



Copyright © authors, 2026
Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 18 (2026), pp. 105-126
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/pf1ske15>



The missing social-emotional dimension of internationalization: International students' bicultural identity development in Korean higher education

Sookyung Min
Kinsley Titchener
Woosong University, South Korea

Sookyung Min, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1699-5984

ABSTRACT: *The rapid increase in international student recruitment in South Korea has raised concerns about social-emotional support within higher education institutions (HEIs). While research emphasizes academic adjustment and cultural adaptation, less attention has been given to how institutional policies shape international students' bicultural identity development. Therefore, this study examines how policy discourse in a Korean HEI supports or constrains such development through the lens of social and emotional learning (SEL). Drawing on Berry's acculturation model and the bicultural identity integration (BII) framework, this study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine three types of institutional documents. The findings indicate that despite program-level initiatives supporting students' well-being, policy discourse prioritizes institutional reputation, academic performance, and hierarchical governance, limiting student participation and cross-cultural engagement necessary for bicultural integration. The study calls for higher education policies that more explicitly incorporate SEL principles to support international students' identity formation and well-being.*

Keywords: bicultural identity, higher education, international students, internationalization, social and emotional learning, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

As globalization intensifies, studying abroad has become an increasingly attractive educational pathway for university students worldwide (Wang et al., 2024; Yang & Zeng, 2026). Within the broader massification of higher education, many countries have adopted international student recruitment strategies to strengthen national competitiveness and enhance institutional reputation (Kim & Lee, 2006). In this context, South Korea has actively expanded its efforts to attract international students as part of its broader higher education internationalization agenda (Jon et al., 2014). As of 2024, approximately 200,000 international students are enrolled in Korean higher education institutions (HEIs) (Korean Ministry of Education, 2024).

While remarkable progress has been made in recruiting international students among Korean HEIs (Ryu, 2024), concerns are growing that institutional policies and practices do not sufficiently address the social and emotional needs of their new student bodies (Jung & Kim, 2017). Studying abroad often involves a range of challenges for international students, including separation from family, adjustment to new cultural environments, meeting academic expectations, and negotiating identities across both home and host cultures (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Social and emotional stressors, such as a limited sense of belonging and alienation, further heighten international students' vulnerability to mental health challenges and academic disengagement. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of providing institutional support in this context to mitigate students' struggles.

Despite the importance of international students' well-being, host institutions often fail to provide support systems to address social-emotional challenges (Lau et al., 2018). In terms of scholarly work, most studies focus primarily on individual-level adaptation processes, with comparatively limited attention to how institutional internationalization policies shape the structural and discursive environments in which international students' identity development occurs. To address this gap, this study investigates how a Korean HEI frames and supports international students' bicultural identity development through its institutional policies and programmatic strategies. Specifically, the study analyzes various institutional documents to explore how international students' social and emotional needs are acknowledged, supported, or constrained within the university's internationalization agenda. This study contributes to the international student literature by demonstrating how institutional policies may constrain opportunities for bicultural identity integration by prioritizing managerial and reputational goals over social-emotional development.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does a Korean HEI support international students' development of a healthy bicultural identity?

2. What challenges and barriers prevent a Korean HEI from supporting international students' development of a healthy bicultural identity?
3. How is social and emotional learning (SEL) acknowledged in institutional policies supporting international students' bicultural identity development?

Theoretical Framework

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring the mindset and abilities required to process and regulate emotions, form wholesome bonds with others, make moral choices, and accomplish individual and group objectives (Kim et al., 2022; Lawson et al., 2019). According to the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is defined as follows:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2024).

Recent research highlights the potential of SEL frameworks to address disparities in learning experiences related to identity, race, cultural background, and socioeconomic status (Simion, 2023). SEL can serve as an important framework for supporting students' interpersonal development and emotional well-being, particularly for those navigating complex cross-cultural environments. In the context of international education, the five core SEL competences—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—can be particularly valuable for helping international students navigate unfamiliar cultural environments and develop meaningful connections within the host institution (CASEL, 2013).

Acculturation Model and Bicultural Identity Integration

The conceptualization of how international students manage their dual cultural identities relies on the explicit bridging of Berry's (2019) acculturation model and the construct of bicultural identity integration (BII) pioneered by Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005). Berry's (2019) foundational framework posits that individuals from cultural minority groups negotiate two primary dimensions, namely, the maintenance of their heritage culture and their participation in the dominant host culture, yielding four potential outcomes: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. While Berry's (2019) model provides a macrolevel taxonomy of acculturation orientations, BII (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos 2005) specifically addresses how bicultural individuals perceive their dual identities—whether they view them as compatible and blended or

oppositional and distant. By engaging both traditions, this study utilizes Berry's (2019) framework to identify the broad acculturation strategies promoted by institutional policies while employing BII (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos 2005) to examine how these discourses facilitate or hinder the psychological blending of students' heritage and host identities.

