

**Decelerating Primary and Secondary School Closures in South Korea: Possible
Lessons from International Student Recruitment in Higher Education**

By

KIM, Moonsu

THESIS

Submitted to

KDI School of Public Policy and Management

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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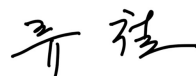
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ABSTRACT

This study argues that international student recruitment can decelerate school closures in Korea's primary and secondary schools. The study analyzes government policies and initiatives for international student recruitment in the higher education sector and identifies key success factors. The findings suggest that these strategies can be incorporated into the primary and secondary education sector to alleviate school closures derived from the country's negative population growth and to address the decline in domestic student enrolment. The research offers policy recommendations for primary and secondary schools to promote international student recruitment and highlights the importance of the issue in light of the demographic challenges facing Korean educators.

Keywords: International student, recruitment, school closure, primary and secondary education

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1. INTRODUCTION

At present, studies on how international student recruitment may alleviate primary and secondary school closures are nearly non-existent. Meanwhile, regarding higher education institutions, many studies have examined the social and economic impacts of international student recruitment, so this study aims to connect the gap by exploring the key potential for primary and secondary schools to benefit from similar strategies and policies. The Korea government's policies on international student recruitment in higher education, which was initiated in the 2000s, have proven to be successful in increasing the enrolment of international students when the number of domestic students has declined during the same period of time. These policies have significantly contributed to the management and economic stability of higher education institutions during the recent period of negative population growth. Similar strategies have been adopted in many other developed countries, resulting in positive impacts and benefits to numerous industries and have played an important role as one of the driving forces in economics.

On the other hand, the Korean government has neglected primary and secondary schools in terms of international student recruitment, which has accelerated school closures while the country has witnessed the rapid decline of the student population. The importance of international student recruitment and their enrolment at higher education institutions as a factor in maintaining stable management in the face of declining population highlights the feasibility for primary and secondary schools to benefit from similar recruitment policies and strategies. With many other governments and institutions of higher education in both the public and private sectors from developed countries proactively developing and implementing recruitment strategies to host overseas students, this research seeks to explore the potential for Korean

schools in primary and secondary education to decelerate school closures. This study examines the success factors in the Korean government's policies on international student recruitment in higher education and identify the potential for these principles to be adopted in primary and secondary schools. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and relevant case studies, policy recommendations for Korea's primary and secondary schools to host international students will be suggested, demonstrating the potential for this approach to help mitigate the domestic demographic-driven school closures in Korea. With negative population growth leading to a rapid decline of school numbers, the significance of this study cannot be overlooked, as it aims to find novel and applicable strategies to this pressing challenge.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Low birth rates in South Korea have been encouraging a faster depopulation phenomenon than was previously predicted, which has resulted in a dramatic reduction of student enrolment at all school levels and has elevated the risk of school closures throughout the country. The Ministry of Education has constantly developed and implemented national strategies for higher education in order to attract more international students, not just to strengthen their global competitiveness, but also to secure the future of colleges and universities in response to declining student numbers. On the other hand, secondary and primary schools are facing negative consequences of falling enrolment without strategic visions to protect their educational ecosystem, resulting in the declining number of schools, particularly in rural areas where the youth population is comparatively lower than their counterparts in urban areas.

The world's population is projected to surpass 10 billion by 2100 (UN, 2022), even though its growth rates have been slowing down across the globe. Some countries, such as Bulgaria, Lithuania, Croatia, Japan and Italy, are in the top group where depopulation is already occurring with a decline in population that is faster than in other countries. South Korea was in a relatively modest group where the pace of negative population growth was just under the medium variant (Stangarone 2022). However, the recent demographic change has accelerated this decline to 2021 (Statistics Korea, 2019). This downward trend does not simply reflect a social phenomenon, but led to decreased student enrolment, increased school closures, and negative impacts on multiple industries across the country. In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this dramatic social change has been exacerbated, which has led to a faster decline of population across the nation due to low birth rates and high death rates associated with the disease.

On the contrary to primary and secondary education, higher education institutes in many advanced countries have strategically developed educational policies to recruit more international students as a means to boost their economies, which are not fully supported by domestic public funding (NAFSA, 2020). In some countries, such as Australia and the United States, education services have been one of the top export industries: the third largest in Australia (Hare, 2022) and the fifth in the U.S (Calder, 2020). These nations have witnessed their student enrolment decline earlier than other countries and realized that attracting international students into their territory could be an alternative to compensate for their declining student body (OECD, 2020). At the same time, the demand for international higher education has been growing in developing countries because of a lack of domestic educational services and a growing

population. Thus, outbound demand from these developing countries has met the necessity of inbound international students in select advanced countries. In the Korean context responding to this demand, the Ministry of Education implemented a national policy ‘Study Korea Project’ in 2004, the very first educational policy in the country to attract global talent, and the initiative successfully reached its target of 50,000 students in 2007, three years in advance of the 2010 goal. A second policy was then introduced in 2008 to attract 100,000 students by 2012, and the number was very nearly achieved in 2011, falling only 10 percent short of the target number. The Ministry of Education aggressively developed its next stage to attract 200,000 students by 2020 in 2012 and modified its target year in 2015 to 2023. However, the number of international students in South Korea as well as throughout the world has stagnated in the past two years because of restricted border control, in no small part fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the number of international students in Korea has slightly decreased since 2019.

In Korea and other developed nations, birth rate is not the only factor that has contributed to a decline of student enrolment and school closures; intranational migration has also influenced the downward trend, particularly in rural areas where young adults move to urban areas in search of stable and better economic opportunities (youth-out phenomenon). In the case of South Korea, the number of schools is still growing in 12 metropolitan cities and provinces where domestic population mobility has been concentrated except for 5 provinces: Gangwon-do, Chungcheongnam-do, Jeollabuk-do, Jeollanam-do, and Gyeongsangbuk-do. However, because of the decreasing population across the country, many local governments in the rural areas find it difficult to attract young people into their regional labor market, resulting in the need to actively recruit and host international migrants to supplement their labor shortfall. Hosting global talent

can be a good source to compensate for demands in the labor force, but a national and local policy to support these incoming families is limited in many ways. The majority of those multicultural students¹ are from families with one parent holding a different citizenship because of marriage migration, which has increased since the 1990s (Yang, 2011). Due to this rapid growth of multicultural students in primary schools, a strong demand to support their learning has been emphasized. However, this increase of multicultural population is not driven by national policies to attract international talent, but rather from social phenomena tied to national economic growth.

