



## UNDERSTANDING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND LANGUAGE IN DETERMINING ACADEMIC SATISFACTION

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### Abstract:

Foreign governments award international students' bursary for some reasons, including providing international students with opportunities to conduct advanced studies, promote international exchanges in education and mutual friendship between countries and to increase enrollment in higher education institution. These students face unique challenges compared with domestic students, but sufficient research is still needed to explore this issue deeply. In this article, findings are reported from survey and interviews with international graduate students currently receiving the Korean Government Scholarship. The study found that academic life, environment, and Korean language competency are all significant factors affecting the level of satisfaction of international students in the scholarship program.

**Keywords:** international students, environment, Korean language, academic satisfaction

### 1. Introduction

The internationalisation and globalisation of Higher Education around the world have resulted in the inflow of international students significantly across the globe (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In 2010, the Korean Government announced a plan to increase the number of international students in Korean institutes of higher education to 200,000 by 2020 (Korean Ministry of Education, 2010). Less than 100,000 international students studied in Korea in 2015. Consequently, the government has developed a new national strategy to achieve the 200,000 international students' enrolment by 2023 (Korean Ministry of Education, 2015). In 2015, 1,200,253 students studied in Higher Education with 91,332 International Students accounting only for over 7.61% of the student population (Korean Ministry of Education, 2016).

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The figures for the year 2015 indicated less than 2 percent of international students compared to other OECD countries which take Korea as a destination for their studies. This ratio of international students is quite low when compared to 19.4 percent in the United States, 10.3 percent in the United Kingdom, 6.2% in Australia, 5.7 percent in France and 4.9 percent in Germany (OECD Education at a Glance 2015). Consequently, to attract more international students, the Korean Government has been continuously providing scholarships to international students. The number of scholarships provided by the Korean government in the graduate program is extremely high at 21.9 percent (approximately 4,980 out of 22,767 international students in 2015) (NIIED, 2015).

To provide international students with prospects to conduct advanced studies in undergraduate and graduate programs at higher educational institutions, to promote international exchanges in education and mutual friendship between countries, the Korean Government established the Korean Government Scholarship Program for International Students (NIIED, 2010). The Korean Government Scholarship Program (KGSP) is awarded to both International undergraduate and graduate students to give them the opportunity to conduct advanced studies at higher educational institutions in the Republic of Korea to promote international exchange in education and mutual friendship between countries. Grantees are required to take Korean language training course for a year at a language institution decided by the National Institute for International Education (NIIED). The mandatory language institute where the students will be randomly assigned is different from the University in which the student is duly admitted to their Degree Program (Shaibou & Moluayonge, 2015). This decision is to enable the incoming student to interact with students from other universities and nationalities. Moreover, since they are in a University different from that which they will eventually do their degree; they get to experience living in various cities in Korea (Shaibou & Moluayonge, 2015). Students who achieve Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) 5 and above before the award of scholarship are exempted from taking the Korean Language course.

The present study focuses on determining the level of satisfaction of international graduate students in the Korean Government Scholarship Program. Since learning is central to the program, it is imperative to look at satisfaction from the learner's' point of view. According to Kotler *et al.* (2009), satisfaction is a person's feeling of pleasure that comes about as a comparison between the outcome and the person's expectations. Through this definition, it can be deduced that when the expectations match or are higher than the expected, then a person would be satisfied. Similarly, in the event that there is a mismatch between the outcomes and the desired results, then that person will be dissatisfied. Depending on the expectations that people have, their level of satisfaction can also vary. In line with the definition above, we can argue that one is satisfied if there is the successful fulfilment of his/her needs, expectations, wishes, or desires. Also, satisfaction could also imply anything that brings gratification, contentment or pleasure to a person (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 1990). Thus, according to Domer (1983), the degrees of learner satisfaction

can be perceived as a gap or discrepancy between a student's expectation level and actual outcomes obtained.

