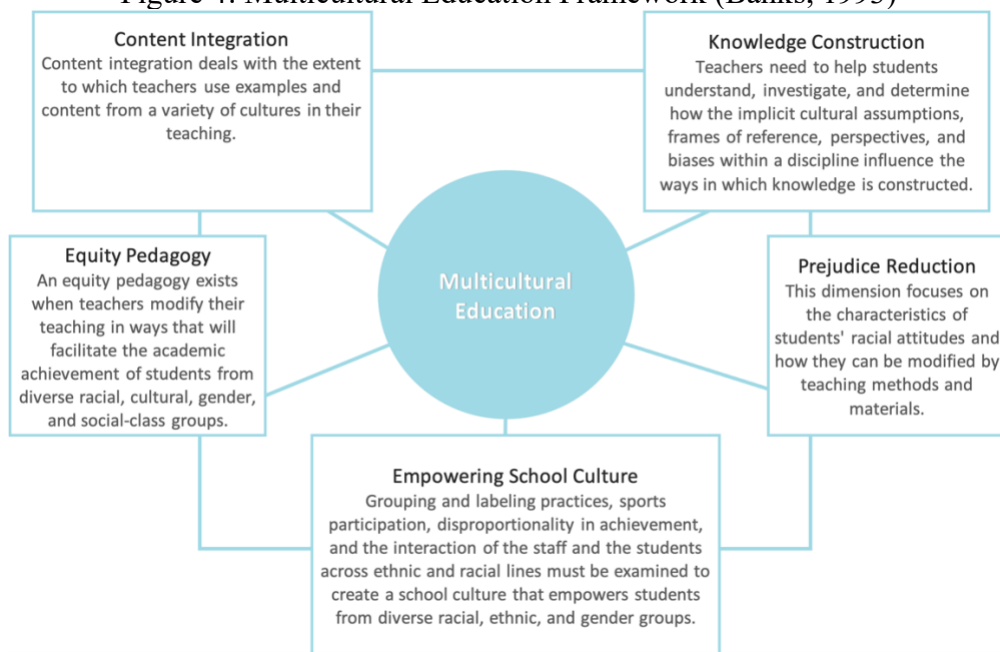
Multicultural education in South Korea has evolved to address the needs of marginalized students, including immigrants. Some approaches include instruction about different cultures, ethnic studies, intergroup relations, and culturally relevant teaching. Also, the existing multicultural education in Korea has been implemented with an assimilation approach, helping minorities adjust to the mainstream society, rather than aiming at integration where every member maintains their identity while respecting each other. The increase in international marriages and foreign workers has driven the need for inclusive education that reflects Korea's diversity. However, most participants had limited prior interactions with diverse racial and ethnic groups before the multicultural program, which underscores the importance of providing such experiences in teacher education (Kim & Choi, 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of specific multicultural content in Korean teacher education programs can lead to teachers feeling unprepared to implement multicultural education effectively in their classrooms (Kyun et al., 2015). Moral education and multicultural education are commonly concerned with cultural diversity. Multicultural education systematically aims to institutionalize cultural diversity in education settings (Chu, 2008).

Using Banks’ (2013) framework on multicultural education, this study seeks to understand how Korean universities are addressing the needs of their diverse student body and fostering an inclusive academic environment. Through surveys and in-depth interviews, the study would like to explore the challenges and opportunities encountered by international students, providing valuable insights for South Korea and other nations, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, as they strive to create globally connected academic environments. By doing this, the study aims to identify best practices and policy recommendations for promoting equity and inclusion in higher education.

Multicultural education in Korea has been shaped by institutional strategies including intensive Korean language programs, mentoring, and cultural exchange. Yet, questions remain about how effectively these initiatives promote an inclusive learning culture and foster global citizenship among students, particularly those from Southeast Asia. In response to these unresolved questions, this study takes a closer look at how multicultural education is experienced on the ground. Anchored in Banks’ (1993) five-dimensional framework—Content Integration, Knowledge Construction, Prejudice Reduction, Equity Pedagogy, and Empowering School Culture—this study investigates the experiences and perceptions of international students in Korean universities, and the extent to which multicultural education supports global citizenship development.

