

Korea-Canada, Canada-Korea: Learning from both ends of a successful exchange

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Pre-departure provision, orientation activities and internal support for international exchange programmes between UK universities and institutions in North America, Australia and Europe is well established at both the sending and receiving ends. In recent years, with the support of the Prime Minister's Initiative, there has been an increasing move to set up links with non-traditional exchange partners in Asian countries. In line with PMI2, which names South Korea as a priority country, Keele, like several other UK institutions, has started to develop new partnerships in South Korea.

A survey conducted informally among the membership of the British Universities Transatlantic Exchange Association (BUTEX) reveals that existing programmes between UK and Korean institutions are limited and not working at maximum capacity. Of 80 members, only 15 appear to have partnerships in place. UK universities need to know what issues are important to incoming Korean students to aid recruitment, better cater to students' social and academic needs, and increase their overall satisfaction. At the same time, they need to overcome the reluctance of their non-Asian students to consider Asia as a study abroad destination, as successful partnerships cannot divorce incoming provision and practice from outgoing promotion and support.

In contrast to the UK, collaboration between Canada and South Korea works very well. *The Atlas of Student Mobility* identifies Canada as a key destination for Korean students, and Canada falls within the top ten nations sending students to Korea. More than forty Korean and Canadian institutions have established reciprocal relationships. Korean Studies is flourishing at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the University of Toronto (U of T) and York University, and all have long-standing programmes with several Korean institutions. Canadian universities are more experienced in the support of incoming Korean students and the promotion of study opportunities in Korea and provide a good model for the UK to learn from.

My site visits were designed to learn from the best practice of working Canadian-Korean exchanges from the perspective of incoming and outgoing students. I visited three Canadian universities – UBC, York and U of T - and two of the Korean institutions that they partner with - Ewha Womans University and Korea University (KU). I interviewed Korean students who had been or are preparing to go to Canada to learn firsthand what can be done to enhance student support provision for Asian students. I met with Canadian students who have been or are planning to go to Korea to learn what issues are important when promoting and preparing western students for less traditional study abroad experiences. And I met with the staff who facilitate these programmes and observed the support provision they offer to their students. By experiencing some of the activities that the different institutions run -- including pre-departure meetings for outgoers, short-term academic programming and international student events - I gained an insight into strategies that can be developed to overcome students' misperceptions over cultural issues, the cost of living, the language of instruction and so on. Meeting with both sets of students and staff allowed me to build a broad picture of the exchange programmes and

to develop a template to implement at Keele and to share with other UK institutions. While my primary focus was on exchange programmes, I also learnt a great deal about the issues facing degree-seeking students.

This report will demonstrate the way that a number of well-established issues regarding Korean relations with the West inform the Study Abroad decisions that individual students make, and then identify a series of more specific issues arising from my discussions with staff and students.

Drivers for Korea to Canada Study Abroad

Only one of the Korean exchange students interviewed expressed a specific interest in Canada's famed multiculturalism as a motivating factor for studying there: "The only thing that I kind of vaguely knew about Canada was that whereas the US is known as the melting pot, Canada is more of a multicultural collage. ... Even though it's considered as a North American region and even though it seems similar [to the US], I wanted to notice some differences as well. First, because I'm familiar with English and second, because it's still different". The majority of students, however, claimed to have little specific knowledge of the country before applying. One student commented: "I didn't know much about Canada. I have distant relatives here but I'm not very familiar with them, so basically everything's new". Canada tends to be seen as a safer, cheaper extension of the US in the eyes of most students. A conflation of the two countries frequently occurred when students discussed their motivation for studying in Canada. For example, when asked specifically why she had chosen Canada, one Korean student explained: "for America, North America is cheaper than Europe right, most of the Asian countries are used to American English. I have relatives in Seattle and California."

Historical factors and immigration patterns are fairly obvious explanatory pull factors for students wanting to go to the US. The Korean War and ongoing US military presence, as well as the prevalence of American culture in Korea, ensure that students have grown up with a strong awareness of the States. Many students are taught by professors who have graduate degrees from North American institutions and, as Korea University's Exchange Programs Manager notes, "Students normally do want to go where their professors have been to study". Consequently, it is a well-established pathway for Korean students to study abroad in North America as part of their degree. In the words of one student, "it shows you're taking your education seriously as the US is a super economy".