Synthesizing Theoretical Frameworks

Rather than functioning as parallel lenses, SEL (CASEL, 2024), the acculturation model (Berry, 2019), and BII (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos 2005) operate synergistically within this study to answer the research questions regarding institutional support for bicultural identity development. The acculturation model (Berry, 2019) and BII (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos 2005) provide a developmental target, establishing that a healthy bicultural identity requires individuals to perceive their heritage and host cultures as blended rather than distant. SEL provides the pedagogical and interactive mechanisms necessary to achieve this target, detailing the specific competencies (such as social awareness and relationship building) that students must cultivate to successfully negotiate their distinct cultural environments (CASEL, 2024). Analytically, this synthesis allows for a nuanced reading of institutional discourse: if an institution's policy language fails to acknowledge or systematically support SEL competencies, it structurally impedes the student's ability to navigate the complex interpersonal dynamics required for bicultural identity development. Thus, the integrated framework enables the identification of a critical discursive gap, highlighting instances where higher education policies may superficially demand cultural integration (Berry's model) but simultaneously eliminate the social-emotional structural support (SEL) needed for students to psychologically reconcile their blended identities (BIIs).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social and Emotional Learning in Higher Education Contexts

The practice of SEL and its positive impact are widely known in K-12 education, yet its implications for higher education have not received sufficient attention. Conley (2015) explained that social-emotional skills are relevant throughout the lifespan and affect individuals differently across developmental periods. In the college years, such skills play a significant role in students' academic success, retention, and overall well-being. Numerous studies (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2021; Andrade, 2006; Conley et al., 2023) have demonstrated that college students face challenges, including psychological distress, emotion regulation and coping styles, social adjustment, and mental health issues, because of changes in psychological, cognitive-affective, and social adjustment (Conley et al., 2020). The promotion of social-emotional skills, such

as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and resilience, has the potential to mitigate psychological distress among students while enhancing positive outcomes (Conley et al., 2023). For example, students who demonstrated higher levels of resilience subsequently felt more adjusted to college, received higher grades, and were more likely to endure academic setbacks.

For international students in HEIs, SELs can offer a specific kind of support in identity development. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) explains that these individuals have multiple identities that are developed and performed within particular social and cultural contexts. The development of multiple identities occurs as international students are exposed to cultural environments and interactions different from their home culture and constantly organize and reorganize their sense of who they are. International students who undergo negative social-emotional experiences of rejection and alienation are likely to struggle with an identity crisis, as they fail to establish belongingness to the host culture, whereas those who successfully develop a sense of belonging and meaningful friendship are more likely to develop a healthy bicultural identity.

International Students' Experiences in Korean Higher Education

In a study by Jon et al. (2014), 425 international students reported the highest levels of satisfaction with academic resources, university facilities, and professors and instructors in Korean universities. In another study by Ko (2024), the findings demonstrated that international students generally felt welcome by Korean faculty and peers in an academic setting and maintained strong academic motivation throughout their stay. While a few studies have shown that international students have positive academic experiences, a significant body of literature reports contrasting experiences in the social and emotional domains. Despite many international students' desires to build friendships with their Korean peers, numerous studies have reported that such relationships are difficult to establish in practice (Kim et al., 2007; Kim, 2009; Lim, 2009). For instance, international students from Asian countries face greater adversities in forming positive social relationships.

In Kim's (2013) study, participants from China reported having very few to no friends, despite intentional efforts to establish friendships with Korean students. Mongolian students in Yang and Kim's (2019) study also reported limited interaction with their Korean peers and the absence of meaningful social relationships. Lee and Lee (2024) surveyed more than 200 international students and reported that they had an average of 3 or fewer Korean friends. In addition to challenges within the social realm, international students also experience psychological difficulties and emotional distress. Studies of international students' experiences have discussed the emotional pressure created by new roles and behavioral expectations, homesickness, and loneliness (Choi & Kim, 2014; Coles & Swami, 2012). In a study by Song et al. (2020), international students expressed

dissatisfaction with their experience studying at a Korean HEI because of high levels of stress and depression. Students reported that international students face greater psychological challenges than domestic students do, as they have an additional layer of cultural adjustment that significantly impacts students' emotional experiences. These findings suggest that while international students may experience relatively positive academic interactions, their broader social integration within Korean HEIs remains constrained.