Figure 4: Multicultural Education Framework (Banks, 1993)



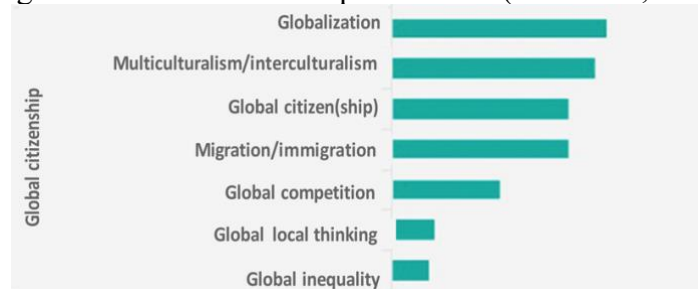
The concept of global citizenship serves as an essential complementary framework for understanding the broader aims of multicultural education in an interconnected world (UNESCO, 2015). According to Oxfam UK a global citizen is someone who is aware of the wider world and their role within it, respects diversity, understands how the world works economically, socially, politically, culturally, technologically and environmentally, and takes action to make the world more equitable and sustainable. However, as UNESCO's 2015 Global Education Monitoring Report highlights, global citizenship education (GCED) remains underdeveloped in many national education systems (UNESCO, 2015). Only 10% of textbooks explicitly address topics such as peace and conflict resolution, and a mere 7% of countries offer standalone GCED courses. While 91% of nations report initiatives toward

curriculum reform, just 66% actually emphasize global citizenship in practice (UNESCO, 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how multicultural education in Korean higher education institutions may address this global deficit, particularly for international students from Southeast Asia. The research investigates whether Korea's educational approaches facilitate not only academic adaptation but also the development of empowered, globally engaged citizens who can navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world (Guo & Jamal, 2007).

The findings from this research offer valuable insights for educational policymakers, university administrators, and faculty members involved in international education initiatives across Asia. Furthermore, by identifying both successful practices and areas for improvement in Korea's approach to multicultural education, this study contributes to the broader discourse on creating inclusive, globally oriented higher education environments that prepare students for meaningful participation in an interconnected world.

Figure 5: Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2015)



Methodology

This research employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate multicultural education in Korean higher education institutions and its impact on international students' global citizenship development. The study was conducted in two distinct phases to address three primary research questions:

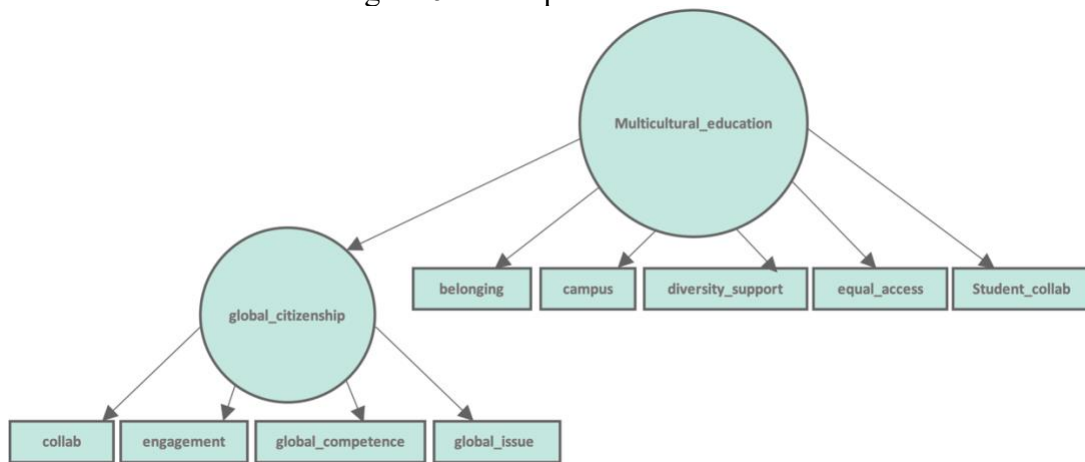
1. How do international students perceive multicultural education in Korea?
2. Does multicultural education foster global citizenship?
3. How is an empowering and inclusive learning culture experienced by international students?

The first phase employed a survey to collect quantitative data on students' experiences with multicultural education and global citizenship development. The survey instrument was developed based on (Banks, 1993) multicultural education framework and included nine construct categories measuring both multicultural education dimensions (campus environment, sense of belonging, student collaboration, diversity support, equal access) and global citizenship dimensions (global issue awareness, cultural collaboration, global competence, cultural engagement).

A purposive sampling approach targeted international students at Korean universities. Survey participation required at least six months of residence in Korea to ensure sufficient exposure to the educational environment. The questionnaire was distributed to 150 international

students at 17 Korean universities between September and November 2023, with 137 valid responses collected (91.3% response rate).

Figure 6: Conceptual Framework



Data Analysis & Findings

The sample included students from 12 countries, with Vietnamese students comprising the largest group (45.2%), followed by French (10.4%), Chinese (8.1%), and Myanmar (8.1%) students. Participants were enrolled across diverse academic disciplines: engineering (n = 26), business and economics (n = 24), social sciences (n = 23), and humanities (n = 18). The gender distribution was 54.6% female, 44.1% male, and 1.3% non-binary.