2-1. International Student Mobility

Discussion on internationalization in education gained attention in the 1980s when the number of higher education providers across the world had sharply expanded, thus the institutions began to show increasing interest in developing strategies not just to enhance students' competitiveness on a global scale but also to recruit international students (Yemini, 2014). Since then, institutional internationalization has been an important part of developmental strategies at universities and colleges (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Dolby & Rahman, 2008; Uys & Middleton, 2011). Private higher education institutions with limited funding from their government have found their own way to survive by offering dynamic academic programs to students from developing countries where demand for advanced knowledge and skills is high but their domestic infrastructure is not sufficient enough to support their local talent. Meanwhile, public funded institutions with stable financial resources have focused on enhancing academic knowledge, research capabilities, and cultural awareness, and they have also developed

¹ In the education sector, students from multicultural families are defined as either one parent or two parents holding a different nationality other than Korean citizenship.

internationally-oriented curriculum, language learning, and a variety of study abroad programs for both domestic and international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Students consider studying abroad during their college time as a positive contribution to their future career development, which sets them apart from their competitors in the labor market, regardless of their origins - whether it is domestic or global (Waters, 2009; Findlay et al., 2012). Another reason young adults decide to get a degree outside of their home countries is purely economic; they seek economic opportunities to have higher and more secure income in the host destination country which might have a lack of human resources and is in need of advanced, skilled labor in specific occupations. Thus, popular destinations for international students to study abroad have been dominated by mainly English-speaking countries for the past decades: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Other desired destinations include China and Japan, where a majority of the inbound students are from Asian backgrounds, and France and Germany where most of the students are from other European countries: all these countries are positioned in the top economy group in each continent.

The developing nations with the growing population have great potential to send more young adults to developed countries for higher education and advanced skills and knowledge. Thus, many of the developed nations strategically attract international students by offering a variety of academic, vocational programs, as well as scholarships. Even though some of the young migrant students would return to their home countries for many reasons (such as family reunification, cultural difference, social status, etc.), others eventually prefer to stay in the host

countries for better economic opportunities and social benefits than what they could earn from their countries of origin. International education is not simply a one-time experience, but it can be extended to a lifelong decision. Young adults typically go abroad without their family members as they are mature enough to survive in an exotic environment where their language and culture is different. However, for younger pupils pursuing primary and secondary education, it is required by laws and regulations that they need a legal guardian in the host nations who can support and protect them, creating more limitations than for students in the higher education sector. Therefore, international student recruitment policies in primary and secondary education to invite overseas students require more nuanced approaches than in higher education.

2-2. International Students

Research on international students in secondary education has not been sufficiently discussed in academia with existing research mainly focusing on students' academic achievements or school services for multicultural students with one or both parents holding overseas citizenship. In the higher education sector, international students have been considered as part of the institutional globalization strategy, but they are now seen as important resources for school management, as declining domestic student enrolment requires diverse student groups. In many advanced countries, especially English-speaking countries, higher education institutions charge higher tuition for international students than local students with a tuition gap almost double that for local students (University World News, 2014). Despite the higher expense, demand for overseas experience in education continues to grow, driven by a growing number of population in the sending countries. However, an international student body in the secondary education sector is not increasing as rapidly as in the higher education sector due to a lack of

supportive policy to enhance global competitiveness and neglected research on these younger students.

The reasons behind international students in higher education deciding to study abroad include employment and career competitiveness and the expansion of intercultural awareness, including language acquisition. Students who complete their higher education are under intense pressure to succeed in finding a job in the labor market, which is directly relevant to their graduation. On the other hand, younger students before college have less motivation to study abroad because their primary focus is getting into university, and they are still not mature enough to be completely independent. Young adults in postsecondary education have more freedom and independence to go abroad and create their own lives while younger pupils have few opportunities to choose their overseas experience without legal guardians. Furthermore, as governments and higher education institutions have mainly focused on recruiting international talents only to the higher education sector with competitive scholarships and benefits, there has been limited support and policy directives to attract young pupils into secondary education. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2008), from 1998 to 2004, international student mobility increased by 52% whereas world migration grew by only 13%. This difference highlights the need for a synthesis of existing research and policies on international student recruitment in secondary and higher education in South Korea.

2-3. International Student Recruitment Policy

The Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development (this agency became the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2008, and simply the Ministry of Education in

2013) in Korea first introduced policy for international student recruitment in 2004 with the following objectives: (1) to intensify an education value in the global market as an export industry, (2) to achieve a balance in numbers between outbound and inbound students, (3) to establish stronger relationships on the global stage, particularly in North-East Asia, and address the impending shortage of human resources due to a rapidly aging society, and (4) to make higher education institutions more internationalized and globally competitive. Before the Ministry introduced this policy, support from the government was insufficient in many ways. Government funding was approximately USD 2.3-5.7 million² between 2001 and 2004, which led to a lack of administrative personnel, a shortage of marketing strategies, less competitive national scholarships, and inadequate support services for international students such as academic courses offered in English, scholarship opportunities to reduce financial burden, and career development.