In line with the evaluation of satisfaction of international students studying in Korea under the auspices of the Korean Government, this study tries to address three different issues. The first issue is academic life, including curriculum, supervisor's advice, research progress, and facilities. These elements of academic life are directly related to the purpose of international students studying in Korea. The second aspect is daily life, including housing conditions and cultural adaptation. These elements of everyday living somewhat indirectly affect their academic life. The third issue, Korean language ability, is related to some degree to both areas of university life and daily living. Based upon 17 variables of the three topics mentioned above and consistent with the goal of improving the lives of international students in Korea, the present study investigated how these variables affect the satisfaction of international students.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the overall level of student satisfaction with the scholarship program with regards to academic life, environment, and their Korean language competency?
2. To what extent do the environment and Korean language competency affect students' academic life?
3. How does the Korean language competency influence the students' academic experience?

## **2. Literature Review**

Gaining a deeper understanding of the students' perception based on their program satisfaction is not only relevant to the program goal, but it also provides insights on how international students interact with the host country's environment. They contribute to the diversity and internationalisation of their classrooms, campuses, and communities by adding different perspectives in the classroom and enhancing mutual understanding and appreciation of the differences found around the world (Wu, Garza and Guzman 2015). The international students also constitute an increasingly relevant and important source of diversity on University campuses. International students studying and living in Korea benefit from Korea's economy and culturally enrich Korea education institutions and the wider community. This group's satisfaction with studying and residing in Korea should be of interest. In order to measure how international students perceive the Korean education system, studies should be taken to account the experiences of international students in Korea. This research will provide government and the international education sector with valuable indicators of how well KGSP is meeting the expectations of international students and how resources might be best directed to improve the students' level of satisfaction.

For many international students, entering Korean universities can be an incredible life experience and a cultural transition. Many studies have explored the challenges experienced by international students attending institutions of higher

education in other countries (Erichsen and Bolliger, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Msengi, 2007; Zhang, 2010). These difficulties include language difficulties, problems adjusting to the academic culture, social experiences, misunderstanding, and communication with faculty and peers; anxiety, stress, financial hardships, lack of appropriate accommodation, isolation and loneliness, and any adoption in their daily life.

In a study conducted by Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010), among 900 international students in Australia, they found that 41% of the students, experience strong levels of stress. The stress could be as a result of cultural shock, homesickness, or perceived discrimination. Yi and Kishimoto (2003) conducted another study at a university in Texas on the use of counselling services by international students. Their study aimed at understanding why international students pursue advisory services. The data collected over six years of the study indicated that many international students when faced with difficulties or psychological concerns hang on family and friends instead of counselling services.

Many challenges also occur in the academic setting. Academic challenge means that international students have to learn how to adapt and adjust to new and different relationships with instructors as well as course mates. This is of particular importance because the student-instructor relationship varies from country to country. In many Asian countries, for instance, the lecturers are considered superior and are the primary authority in the classroom and students rely on them as their ultimate authority on courses (Robinson, 1992). The student-instructor relationship in such countries is much more formal, and students are not expected to address the lecturers by their first name. However, in the West, for instance, students are usually encouraged to think independently; and it is common to hear teachers overtly admit that they do not always know the right answer.

Language is considered one of the main issues thwarting smooth academic adjustment for international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Liu (2011) used her experiences to discuss her struggles as an international student in Canada. Liu expressed that her lack of English proficiency became a barrier for successful participation in the community that hosted her. She was in a situation where she could not understand what her instructors and classmates were talking about in her graduate-level classes. She even had difficulty solving everyday problems, such as taking the correct buses, grocery shopping, or asking for help.

Some of the issues that international students identified according to Bartram's (2008) taxonomy stressed three distinct areas; social needs, academic needs and practical needs. Positive learning environment includes academic requirements referring to the condition that provides positive externalities for academic achievement. Barriers that arise about student's academic needs were termed 'academic, cultural shock' and 'learning shock' by Huang (2012). This is a consequence of students having to develop new academic skills as independent thinkers and agents for change (Campbell, 2010) while experiencing different pedagogical approaches to learning from their home country. Hence, looking from this perspective, the host learning environment can make or break international student's learning experiences.