Figure 7: Universities

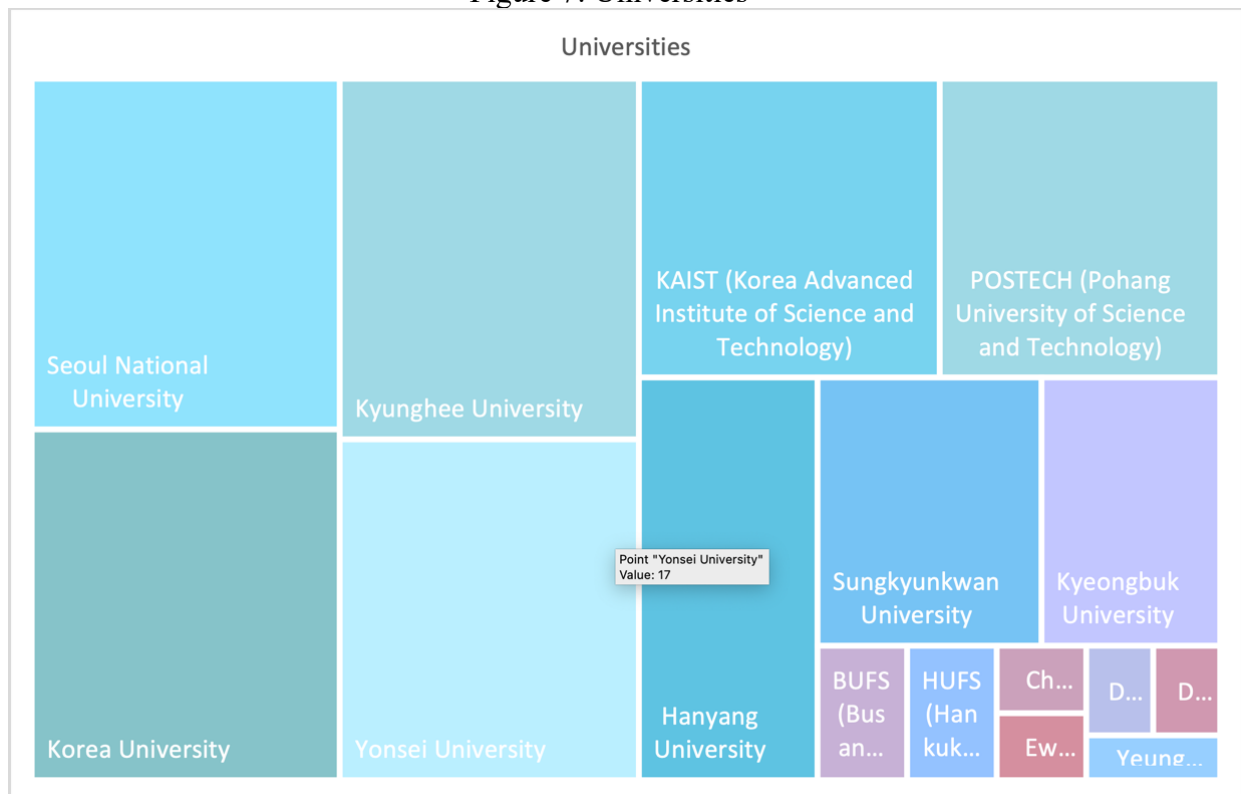
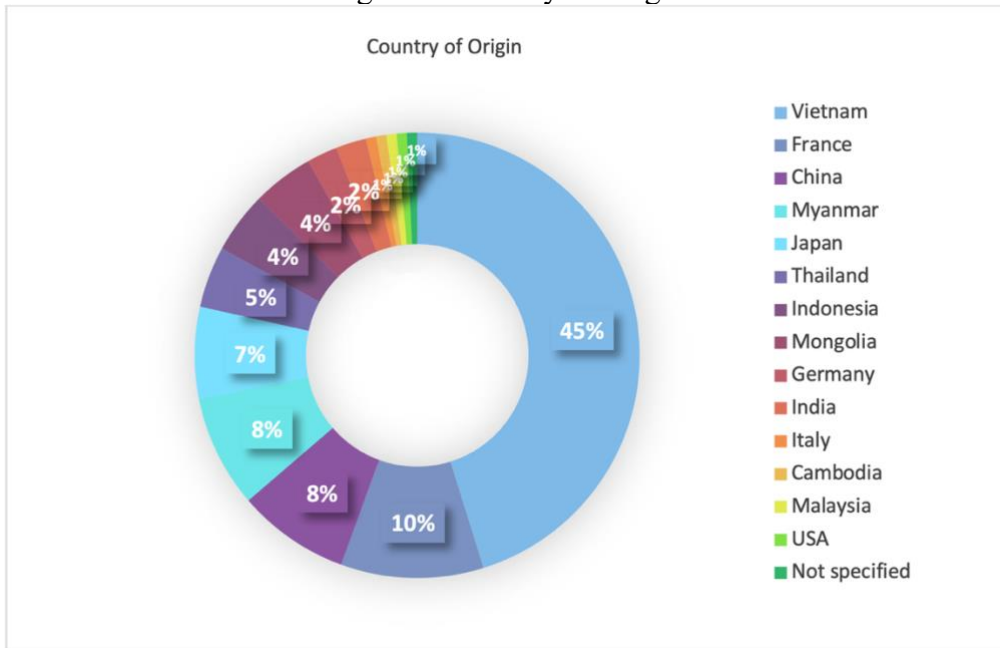
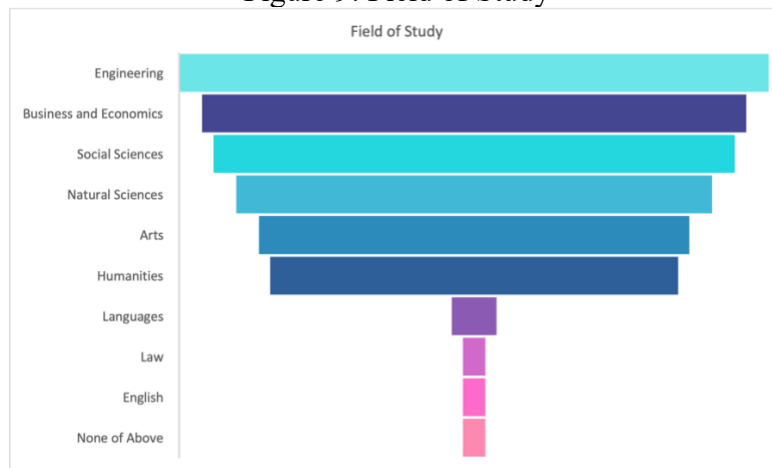