Social–Emotional Experiences and Bicultural Identity Development

International students often encounter complex social-emotional experiences (Brunsting et al., 2024), and these students may enter higher education with various cultural affiliations (Adewale et al., 2018). Social-emotional support is often unavailable to international students who are far from home and family. In the absence of such resources, being able to speak, behave, and engage in ways that reflect the heritage culture is the only meaningful opportunity for international students to actively express, rediscover, and affirm their authentic cultural identity; moreover, maintaining their cultural heritage while adding new understanding and experiences is the ideal outcome. Studies (Berry, 2005; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) have shown that positive social-emotional experiences significantly contribute to the development of a healthy bicultural identity because international students can feel safe to freely navigate various new cultural identities only when they have already established a sense of belonging and acceptance within a strong group of friends, which acts as a safety net and gives them the courage to explore different identities without the pressure to trade in self-ascribed identities.

Through positive social-emotional experiences, international students can become what Carter (2003) describes as *multicultural navigators*—those who can utilize multiple types of cultural capital through the “balancing act of maintaining both dominant and nondominant cultural capital” (p. 139). Without positive social-emotional experiences, a conflict between international students’ self-ascribed identities and expectations established by the dominant culture will arise, and ultimately, international students are prone to assimilating and conforming to the host culture to avoid external pressure and discrimination (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012). Students’ identities conform to norms and standards that favor the status quo and make them more or less like anybody else of the same race, class, gender, or ability (Glass, 2005, p. 84).

More specifically, students are likely to experience a cultural identity crisis through the process of assimilation, internalization, and/or double marginalization. Whereas assimilation indicates a forced setting aside one’s cultural identity, internalization is the deliberate embrace of stereotypes about one’s cultural identity (Baumert et al., 2024). Although the latter is also involuntary, it still allows individuals to lay some claim to their cultural identity. Furthermore, double marginalization is a consequence that international students face when they fail to

build meaningful relationships with peers and lack a sense of belonging to their school but choose not to assimilate (Constantine et al., 2008).

Institutional Policies and Support for International Students

Adewale et al. (2018) highlight the significance of institutional support for their international student bodies by stating the following:

Crafting adequate support for international students should begin by understanding the complexities of their identities beyond what passports and other institutionalized data capture. A genuine interest in who they are will further endear the institution of the students, making them feel that they matter to the institution. (p. 879)

International students face language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in forming social relationships as major challenges in Korean higher education institutions (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Kim, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, framing these challenges solely as individual student deficits risks reinforcing a hegemonic institutional discourse that places the primary responsibility for adaptation primarily on international students themselves (Barnes, 2019; Lander, 2016). Furthermore, studies (Bae & Hong, 2013; Yoo & Kim, 2022) have shown that it is not students' individual capabilities but institutional support that directly affects students' participation and satisfaction levels in university life. Therefore, analyzing policy documents and institutional strategies is crucial to gaining important insights into how universities conceptualize their responsibilities toward international students.

Existing research suggests that institutional support for international students in Korean HEIs often remains limited. For example, studies examining international students' perceptions of Korean universities have indicated that many students do not receive sufficient support to adapt to the academic and social environment successfully (Kim et al., 2021; Merola et al., 2019; Penman et al., 2021). Jung and Kim (2017) argue that many universities rely primarily on standardized national policies that focus on administrative requirements, such as visa compliance, rather than broader aspects of student well-being. Similarly, Kim (2016) identifies a gap between institutional policy commitments and the actual support provided to international students. Taken together, these studies suggest that institutional policy discourse in Korean higher education explicitly addresses international students' social-emotional well-being and bicultural identity development.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

This study purposely selected a Korean HEI with a rapidly expanding international student population and publicly articulated internationalization strategies, as it provides a relevant case for examining how internationalization discourse is constructed within institutional policy documents. From the institution, three types of documents were chosen by researchers: 1) official policy on international student management, 2) globalization strategies and international program plans, and 3) two informational brochures produced by the university's international colleges. Analyzing multiple types of documents enables cross-source comparison, allowing researchers to identify recurring patterns and themes across institutional texts and thereby strengthening the validity of the analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The documents were analyzed in their original Korean versions to capture culture-specific discursive features, with English translations used for comparative verification. This dual-language approach allowed the researcher to identify nuances in "translated" institutional identities, ensuring that the discursive analysis accounted for how the institution represents itself to different linguistic audiences.