The Korean government's policy on international student recruitment which was first introduced by the Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development in 2004 aimed to enhance education as part of many export industries, to make balance between outbound and inbound student flow, to build tighter connections with global communities focusing on North-East Asia, and to help higher education institutions to be more competitive on the global stage. The policy resulted in a tenfold increase in the number of international students, from 16,832 in 2004 to 160,165 in 2019, before the covid-19 pandemic hit. At the same time, the student body became more diversified, coming not only from China but also from many other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Mongolia, and Central Asia, as well as from Africa and South America. However, despite the quantitative growth in the past two decades, the government's

² This study assumes a general exchange rate of USD 1 = 1,000 KRW.

recruitment strategy has remained noticeably unchanged. According to the 2020 issue paper published by the Korean Educational Development Institute (KERI), *A Study on International Student Recruitment and Management at Higher Education Institutions in Korea* (Kim, 2020), the growing number of international students has led to a rise of illegal sojourns that accounts for 15% of the total student population from abroad. In spite of these negative outcomes, it is expected that the number of international students will continue to increase, despite being stagnant in the past three years due to the pandemic, as the developing countries with growing populations will continually send more students to developed countries with advanced knowledge and skills.

The Ministry of Education in Korea has mainly focused on its efforts on international student recruitment in higher education, neglecting the needs of primary and secondary education. This has resulted in increasing demands for support for pupils from multicultural families who struggle with academic performance, language acquisition, and other school-related activities. Whereas universities have offices and staff members who specialize in providing professional services to international students in their academic pursuits and in helping them to adapt to campus life, primary and secondary schools have limited resources to assist new arrivals who need more assistance than young adults in higher education. In this paper, the existing strategies implemented in higher education will be evaluated and applied to primary and secondary schools in Korea to assess the economic impact of school closures.

2-4. School Closure in Primary and Secondary Education

The school communities, particularly in rural areas, have faced a significant decline in student enrolment, which has led to school closures and had negative impacts on local economies. However, it is not evident if school closures are a cause or consequence of depopulation (Barakat, 2014). Some believe that school closures are a result of out-migration from the region, but others argue that negative population growth occurs because of a lack of schools and associated infrastructure. According to data from Statistics Korea (2022), while the number of higher education institutions has increased from 368 in 1999 to 426 in 2021 - an increase of more than 15% in the past two decades, the total number of students has only slightly increased by 1.5%. Interestingly, the number of primary and secondary schools has increased from 10,344 to 11,777 - more than a 13% increase - during the same period, but the student population has dramatically reduced by 34%. In higher education, the main reason for the stable student enrolment can be attributed to the rising participation rate of female students and an increase in the number of general students pursuing higher education. On the other hand, although the student body has significantly declined in primary and secondary schools during the same period, the number of schools has gone up primarily due to the consistently decreasing teacher-student ratio over the years.

In higher education, the term “school closure” has not been rarely used. Instead, universities that are merging with neighboring universities are often referred to as being “merged or integrated” into one management system and leadership, allowing them to maintain separate campuses. This managerial change has led to a continued growth of infrastructure supporting higher education, with no change in the actual number of colleges and universities. However, the

situation in primary and secondary education is different, where the accumulated number of closed schools has reached up to 3,855 since 1982 (Korean Educational Statistics Services, 2021). This is in contrast to the increasing number of new schools opening in the same period. The expansion of new schools has been driven by several factors, such as the reduction in class size or the lower teacher-student ratio, resulting in an increased number of teachers even as the overall student population has significantly declined. Additionally, the concentration of the population in urban areas has led to schools opening in already overpopulated cities. However, in rural areas where the youth have migrated out, it is often difficult to close a small-sized school, even when the number of students is smaller than that of teachers and school staff members.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis on the issues of international student recruitment, enrolment decline, and school closures in the education sector in South Korea, with a particular focus on both higher education and primary and secondary schools. The traditional research on these issues has been limited, with a major emphasis placed on higher education and a narrow focus on the educational performance of multicultural students in primary and secondary education. To address this difference, the paper will utilize statistical data collected by Statistics Korea and the Korean Educational Development Institute. The data to be analyzed in the paper include the national population and its projected in Korea, enrolment numbers in higher education and primary and secondary schools, the number of higher education institutions and primary and secondary schools, the number of international students enrolled in both levels of education, the number of closed higher education institutions and primary and secondary schools, change of class sizes in primary and secondary schools, and student-teacher

ratios in both levels of education. This data will be analyzed to identify any similarities and differences in the management of international student recruitment in different levels of education and to determine the applicability of national strategies for international student recruitment to primary and secondary schools. This study will also review relevant articles and policy regulations for international student recruitment in Korea found on the Ministry of Education website to provide additional insights.

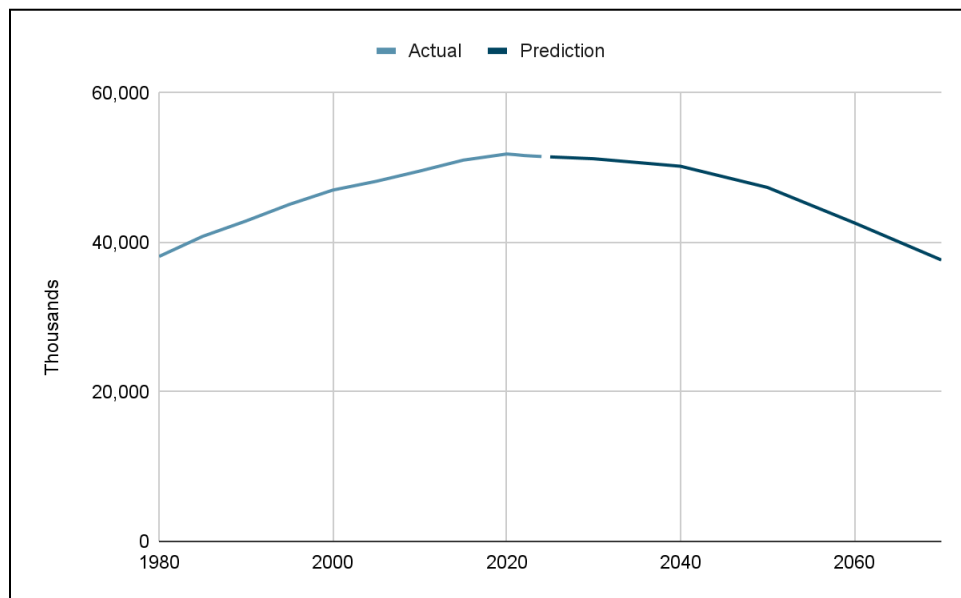
4. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

