

From Mobility to Inclusive Internationalization: Policy–Practice Gaps in South Korean Higher Education

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines how the internationalization of higher education has developed in South Korea and how national and institutional ambitions are translated into academic practice. It draws on policy and scholarly documents and semi-structured interviews with four expert informants from public and private universities, including current and former deans of international affairs. The interview material was thematically analyzed across three domains: research, student learning and mobility, and faculty participation. The findings identify four interconnected tensions. First, financial incentives support publication, conference participation, and mobility, but access and continuity vary across institutions. Second, English-medium instruction is promoted more rapidly than faculty and students are prepared or supported to adopt it. Third, international research collaboration is valued but often lacks durable administrative and funding structures. Fourth, online and home-campus approaches remain underused despite their potential to broaden participation and reduce dependence on physical mobility. Across these themes, participants described a persistent misalignment between policy targets and academic needs. The study argues for a shift from activity- and mobility-based indicators toward inclusive, sustained, and context-sensitive internationalization. It recommends multi-year support for collaboration, stronger faculty development and language assistance, wider use of virtual exchange, and more flexible regulation of joint curricula, degrees, and credit recognition.

Keywords: Faculty internationalization; Higher education Policy; Internationalization at home; South Korea; Virtual exchange

1. Introduction

Internationalization has become a central strategy through which higher education institutions respond to globalization, develop intercultural learning, extend research networks, and prepare graduates for transnational labor markets (de Wit, 2023; Streitwieser, 2014). The concept now reaches beyond cross-border

mobility. Internationalization at Home (IaH), internationalized curricula, virtual exchange,

and collaborative online learning seek to make international and intercultural learning available to the non-mobile majority of students (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Boonen et al., 2021; Yuan, 2011). This broader understanding is especially important because mobility-centered

approaches may reproduce unequal access while carrying financial and environmental costs.

The purposes of internationalization are also contested. Governments and institutions frequently associate it with reputation, competitiveness, human-capital development, and research visibility (Marginson, 2011). Critical scholarship, however, cautions against reducing internationalization to markets, rankings, and recruitment. It calls for reciprocity, local agency, social responsibility, and more equitable knowledge relations (Bamberger & Morris, 2023; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Gao et al., 2024). Accordingly, the quality of internationalization depends not only on the volume of mobility or international publications, but also on who participates, what students learn, how partnerships are sustained, and whether policy instruments fit academic contexts.

South Korea provides a revealing case. Its higher education system has pursued international recruitment, research collaboration, English-medium instruction (EMI), global campuses, and joint educational programs while responding to demographic decline and intensifying international competition. Policy development has moved from controlled outbound mobility toward inbound recruitment and, more recently, toward wider social and sustainability rationales (Jon & Yoo, 2021; Kim et al., 2023). Yet previous research reports recurring tensions between ambitious national targets, regulatory requirements, institutional autonomy, academic preparedness, and the everyday needs of faculty and students (Cho & Palmer, 2013).

Existing studies offer valuable policy histories and institutional analyses, but fewer studies place system-level development in direct dialogue with the implementation perspectives of university internationalization leaders. This study therefore examines the development and enactment of higher education internationalization in South Korea, with particular attention to research, students, and

faculty. It asks: (1) How do expert informants understand national and institutional internationalization policies? (2) What policy–practice tensions emerge across research, student, and faculty internationalization? and (3) What changes could make internationalization more inclusive, sustainable, and effective?

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Multidimensional View of Internationalization'

Research internationalization is commonly expressed through international coauthorship, shared infrastructure, joint projects, and transnational knowledge networks. International collaboration can increase visibility, citation impact, and the diversity of expertise brought to complex problems (Adams & Gurney, 2018; Cardoso et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2015). However, collaboration does not become durable through individual contacts alone. Institutions must provide seed funding, administrative support, appropriate recognition, and continuity beyond one-off projects (Freeman et al., 2014).