The policy document, titled *Regulations on the Management of International Students*, outlines the institutional framework governing international student administration. The document includes sections addressing the policy's purpose, definitions of international students, exchange program objectives, eligibility requirements, admission criteria, duration of study and student status, scholarship and student benefit provisions, codes of conduct, insurance enrollment and claims procedures, and additional administrative regulations. The second document, titled *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan*, presents the university's institutional profile, educational goals, and strategic initiatives related to internationalization. The document specifically outlines the institution's efforts to expand global partnerships and enhance support services for international students. The third set of documents consists of informational brochures produced by two international colleges within the university foundation. Although the foundation includes five colleges, the present study focuses on brochures from two colleges that host the largest proportion of international students, with international enrollment exceeding 75 percent. These brochures provide essential information for prospective and current students, including descriptions of academic programs, campus life, student services, extracurricular activities, and health-related resources.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a qualitative method that examines how language within institutional texts reflects and

reproduces broader social structures, power relations, and ideological assumptions. This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological framework, specifically in accordance with Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model. CDA is uniquely suited for this study, as it moves beyond descriptive content analysis to examine how language functions as a social practice that reflects and reproduces power relations within institutional structures. Following Fairclough (2003), the analysis is conducted across three interrelated dimensions. First, the textual dimension is a microlevel analysis focusing on formal linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, modality, and text structure. Second, the discursive practice dimension is an examination of how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within the university context. Third, the social practice dimension is a macrolevel analysis exploring how these discourses relate to broader ideological structures, such as the marketization of higher education and neoliberal internationalization rationales.

The analysis followed an iterative and recursive process grounded in Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional framework to ensure a systematic transition from textual description to social explanation. Initially, the researcher conducted a preliminary structural mapping of the documents to identify the specific genres and their intended audiences within the institutional hierarchy. This was followed by a phase of open coding at the textual level, where a line-by-line examination focused on specific lexical choices and the use of modality to identify how authority and student identities were linguistically constructed. These initial codes were subsequently organized through axial coding at the discursive level to identify recurring categories such as "administrative regulation" and "reputational management". These categories were then synthesized into broader analytical themes by examining them through the theoretical lenses of social and emotional learning (SEL) and bicultural identity integration (BII) to determine how institutional language supports or constrains student development. Throughout this process, the researcher maintained analytical credibility by employing a constant comparative method, moving back and forth between the raw data and the emerging themes to ensure that the findings remained deeply rooted in the analyzed texts.

Example of CDA Analysis

To demonstrate the methodological transition from specific textual features to broader thematic claims, the researcher conducted a multilayered analysis of a representative clause from the university regulations stating that the president of the university shall determine the status and regulations regarding the management of international students. In the textual dimension, the microanalysis reveals the use of the deontic modal verb "shall" combined with the active subject of "the president," which linguistically establishes an authoritative and top-down power dynamic. Furthermore, the lexical choice of "management" rather than "support" or "engagement" nominalizes international students as objects of

administrative oversight rather than as active participants in the academic community. In the discursive practice dimension, this clause functions within a regulatory genre to consolidate decision-making power within senior leadership, effectively silencing student voices and removing opportunities for collaborative governance. Finally, in the social practice dimension, this linguistic construction is explained as a “Separation” discourse that creates a symbolic barrier between the social structures of the student and the host institution. By framing the international student primarily as an administrative subject to be managed, the institution reinforces the “symbolic-versus-substantive” inclusion gap and constrains the interpersonal connections necessary for successful bicultural identity integration.

FINDINGS

The analysis of institutional documents revealed several recurring discursive patterns regarding how the university conceptualizes international students and internationalization. Seven themes emerged from the analysis: hierarchical governance structures, managerial discourse surrounding international students, institutional reputation, academic prioritization, educational goals, globalization narratives, and institutional support programs.

Theme 1: Hierarchical Institutional Structure

The *Regulations on the Management of International Students* policy document clearly reflects a hierarchical governance structure that centralizes decision-making authority within senior leadership. The policy repeatedly emphasizes that key decisions are made at the highest administrative level. For example, several clauses state that “the President of the University shall decide” or “the President of the University shall determine.” Such wording constructs institutional authority as highly centralized, positioning senior leadership as the primary locus of decision-making power. While consultation with other administrative units may occur, the policy language suggests that the ultimate authority rests with top-level administrators. From a discourse perspective, this hierarchical framing may limit the visibility of student participation in institutional decision-making processes. The absence of language-referencing student consultation or participation suggests that international students are largely positioned as recipients of institutional decisions rather than as active participants in shaping policy.