Highland Schools (2000) suggested that to create and maintain a stimulating learning environment; there is a need to provide adequate and relevant resources, effective classroom organisation, and an interactive and innovative climate. In order to provide the above resources and establish a positive learning environment, there are several factors to be considered. Alabi, Oduwaiye, and Fasasi (2009) described the components of an active learning environment which is the combination of the physical, emotional, cultural/social and academic settings. Emotional environment component would include culturally-sensitive educators who are responsive to the student's diverse needs and interest. An example of this situation is when a teacher influences a student's self-confidence by providing supportive feedback like words of encouragement, acknowledging successes, etc. The academic environment encompasses all resources; physical, human and material and programs and opportunities for students to use these resources creatively and imaginatively to learn and develop their potentials (Alabi, Oduwaiye, & Fasasi, 2009). The cultural environment deals with the creation of an atmosphere where students feel that their individuality is respected.

Recognising all the factors that must be considered to create a positive learning environment, one might argue that different countries would have different learning environments based on underlying cultural assumptions. For example, Huang and Brown (2009) explained that some international students have problems trying to adapt to classroom behaviour, the focus of discussion rather than lecture, emphasis on group work and are troubled when the instructor does not follow the text. These problems are as a result of how much they are used to their previous learning environments which assumed to have more of fixed and rigid rules. They will be dealing with inner conflicts for a while until they eventually adapt to the new learning environment.

Although there are various concepts of what constitutes a positive learning environment, consensus can still be reached regarding the importance of a positive learning environment on student outcome. In order to maximise the benefits of the cultural and learning experience for the international students, the key is to understand the impact of how students perceive their learning environment and its relation to their academic performance.

Lastly, various studies have addressed the issue of service quality and student satisfaction. This is linked to other external factors that may explain program satisfaction. According to Fitri et al. (2008), service quality could include responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy to mention but a few. Bigne et al. (2003), Ham and Hayduk (2003) and Elliot and Shin (2002) have all established that there is a positive relationship between the service quality and students' satisfaction level. In this case, the quality of the program under evaluation may have a positive or negative effect on the satisfaction of the graduate students. Also, according to Garrett (2014), a vast majority of international students both undergraduate and graduate students are satisfied with the program offered by experienced Universities who have histories of handling international students. The reason for this is because the research only included schools who had been dealing with international students for a long while which made them gain much more experience. Suffice to say that this could have

been different if the selection of universities was all encompassing. Having a background on how students cope with the academic life, learning the environment and language competency would provide educators, administrators, policy makers and evaluators with guidelines for creating culturally-appropriate services and better academic programs for international students.

### **3. Material and Methods**

Evaluation of international scholarships for higher education is predominantly based on mixed-methods: using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect research data.

#### **3.1 Participants**

The present study targeted international students studying under the Korean Government scholarship (KGSP) at the graduate level. These students have taken the mandatory Korean language training courses for at least one year at a language institution located on-campus of the Korean universities. The online form was sent to 300 participants, and a total of 252 responses were obtained from the survey. The response rate of the study is 84% of the total targeted participants. Participants included 161 females and 91 males between the ages of 22 and 41. In this sample, 195 respondents are currently in the Master's Program while 57 are pursuing Doctoral Degree. More than half of the participants, represented by 52.4% are in the third semester of their respective programs. Regarding TOPIK, the average level of respondents has at least Level 3 at 30.6%. Only 2% of the participants have the TOPIK Level below the scholarship requirement of Level 3. Four classes were the average number of Korean-taught classes taken by the respondents while exactly one-third or 33% of them did not take any Korean-taught classes. Participants came from 60 Universities, and a collection of 73 courses from different departments were gathered.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

##### **A. Questionnaire**

The survey was comprised of six subsections with 17 items distributed as follows: curriculum (2 items), supervisor's advice (3 items), research progress (2 items), facilities (3 items), coping with the learning environment (4 items) and Korean language competency (3 items). Based on the three research questions that the study aims to answer, the questions were divided into (1) academic variable consisting of curriculum, supervisor's advice, and research progress, (2) learning environment including facilities and (3) Korean language competency. See the appendix for the questionnaire. The scores are averaged across the 17 items,  $M = 62.03$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ . Cronbach's alpha (an estimated internal consistency) was .83 for the present study. These questions were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale as follows: 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree and 5 for strongly agree.

