

Book Review: Constructing student mobility: How universities recruit students and shape pathways between Berkeley and Seoul **The MIT Press (2023). ISBN 9780262373371 By Stephanie Kim**

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Overview

Constructing Student Mobility: How Universities Recruit Students and Shape Pathways between Berkeley and Seoul challenges the dominant discourse on international student mobility. Kim (2023) argues that the book “centers on universities—rather than students—as the most important actors in understanding student mobility flows” (p. 4). Kim explores topics for current higher education scholars to re-focus on the emergence of novel university pathways, the contested influx of international students, and the global student supply chain as well as institutional actors. In other words, this book aims its scholarships to provide a better understanding of international student mobility to further navigate through developing study abroad systems within today’s industrializing international education.

Kim has accumulated these scholarly findings over a decade of studying, researching, and working in higher education in the United States and South Korea. The book consists of three distinct research studies that the author has conducted in South Korea, California, and Washington, D.C. First, Kim conducted participant observations and semi-structured interviews across Berkeley and Seoul, primarily at UC Berkeley and Yonsei University. Second, she interviewed a total of eighty-three students, faculty members, administrators, and other professionals. Third, Kim contextualized information acquired through observations and interviews by compiling documents including university mission statements, strategic plans, deans’ statements, promotional materials, enrollment statistics, institutional reports, etc. Further, Kim offers a plain view of internationally mobile students by situating students’ experiences whose global aspirations are cultivated through two specific universities—University of California, Berkeley in the United States and Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

Organization of the Book

The focal discussion of this book was extrapolated from the combination of the author’s professional experience, academic research, and participated students’ primary experiences. The book consists of 6 chapters as follows: 1) “Those Rich International Students,” 2) A Pathway into UC Berkeley, 3) A Pathway into Yonsei University, 4) The Contradictions of Choice, 5) The Global Student Supply Chain, and 6) Lessons from a Turbulent Decade. This book also includes a methodological appendix for those interested in how the studies were conducted.

Chapter 1: “Those Rich International Students” demonstrates the palpable impact of the economic prosperity embedded in the global student supply chain and its impact on the U.S. economy, primarily from South Korean students. Kim points to the market-driven logic in higher education as the conflation of international students regarding revenue generation—and how this is related to the educational culture in South Korea. Chapter 2: A Pathway into UC Berkeley examines students from South Korea studying at UC Berkeley. The embedded story explains how the California higher education system reconfigured its pathway and admission systems along with its community colleges. Chapter 3: A Pathway into Yonsei University examines Yonsei University in South Korea. The discussion captures the early years of the international college’s operations in the 2010s as they opened an international college with an adaptation of the American liberal arts model.

Chapter 4: The Contradictions of Choice shares stories of students who chose to pursue their education at either UC Berkeley or Yonsei University by participating in the universities’ agreements, such as an exchange student program. Further, the chapter problematizes the concept of international students’ decisions through encountered challenges and the process to come to fruition in their educational investment. Chapter 5: The Global Student Supply Chain identifies a range of associated education agencies and individuals between universities and students within the industry of the global higher education market. This process funnels students to specific universities to reinforce the global student supply chain to specific universities to accommodate market demands. Chapter 6: Lessons from a Turbulent Decade places emphasis on lessons from the post-recession decade in global higher education and reflects on the future of international student mobility: the emergence of novel pathways, the contested influx of international students, and the acknowledgment of the global student supply chain. These lessons triggered a reformation of mechanisms for university arrangements to further captivate students’ attention through more internationally mobile pathways. Moreover, the chapter provides resonating stories from the students who participated in the book earlier and their post-college lives.

Analysis

Considering the author holds multiple identities—as an academic scholar, a woman, a Korean American, a speaker of fluent English and a serviceable Korean, the author takes a reflexive approach to transparentize the analytical perspective in various scenarios through participating students’ primary experiences with their decision to internationally pursue higher education. While the students’ shared experiences provide a broad understanding of the given circumstances, readers should keep in mind that there could be other variable scenarios and limitations in eliciting standardized practices when solving complex challenges with international student mobility. Particularly, issues pertaining to international students’ temporary residence status and limited work authorization remain an ongoing subject of discussion.

The author uses an expression that South Korea has “hypercompetitive” college admissions. An additional factor to consider is the academic grading process in the education systems between South Korea and the United States: relative evaluation vs. absolute evaluation. In South Korea, the academic grade is often given in the certain top percentile while classmates compete with each other, known as relative evaluation. For example, if there are 30 students in a class, only 10% can receive an academic letter grade of A—3 students. The students’ grades are based on ranking and how well they do compared to their peers. In the United States, the academic grade is often based on absolute evaluation—which is to evaluate the performance in relation to certain standard criteria established as a whole, regardless of other individuals’ outcomes. This system could be a contributing factor in giving the sense of competing versus cooperating with each other—which affects the “hypercompetitive” college admission system that is constantly in flux as the author mentions. Subsequent to this educational environment, another challenge is “a high unemployment rate of university graduates” (Jeong, 2018) in South Korea. Accordingly, Jeong (2018) discusses how universities in South Korea have transformed their new policy practices toward globalization and a knowledge-based economy through competition and marketization—to respond to the new social environment in higher education over the past two decades.

The rapidly growing interest in pursuing higher education in South Korea is a significant element of today’s global market consumption in the education industry. Kim briefly mentions the rapid shift of culture in attaining [higher] education before and after the Korean War in the 1950s. This historical event conveys a principal understanding of why

most South Koreans had not completed primary school around that time—and why today’s South Korean youth are the most educated in the world in terms of higher education attainment among members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The culture of promoting higher education in South Korea might have been derived from the history of limited education opportunities; therefore, parents who were born or raised near or immediately after the Korean War may want to provide their children with privileged access to [higher] education that they did not have. History creates culture; culture creates expectations. These expectations can play a major role in creating students’ responsibilities in their educational investment.

For the return on their educational investment and student mobility among many other countries, the choice of country and time to study abroad should be made prudently. Kritz (2016) shares findings that countries with higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita tend to have more students abroad compared to others. This economic factor may be another interface in shaping international student mobility ratios between different countries. With the increasing number of studies focusing on the internationalization of higher education, Yang (2020) also questions about rights, responsibility, justice, and equality of international student mobility since these topics have remained largely scattered. It is imperative for international students to understand subsequent limitations in studying abroad and prepare within available options along with contingency plans.

Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education

The scholarly contributions of this book carry significant value in filling a noticeable gap between higher education scholars and practitioners whose audiences are connected to international students. This book well-contextualizes the education systems and modern trends between South Korea and the United States through selective individuals who have gained relevant experiences. For higher education scholars and/or practitioners who are not familiar with the opportunities and embedded challenges that international students have been experiencing or will experience, this book provides readers with a general understanding of international students’ mobility. While there are implicit learning opportunities that international students can benefit from this book, the primary audience of this book may be more suitable for higher education scholars and practitioners rather than international students.

Also, the author reconciles the need for demand and supply to achieve global and domestic aspirations between universities with an implication of refining the mechanisms of university pathways to further strategize the education market. The book further identifies associated stakeholders and acting agencies that are involved in supplying the global education chain, along with associated challenges and opportunities that students may encounter during their endeavors. Parallely, the author provides contextualized knowledge to supplement an increasing education sector with the global student market and its associated economic implications.

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