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## **Nation Branding through Internationalization of Higher Education: A Case Study of African Students in South Korea\***

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2016.45.3.04

### **Abstract**

This study focuses on the effect that internationalization of higher education has on the nation branding of South Korea. To better understand the role that international students in higher education play in nation branding, research is needed on the actual experiences of international students in the country. In this study, current and former African university students' experiences living and studying in South Korea are investigated. This study, therefore, uses the nation branding framework within the context of South Korea and the role of higher education as an image enhancement strategy geared toward global public inclusion; its focus is on the experiences of African students. In order to obtain multiple perspectives on African student experiences, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire. The empirical evidence obtained in this study demonstrates that African students' experiences in South Korea are relevant in their perceptions of the host country. The results suggest the positive impact that the South Korean government has on improving the country's image through encouragement of internationalization of higher education, especially among African students who come to the country for their tertiary education.

**Keywords:** *African students, globalization, higher education, internationalization, nation branding, South Korea*

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\* This work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2016.

## **Introduction**

Nation branding, the strategy of promoting a positive image of a country, is an approach that countries are using to reshape their national identities and become more visible on the global landscape. In 2008, South Korea earned a surprisingly low ranking of 33 out of 50 on the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index (NBI) (Anholt, 2008). While South Korea is the world's 13<sup>th</sup> largest economy (World Bank Group, 2015), its low image ranking lagged far behind the economic status. Nation branding is a strategy that South Korea is now adopting to improve its national image. South Korea's nation branding efforts have been among the strongest, and the enrollment of international students in South Korean universities is an example of the initiatives. Currently, over 80,000 international university students are studying in South Korea, and there is a push to increase enrollment to 200,000 international students by 2020 (National Institute for International Education, 2014).

## **Research Problem and Focus**

While most studies on nation branding in South Korea have concentrated on Korean popular culture, tourism, and diplomacy, higher education for foreign students has not been the subject of rigorous study. To better understand the role of international students in higher education in nation branding, research is needed on the actual experiences of international students in South Korea. In this study, current and former African university students' experiences living and studying in South Korea are investigated. Cooperative relationships between South Korea and African countries have been increasing year by year, especially in the area of development assistance. South Korea has sought to attract more African students into its higher education system, but no study has explored the experiences of African students and how the effects of higher education and nation branding perspectives are related. To fill this gap in the literature, this research examines the role of attracting international students in higher education as a strategy for nation branding in South Korea with a focus on the experiences of African students.

## **Literature Review**

Nation branding is becoming recognized as a principal governmental strategy as more countries begin to see the value and influence of improving their national image in the global marketplace. The concept of nation branding is still a developing field where scholars and practitioners are working toward a common conceptual framework. Gudjonsson argues that “Nation branding occurs when a government or private company uses its power to persuade whoever has the ability to change a nation’s image” (2005, p. 285). According to Fan, a country’s image has a direct influence on international relations (2010). Some benefits of engaging in nation branding include stabilizing currency, helping to reinforce international reputation and trust among investors, increasing international rankings and global political power, and strengthening international ties and encouraging nation building (Dinnie, 2010). This requires a country to develop a comprehensive nation branding plan as part of its national policy framework as in the case of South Korea. According to Kim, “countries are increasingly turning their attention to improving their nation brands. Perhaps no other country in the world has tried so aggressively to improve its nation brand in recent years as South Korea” (2011, p. 147).

In 2009, former President Lee established a new campaign, the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB), in an effort to rebrand South Korea’s reputation. The PCNB devised a 10-point action plan. In particular, the key action point aimed at attracting international students of higher education has been carried out by offering university scholarships to study in South Korea under the Campus World, Global Korea Scholarship and Campus Asia programs. Many countries have made international education a priority for fostering international exchange and mutual understanding (Byun & Kim 2011; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Brooks & Waters, 2011). The scholarship programs have been created to help promote the country’s image among international students.