Theme 2: Managerial Framing of International Students

Another prominent feature of the policy document is the frequent use of managerial terminology when international students are referred to. Phrases such as “management of international students” and “regulations on management” appeared repeatedly throughout the policy. The emphasis on management focuses

on international students primarily as administrative subjects requiring regulation and oversight rather than as members of the university community requiring holistic support. The managerial discourse positions institutional actors as regulators responsible for maintaining organizational order and compliance with policy requirements. Such framing may reflect a broader institutional orientation toward administrative efficiency and regulatory compliance rather than toward student-centered support systems. Within this discourse, international students are implicitly positioned as individuals to be supervised and managed rather than supported in their social and emotional development.

Theme 3: Institutional Reputation and International Standing

Institutional reputation emerged as another dominant theme, as several statements across the documents emphasize the importance of maintaining the university's international reputation and institutional standing. For example, phrases such as "enhance the international standing of the University" and references to policy compliance to "ensure the reputation of the institution" appear consistently. This emphasis suggests that internationalization is closely linked to institutional prestige and global competitiveness. The language frames international student recruitment and management as part of a broader strategy to strengthen the university's international image. While such goals align with global trends in higher education internationalization, the discourse places greater emphasis on institutional reputation than on the social or developmental needs of international students.

Theme 4: Academic Prioritization in Institutional Messaging

The brochures produced by the university's international colleges highlight academic programs, departmental strengths, and global partnerships while providing detailed information about each component. In contrast, information concerning international students' cultural adjustment and social experiences is relatively limited. References to cultural engagement opportunities and student life activities appear only briefly toward the end of the brochures. As a result, the materials foreground academic achievement and institutional prestige while providing relatively little information about social support systems or opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. This imbalance suggests that international students are positioned primarily as participants in academic programs rather than as individuals navigating complex social and cultural transitions.

Theme 5: Institutional Educational Goals

The *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan* document outlines the university's long-term vision of developing "global individuals" equipped with comprehensive skills for the global workforce over the next 20 to 30 years. To achieve this goal, the university proposes fostering seven core competencies among students. Two of these competencies—social understanding and relationship skills—as well as morality and character—may be related to students' social-emotional development and identity formation. However, the document provides a minimal explanation of how these competencies will be cultivated by the university and put into practice. In contrast, the remaining competencies—such as analytical thinking, scientific reasoning, humanistic literacy, a global mindset, and professional creativity—are accompanied by detailed implementation strategies. For example, the university outlines 39 competency-based educational programs designed to foster analytical and scientific thinking, while specific academic departments are designed to cultivate global and professional competencies. The uneven level of detail across competencies suggests that the institution prioritizes career preparation and workforce readiness. Moreover, aspects related to social-emotional development and identity formation receive less institutional attention.

Theme 6: Globalization as Institutional Expansion

The discourse of globalization frequently appears throughout the *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan*. The document highlights two primary indicators of globalization success: the expansion of global education programs and the growth in international student enrollment. Between 2022 and 2023, the number of global programs increased from 15 to 19, while international student enrollment rose from 657 to 690 students. Universities attribute these increases to initiatives such as foreign language programs, collaborative research partnerships with overseas institutions, shared educational resources, and collaborative online courses. Within this framework, globalization is measured primarily through quantitative indicators such as program expansion and student recruitment. The emphasis on enrollment growth and program numbers suggests that internationalization is framed largely as institutional expansion rather than as a process of fostering intercultural engagement or supporting international students' developmental experiences.

Some initiatives appear more closely connected to cross-cultural engagement. For example, a Korean culture learning program aims to facilitate cultural exchange through events such as cultural festivals and excursions held approximately six times per year. Similarly, an English debate program provides students with opportunities to discuss global topics. However, the stated purpose of the debate program focuses primarily on improving English proficiency rather than promoting intercultural dialog or identity exploration.

Theme 7: Institutional Support Programs for International Students

The *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan* outlines future initiatives to enhance support services for international programs. Establishing a Korean language institute aims to improve students' proficiency in Korean through conversational practice and academic language training. One branch of the program includes one-on-one conversation sessions with Korean instructors, while the other, which focuses on community engagement activities, is designed to encourage practical language use. Another plan is to launch safety education programs covering crime prevention, traffic safety, and infectious disease prevention. These programs are intended to provide essential information to help international students navigate life in Korea. The university also plans to introduce orientation sessions and distribute multilingual student life guidebooks to support students' transition to campus life.

Finally, housing support initiatives include expanded staffing in international student dormitories and the establishment of a floor representative system designed to improve emergency response and student assistance. Although these initiatives demonstrate institutional recognition of international students' practical needs, the programs focus primarily on language acquisition, safety, and administrative adjustment while paying less attention to opportunities for social-emotional development.