Figure 8: Country of Origin



Academic representation was balanced, spanning engineering (26 students), business and economics (24), social sciences (23), and humanities (18), among others. This range enhanced the study's capacity to explore disciplinary variations in students' experiences with multicultural education. Notably, 54.6% of respondents identified as female, suggesting gender-based perceptions may also play a role in shaping how multicultural experiences are internalized.

Figure 9: Field of Study



In this study, the constructs were operationalized as follows. For multicultural education, five key indicators were used: campus environment, sense of belonging, student collaboration, diversity support, and equal access. For global citizenship, four core dimensions were identified: awareness of global issues, cultural collaboration, global competence, and cultural engagement. These variables served as the basis for both the Likert-scale survey design and the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis conducted in the later stages of the study.

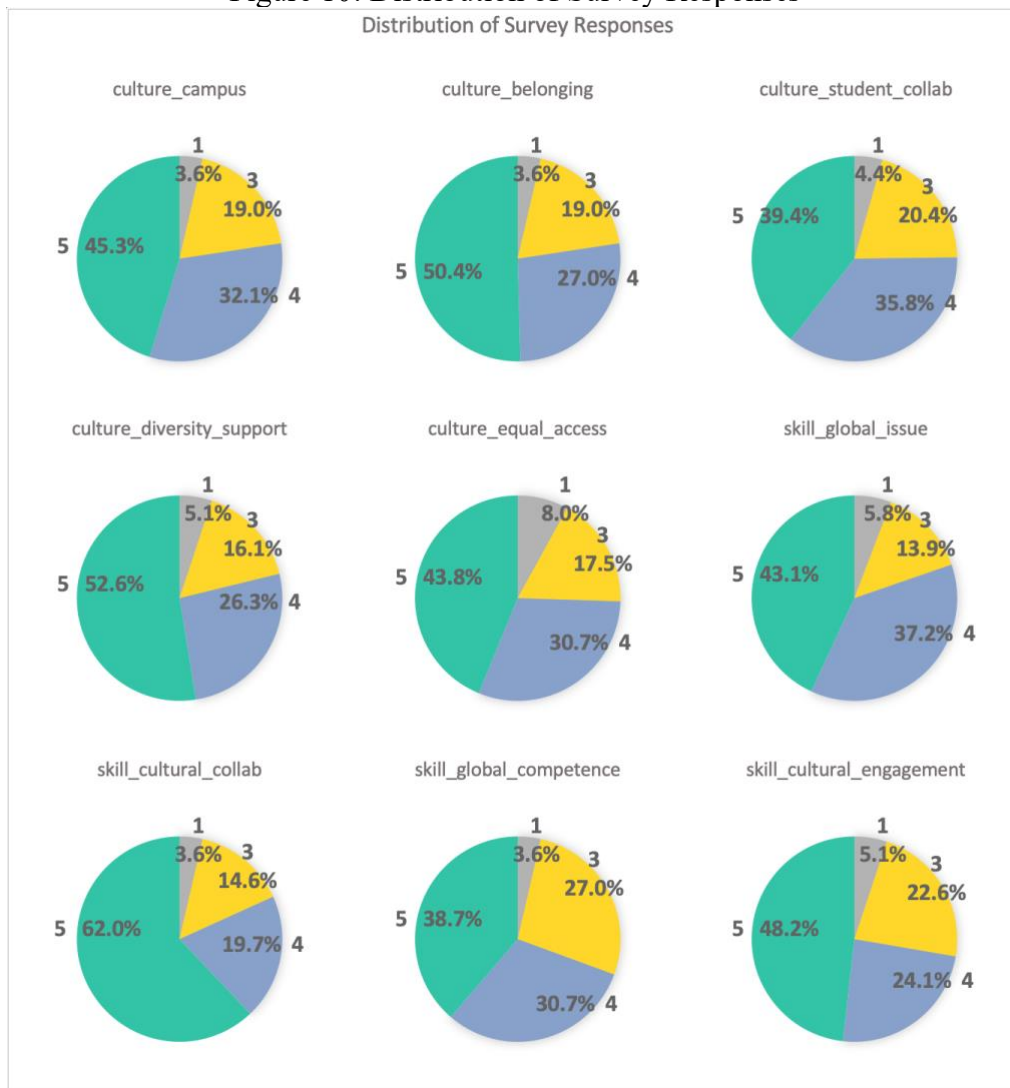
The data revealed a generally positive perception of multicultural education's role in promoting global citizenship. Notably, 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that