South Korea began to develop policies related to foreign students with the announcement of the Study Korea Project in 2005. With this governmental initiative, the number of foreign students increased approximately 7.3 times from 12,314 in 2003 to 89,573 in 2011, which was the highest thus far (Ministry of Education, 2014). According to 2014 statistics, there are 84,891 foreign students at 356 universities and colleges from 192 countries (Ministry of Education 2014). In 2013, the government launched the Study Korea 2020 Project, which aimed to reach 200,000 students by 2020. In addition to attracting more foreign students, this new project also addresses quality assurance and recruitment policies in order

to improve the learning and living conditions of foreign students and support their settlement in the county after graduation.

With the governmental support for internationalization of higher education and official development assistance in the education sector, the number of African students in South Korean universities has increased dramatically since 2000. In the last 12 years, the number of African students grew from 112 in 2003 to 1,790 in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014). The following discussion uses a case study of African students' experiences in the country to investigate how South Korea's effort to attract foreign students affects its nation branding.

## **Research Methodology**

### **General Background of Research**

This study is based on quantitative research designed to interpret African students' experiences in South Korea and their perceptions of the country. In order to obtain multiple perspectives from African students, a survey was conducted with both current and former African students who have experiences studying in South Korean universities. Survey questions focus on the experiences of African students living in South Korean culture and how these experiences influenced their image of the nation. An analysis of the responses focuses on the change in African students' perceptions of South Korea after their living and learning in the country for a certain period of time.

### **Research Sample**

This questionnaire survey was aimed at African students who are presently enrolled at South Korean universities or colleges, or who have remained in the country following their studies. These individuals form a proper group for assessing the effect of internationalization in higher education on nation branding. The vast majority of African university students in South Korea are, in a sense, induced to study in the country through scholarship opportunities offered by either the South Korean government or non-governmental organizations.

The research sample was composed of 50 current or former students who are nationals of an African country. 38 male students and 12 female students responded to our request and completed the questionnaire. The nationalities of the respondents include Kenyan (13), Ethiopian (8), Ugandan (4), Nigerian (3),

Ghanaian (3), Congolese (3), Rwandan (2), Zimbabwean (2), Liberian (2), Tanzanian (1), Algerian (1), Gabonese (1), Gambian (1), Zambian (1), Moroccan (1), Cameroonian (1), Senegalese (1) and Burkinabe (1). A male respondent identified his nationality as 'African.' More detailed characteristics of the research sample are presented in Table 1.

### **Instrument and Procedures**

This questionnaire survey was conducted on-line for about a month from October 15 to November 13, 2015. We created a webpage with the questionnaire (<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18UUp1G94OQYmJEOKggft9i0RQuEu3D-1N7DyLGqZJesA/viewform>) for this survey and invited the targeted group of African students in South Korea by sending emails and advertising on community-based group pages on social media. These groups include the Korea Association of African Students, African Academics Forum and the Association of African Students in Korea. We received 52 responses after sending and posting the questionnaire, but two responses were incomplete and were therefore excluded from the sample. It was an anonymous survey to protect participants' identities.

The questionnaire consists of 22 questions and is divided into four sections: (1) respondents' socio-demographic information, (2) their images of South Korea before coming to the country, (3) their experiences living and studying in the country, and (4) their images of South Korea after spending some time in the country. The demographics section contains questions concerning gender, age, nationality, duration of stay in South Korea, academic degree (currently pursuing or last obtained) and occupation (if not a student). The questions in the second to fourth sections are intended to explore various aspects of the African students' perceptions of South Korea before and after their stay in the country. Scale questions are used to analyze respondents' experiences in the foreign country and opinions about its national image. 5-point scale questions (1-greatly satisfied, 5-greatly dissatisfied) measure students' level of satisfaction with respect to living and the educational environment; respondents are asked to express their level of preference or dislike toward the host country on a 10-point scale (1-best, 10-worst). Supplemental multiple-choice questions are intended to obtain more information about the African students' experiences and opinions. In addition, three open-ended questions are included in the last part of the questionnaire in order to get lengthier responses with more in-depth comments from the African students.