Student internationalization includes outbound and inbound mobility, but also curriculum-based learning at the home institution. Study abroad can provide intensive intercultural experience, whereas IaH can reach students who are unable or unwilling to travel (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Boonen et al., 2021). Virtual exchange and internationally oriented courses can therefore complement rather than merely substitute for physical mobility. The relevant criterion is whether students develop international and intercultural learning outcomes, not simply whether they cross a national border.

Faculty is central to both dimensions. They design curricula, teach in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, build research partnerships, and support mobile and non-mobile students. Faculty participation is nevertheless shaped by time, language confidence, workload, incentives, and access to

professional development (Cantu, 2013; Gopal, 2011). An institution may adopt an international strategy, but implementation will remain fragile if promotion systems, teaching support, and administrative processes do not recognize the work that the strategy requires.

2.2 Policy Development in South Korea

South Korean internationalization policy has developed through overlapping phases. Earlier initiatives emphasized deregulation, international competitiveness, expanded scholarships, and opportunities for foreign providers. Later initiatives promoted South Korea as an educational hub, developed global campuses, recruited international students, and linked study with post-graduation employment (Green, 2015; Jon & Yoo, 2021; Kim et al.,

2023). These policies helped move internationalization from a peripheral activity to a visible component of university strategy.

Available indicators illustrate the scale and diversity of this agenda. In 2020, 27,281 South Korean research publications in the source data involved international collaboration, compared with 60,190 authored domestically. Student indicators reported 101,493 outbound and 98,867 inbound tertiary students, while 4,928 scholars from South Korea were recorded in the United States in 2020/21 (Institute of International Education, 2022; National Science Board, 2021; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Because these figures originate from different systems and denominators, they should be read as a descriptive profile rather than a single comparative index.

Table 1. Selected indicators of higher education internationalization in South Korea

Domain	Indicator	Reported value
Research	Publications involving international collaboration (2020)	27,281 (45.32% in source table)
Research	Publications with domestic author(s) only (2020)	60,190
Students	Outbound tertiary students (2020)	1,01,493
Students	Inbound tertiary students (2020)	98,867
Faculty	Scholars from South Korea in the United States (2020/21)	4,928 (5.8% of total)

Sources: Institute of International Education (2022), National Science Board (2021), and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022).

Expansion has also exposed implementation problems. Rapidly changing initiatives and detailed regulation may constrain institutional adaptation, while recruitment and performance targets can overshadow learning quality and academic support (Cho & Palmer, 2013; Kim et al., 2023). The central analytical issue is therefore how internationalization is enacted within universities and whether its instruments align with the capacities and motivations of faculty and students.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study used an exploratory qualitative design combining document analysis with semi-structured expert interviews. Document

analysis provided the policy and scholarly context, while interviews elicited experience-based interpretations of implementation. This combination is appropriate when formal policy texts cannot fully reveal how institutional actors understand incentives, regulations, support structures, and practical constraints (Bowen, 2009; Owen, 2014). The study does not seek statistical representation; it provides a context-rich account of policy enactment from strategically positioned informants.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling identified four expert informants with experience in higher education internationalization. The group included academics from public and private universities,

three of whom had served as current or former deans of international affairs. Their roles provided both scholarly and administrative

perspectives. To protect confidentiality, participants are identified only by number and broad institutional characteristics.

Table 2. Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	Position	Relevant experience	Institution
1	Male	Professor	Research in higher education	Public
2	Male	Professor	Dean of international affairs	Private
3	Male	Associate professor	Dean of international affairs	Public
4	Female	Professor	Former dean of international affairs	Private

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The interview guide addressed three levels and domains: national policy, institutional policy, and recommendations for research, student, and faculty internationalization. Follow-up prompts explored EMI, study abroad, IaH, international research, faculty support, joint programs, and online collaboration. The semi-structured format allowed common questions to be asked across participants while permitting clarification and elaboration.