## B. Interview Guide

The interview guide is aimed at gathering information for the third research question which is; how does Korean language competency influence the students' academic experience? This instrument comprises of 6 open- ended questions (see appendix for the interview guide).

### 3.3 Procedure

Students were contacted through an email to answer an online survey. The researchers randomly selected 300 students' email addresses from NIIED Graduate Students handbook for 2016 and sent emails from November 23 to December 2, 2016, only to students in their Graduate School. For the interview guide, five students were randomly selected among those who participated in the survey. The interview guide was administered through emails and was conducted from December 13th to December 16th, 2016.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS 23.0 for descriptive analyses, correlation analyses, and regression analyses.

## 4. Results

Correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between academic life, environment, and their Korean language competencies.

**Research Question 1:** What is the overall level of student satisfaction with the scholarship program with regards to academic life, environment, and their Korean language competencies?

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of three variables concerning satisfaction of learning and living conditions held by international students are reported in Table 1. Five points Likert scale was used to assessed Academic satisfaction and Korean Language competencies with Strongly agree = 5, Agree= 4, Neutral= 3, Disagree =2 and Strongly Disagree=1 with a mean greater than three is considered as agreed.

Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics and analysis results. Results show that Korean Government Scholarship Students at the graduate level are satisfied (M=3.73, SD= .721) with their Academic life in Korea and the learning environment (M=3.87, SD=.642). However, the students are less competent with Korean Language (M=2.96, 1.065).

**Table 1:** Means, and Standard Deviations Concerning Variables of the Satisfaction of International Students

Variables	N	Mean	SD
Academic Satisfaction	252	3.73	.721
Environment	252	3.87	.642
Korean Language Competencies	252	2.96	1.07

As can be seen, each of the variables is positively and significantly correlated; Academic Satisfaction and environment ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ) indicating higher score in environmental satisfaction tend to have higher academic satisfaction. Academic Satisfaction and Language Competencies ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ), showing that higher level of Korean language abilities leads to higher academic life satisfaction. Finally, environment and Korean language Competencies ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ) indicating that higher language proficiency results in higher environmental satisfaction.

**Table 2:** Correlations Concerning Variables of the Satisfaction of International Students

Variables	1	2	3
Academic Satisfaction	-		
Environment	.47**	-	
Korean Language Competencies	.25**	.32**	-

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do the environment and Korean language competencies affect students' academic life?

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the environment and Korean language competencies significantly predicted students' academic life. The results of the regression indicated the two predictors explained 22.7% of the variance in students' academic satisfaction ( $R^2=.227, F(2,251) = 36.65, p < .01$ ).

**Table 3:** Summary Statistics and Results from the Regression Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	T	Sig.
Academic Satisfaction	3.73	.721	1.640	.248		6.62	.000
Environment	3.87	.642	.482	.066	.430	7.30	.000
Korean Language Competencies	2.96	1.07	.075	.040	.110	1.87	.062

$R^2=.227, F(2,251) = 36.65, p < .01$

**Research Question 3:** How does the Korean language ability influence the students' academic experience?

The respondents described that the reason they took Korean-taught courses was either that there were no English courses offered during the semester or it was designated by their adviser. None of the respondents revealed that they took Korean classes out of personal preference: "If I have the option, I will not take them, to the registration site, it is usually indicated English lectures but in class it's Korean and since it's really on my core courses no option but manage a risk". "I had no other choice because I need those courses in my Major. They are not taught in English" was the way one person phrased it.

The respondents also expressed difficulty in being active during the Korean-taught classes despite the above-average level of their Korean ability as proven by the following statements: "Not active but as passive as passive verb" and "I'm not that active. Usually, I can only get 60% of the lessons even if I have level 6 so I don't participate in the discussion that much". Regarding completing the academic



requirements and answering exams in Korean-taught courses, the respondents still used English while some of them admitting to using Korean in only a fraction of the requirements and exams. This is indicated by the following statements: "I write the questions to be uploaded in blackboard in Korean but submit the final papers in English" and "Depends on the lecture most time I ask to write in English. Once I wrote in Korean".

