



Why South Korean Universities Have Low International Rankings - Part II: The Student Side of the Equation

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In the [first part of this essay](#), the reasons 'Why South Korean Universities Have Low International Rankings' (Paul Z. Jambor in *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*, 2009: Volume 7; first issue) are clearly laid out from numerous points of views pertaining to two prominent international rankings; the Times and the Shanghai rankings (QS, World & Shanghai, 2008).

Herein, different aspects involving the complex relationships between students and professors as well as between students, administrators and the institutions are shown to account for the relative low rankings of South Korean universities on an international scale. That is to say, South Korean universities may very well fall low on international rankings due to the comparatively large flexibility students are afforded during the course of their university studies.

The reason I decided to write this paper is mostly because a number of my colleagues have gone to lengths in convincing me to write about the student side of the overall picture in addition to the reasons laid out in the first part of this essay. Therefore, I am taking this opportunity to outline for you a comprehensive body of reasoning and evidence in an attempt to show that the hassle-free atmosphere Korean university students find themselves in may well be a significant determiner for the below average standards at South Korean universities. In effect, this is shown by the low international rankings of Korean universities in both the Times and the Shanghai rankings (QS, World & Shanghai, 2008).

As clearly demonstrated in the first part of this essay, South Korean high school students perform well above average academically in the areas of mathematics, reading and science. In comparison, South Korean university students find themselves lagging behind on the international front due to the lower standards of post secondary education in Korea, as is exemplified by the rankings of South Korean universities. All in all, while Korean high school students are under great deals of pressure in meeting the educational requirements set out for them by the Korean Ministry of Education, university students nonetheless find themselves excessively involved in student/sports festivals and extracurricular activities that keep their minds off their educational pursuits. Moreover, the institutionally accepted reasons for students to miss classes are simply unheard of in most 'higher ranked' academic institutions.

On the whole, Korean university students have it comparatively easy and few of them seem to take at least their freshmen and senior years of university education as seriously as they should, with many claiming that they in fact do little studying in their freshman year. On the whole, they may only be immersed in serious education in their sophomore and junior years. That is to say aside from the relaxed freshman environment, many students in their senior year are easily let out of having to attend classes if they had already found employment before the conclusion of their studies, perhaps as a result of a misguided attempt by their administrations to improve the student employability figures of their institutions.

With all these factors combined, since at least fifty percent of the Times ranking system is opinion based with forty percent based on a system of peer review and ten percent based on a system of employer review (QS World; Methodology, 2008), it is only logical to conclude that any ineffectiveness in the Korean post secondary system of education would not go unnoticed by the 'peers' and the 'employers' who are being surveyed. Consequently, this would invariably lead to lower rankings on a global scale.

The Post High School Break

For the most part the South Korean secondary system of education puts students under a great deal of pressure in preparation for the SAT (Standard Achievement Test) to get into the universities of their choice. What is more, in addition to the time students spend in high school, they spend long evenings in supplementary private educational institutions, studying 15 hour days (Dillon, 2008), to prepare for the SAT. Not surprisingly, South Korean 15 year olds do well in mathematics and reading according to the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2006 (PISA, 2006). Assumingly, Korean university administrators are well aware of this and are thus likely to allow students to have a relatively stress free academic year as freshmen in order to make up for the previous year of hardship caused by being overworked.

Student Surveys

My student surveys reflect this very same point. That is, a significant number of students often point out that the workload in my Academic English course is excessive; however, I would respectfully disagree. To be exact, they only have to hand in 3 written assignments, at less than one page each. Furthermore, there are only four evaluations, two of which are written, one of which is a presentation and the last one being a group discussion test. All things considered, that hardly accounts for an excessive workload.

When I ask my students when they study and how much of it they do, often times they claim that they never study. Even though this is nonfactual evidence and it may not hold true in all cases, it is yet another indication that student course loads are rather light in relation to their high school years. By and large, students do admit that they did more studying in high school than in their freshman year of university, and this does speak volumes for why South Korean universities are ranked comparatively low internationally.