their universities fostered an inclusive campus culture supporting diversity. Similarly, 61.2% reported a strong sense of belonging due to the multicultural environment, while 56.3% noted structured opportunities for collaboration with local students.

A detailed analysis of the Likert-scale responses across nine key constructs revealed meaningful trends in how international students perceive multicultural education and its impact on their learning experience and global citizenship development. Each construct was evaluated on a five-point scale, ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The results indicated overall positive perceptions, with certain domains showing higher consensus among students.

In the institutional and cultural dimensions, culture_diversity_support recorded the highest rate of strong agreement (52.6%), followed by culture_belonging (50.4%) and culture_campus (45.3%). These results suggest that students generally feel that their universities promote diversity and foster a sense of inclusion. However, culture_equal_access showed a relatively higher level of disagreement (8.0%) compared to other categories, pointing to potential inequities in access to campus resources or opportunities.

Figure 10: Distribution of Survey Responses

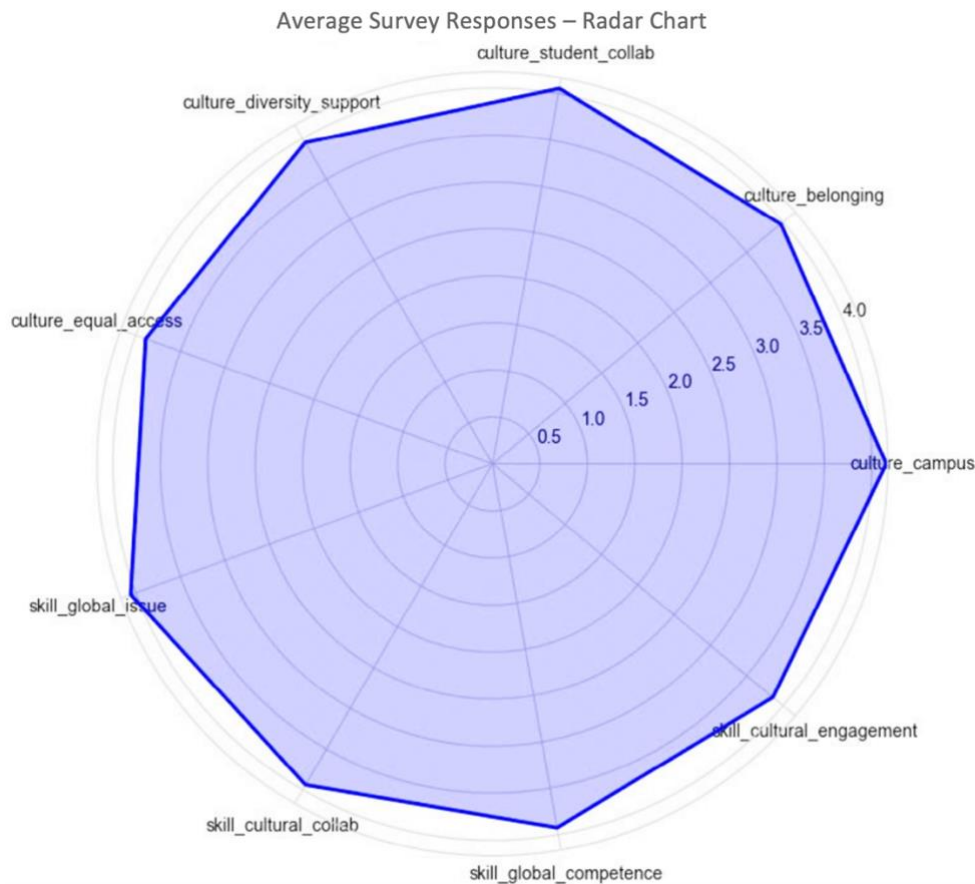


In terms of collaborative and structural engagement, *culture_student_collab* showed a strong combined agreement (39.4% strongly agree and 35.8% agree), indicating that many students experienced structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. However, a notable 20.4% remained neutral, and 4.4% disagreed, suggesting that these opportunities may not be uniformly implemented across institutions.