## 5. Discussion

**A.** What is the overall level of student satisfaction with the scholarship program with regards to academic life, environment, and their Korean language competency?

Based on the findings of the factors that affect the international graduate students' overall satisfaction of the Korean Government Scholarship Program, it was revealed that all three variables indicated as academic life, environment and Korean language competencies that were tested in this research significantly contributed to the International students' satisfied response. International students as subjects of this study provided a unique dimension of academic life that is not often explored in other studies such as environment and academic life.

Though International Graduate students are satisfied with Korean Higher Education, Satisfaction levels for respondents in Korea were very similar to other international tertiary students around the world. The level of satisfaction is lower (3.73 on the scale of 5 which is approximately 0.746) compared to those in Western Countries. This study is similar to the one conducted by I-graduate 2014, showing the satisfaction of International students studying in Korea to be 2.99 on the scale of 4 which is approximately 0.747. This level of satisfaction may be a result of generous support from the Korean government as well as because 33.33% of the graduate students have never taken Korean taught courses.

The present study also found out that more than the Korean language competency, the environment which was rated as 3.87 on a scale of 5 is comparatively higher than the Korean language competency rating of 2.96. This was also consistent with a study of Zhang and Mi (2009) which found that language problems were neither obstinate nor widespread in academic performance.

**B.** To what extent do the environment and Korean language competency affect students' academic life?

An Evaluation of the educational environment is a vital element of program evaluation (Roff, 2005; Varma, Tiyagi & Gupta, 2005). The perception of students' educational setting can be a basis for implementing any academic program and thus optimizing the educational environment. Academic Satisfaction correlates positively with the students' perceptions of the educational environment ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ), which impacts on students' learning experiences and outcomes. It influences how, why, and what students learn (Aghamolaei & Fazel, 2010). This is further validated by (Yusoff, 2010) in his study revealing that the quality of the educational environment is indicative of the effectiveness of an educational program. The educational environment subscales

correlate positively with academic success and satisfaction toward educational programs.

Academic Satisfaction and Language Competencies ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ), showing that higher Korean language competencies lead to higher academic life satisfaction. Even though Language competencies correlate positively with academic satisfaction, Korean language competence does not significantly predict academic satisfaction. This may be the result of the internationalisation of Korean Higher Education where more than 30% of graduate courses are taught in English and the fact that some Korean Universities have established programs where all courses are taught in English. Moreover, it is interesting to note that 33.3% of the respondents have never taken any Korean taught courses and only 5.2% have taken all courses taught in Korean.

C. How does the Korean language competency influence the students' academic experience?

Even though we expected the Korean language proficiency acquired by international students to be important in the pursuit of academic degrees in Korea, the present study shows Korean language proficiency does not predict academic satisfaction. Due to the difficulty of participating actively in Korean-taught courses, it was revealed in the interview that the respondents would rather take courses in English. Even though they have sufficient Korean language ability; it does not automatically reflect that they complete the requirements and exams in Korean. Therefore, it is concluded that Korean language proficiency is not necessarily a requirement for International Students to study in Korean Graduate schools. This result is similar to the study conducted by Tamaoka, Ninomiya, and Nakaya (2003). The students in the present study were all graduate students so that they may be taught in English, and mostly read and write research papers in English. If this is true, Korean language ability, especially for those who do not use Korean in their academic work is only needed for daily living.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study of international students closely investigated the level of satisfaction held by graduate students. This study aimed to clarify the priorities of international students for coming to Korea under the auspices of the Korean Government School Program. This result may be attributed to the recent trend of English as an academic media; academic research at the graduate level is often conducted in English. Graduate students regardless of their linguistic backgrounds are required to publish academic papers in International Journal which are mostly in English.

This finding has implications for the importance of examining all three variables as critical considerations in evaluating how International students learn in a setting where their academic performance is not only the sole measure of their satisfaction but rather coupled with their learning environment and language competency. Although the present study is only limited to graduate students under the Korean Government Scholarship Program represented by 60 Universities, the paper provided information

regarding the priorities relative to satisfaction held by international students which should be given significant consideration for future reforms in the Korean higher institutions.

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