For degree-seeking students it is considerably cheaper to study in Canada than the US. Students can attend premier Canadian institutions at a fraction of the price of their elite US equivalents. This is particularly attractive, because as U of T's Safety Abroad Officer, points out, "rankings are the most important consideration for Korean students selecting a study abroad destination". The presence of a diasporic Korean community in Canada's biggest cities is another key attraction. Vancouver has become a traditional destination for Korean students, with Koreans making up the largest international student group in British Columbia for the last seven years. Although the majority of students go abroad to improve their English, well-established Korean communities in Vancouver -- as well as Toronto in Ontario -- mean that the experience does not feel as alien. The likelihood of knowing of someone - if not relatives, then

friends of friends - is reassuring for students and their parents, not least because of the significance of networking in Korean society. For students with long term objectives to live and work in North America, Canada is likely to attract more students than the US, because it is much easier to obtain a residency permit. UBC's International Student Adviser believes that, "many students come with the intention of becoming immigrants" and that the introduction of the Post-Graduation three-year work permit and the Provincial Nominee Programme has accelerated the number of Korean applications to Canadian institutions.

Drivers for Canada to Korea Study Abroad

The majority of Canadian students going to Korea are "heritage-seeking students," defined by B. Szekely in 1998 as "selecting a study abroad venue because of family background - national, religious, cultural or ethnic". Most of the students interviewed were born in Korea, moved to Canada in their early teens, and are motivated to study abroad to reconnect with Korean culture, family and people: "I was born in Korea, but I was raised in China and emigrated to Vancouver in Junior High, so I never really had experience of Korean culture, so my dad suggested I go to Korea as an exchange student so I can know my motherland". Another student explained that, "it's hard to know what it is to be Korean", when you've only been there on summer vacations. UBC's Outgoing Asia Adviser feels that a heritage connection is more pertinent to the success of Korean exchanges than it is for other Asian programmes. Although also a factor for Hong Kong programmes, the perception that English is widely spoken there means that not just heritage students take part.

At UBC and U of T there is also a distinct trend for degree-seeking international students to go home for their exchange as a means to experience Korean university life. Such students are effectively going abroad to "study home". They enrolled in a Canadian university because of the perceived benefits of a western qualification, but recognise the importance of establishing connections in Korea for their future careers. For heritage-seekers and "study home" students alike, networking is paramount if they are considering working in Asia in the future: "Not just for Korea, but all Asian countries, all businesses are connected by networks rather than your ability. So that's one of the reasons, because I might go back to an Asian country or Korea and work there, so it's good to have some ties with actual institutions because it does save you a lot... it makes a lot of difference especially when you're dealing with Korean businesses". Several Economics students also commented that, as Canadian Commerce classes are primarily grounded in Western economic business models, they wanted to go to Korea to study specifically Asian systems and practices.

Students without any Korean connection comprise only a very small category of participants. Last year, for example, UBC sent just two non-heritage students to Korea out of a total of twenty-six. However, this situation is changing, partly because Korea University now offers 40% of courses in English. As KU's International Communications and Protocol Manager explains, students "can have an Asian experience, but not have to learn the language in order to bring credit back... Before it used to be if you were a heritage student, if you could speak Korean, you could come, or if you were studying the Korean language, so this has opened up the opportunity to a broader range of students". Staff at Korea University and York University also noted that

after the first “adventurous” student takes part, other non-heritage students are quick to follow suit.

Barriers to Korea-UK Study Abroad

When considering UK students’ reluctance to study in Korea, we might reasonably expect language to be the primary barrier. East Asian Studies is less established as a degree course in the UK and the Korean language less widely taught. However, my interviews suggested that language problems are perhaps more a matter of perception than actuality. Many of the Korean-Canadian heritage students interviewed do not have the language skills to take courses in Korean, but were able to put together academic programmes made up of courses taught in English. Nor had the non-heritage students interviewed experienced any problems with the language, and only one had made serious efforts to learn Korean.