The skills-related dimensions also yielded encouraging outcomes. *skill_cultural_collab* was particularly high, with 62.0% strongly agreeing that their experiences enhanced their ability to collaborate across cultures—the highest agreement score across all constructs. *skill_global_issue* and *skill_cultural_engagement* followed with strong agreement rates of 43.1% and 48.2% respectively. Meanwhile, *skill_global_competence* showed a slightly lower rate of strong agreement (38.7%) but had the highest rate of neutral responses (27.0%), suggesting students may feel less confident or uncertain about their readiness to act as global citizens despite institutional efforts.

These findings highlight that while the multicultural learning environment in Korean universities is generally perceived positively, variability remains in how students experience inclusiveness, access, and skill development. Notably, dimensions related to cultural collaboration and diversity support scored consistently higher than those tied to systemic equality and personal global competence, reflecting both the strengths and gaps in current multicultural education practices.

Figure 11: Average Survey Responses – Radar Chart



The radar chart in Figure 12 displays average survey responses across nine key constructs measuring multicultural education and global citizenship skills. The chart utilizes a blue polygon that extends outward from the center along multiple axes, with each axis representing a different survey construct. Values range from 0 at the center to approximately 4.0 at the outer edge of the grid.

All constructs show relatively high average scores, with most reaching beyond the 3.5 mark on the scale. The data reveals a fairly balanced distribution across all dimensions, creating a somewhat symmetrical polygon shape. Culture_diversity_support and skill_cultural_collab appear to have the highest average scores, extending furthest from the center. Culture_equal_access shows a slightly lower average compared to other constructs, though still remains well above the midpoint of the scale. The strong overall scores across all dimensions indicate generally positive perceptions of multicultural education and its impact on global citizenship development among international students in Korean higher education institutions. The consistent pattern across both institutional factors (culture variables) and individual competencies (skill variables) suggests a coherent relationship between multicultural education provisions and students' perceived global citizenship outcomes. The findings also highlight the importance of integrating multicultural education with practical global engagement activities.

Multicultural education serves as a foundational element in preparing students to effectively navigate an increasingly interconnected global landscape by cultivating nuanced cultural understanding, promoting empathetic tolerance, and enhancing cross-cultural communication proficiencies.

Figure 12: Structural Model

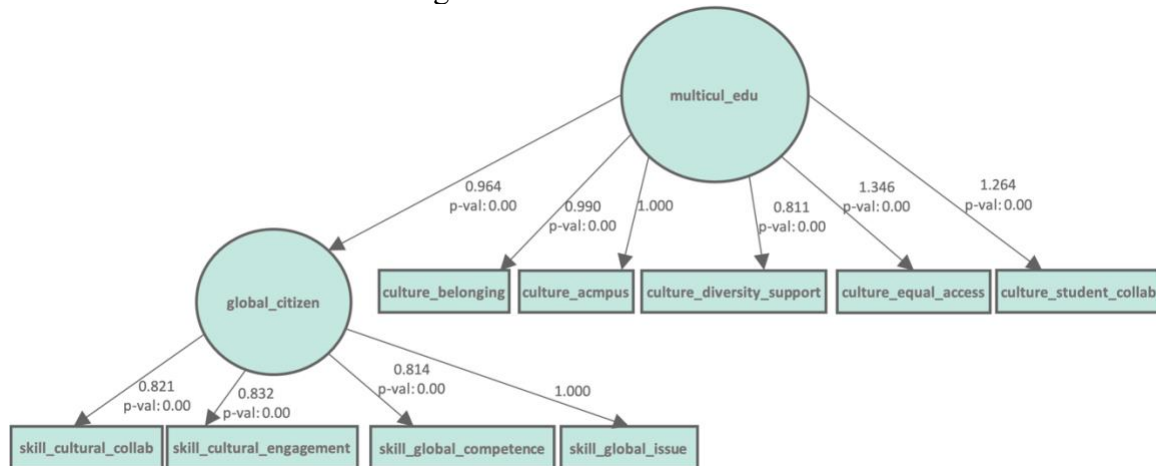


Figure 12 shows the structural equation model that explores the relationships between multicultural education and global citizenship, along with the specific factors measured for each. The model presents the strength of the connections, as indicated by the path coefficients and statistical significance levels.