One would think that it is just as valuable to have higher ranked universities, thus better university students, as it is to have high performing 15 year olds; however, there should be no excuse for South Korean universities to hold their students to lower standards than the high schools that precede them. After all, to have universities with higher standards of education than those found in high schools would only be the sensible thing to do since it is best to raise and not drop the standard of education at each new stage of a young adult's educational development.

The Annual Student and Sports Festivals

Speaking sensibly, it is safe to assume that there is a clear advantage for students to feel comfortable at their institutions, yet still argumentatively it may be overreaching

acceptable boundaries when many South Korean post secondary institutions make it standard for their students to take the majority of a week off each for a student and sports festival in the spring and fall semesters. It is the same as giving students the large part of two weeks off from an entire year of their studies in order to participate in activities that are nonessential and more importantly non-academic.

Even if students are required to come to class at least a few times during the week of the student festival, they are nonetheless insufficiently functional as a result of the binge drinking that goes on during the course of the week. Even professors are encouraged by their departments to drink with their students at the beer tents. This is for the most part done as a trade off for the classes that are persuaded to be cancelled by the respective departments. All in all, it may not come directly to mind for those in charge that drinking on weeknights has devastating consequences on the coherence levels of not only the students but also the professors/instructors in the mornings to follow. Therefore, regardless of the number of actual cancellations, even the classes which are promptly held yield low academic results.

What is more, especially freshmen students, highly instrumental in setting up and running of the student beer tents where students gather by departments to drink together, are often excused from class legitimately so they can set up their drink tents during the course of the student festival. Customarily, the students selected for set-up duty are often excused from attending regular classes.

Relatively Insufficient Excuses for Absences

Aside from the institutionally accepted absences during the week of the student and sports festivals, leave taking for graduation photo-shoots are for the most part considered as legitimate absences in the view of the post secondary system. More importantly, students are even excused from their regularly scheduled classes in order to appear for their yearly class and individual photo shoots. What is more, a number of institutions allow female students to be excused for one day a month due to their premenstrual cycle cramps. Perhaps the argument could be made that this is rather unnecessary practice as it is not an adequate excuse in higher ranked institutions.

The South Korean Army Service for Young Men

As for my male freshman students, most of them miss a day of classes to go to their 'Army Test'. This is a standardised physical examination for young Korean males who are of arms bearing age starting at the age of nineteen. What is more tragic is that the Korean government often drafts a significant portion of male freshmen students during the middle of the semester instead of waiting till the end so they could at least have the chance to complete their semester of studies. These students often miss months of education. Taking this calamity into account, universities often get professors to base these students' grades on the work they had completed up to the point of their military draft. This is yet again missed time in class.

After having completed two years in the military, the returning students are allowed to start the semester as much as one month into the course. In effect, it is possible for students to miss nearly an entire semester, having completed just over a semester of studies, and still get credited for having concluded both semesters.

The Senior Year Employment Excuse

What I find the most disturbing is the tendency of Korean universities to let students out of attending a large portion of their senior year of studies, all in the hopes of improving the figures related to the employability of their students. On one particular occasion, I was even called by one of my former department heads encouraging me to excuse a senior student from an entire semester of studies as a result of him having found a job less than half way into his senior year.

What should be even more troubling is that senior students on occasion find work in fields unrelated to their majors, and still they are able to use this employment as an acceptable excuse to miss an entire semester of classes. While it is standard practice for professors and instructors to give some sort of out of class project to these students, the kind of work they are able to give them rarely makes up for the classroom experience and knowledge they could have gained by actually taking active roles in the classes.

The Inefficiency of the Heavy Course-load

It is true that South Korean students have a heavy class load in their freshmen year, taking part in as many as 20 hours worth of classes, nonetheless, it seems to be inefficient from the point of view that such a high percentage of them can still get away without actually doing any studying outside of the classroom, as they often claim to do. All in all, it may very well be more advantageous for Korean university students to take part in more efficient education with fewer classes that yield higher workloads.