Somewhat unexpectedly, a perceived language barrier does pose a real deterrent for Korean students considering studying in the UK. Whereas Canada and the US are seen as relatively unproblematic in this regard, every student interviewed perceived British accents as an obstacle: “Even though the UK speaks English, it’s not the standard American accent that Korean people usually learn from ever since they were little. Even though they would think that going to UK might improve their English, it might be hard for them in the beginning because they’re not used to hearing British English”. Other students are worried that they won’t be able to understand British accents in the classroom and that their academic progress will suffer: “I really like it when I hear it and I don’t have to respond to it. I really like it but it’s hard for me to adapt to and hard for me to learn” is a typical response. Korean Faculty are unlikely to discourage this thinking, or engender wider appreciation of UK culture and academic life, as they are more likely to visit North America than the UK themselves.

Ewha’s International Program Manager sees concerns over the British accent as a symptom for a wider unfamiliarity with UK culture. With the exception of Premier League football and particularly Korea’s Park Ji-sung raising the profile of Manchester United, British culture is not widely known in Korea. Most students claimed to have only a vague idea of the UK and feel that not much information is out there. Cable TV and music are dominated by the American market. While BBC news is available, CNN is far more widely watched. Students’ awareness of British culture is generally derived from romanticised depictions designed for the export market such as *Love Actually*. Optimistically, one student felt that, “Now it’s booming up a little, with shows coming in, but people are not familiar with it”. She, along with another student, cited Channel 4’s drama series *Skins* as the British cultural reference point that has “fuelled Korean people’s interest in the UK”. Another student explained that, “It’s becoming more available, but still I think you have to search for it, it does not come to you like US culture”.

Inevitably, due to immigration patterns and the absence of established Korean communities, the UK is seen as “more foreign” and as a “difficult place to adapt”. One student explained, “Because you don’t know the culture well, you get scared. ...It feels like you have more connection to your home country in Canada because of relatives, friends, etc.” Added to this, finance came up again and again as a barrier to studying in the UK: “Living costs are so high that you can’t go there for a year. My sister went for a month and it was too expensive.”

Another indicated that, “If the living costs were similar with Toronto, then it might have been either UK or Canada, it’s not like just stick to Canada”. More generally, assumptions about the UK and Europe being outmoded, in contrast to Asian and North American destinations which are seen as up and coming, may be off-putting to entrepreneurially-minded students. UBC’s Korea University Manager suggested that the UK and Europe are viewed primarily as tourist destinations. Subsequent interviews with students confirmed this, as while many students had backpacked through Europe during the summer, few had considered the UK as a study destination.

From a course compatibility perspective, there appear to be credit issues obstructing Korean students wanting to study in the UK that are not present in North America. One of the Korea U students at UBC had strongly considered the UK for her exchange, but opted for Canada because she could not take as many credits as she needed. In the other direction, where North Americans can participate in Korean summer schools for credit, the inflexibility of the UK degree structure means that British participants generally do not have this option. UK students’ involvement is, therefore, reliant on them being motivated to take additional courses for interest-only during vacation time, when they may need to be working to finance their degrees. This may work whilst PMI funding is available to incentivise participation, but in the long term, unless credit transfer can be established, we may see a decline in UK interest, and students may well prefer to invest in independent travel instead.

Institutional Initiatives Canada

The support services offered at Canadian universities are generally not specifically Korean-focused, but are run for the benefit of all international students. Nevertheless, their initiatives provide a model of good practice for UK institutions.

UBC’s *Jump Start* is a free, two-week programme of intensive workshops that last year saw 183 participants benefit from faculty-led workshops on academic writing and in-class participation. Initiatives like this are particularly important for Korean students whose expectations regarding what constitutes appropriate academic conduct will be at variance with North American and European models. As UBC’s International Student Adviser explained, “Korean students are often reluctant to ask questions in class and would rather talk to the professor after class. They don’t want to challenge their professors because they want to be polite”. Given that class participation frequently counts towards a student’s final grade, it is important to make students aware of the context of politeness and to challenge this mode of behaviour early on. As part of *International-Week*, a student-led event that showcases international culture on campus, Korean exchange students host a “Dynamic Korea” evening. The event provides UBC students with an opportunity to engage with exchange students, experience traditional folk music and Korean Pop dance and learn how to get involved with the Korean community through cultural activities, exchange programmes and internships.

