

South Korean students look beyond US for study abroad options

Japan and Australia becoming more popular options, alongside European destinations

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South Korean students are reconsidering their study abroad options, with traditional destinations such as the US on the wane in favour of new locations in Europe, although a chunk of those who would once have gone overseas are now deciding to stay home.

The Asian country is sending about 126,000 students overseas each year, meaning it is one of the world's largest outbound markets, a webinar hosted by Bonnard, an international education market research and advisory firm, heard.

The US continues to dominate as a destination, enrolling more than 42,000 South Korean higher education students, over 40 per cent of the total, but its position is weakening as families reassess their options.

"Traditional destinations are not collapsing, and they are no longer benefiting from automatic preference," said Kyuseok Kim, director of IES Abroad.

Instead, students and parents are becoming more strategic. "They have not reacted with panic but recalibration," Kim said, with decisions increasingly shaped by long-term outcomes rather than prestige alone.



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“South Korea’s market is really in transition and one that remains highly relevant, yet also evolving in terms of the student expectations, global competition and also its own ambitions as a study destination (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/growing-english-medium-teaching-both-opportunity-and-risk-korea>),” added Sarah Verkinova, head of international education at Bonnard.

Mark Bentley, executive officer of CivicUK, added that Korean students “want to check details and really think deeply about their choices”, making students particularly sensitive to policy and cost changes.

This shift is reflected in enrolment patterns. Undergraduate mobility has fallen by about 20 per cent since 2019, while vocational enrolments have dropped by 35 per cent, data presented by Bonnard showed.

At the same time, the market is fragmenting. Japan and Australia each account for roughly 13 to 14 per cent of outbound South Korean higher education students, while newer destinations such as Germany and the Netherlands (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-recruitment-falters-asian-students-enrol-closer-home>) are gaining traction amid rising costs and tighter visa policies elsewhere.

Despite this diversification, overall outbound demand remains resilient, even as it sits below pre-pandemic levels owing to demographic decline.

South Korea is also increasingly competing at home. The country has “just transformed from the sending country to receiving country in terms of long-term student mobility”, Kim said.

Government policy has accelerated this transition. The country has already exceeded its target of hosting 300,000 international students ahead of schedule.

This rapid growth is changing perceptions among domestic students (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/growing-english-medium-teaching-both-opportunity-and-risk-korea>). “Global education is no longer something that must happen elsewhere first,” Kim said.

Rather than replacing outbound mobility, the rise of South Korea as a destination is reshaping it. “It does not eliminate the mobility, but rather it changes form,” he said, pointing to the expansion of “hybrid pathways such as exchanges, dual degrees [and] short-term mobility”.

For universities seeking to recruit in the market, the implications are significant.

“With Korea’s demographic decline, institutions should stop thinking about Korea as a broader volume market, and start thinking about it as a smaller but more selective and higher expectation market,” Kim said.

That shift, panellists said, reflects a more mature and competitive landscape in which students are increasingly focused on return on investment and career outcomes, while institutions face intensifying global competition for a smaller pool of highly selective applicants.

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