Interview material was organized in NVivo and analyzed thematically. The analysis proceeded from initial coding of policy instruments, perceived benefits, implementation barriers, and proposed improvements to comparison across participants. Related codes were then grouped into cross-case themes. Documentary sources were used to contextualize, rather than override, participant accounts. The final themes were checked against the interview material, and quotations were retained to make the connection between interpretation and evidence visible (Woods et al., 2016).

4. Findings

4.1 Incentives are important but Uneven and Insufficiently Sustained

All four participants described funding and rewards as necessary conditions for international engagement. Participant 1 reported incentives for internationally indexed

publications and travel support for conference participation, while Participant 4 described larger institutional allocations for international travel and publication. Participants 2 and 3 similarly called for subsidies, multi-year research support, and incentives for collaboration. The shared view was not that incentives were absent, but that their scale,

accessibility, and continuity varied by institution and activity.

Participants also distinguished between rewarding completed outputs and enabling collaboration. Participant 1 noted that joint research with overseas professors was encouraged “but [received] no support.” Participant 2 argued that universities should reward faculty members who conduct joint research across countries, and Participant 3 favored project-based exchanges extending beyond a single year. These accounts indicate that output bonuses alone do not provide the relationship building, administrative assistance, and time needed for sustained partnerships.

4.2 EMI Expansion Exceeds Faculty and Student Preparedness

EMI emerged as both a recruitment strategy and a source of resistance. Participant 1 described extensive English-language course requirements but observed that some professors were not sufficiently comfortable teaching in English. Participant 2 reported

resistance because “their students and themselves are not well-equipped” and because faculty lacked incentives. The issue was therefore framed as a capacity and support problem rather than simply unwillingness.

Suggested responses differed. Participant 1 emphasized translation and interpretation systems, whereas Participant 2 recommended expanding EMI curricula to attract international students alongside intercultural training and language programs. Taken together, the accounts suggest that expansion should be differentiated: language services, course-design support, faculty development, and incentives need to accompany expectations for additional EMI provision.

4.3 International Research is valued but Weakly Structured

Participants consistently supported international coauthorship and joint projects, but identified fragmented mechanisms for finding partners and developing projects. Participant 1 proposed a national pool matching research topics with interested scholars. Participant 3 referred to support from the National Research Foundation of Korea and recommended less burdensome regulation and longer funding cycles. Participant 4 emphasized recognition of individual researchers’ international work and consultation with academically active staff.

These observations reveal a gap between endorsing collaboration and building an enabling infrastructure. Participants wanted brokerage, seed funding, administrative coordination, and recognition adapted to disciplinary differences. They also questioned initiatives designed without sustained dialogue with the academics expected to implement them.

4.4 Student Internationalization is Diversifying beyond Mobility

All participants supported exchange and study-abroad opportunities. Participant 2 additionally highlighted international internships and dual or joint degrees, while Participants 3 and 4

emphasized online curricula and lectures by overseas scholars. Participant 3 described project-based and online exchange as mechanisms for continuing collaboration, and Participant 4 saw online access to internationally recognized scholars as a scalable institutional resource.

The findings suggest that mobility retains symbolic and educational importance, but no longer provides a sufficient model for student internationalization. Online joint courses, home-campus intercultural activities, and curriculum collaboration can broaden access and add continuity before and after travel. These approaches were viewed as promising but not yet fully institutionalized.

4.5 Policy–Practice Misalignment Cuts Across All Domains

The most integrative theme concerned alignment. Participant 1 attributed limited results partly to excessive regulation. Participant 3 called for flexible policy and reduced administrative burden. Participant 4 stated that a “significant share” of initiatives was not productive because policies were insufficiently aligned with academics’ needs and argued that policy makers should engage seriously with academic staff. These views connect regulation, motivation, and institutional capacity.

Misalignment was evident when universities required EMI without adequate preparation, encouraged collaboration without enabling support, or measured internationalization through activities that did not capture learning and partnership quality. Participants therefore favored consultation, differentiated incentives, flexible regulation, and support systems designed around implementation conditions.