This study has several limitations to be acknowledged. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted international student mobility and recruitment patterns both globally and within Korea, making it difficult to accurately extrapolate data and measure the effectiveness and success of established goals. Despite these limitations, this study highlights the need for further research on the impact of international student enrolment on higher education, and its potential applications in primary and secondary education. Additionally, there are some areas that require further investigation. First, it is important to explore the motivations behind international migration, which can vary across countries and age groups. Secondly, the economic costs associated with opening new schools and closing existing ones need to be thoroughly analyzed. Lastly, the examination of national strategies aimed at increasing overall international migrants in Korea is necessary in order to develop effective and practical policies for international student recruitment in primary and secondary schools.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

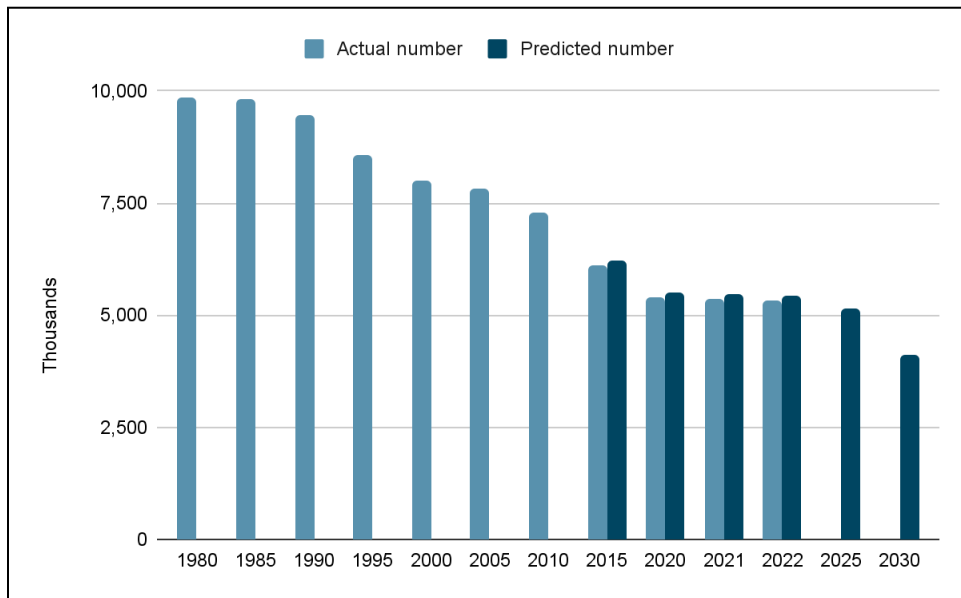
The enrolment of students in primary and secondary schools in Korea reached its highest point in the 1980s as a result of the government's family planning policies developed and implemented between the 1960s and 1970s (Haub, 2010 and KEDI, 2022). However, the number of pupils enrolled in schools began to decrease, but it was not considered as a major issue to the school community because it was a deliberate adjustment by the government and the country was experiencing rapid economic growth. In the late 1990s, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Korea fell below 1.5 children signaling a potential for negative population growth and eventual decline in the near future. As a result, the national population was initially predicted to decrease near 2030, but the nation witnessed its first negative population growth in 2021, which was nine years ahead of the predictions.

<Figure 1. The National Population in South Korea and Its Prediction (1980 - 2070)>



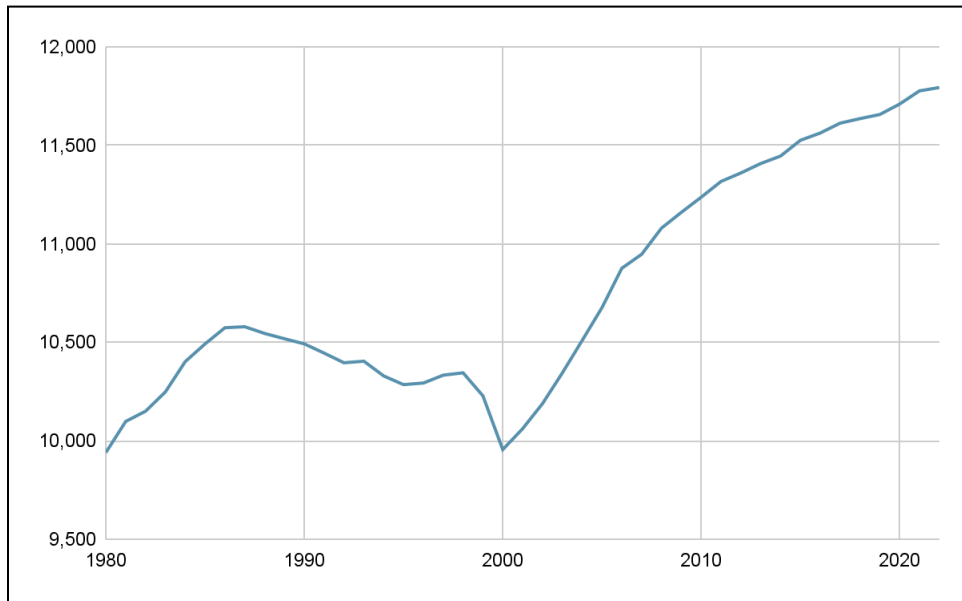
As a result, the number of students enrolled in primary and secondary schools has dramatically dropped over the past four decades after reaching its peak in the 1980s. Despite this downfall, the number of schools has increased by 18% from 9,940 in 1980 to 11,794 in 2022. This growth can be attributed to the decrease in student-teacher ratio and class size during the nation’s developmental period. The student-teacher ratio was reduced to less than one third of its size in 1980 from 47.5 students per teacher to 13.7 in primary school, from 45.1 to 11.7 in middle school and from 33.3 to 9.6 in high school by 2022. Similarly, the class size was also reduced by a little more than one third of its size in 1980 from 51.5 per class to 21.5 in primary school, from 65.5 to 25.4 in middle school, and from 61.2 to 23 in high school. This reduction in student-teacher ratio and class size explains the increase in the number of schools despite the decline in the total number of students during the same period.