York University has made highly effective use of returnee study abroaders. One non-heritage student started something of a trend when, having spent a year at Yonsei University as part of her East Asian Studies degree, she returned to work for York International. For York’s International Mobility Coordinator it makes good sense for returnees to run information sessions

for students interested in exchange, because “student enthusiasm is much greater. [They] love talking about [their] experience and applicants are more at ease asking questions!” As someone who had ‘been there and done that’, the returnee gained students’ confidence and challenged assumptions by explaining that she couldn’t speak Korean either: “A lot of them would never even consider a place like Korea because they couldn’t speak the language and assumed they couldn’t go. Because they didn’t know they didn’t look into it”. As a result of her enthusiasm and reassurance, three times the number of applicants applied - and not all of them heritage students!

Of note at all three Canadian universities is the strength of their online promotion and advising. With upwards of 40,000 students on campus, one-to-one advising is necessarily limited, and comprehensive websites that provide answers to student questions, feature reports on overseas experiences and provide clear programme guidelines are essential. U of T’s Safety Abroad Office provides an online *Go Global Guide*, covering every aspect of the overseas experience. Online information is supplemented by an interactive pre-departure session which draws on a series of real-life student case studies to develop awareness through group discussion of the risks associated with personal safety, credit transfer, culture shock and more.

Institutional Initiatives Korea

At both a programme and promotional level, Korean universities have worked creatively to enhance international cooperation. As interest from exchange partners often does not match demand from their students, Korean universities have started to look beyond the one-in one-out bilateral model. Like many other institutions, Korea University and Ewha Womans University have launched International Summer Programmes, enabling their exchange partners to send a certain number of participants in return for semester or year-long Korean students. Visiting Programmes have also been set up that are not reliant on reciprocity and cater for a much greater number of students. Korea University’s strategic relationship with UBC allows up to 100 students to enter on the Visiting Programme each year. KU have financed the construction of a residence hall - Korea-UBC Student House - which has both raised KU’s profile at UBC and enabled them to negotiate a discounted tuition fee for their students.

KU’s Vice President for International Affairs sees “increasing the attractiveness of KU as a study abroad destination” and improving general awareness of Korea as a key challenge in growing incoming student numbers. This is not just a matter of increasing international students’ awareness, but of educating the staff who advise them. Exchange partners are invited to visit KU and meet with faculty and international officers, because “once they come here and they see what we’re doing, partners can promote us more effectively”. KU takes an equally active role in marketing themselves abroad. The Office of Student Mobility organises student-led participation in study abroad fairs at their North American partner universities. To increase interest in studying abroad among home students KU run a series of “Happy Hour” networking sessions, in which international students at KU promote their country to prospective applicants. In addition to increased promotion, KU also guarantee a first year scholarship for prospective partners that are reluctant to sign an agreement because of the problems of recruiting outgoing

students. The scholarship is used “to set the ball rolling”, as once the “first adventurous student” has taken part, word of mouth creates further demand.

Ewha’s inspirational globalisation agenda aims for 60% of students to have an international experience by 2010. Commitment to internationalisation is embedded across the university through a rewards scheme of internationalisation points which count towards promotion. During my visit I observed Ewha’s Harvard College in Asia Program (HCAP) - a week long conference organised by student leaders for Harvard students. Earlier in the year Ewha students had participated in a parallel program of academic, cultural, and social events at Harvard. The HCAP programme included workshops on North Korean Relations and a student-led seminar on the development of K-Pop. The Harvard students responded extremely well to the lively student presentation, indicating the benefits of drawing on popular culture to cultivate interest and enthusiasm for participation in Korean programmes.

Lessons for UK universities: Promotional and Pre-departure

The playing field is not level: Korean-North American relations, diaspora and the prevalence of US popular culture in Korea have created cultural, communal and family connections that must necessarily frame any understanding of exchange links. While the UK cannot “compete” with or replicate these circumstances, we can learn from observing the practical ways that these exchanges work. This report acknowledges the importance of these historic and diasporic connections, it also recognises that they are not the only factors that make Korean-Canadian exchanges successful.