5. Discussion

The findings reinforce the view that internationalization is not a single program but an institution-wide process connecting research, curriculum, mobility, staffing, and governance. The prominence of financial support is consistent with research showing

that faculty engagement depends on institutional investment (Cantu, 2013; Gopal, 2011). This study adds an important qualification: incentives that reward final outputs do not necessarily create the conditions for sustained collaboration. Relationship building, partner matching, administrative help, and multi-year funding are distinct policy needs.

The EMI findings similarly shift attention from numerical expansion to implementation quality. Resistance should not be interpreted only as an attitudinal barrier; participants connected it to language confidence, student readiness, workload, and absent rewards. A context-sensitive approach would distinguish courses and disciplines for which EMI advances clear learning goals from those in which bilingual resources, team teaching, or phased implementation may be more effective.

Participant support for virtual and home-campus approaches aligns with IaH scholarship (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Boonen et al., 2021). The practical significance is equity. When international learning is attached mainly to travel, financial, family, health, language, and scheduling constraints shape participation. Virtual exchange and internationalized curricula do not eliminate these inequalities, but they can extend access and create more continuous learning pathways. They also offer a more environmentally sustainable complement to frequent travel (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

At the policy level, South Korea's transition from mobility and recruitment toward broader social rationales remains incomplete. The findings support Cho and Palmer's (2013) concern that frequent or rigid policy instruments can conflict with institutional realities. They also resonate with Jon and Yoo's (2021) account of a policy trajectory increasingly connected to sustainable development. Moving from aspiration to implementation requires indicators that assess participation, intercultural learning, partnership durability, and academic value alongside counts of students, courses, and publications.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

6.1 University-Level Priorities

- Build integrated EMI support. Combine language assistance, course-design consultation, teaching development, and incentives, and phase expansion according to disciplinary and student readiness.
- Recognize the full range of international work. Promotion and workload systems should value collaborative research, internationalized teaching, partnership building, student mentoring, and virtual exchange rather than publications alone.
- Institutionalize inclusive international learning. Embed virtual exchange, joint online courses, intercultural learning, and international guest teaching within curricula so that non-mobile students can participate.

6.2 Government-Level Priorities

- Provide durable collaboration infrastructure. National partner-matching platforms, seed grants, and multi-year funding can help universities move from individual contacts to sustainable research and teaching partnerships.
- Reduce avoidable regulatory friction. Streamline approval and recognition processes for joint curricula, dual degrees, credit transfer, and cross-border online provision while retaining appropriate quality assurance.
- Use multidimensional evaluation. Complement mobility and output counts with evidence on access, intercultural learning, partnership quality, faculty capacity, and longer-term institutional outcomes.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The study is exploratory and based on four expert informants; it does not represent all South Korean universities or all participants in internationalization. The sample gives greater weight to academic and international-office leadership than to students, professional staff,

or government officials. The descriptive indicators also come from different datasets and should not be interpreted as directly comparable measures. Future studies could include a larger and more diverse sample, compare institution types and regions, examine student learning outcomes, and track how internationalization policies change over time. Comparative research across East Asian systems could further clarify which tensions are specific to South Korea and which reflect wider regional dynamics.

8. Conclusion

South Korean higher education has developed a broad internationalization agenda spanning research, mobility, recruitment, EMI, and cross-border programs. The four expert accounts show, however, that policy visibility does not guarantee effective implementation. Uneven support, limited preparedness, weakly structured collaboration, underused inclusive

approaches, and regulatory burden create a recurring gap between aspiration and practice. The next stage of development should therefore be judged less by the accumulation of international activities and more by their academic value, accessibility, continuity, and fit with institutional conditions. Aligning incentives with capacity, expanding IaH and virtual exchange, funding durable partnerships, and consulting those responsible for implementation can move internationalization from a collection of targets toward a sustainable educational strategy.

Contribution/Originality: This study connects South Korea's national internationalization trajectory with the implementation experiences of university leaders. It shows that the central challenge is not a lack of policy activity, but the alignment of incentives, institutional capacity, academic needs, and inclusive forms of participation.

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