< Figure 2. The Number of Students in Primary and Secondary Education (1980-2035) >

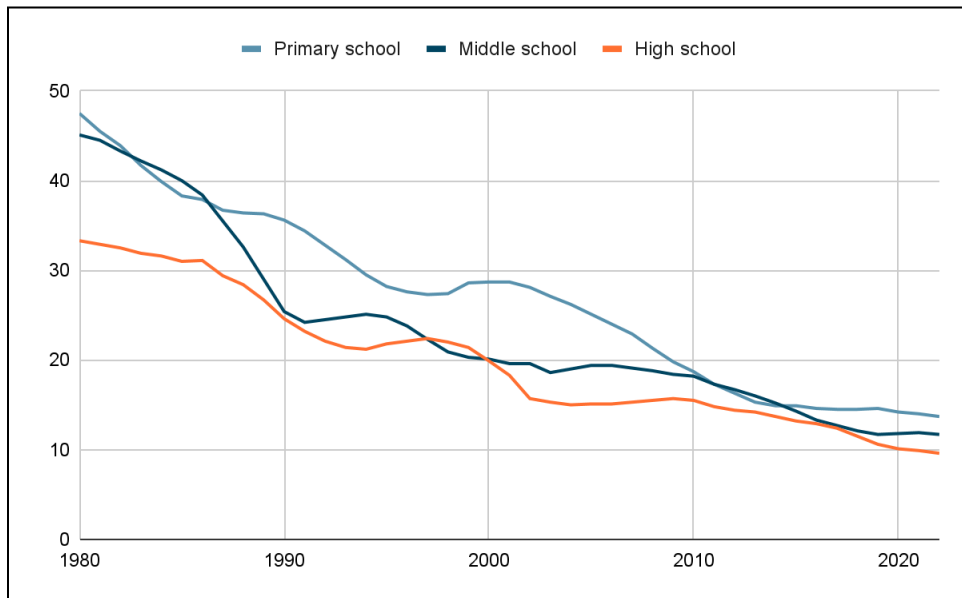


As shown in Figure 2, the student enrollment recorded its highest point of 9.99 million in 1982, with 10,150 registered schools. During that period, the student-teacher ratio and class size was not ideal for learning. Studies by Hamre et al. (2007) and La Paro et al. (2004) suggest that social interaction between pupils and teachers is a crucial factor determining academic success, and this can be influenced by other external elements such as the number of students per teacher and class size. It is widely believed that small classes are more efficient for teaching and learning (Koc & Celik, 2015), and this belief has led to educational policies aimed at reducing class size in many countries including Europe, Japan, and the US (Blatchford & Lai, 2012). However, in Korea, the decrease of student-teacher ratio is not only due to class size reduction, but also a result of decreasing student enrollment in rural areas where negative population growth was recorded earlier than in urban areas. In 2022, the total number of students in primary and secondary education was 5.27 million, a 47% decrease from 1982, while the national population increased from 39.33 million to 51.45 million, a 30.8% increase during the same period. This disparity between the number of students and the national population is attributed to the low birth rate and increased life expectancy. The World Bank (2019) reports that life expectancy in Korea was 66 years in 1980 and 83 years in 2019, and is expected to increase.

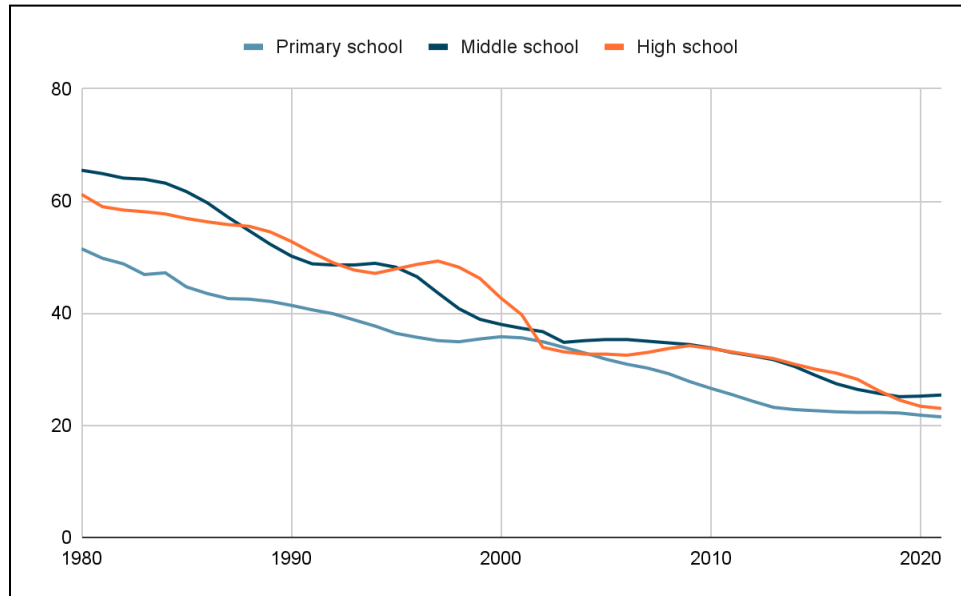
< Figure 3. The Number of Primary and Secondary Schools (1980 - 2022) >



< Figure 4. Student-Teacher Ratio in Primary and Secondary Education (1980 - 2022) >