The Differential Treatment of Foreign Instructors/Professors by Students

What is more, bad reviews by foreign professors and instructors often find their way into the open for all to see and thus further damaging the reputations of the respective institutions. To be precise, the differential treatment of foreign professors by Korean students may also go far in this respect.

It is true that "in the Chinese Confucian tradition, 'teacher' is the most respected profession" (Hofstede, 1986:304) and according to Cortazzi "Confucianism, with its emphasis on family values and respect for age and learning, has been particularly influential on the Korean way of life" (Cortazzi in Finch, 2000: Ch. 2.4.2). What is more, Underwood states that "Korea is a Confucian society. Everyone is Confucian, including the Christians". (1998:85) Nonetheless, the high levels of respect consistently expressed to Korean educators by Korean students is rarely conveyed toward the foreign professor/instructor as Confucianism has no established system of conduct toward foreigners.

Under the Confucian legacy, there is no provision for communicating with strangers who are by definition beyond the realm of prescription of the proper human relationship under Confucian ethics. Koreans are very polite and follow an elaborate etiquette but only toward insiders. They can be quite rude toward strangers. (Yum, 1987:84)

Perhaps almost automatically, this alone places the average foreign professor/instructor outside of the Confucian hierarchy, therefore being afforded a different standard of treatment and respect by not only the students but also the administration. Case and point, while Korean professors are often showered with gifts and praises on teacher's day, this does not seem to be the case for the average foreign professor/instructor. At least this does not appear to be the case based on personal experience and the experience of a significant number of my colleagues. But of course, my non-Korean students are for the most part much more keen on wishing me a happy teacher's day and are rarely hesitant to bow to all their professors, regardless of race and nationality. This in itself speaks volumes about the Korean post secondary students and their Confucian upbringing. After all, it is not uncommon for Korean students to bow to Korean professors in the hallways or at any other organized event. Students even stand up when a Korean professor walks into a room or any public gathering. Of course this is rarely the case with foreign professors. In fact, Korean students often treat foreign professors as if though they were merely their friends. At times they even call foreign professors by their first names, which of course is outright rude with respect to the standard treatment toward Korean professors. All in all, the standard behaviour toward foreign professors by Korean students is very careless, for the most part void of the deep respect Korean professors are shown. Perhaps this is also because Koreans have "no experience of diversity" and "no openness to difference" (Underwood, 1998:91).

Conceivably, due to the non-authoritarian teaching approach of the foreign professor/instructor, students may not see the need to show the same amount of respect toward the average foreigner as opposed to the average Korean. This difference in treatment between foreign and Korean professors/instructors; however, does not go unnoticed by the foreign professors. Often times this is hard for the 'foreigner' to swallow and it goes far in alienating the foreign professor in what should otherwise be a professional teaching environment where race and nationality should have little to do with the respect a person is afforded.

What is more, I have even been told by administrators at one of the post secondary institutions I work for that "the tennis courts are only for the Korean staff, therefore, you cannot use them." Later, this was changed to "the tennis courts are only for tenured staff", but of course, for the most part, only the Korean staff has the chance to be tenured. Afterwards the wording changed yet again and I was told that "even though the tennis courts are normally reserved for tenured staff, an exception can be made so you can use it. Just make sure you pay the registration fees. Also, do your best to get along with the Korean staff and try not to make them feel uncomfortable." Now what in the world could I possibly do to make them feel uncomfortable? Throw balls or rackets at them? Surely I am not going to do that.

Overall, this blunt tendency by the administrations tends to send the wrong message to students, and the resulting collective bias does tend to alienate foreign professors at the respective institutions. Surely, there is a real likelihood that this has an indirect but negative effect on the international rankings of Korean universities. That is to say, the word has the tendency to get out of Korea, and it is quite reasonable to assume that this kind of reputation goes far in persuading the 'peers' and 'employers', taking part in the surveys conducted by QS Times, to rank Korean universities relatively low internationally. Keeping in mind, that only Seoul National University made it into the top 200 universities according to the Shanghai rankings and only three Korean universities qualified for the top 200 group of post secondary institutions in the Times rankings (QS, World & Shanghai, 2008). This is perhaps the biggest irony, for it is likely that the differential treatment of the foreign staff may very well have the most far reaching consequences with regard to the low rankings awarded to Korean universities by the peers and employers being surveyed by QS Times. After all, their combined opinions accounting for 50% in weight when it comes to the determiners used to establish the overall rankings (QS Times; Methodology, 2008).