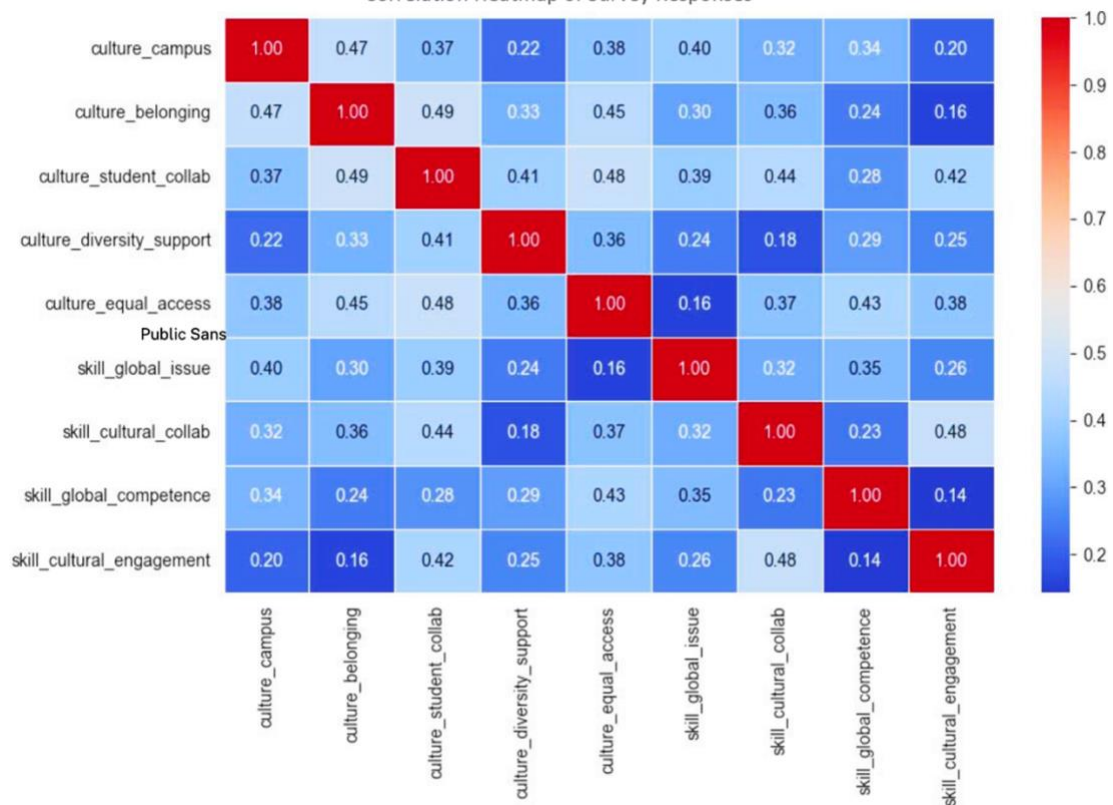
Multicultural education demonstrates a strong positive effect on global citizenship ($\beta = 0.964$, $p < 0.001$), showing the core hypothesis that multicultural educational environments in Korean universities significantly contribute to global citizenship development among international students. As can be seen from the pathways between multicultural education and its five indicators, there is a particularly strong effects on culture_student_collab ($\beta = 1.264$,

$p < 0.001$) and `culture_equal_access` ($\beta = 1.346$, $p < 0.001$), means that structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and equitable access to institutional resources are critical components of effective multicultural education.

The global citizenship construct displays robust connections with its four indicators. Moreover, the relationship with `skill_global_issue` shows a perfect standardized coefficient ($\beta = 1.000$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting this pathway may represent a theoretical saturation point. The relationship with `skill_cultural_collab` is also strong ($\beta = 0.821$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the critical role of intercultural collaboration skills in global citizenship formation. The weaker loading for `skill_cultural_engagement` ($\beta = 0.614$, $p < 0.001$), while still significant, indicates that cultural engagement activities may be necessary but not sufficient components of comprehensive global citizenship development within Korean higher education institutions.

The strongest latent variables were student collaboration (standardized loading: 0.724) and equal access to resources (0.703). These factors were crucial in shaping students' personal experiences of inclusive education. Interestingly, while cultural engagement was important, it alone was not enough to truly foster a strong sense of belonging and community among the students. Instead, it necessitated the backing of robust institutional support and collaborative structures to make a meaningful difference. By developing and implementing policies that thoughtfully address underlying issues like race and class, multicultural education can tackle hidden problems and effectively promote equality for all (Lee et al., 2019). The statistical analysis reveals that multicultural education has a significant impact on global citizenship, with specific factors like encouraging student collaboration, providing equal access, and promoting cultural engagement playing key roles (Khaedir & Wahab, 2020; Watson et al., 2011).