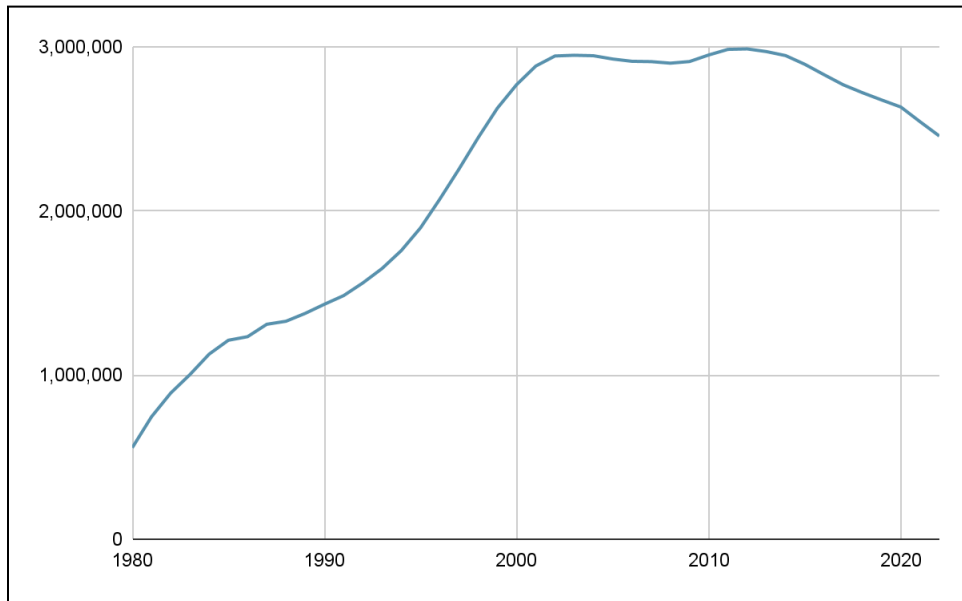


< Figure 5. Class Size in Primary and Secondary Schools (1980 - 2021) >



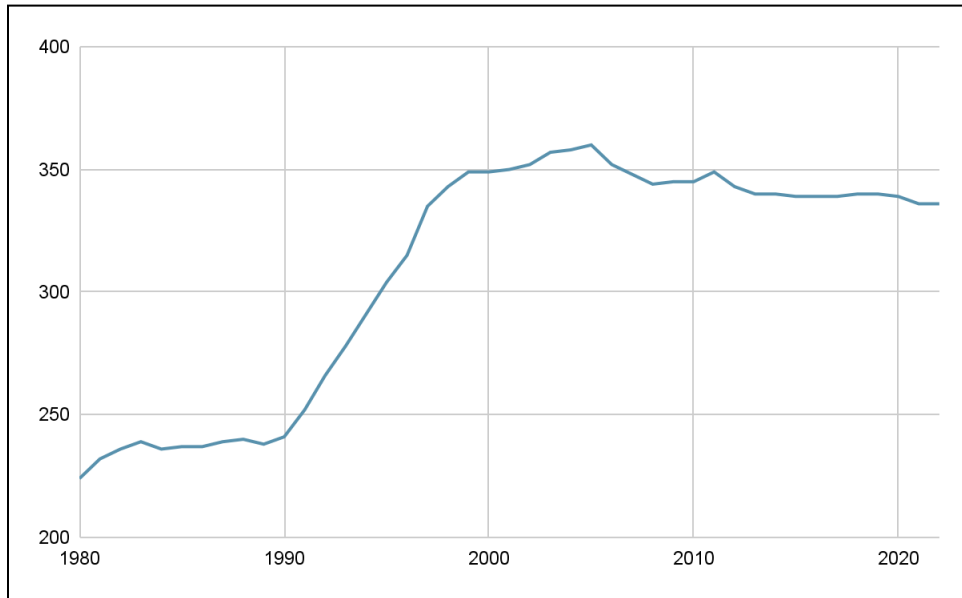
The number of students in higher education has remained relatively stable over the past two decades, unlike the decline in primary and secondary education. This can be attributed to the compulsory education system in primary and secondary schools and a low admission rate to higher education during the nation's economic development stage. In 1982, the number of pupils enrolled in primary and secondary schools was 9.99 million, and that in higher education was only 0.89 million, which was 8.9% of the size in primary and secondary education. By 2022, the number of students enrolled in higher education went up to 2.45 million, which was 46% of the size in primary and secondary schools. As the national economy improved, the enrollment rate from high school to higher education institutions increased from 11% in 1982 to 71.5% in 2021, leading to fewer changes in the number of higher education students.

<Figure 6. The Number of Students in Higher Education (1980 - 2022)>



As seen in Figure 7, there was a surge in the number of higher education institutions in the 1990s due to a significant rise in student enrollment from secondary schools and the lifting of government restrictions on the establishment and opening of new universities across the country. Despite reaching a peak of 2.9 million students in 2002, enrollment numbers have remained stagnant over the years and started to decline in the 2010s. Recognizing the need to address this issue, the Ministry of Education became interested in developing national strategies to attract more international students, not only to remain competitive with other higher education institutions in advanced countries, but also to maintain and protect their institutions from further decline in domestic student enrollment. This resulted in many higher education institutions successfully recruiting a large number of international students until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020.

< Figure 7. The Number of Higher Education Institutions (1980 - 2022) >



Despite the current challenges faced by higher education institutions due to declining domestic enrollment and limited budget, some have found success by making their campuses globally oriented through recruiting a high number of international students. For instance, Australian universities have demonstrated the positive impact hosting international students can have on the national economy. According to the Parliament of Australia (2022), one in three students at Australia's 43 universities are from overseas, with the average percentage of international students on campus in 2019 reaching 32.4%. The highest percentage of international students was at Federation University Australia (54.9%), followed by Bond University (53.7%), Monash University (47.7%), RMIT (46.5%). On the other hand, the lowest percentages were at The University of Notre Dame Australia (1.8%), The University of New England (7.3%), University of Divinity (10.5%) and University of Southern Queensland (11%) (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021).