DISCUSSION

According to the acculturation model (Berry, 2019) and bicultural identity integration (BII; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005), the development of a healthy bicultural identity depends largely on the extent to which individuals can maintain identification with their culture of origin while simultaneously engaging with the dominant culture of the host society. The findings of this study suggest that the Korean higher education institution examined offers some programmatic opportunities that may facilitate aspects of bicultural identity development, yet several institutional and discursive barriers limit the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Institutional Support for Bicultural Identity Development

The findings indicate that support for international students' bicultural identity development occurs primarily at the **program** level rather than through institutional policy frameworks. The *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan* outlines long-term educational goals aimed at fostering core competencies in *social understanding and relationship skills*, as well as *morality and character*, among students. These competencies align with CASEL's (2013)

core SEL domains of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills, which may contribute to students' interpersonal development (Dumbuya, 2025).

Several programs outlined in institutional documents may also offer international students the opportunity to engage in intercultural dialog. For example, English debate programs could allow international students to discuss global topics. Moreover, they are integrating lived experiences from their home countries, thereby actively affirming their original cultural identity through their own voices (Berry, 2005). Additionally, the proposed Korean language and culture programs can support international students' engagement with the host culture by helping them develop familiarity with local cultural norms and expand their access to cultural resources within the host institution. If these initiatives provide meaningful opportunities for interaction and reflection, they could support students in navigating what Carter (2005) describes as the "balancing act" of maintaining both dominant and nondominant cultural capital.

Institutional Barriers to Bicultural Identity Development

Despite these program-level initiatives, several structural and discursive features of institutional documents suggest potential barriers to international students' bicultural identity development. One prominent challenge is the hierarchical governance structure reflected in the *Regulations on the Management of International Students* policy document. The policy's language emphasizes centralized authority and top-down decision-making, with senior leadership as the primary actor responsible for determining institutional actions. Such governance structures limit students' opportunities to participate in institutional decision-making processes. Furthermore, positioning international students as subjects of policy rather than as contributors to institutional discourse constrains opportunities for student voice and representation. Limited participation in institutional governance ultimately leads to feelings of marginalization among students, particularly for those from minority or international backgrounds (Caetano et al., 2020).

Another barrier concerns the institution's broader internationalization strategy. The policy discourse examined in this study placed significant emphasis on measurable indicators such as international student recruitment, program expansion, and workforce preparation. Such an instrumental framing of internationalization reflects that the institution's internationalization agenda is focused on economic competitiveness and institutional prestige. Moreover, relatively little attention is given to structured opportunities for intercultural engagement, identity exploration, or emotional adjustment. The absence of support systems and intentional structures that sustain both heritage identity maintenance and host-culture engagement is likely to overshadow international students' social-emotional needs while limiting the development of balanced bicultural identities.

Recognition of Social and Emotional Learning in Institutional Policy

Although the institutional documents analyzed in this study do not explicitly reference the SEL framework (CASEL, 2024), several initiatives suggest implicit recognition of the importance of social-emotional support for international students. Unlike existing policy documents and promotional brochures—which emphasize primarily administrative management and academic programs—the *Globalization Strategies and International Program Plan* proposes several initiatives designed to enhance international students' well-being. For example, the new Korean Language Institute aims not only to provide Korean classes but also to develop a community engagement program designed to involve international students in connection-building with local neighbors and to foster a sense of belonging to the community.

Such an initiative aligns with SEL values by highlighting the importance of social interaction and emotional competence in students' personal growth (Dumbuya, 2025; Lerner et al., 2024). Furthermore, safety education, daily life support, and housing support programs will be implemented in the near future, indicating that the institution is beginning to acknowledge international students' practical challenges. These programs can help students navigate daily life in the host country and reduce the uncertainties associated with studying abroad.

Students studying abroad are already destined to navigate multiple social expectations and norms, indicating that negotiating their cultural identities is an inevitable transition (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012; Garner et al., 2014). Without explicit institutional recognition of such complex experiences, opportunities to support international students' bicultural identity development remain limited. There were a few program-level initiatives throughout the analyzed documents that indirectly supported aspects of SEL. However, the broader institutional framework does not appear to systematically consider international students' social-emotional well-being in its internationalization strategy. Concepts of bicultural identity and social-emotional well-being were largely absent from the policy discourse, and similar ideas were not found in the purpose or description of student programs. The findings therefore suggest that Korean HEIs have yet to integrate SEL dimensions into their internationalization frameworks, and there is an apparent lack of understanding of the significance of international students' healthy bicultural identity development.