Figure 13: Correlation Heatmap of Survey Responses
Correlation Heatmap of Survey Responses



The correlation heatmap in Figure 13 reveals the complex human experiences behind numbers, showing how different aspects of multicultural education connect with global citizenship development. When students find meaningful opportunities to collaborate across cultures (culture_student_collab), they're much more likely to feel they truly belong (culture_belonging), with one of the strongest correlations ($r = 0.49$) in the study. Similarly, students who actively engage with different cultures (skill_cultural_engagement) develop stronger abilities to work collaboratively across cultural boundaries (skill_cultural_collab, $r = 0.48$).

The moderate correlations between campus environment and belonging ($r = 0.47$) reflect how the overall atmosphere affects students' sense of inclusion. However, the data tells a more nuanced story when we examine weaker correlations. The minimal relationship between diversity support programs and actual global competence ($r = 0.29$) suggests that simply promoting diversity without meaningful integration doesn't necessarily translate to real-world skills. Even more telling is the weak link between cultural engagement activities and feeling like one belongs ($r = 0.16$).

Perhaps most revealing is how little connection exists between students' awareness of global issues and their perception of equal access to resources ($r = 0.16$). This can be referred that international students in Korean universities are not just passive recipients of multicultural education—they actively engage in and therefore benefit from cross-cultural learning opportunities. The numbers show that genuine human connections and meaningful structural support matter far more than symbolic gestures of inclusion.

$$R_{adj}^2 = 1 - \left(\frac{(1-R^2)(n-1)}{n-k-1} \right) \quad (1)$$

where:

- $R^2 = 0.156$,
- $n = 137$,
- $k = 1$ (only multicult_educ as a predictor),

$$R_{adj}^2 = 1 - \left(\frac{(1 - 0.156)(137 - 1)}{137 - 1 - 1} \right)$$

$$R_{adj}^2 = 1 - \left(\frac{(0.844)(136)}{135} \right)$$

$$R_{adj}^2 = 1 - 0.851 = 0.149$$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.149$ (very close to R^2).

The final adjusted R^2 value of 0.149 tells a humbling story about the complexity of human development. Despite rigorous statistical modeling, multicultural education explains only about 15% of what shapes global citizenship in these students. This modest figure reminds us that becoming a global citizen isn't simply the result of institutional policies or classroom experiences.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of literature evaluating the implementation of multicultural education policies within non-Western higher education systems. The Korean case offers compelling lessons for neighboring Southeast Asian countries seeking to internationalize their higher education landscapes. The story behind Korea's multicultural education efforts is one of grassroots and a commitment to social justice for marginalized communities. Educators and advocates worked hard to create policies and programs that would support these underserved students. Korea's remarkable success in dramatically increasing its international student population, nearly 15-fold over two decades, demonstrates the power of a centralized, data-driven policy initiative. The "Study Korea 300K" project illustrates how national strategies, when aligned with institutional efforts, can attract large numbers of foreign students. For countries like Vietnam or Thailand, adopting similarly ambitious yet localized frameworks could support their own demographic and educational development goals, tailored to their unique contexts.

Korea's experience also highlights the critical importance of addressing not just access, but also inclusion. While Korea has made strides in creating institutional structures to support international students, the findings of this study suggest that a purely quantitative expansion of multicultural education is insufficient. Qualitative aspects such as students' sense of belonging, peer relationships, and cultural adaptation must be brought to the forefront. These human elements are essential in transforming universities from multicultural environments into truly intercultural learning communities where all students feel valued and empowered. As seen in the structural equation model, institutional factors like equal access and student collaboration are stronger predictors of global citizenship than symbolic diversity programs alone, highlighting the importance of centering the human experiences of students. Also, the research implied for educators around the world are recognizing the potential of multicultural education to address the needs of their own marginalized student populations. By aligning more closely with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Pact for the Future, which emphasize the need for mutual understanding and seeing one's own culture as part of a bigger global picture, as well as UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education agenda, Korea can solidify its role as an educational leader in Asia. This approach is what makes the Korean experience so valuable for others to learn from.

Lastly, this study recommends that future research explore longitudinal outcomes of multicultural education on international students' career trajectories, identity formation, and transnational engagement. Phase two of this research will adopt a qualitative lens to deepen understanding of students' lived experiences, especially regarding the role of diversity support in cultivating global leadership.

This study provides empirical evidence that multicultural education in Korean higher education has a significant and positive effect on fostering global citizenship among Southeast Asian students. Through quantitative modeling, it reveals that empowering learning cultures are built not merely through exposure to diversity, but through structured collaboration, equitable access, and meaningful institutional support. On the second phase of the research, we might dig deeply into the qualitative approach, to explore further about this phenomenon, also students perspectives. Also, in order to truly understand the full impact of multicultural education, future research might explore the experiences of underrepresented student groups. It is crucial that we explore how these policies influence their career development, identity formation, and transnational engagement over the long term.

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