Staff mobility between the UK and Korea is an important first step towards encouraging greater student mobility. If research collaborations and networking between UK and Korean professors can be developed, there would likely be a knock-on effect on student mobility patterns. To this end the British Council has established a website indicating which Korean professors received PhDs in the UK. Improved awareness of which Korean academic programmes facilitate the development of specialist employment knowledge would enable UK universities to market study in Korea more effectively. Ewha’s International Program Manager believes that Korean universities would be responsive to establishing niche programmes to attract British students, whether this involved building in professional or vocational experience. More generally, UK universities need to do more to raise awareness of Korean culture on their campuses. Making use of resources like the Korean Cultural Centre UK (<http://london.korean-culture.org/welcome.do>) will enable such profile raising.

Issues surrounding assumptions about the British accent and “old Europe” are beyond the remit of any one university’s international policy. However, organisations involved in promoting UK education abroad, such as the British Council, could instigate a targeted promotional campaign to reframe the issues that Korean students currently see as barriers in more positive terms. This could include raising awareness of British-English to dispel the idea that the British accent is a barrier to mobility, and repositioning the UK as a dynamic destination. Pop culture is obviously a major factor in shaping Korean students’ perceptions and a significant reason for their preference for North American destinations. There are some signs that the UK is gaining greater cultural currency and this could be exploited in promoting study abroad links. One

student told me that, “Because US pop culture is now dominant and it’s so well known, people’s interests are shifting outside the US boundaries and one of them is the UK. Dramas from the UK are coming into Korea and because it’s different from US style, people show interest in it and they’re wondering if I lived there would it be like that... I think British culture is becoming more popular these days because people are kind of tired of the US culture that they can easily encounter”. Another step in this direction might be to utilise high profile Koreans who have been successful in the UK, such as Park Ji-sung.

From some perspectives, Britain’s lack of a diasporic Korean community could be seen as a strength. While reassuring, the presence of a large Korean community might also potentially be problematic, as it means students will not grow in the way they might hope: It’s all too easy to live a Korean existence on Canadian soil – and to speak Korean for the majority of the time. Many students commented that they didn’t want to meet other Koreans, because they wanted to improve their English. Some even stated they would pretend to be Japanese. Korea U’s UBC Manager suggests, “there are students that would like to go to a place where it’s completely foreign and they’re forced to use the English language and that could be an advantage. It might be a tough one year experience, but at the end of the day [they’d] learn a lot.” Studying in the UK is more challenging, but students might also reap greater rewards, because they can’t fall back on the same support networks.

The lack of a diasporic community in the UK makes on-campus integration particularly important. Where Visiting Student Programmes have been set up, such as Korea University’s programme at Royal Holloway and Leicester University’s new programme with Ewha, institutions need to work actively with participants. A key consideration in this regard is integrated accommodation facilities. Through the successful integration of Korean students, it may be possible to raise awareness of Korea as a study abroad destination and in the long term see an increase in UK student interest. Ultimately, the best resource of all is to mobilise the enthusiasm and experience of our returning students to promote Korean programmes following the York model. With the encouragement of returning students, programmes are likely to build their own momentum and short term summer opportunities may develop into bilateral agreements with exchange students moving in both directions.

Given that returning students are such a key asset in cultivating future students’ participation, it is imperative that UK universities provide appropriate pre-departure information and advice. Effective briefings help to ensure that participants have a positive experience, better understand the differences they encounter and subsequently encourage others to participate. My interviewees pointed to significant cultural differences regarding individualism and collectivism, definitions of politeness, gender expectations, modes of socialising and academic conduct that visitors need to prepare for. One of the Korean-Canadians interviewed at UBC neatly illustrated one of the key differences: “In Korea when you buy some chips [crisps]. You just open it and everyone eats. Here you buy chips and then say do you want a chip. You say yes and I get one for you. You can’t touch my chip! In Korea it’s very grouped – my stuff is your stuff. It’s one big family. Non-Asian students would be shocked!” A heritage student, who returns to Korea each summer, highlighted another key adjustment issue: “Every time I go to Korea I cry for a week. I get so hurt. I’m a very sensitive person”. No-one says excuse me or thank you in

Korea and “people are slamming each other constantly”. It is culturally accepted that because Korea is so busy and crowded, you don’t have to apologise - as “you’d be saying it about 100 times a day if you did!” These anecdotes and examples illustrate the challenges of studying in non-traditional destinations, but also suggest some of the possibilities for intercultural learning. For these and other reasons, it is important for UK universities to negotiate the drivers and barriers discussed in this report to establish more effective study abroad relationships with Korean universities.

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