## Research Results

### Respondents' Socio-demographic Characteristics

The African students who responded and completed our questionnaire were 30 ( $\pm 5.42$ ) years of age on average. The majority of the sample (70%) were in their late twenties or early thirties (25–35). Their average stay in South Korea was 2.18 ( $\pm 1.71$ ) years, and slightly more than half of them (54%) had lived in the country for less than two years. Most of them (80%) were currently pursuing or had last obtained a postgraduate degree (34 Master's and 6 Doctoral) in South Korea (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

Categories		N	%
Gender	Male	38	76
	Female	12	24
	Total	50	100
Age	Under 20	1	2
	20–29	26	52
	30–39	19	38
	Over 40	4	8
	Total	50	100
Period of Stay in South Korea	Less than 2 years	27	54
	2–4 years	17	34
	5 years or more	6	12
	Total	50	100
Academic Degree or Certificate	Doctoral	6	12
	Master's	34	68
	Undergraduate	8	16
	Language Certificate	2	4
	Total	50	100

### Previous Perceptions of South Korea

In response to the question about where they usually received information about South Korea in their home countries, most of the African students selected 'mass media' (46%) and 'family/friends' (38%) as their main information sources.

When asked which aspect of South Korea they liked best, ‘economy’ ranked highest (58%), followed by ‘friendly people’ (16%) and ‘traditional culture’ (10%). The vast majority of the respondents (62%) came to study in South Korea because of a ‘scholarship opportunity’. As for the question regarding the previous image of South Korea before coming to the country, 52% of the African students rated South Korea as a fair to middle (4–6) country, and 38% of them expressed favorable (1–3) views (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Previous perception of South Korea

	Categories	N	%
Information Source about South Korea	Mass media	23	46
	Family/friend	19	38
	School	5	10
	Other	3	6
	Total	50	100
Most Likable Aspect of South Korea	Economy	29	58
	Friendly people	8	16
	Traditional Culture	5	10
	Technology	4	8
	Other	3	6
	None	1	2
Reasons for Deciding to Study in South Korea	Scholarship opportunity	31	62
	Academic interest	8	16
	Admiration for South Korea	5	10
	Recommendation from others	4	8
	Other	2	4
	Total	50	100
Previous Country Image of South Korea	Favorable (1–3)	19	38
	Fair to middle (4–6)	26	52
	Unfavorable (7–10)	5	10
	Total	50	100

### Experiences Living and Studying in South Korea

Regarding the question of the satisfaction with living in South Korea, 38% of the African students were satisfied (greatly satisfied, generally satisfied), and

22% expressed dissatisfaction (greatly dissatisfied, generally dissatisfied). Similar responses were obtained to the question about satisfaction with university life. While 34% of the students were satisfied with South Korean university education, 22% were dissatisfied. In response to the question of the most likable aspect of South Korea after their stay in the country, 'social infrastructure' ranked the highest (42%), followed by 'economy' (26%) and 'friendly people' (16%). When asked about the most difficult aspect concerning their daily life in South Korea, 'social issues (discrimination, prejudice)' (26%) and 'adaptation to foreign life' (26%) were equally high, followed by 'dating/relationship problem' (16%) and 'academic issues' (12%) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Satisfaction with living and studying in South Korea

	Categories	N	%
Satisfaction with Overall Living Experience in South Korea	Greatly satisfied	3	6
	Generally satisfied	16	32
	Average	20	40
	Generally dissatisfied	9	18
	Greatly dissatisfied	2	4
	Total	50	100
Satisfaction with University Life in South Korea	Greatly satisfied	7	14
	Generally satisfied	10	20
	Average	22	44
	Generally dissatisfied	8	16
	Greatly dissatisfied	3	6
	Total	50	100
Most Likable Aspect of South Korea	Social infrastructure	21	42
	Economy	13	26
	Friendly people	8	16
	Traditional culture	2	4
	Social welfare	2	4
	Natural environment	2	4
	Other	2	4
	Total	50	100
Most Difficult Aspect Concerning Daily Life in South Korea	Social issues (discrimination, prejudice)	13	26
	Adaptation to foreign life	13	26
	Dating/relationship problem	8	16