Figure 1: The Times Higher Education Methodology

Indicator	Explanation	Weighting
Academic Peer Review	Composite score drawn from peer review survey (which is divided into five subject areas). 6,354 responses in 2008.	40%
Employer Review	Score based on responses to employer survey. 2,339 responses in 2008.	10%
Faculty Student Ratio	Score based on student faculty ratio	20%
Citations per Faculty	Score based on research performance factored against the size of the research body	20%
International Faculty	Score based on proportion of international faculty	5%

(QS Times; Methodology, 2008)

With the peer review indicator accounting for 40% of the total weight used to calculate international rankings, would it not be a sensible thing to treat colleagues as equals. That is to say, the very same colleagues that are treated indifferently by Korean students and post secondary institutions, as well as their friends with whom they share personal experiences, could very likely make up a substantial percentage of the peers filling in the surveys. This would surely result in the prescription of lower ranks to South Korean universities and thus Korean parents would be more inclined to send their children to study at higher ranked universities in the United States. After all, "Going to U.S. universities has become like a huge fad in Korean society, and the [Ivy League](#) names — Harvard, Yale, Princeton — have really struck a nerve," (Harvard graduate; Victoria Kim in Dillon, 2008).

Someone please tell the people in charge of the Korean post secondary institutions for they can no longer afford to allow this increased tendency for students to study abroad as it leads to augmented financial strain on the pocketbooks of Korean parents. Overall, Koreans need to take education back into their own hands and become truly independent in terms of both secondary and post secondary education. They owe themselves at least this much.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Korean institutions and students as well as policy makers need to take the above mentioned factors into serious consideration as the transparency of the situation at the respective Korean postsecondary institutions is inevitable given the nature of today's global society being linked up by the World Wide Web. All in all, they must become more concerned with the likely determiners that may very well place them in lower ranks internationally.

South Korea is not in a bubble, and every effort must be made to ensure that Korean students are held to international standards, if the aim is to improve Korean post-secondary institutions on a global scale. Moreover, the standard for attendance on all fronts must be brought to international levels and the Korean government should take the necessary steps to make certain that male students are not pulled out of school half way into the semester. What is more, universities themselves would be better off in allowing students back into the student population only when the semester is beginning and not as far as a month into it. Also, institutions should ensure that senior students complete their final year of studies and not be allowed to finish early in a mere effort to improve employability statistics. Moreover, much care should be taken to ensure that student and sports festivals do not have such profound impact on student attendances. Perhaps, more importantly, foreign educators should be exposed to the same level of respect and the same kind of treatment as is the case with the Korean educators.

All in all, the world is getting smaller and smaller with each passing year, therefore, it is imprudent to assume that what goes on behind closed doors stays behind closed doors for the doors have long been opened and the walls have for a while been transparent. All in all, any ineffective, substandard and biased practices at the respective institutions should be rooted out at all costs so that Korean post secondary institutions can gain a better stance on today's global stage. Most importantly, the differential treatment of foreign professors at Korean universities must cease to exist as it may go far in ruining the reputation of Korean universities worldwide.

Ultimately, it should be stated that it is not my intention to criticise Korean post secondary institutions; however, I do deem it necessary to draw public and institutional attention to any factors that are likely to contribute to the relative low rankings of Korean universities. This is needed so policy makers and those groups of people in charge of the institutions can finally acknowledge that the problems are genuine and thus be given ample awareness and opportunities to effectively tackle the problematic issues. Overall, this would go far in improving the international rankings of Korean post secondary institutions and as a resulting consequence provide better opportunities for Korean students on a domestic level, thus becoming a win-win situation for all parties involved.

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