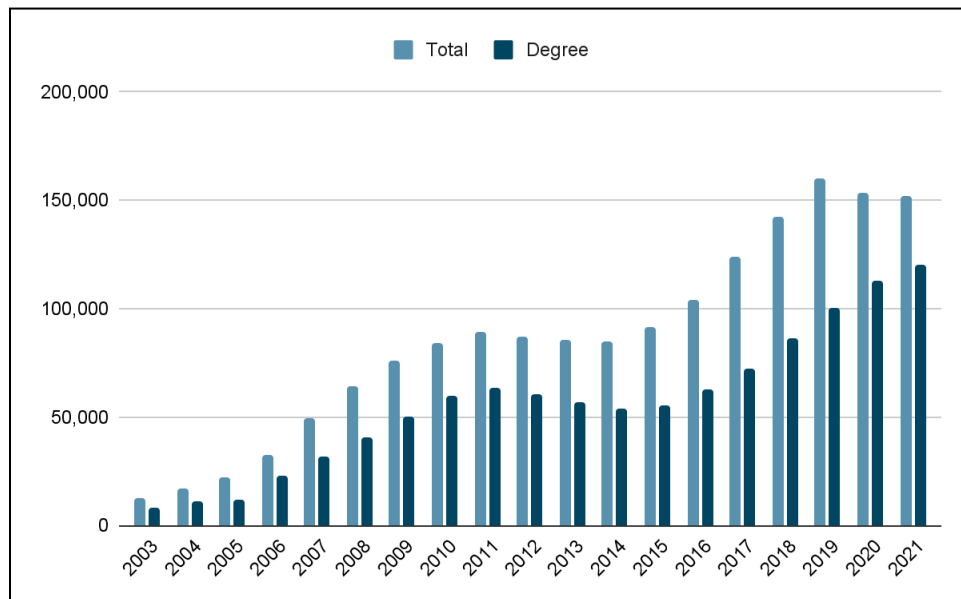
< Figure 8. The Top Five Universities with International Students in Korea (2019) >

Institution	Total Student Enrolment	International Student Enrolment	Percentage of International Student
Kyung Hee University	34,542	6,002	17.38%
Hanyang University	22,556	5,612	24.88%
Sungkyunkwan University	25,439	5,098	20.04%
Yonsei University	27,265	4,883	17.91%
Chung-Ang University	25,714	4,495	17.48%
Korea University	27,274	4,134	15.16%

On the other hand, South Korea's higher education sector has also seen growth in terms of international student enrollment. In 2019, the average percentage of international students was 5.99%. This represents a significant increase compared to 2004 when the government implemented a national strategy to actively attract international students, with the percentage starting at just 0.57% across the country. The top six universities with the highest percentage of international students in the nation are all private institutions located in Seoul, the capital city of Korea. These universities include Kyung Hee University, Hanyang University, Sungkyunkwan University, Yonsei University, Chung-Ang University and Korea University. In 2021, the total number of international students at these six universities was 30,224, accounting for about one-fifth of the total number of registered international students at all higher education institutions. The average percentage of international students at these six universities was 18.57%, a similar trend seen at Australian universities. Private institutions have more autonomy in management compared to public institutions as their budget is self-funded through various funding resources. This autonomy leads to the development of aggressive international student recruitment strategies to maintain management capacity. Moreover, geographical advantages, as

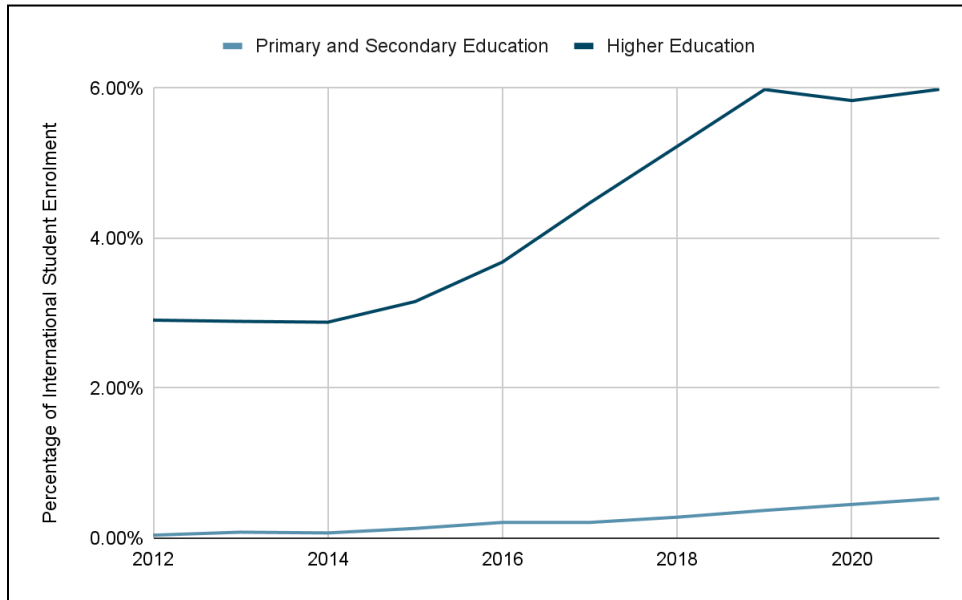
the capital of the country, play an important role in attracting international talents. Although the number of international students in higher education has stagnated in recent years, the government has still made positive progress over the past two decades in terms of increasing international student enrollment.

<Figure 9. The Number of International Students in Higher Education in Korea (2003 - 2021)>



The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022) reports that the worldwide accessibility of higher education for students has seen a significant increase, more than doubling from 99.4 million in 2000 to 235 million in 2020. This trend is projected to continue, with the global number of students in higher education expected to reach 414 million by 2030. This growth has also led to an increase in international student mobility, which has gone up from 2 million in 2000 to 6 million in 2019. Given this upward trend, higher education institutions in developed countries are making consistent progress and efforts to attract more international students, devising strategies and implementing policies to achieve this goal.