Categories		N	%
Most Difficult Aspect Concerning Daily Life in South Korea	Academic issues	6	12
	Visa problems	4	8
Life in South Korea	Economic burden	2	4
	Religious activity	2	4
	Other	2	4
Total		50	100

### Present Perceptions of South Korea

When asked whether education in South Korea had affected their perceptions of the country, the majority (66%) of the African students responded positively (strongly agree, agree). Referring to the question about the present image of South Korea after staying in the country for some time, 52% of the students rated South Korea as a favorable country (1–3), and 26% of them gave the country a middle ranking (4–6). In comparison with the previous image, more than half of the respondents (56%) indicated improvement in the national image. In response to the question about their career path after completing studies in South Korea, ‘return home’ ranked the highest (44%), followed by ‘seek a job in South Korea’ (28%) and ‘seek a job in another country’ (10%) (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Present perceptions of South Korea

Categories		N	%
Experiences in South Korea Affected Your Image of the Country	Strongly agree	24	48
	Agree	9	18
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	18
	Disagree	3	6
	Strongly disagree	5	10
	Total	50	100
Present Country Image of South Korea	Favorable (1–3)	26	52
	Fair to middle (4–6)	18	36
	Unfavorable (7–10)	6	12
	Total	50	100

Categories		N	%
Comparison between Previous and Present Country Image of South Korea	Greatly improved (+ 6 level)	1	2
	Improved (3–5 level)	10	20
	Slightly improved (1–2 level)	17	34
	Neither improved nor worsened	7	14
	Slightly worsened (1–2 level)	10	20
	Worsened (3–5 level)	1	2
	Greatly worsened (-6 level)	4	8
	Total	50	100
Career Path after Completion of Studies in South Korea	Return home	22	44
	Seek a job in South Korea	14	28
	Seek a job in another country	5	10
	Attain a higher degree in South Korea	4	8
	Attain a higher degree in another country	4	8
	Other	1	2
	Total	50	100

## Discussion and Conclusions

From the perspective of internationalization of higher education, the empirical evidence gathered in this study demonstrates that the African students' experiences living and studying in South Korea are relevant in regard to their perceptions of the host country. Our results confirm the effect that the South Korean government's encouragement of internationalization of higher education has on the improvement of the national image particularly among African students who come to the country for their tertiary education.

According to the survey results, many of the African students who used to receive limited information about South Korea mainly through mass media and from surrounding people in their home country tend to have a favorable impression after gaining experiences living and studying in the host country. Their

perceptions of South Korea are largely influenced by its socio-economic characteristics, such as social infrastructure and economy. Therefore, internationalization of higher education, especially attracting international students from Africa to South Korean universities, can be an effective tool for enhancing the country's reputation.

However, there are also some challenges, particularly with social issues that the African students living in South Korea noted. Some of them said that they encountered discrimination and prejudice against Africans in their daily lives and had difficulties in adapting to South Korean society. This fact is especially relevant in today's globalized environment, which is characterized by the increased mobility of people across continents. It is important to facilitate an environment that is friendly to foreigners and to improve African people's public awareness in order to assist their socio-cultural adaptation to South Korean society.

Over the past decade, the influx of international students in South Korean universities has increased dramatically. The growing importance of attracting foreign students to the country's higher education system is emphasized for the nation branding effort. This study has sought to demonstrate the role that internationalization of higher education plays in enhancing South Korea's image by investigating the case of African students. The result that the African students' experiences living and studying in South Korea positively affected their perception of the country presents important implications for decision makers who manage the nation branding campaign. Strategies raising the level of international students' satisfaction through improving the quality of higher education as well as helping their socio-cultural integration into the host society should be designed.

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