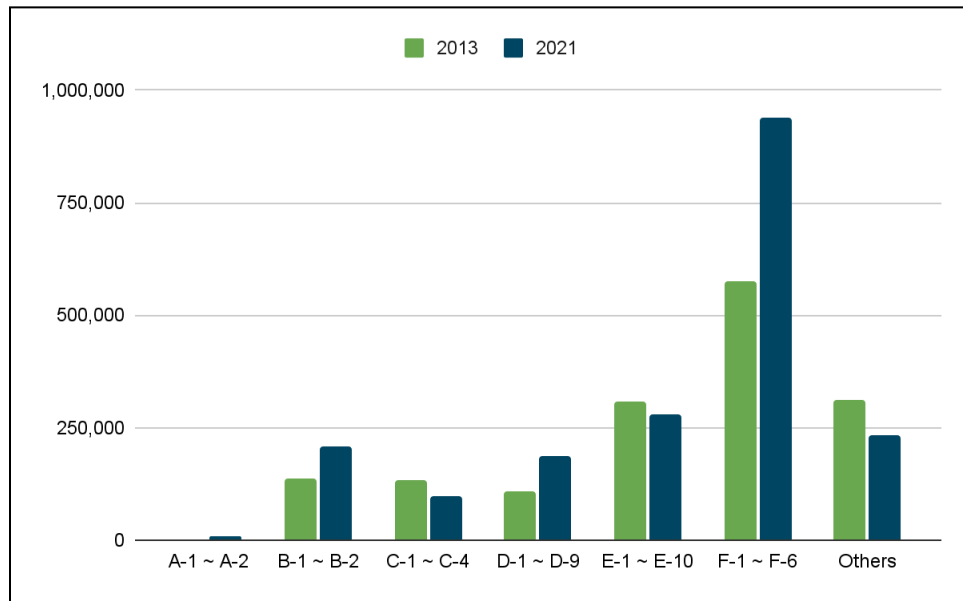
<Figure 10. International Student Ratio in Primary-Secondary and Higher Education (2012 - 2021)>



In contrast to higher education, the number of international students in primary and secondary education in South Korea is relatively low despite experiencing a substantial increase in recent years. The number of international students enrolled in primary and secondary education was only 2,563 in 2012 when the government started collecting data on multicultural students. This number has since grown tenfold to 28,424 in 2021. However, in spite of this upward trend, the number of international students in primary and secondary education remains small compared to higher education as seen in Figure 10, and there is no particular policy in place to attract students from abroad. The recent growth in the number of international students in primary and secondary education is due to labor immigration from countries such as China and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) where many Korean descendents reside. The number of foreign residents in South Korea has also increased from 1,576,034 in 2013 to 1,956,781 in 2021, mainly among those with F-1, F-4, F-5 and F-6 visas (Family Visitor,

Overseas Korean, Permanent Resident, and Marriage Migrant, respectively), allowing for longer stays in the country and the possibility of inviting and making family members in Korea.

<Figure 11. The Number of Registered Foreign Residents in Korea in 2013 and 2021>



The number of students per school in primary and secondary education is 451. Based on this figure, it is possible to estimate the number of new schools, teachers, and classes needed to accommodate the percentage of international students in higher education (5.9%). This would create approximately 696 new schools, 22,924 teachers, and 14,607 primary school classes to accommodate 314,061 international students, providing increased job opportunities in the education sector. In order to emulate the higher education sector’s approach, it is crucial to understand their practices implemented in the past two decades. First, the government has greatly expanded the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS), starting with 44 grantees in 2004 when the Study Korea Project was introduced and growing to 1,378 grantees in 2022. Second, the government leveraged overseas Korean consulates and embassies to promote education in Korea and

provided funding for the construction of additional educational facilities to enhance the connection between international students and domestic higher education institutions. Third, the government combined education with culture. For instance, when the Ministry of Education organized an educational fair abroad, they invited K-pop artists into the fair. Fourth, the government encouraged universities and colleges to increase their offerings of degree programs in English and Korean language courses. Fifth, overseas Korean educational centers provided advanced language courses to prepare students accepted into universities for their degree programs before coming to Korea. Additionally, the government expanded TOPIK test centers in regions with high demand for Korean language and established partnerships with local governments to offer Korean as a second language in schools and Korean studies at universities. Sixth, the government improved administrative services for international students by adding specialized offices and personnel in the central government, standardizing visa procedure, etc.

The Ministry of Education modified its secondary trajectory to recruit 200,000 international students by 2020 to by 2023. However, this timeline may change due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the Ministry has implemented a variety of strategies to recruit and support international students along with many higher education institutes for the past twenty years. Although there is criticism of just focusing on quantity, international student recruitment drives the economy and stabilizes universities facing declining enrollment. Thus a similar policy should be developed and introduced in primary and secondary education. Among the policies implemented in higher education at the initial stage of strategic international student recruitment, two main strategies can be considered to be applied in primary and secondary education: (1) a government-funded scholarship program for pupils in schools and (2)

strengthened administrative support from central and local government. For school students, compared to university students, it requires more funding to invite them as they will have to bring their parents or legal guardians. Even though the government may not be able to fully fund the entire family, providing job opportunities to secure their income is crucial. In terms of administrative support, the primary and secondary education sector lacks specialized personnel and division for international student recruitment, unlike higher education where the Ministry of Education and National Institute for International Education have professional teams for this purpose. Many colleges and universities have offices and personnel dedicated to supporting international students, including recruitment, but the 17 metropolitan and provincial offices of education that oversee educational policies in their areas lack the expertise, skills, and focus on international student recruitment. Instead, they concentrate on supporting students from multicultural families with language development and school admission.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research suggest that adopting international student recruitment strategies seen in the higher education sector in South Korea could be an effective approach to decelerate school closures in primary and secondary schools. This study explored and comprehensively analyzed not only the Korean government's policies and strategies, but also institutional efforts from the higher education sector, and found that these approaches could be applied for primary and secondary education. School closures and the declining number of domestic student enrolment in primary and secondary education is a serious social problem and a pressing concern, given the country's negative growth rate and decreasing birth rate. Even though the current proportion of international student enrolment in primary and secondary

education is relatively small when compared to higher education, the potential economic benefits of international student recruitment and their enrolment can be substantial. As the world population and international student mobility is expected to increase, hosting international students at primary and secondary schools could alleviate the problem of school closures and generate new economic opportunities to a society with a declining population. The need to consider international student recruitment as a key strategy to alleviate school closures in primary and secondary education in South Korea cannot be overstated and some of the policies suggested here may offer a first step in addressing issues that have been too long ignored.

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