CONCLUSION

The rapid internationalization of higher education has led universities worldwide to recruit international students as part of broader strategies to enhance institutional competitiveness and global visibility. In Korea, these efforts have contributed to substantial growth in international student enrollment. However, the findings of this study suggest that institutional internationalization policies

and strategic narratives do not always fully address the social–emotional and identity-related dimensions of international students’ experiences. By examining the discursive construction of international student support within institutional policy documents and promotion materials, this study highlights how institutional narratives shape the conditions under which bicultural identity development and social–emotional well-being may occur.

This study contributes to the literature on international students by integrating the bicultural identity framework (Berry, 2019) with the SEL model (CASEL, 2024). While prior research has largely focused on international students’ psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation, this study focuses on the institutional policy environment that structures these experiences. The analysis demonstrates that institutional discourses of internationalization frequently emphasize recruitment expansion, global competitiveness, and institutional reputation while providing comparatively limited attention to the social–emotional development and identity negotiation of international students.

These findings suggest that universities’ internationalization strategies may benefit from adopting a more holistic approach to international student support. Integrating principles associated with the SEL framework (CASEL, 2024) into institutional policies could help create environments that foster intercultural engagement, belonging, and bicultural identity development. More broadly, aligning internationalization strategies with the developmental needs of international students contributes not only to students’ well-being but also to more inclusive and sustainable forms of global engagement in higher education.

Statements and declarations

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

This study did not require IRB approval, as it did not involve any human subjects.

Acknowledgments

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

☒ None

☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing

☐ Some sections, with extensive editing

☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing

☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

This article does not incorporate content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

REFERENCES

- Adewale, T., D'Amico, M. M., & Salas, S. (2018). "It's kinda weird": Hybrid identities in the International Undergraduate Community. *Journal of International Students*, 8(2), 861–883. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i2.118>
- Alharbi, E. S., & Smith, A. P. (2018). Review of the literature on stress and wellbeing of international students in English-speaking countries. *International Education Studies*, 11(6), 22. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n6p22>
- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589>
- Bae, S., & Hong, J. (2013). The effects of student–faculty interaction and supportive campus climate on Chinese students' active classroom engagement. *Korean Journal of Comparative Education*, 23(6), 109–134.
- Barnes, T. N. (2019). Changing the landscape of social emotional learning in urban schools: What are we currently focusing on and where do we go from here? *The Urban Review*, 51(4), 599–637. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00534-1>
- Baumert, J., Becker, M., Jansen, M., & Köller, O. (2024). Cultural identity and the academic, social, and psychological adjustment of adolescents with immigration background. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53(2), 294–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01853-z>
- Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural Identity Integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, 73(4), 1015–1050. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x>
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Berry, J. W. (2019). *Acculturation: A personal journey across cultures*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blanco-Vega, C. O., Castro-Olivo, S. M., & Merrell, K. W. (2008). Social–emotional needs of Latino immigrant adolescents: A sociocultural model for development and implementation of culturally specific interventions. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 7(1), 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348430701693390>
- Brunsting, N., Katsumoto, S., Lee, H., & Bingham, W. P. (2024). Differential adjustment outcomes of international students at U.S. universities. *Journal of International Students*, 14(3), 448–467. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.4798>
- Caetano, A. P., Pimenta Freire, I., & Biscaia Machado, E. (2020). Student voice and participation in intercultural education. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 9(1), 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.7821/naer.2020.1.458>

- Carter, R. T. (2005). Teaching racial-cultural counseling competence: A racially inclusive model. In R. T. Carter (Ed.), *Handbook of racial-cultural psychology and counseling* (pp. 36–56). John Wiley & Sons.
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). (2013). CASEL Guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs. (Pre-School and Elementary School ed.). CASEL, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- CASEL (2024). What is the CASEL framework: A framework creates a foundation for applying evidence-based SEL strategies to your community. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel%20framework/#:~:text=The%20CASEL%20addresses%20five,and%20across%20diverse%20cultural%20contexts>
- Castro-Olivo, S. M., & Merrell, K. W. (2012). Validating cultural adaptations of a school-based social-emotional learning programme for use with Latino immigrant adolescents. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 5(2), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1754730x.2012.689193>
- Choi, J., & Kim, Y. (2014). Central Asian students' adjustment experiences at a “globalized” Korean University. *International Education Studies*, 7(8), 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n8p94>
- Coles, R., & Swami, V. (2012). The sociocultural adjustment trajectory of international university students and the role of university structures: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 11(1), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240911435867>
- Conley, C. S. (2015). SEL in higher education. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 197–212). The Guilford Press.
- Conley, M. I., Hindley, I., Baskin-Sommers, A., Gee, D. G., Casey, B. J., & Rosenberg, M. D. (2020). The importance of social factors in the association between physical activity and depression in children. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00335-5>
- Conley, C. S., Huguenel, B. M., Shapiro, J. B., & Kirsch, A. C. (2023). Developmental trajectories and predictors of psychological well-being and distress across the college years. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 94(6), 792–821. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2171213>
- Constantine, M. G., Smith, L., Redington, R. M., & Owens, D. (2008). Racial microaggressions against Black counseling and counseling psychology faculty: A central challenge in the multicultural counseling movement. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 86(3), 348–355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00519.x>
- Dumbuya, E. (2025). Integrating social and emotional learning into curriculum development: A pathway to holistic education. *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 19(1), 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.71329/IUPJSS/2025.19.1.53-57>

- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- Garner, P. W., Mahatmya, D., Brown, E. L., & Vesely, C. K. (2014). Promoting desirable outcomes among culturally and ethnically diverse children in social emotional learning programs: A multilevel heuristic model. *Educational Psychology Review*, 26(1), 165–189. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-014-9253-7>
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2009). What is an elite boarding school? *Review of Educational Research*, 79(3), 1090–1128. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654309339500>
- Jon, J. E., Lee, J. J., & Byun, K. (2014). *The emergence of a regional hub: Comparing international student choices and experiences in South Korea*. University of Arizona. <https://experts.arizona.edu/en/publications/the-emergence-of-a-regional-hub-comparing-international-student-c>
- Jung, J., & Kim, Y. (2017). Exploring regional and institutional factors of international students' dropout: The South Korea case. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(2), 141–159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12148>
- Kim, D., Lim, J. H., & An, J. (2022). The quality and effectiveness of social-emotional learning (SEL) intervention studies in Korea: A meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*, 17(6), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269996>
- Kim, J. (2013). Exploring the study experiences of Southeast Asian students at a Korean University in Seoul. *The Southeast Asian Review*, 23(3), 135–179. <https://doi.org/10.21652/kaseas.23.3.201310.135>
- Kim, J.-H. (2016). Racism, equity, and quality of education for international students in South Korean Higher Education Institutes. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 11(3), 338–355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03397126>
- Kim, J., Park, S. H., Kim, M., Chow, H. W., & Han, S. (2021). Leisure and health benefits associated with acculturation among Western international students living in South Korea. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 16(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2021.1945725>
- Kim, S., & Lee, H. (2006). The impact of organizational context and information technology on employee knowledge-sharing capabilities. *Public Administration Review*, 66(3), 370–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00595.x>
- Kim, T. Y. (2009). The sociocultural interface between ideal self and ought-to self: A case study of two Korean students' ESL motivation. In Z. Dornyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 274–294). Multilingual Matters.
- Ko, Y. (2024). Adapting to new horizons: Exploring the academic and social experiences of Mongolian students in Korean higher education. *Korea and World Review*, 6(6), 1155 - 1175.
- Korean Ministry of Education. (2024, February 8) The result of evaluations on colleges' internationalization capacity and management of international

- students. <https://english.moe.go.kr/sub/infoRenewal.do?m=050101&page=050101&s=english>
- Lander, V. (2016). Introduction to fundamental British values. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(3), 274–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1184459>
- Lau, C., Kitsantas, A., Miller, A. D., & Drogin Rodgers, E. B. (2018). Perceived responsibility for learning, self-efficacy, and sources of self-efficacy in mathematics: A study of international baccalaureate primary years programme students. *Social Psychology of Education*, 21(3), 603–620. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-9431-4>
- Lawson, G. M., McKenzie, M. E., Becker, K. D., Selby, L., & Hoover, S. A. (2019). The core components of evidence-based social emotional learning programs. *Prevention Science*, 20(4), 457–467. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1121-018-0953-y>
- Lee, J., & Lee, J. (2024). Exploring the impact of the number of Korean friends and Korean language ability: Focusing on the moderation effects of Korean wave contents use and the country of origin's contents use. *Korea Journal of Communication Studies*, 32(3), 55–77. <https://doi.org/10.23875/kca.32.3.3>
- Lerner, R. M., Yu, D., Abbasi-Asl, R., Keces, N., Gonçalves, C., Buckingham, M. H., Dowling, E. M., Tirrell, J. M., Mackin, M., Olander, K., Hasse, A., & Dunham, Y. (2024). Toward a dynamic, idiographic approach to describing, explaining, and enhancing the development of SEL. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 4, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2024.100050>
- Lim, C.-H. (2009). Acculturative stresses and adjustment elements of Chinese students' studying in Korea. *Korean Journal of Human Ecology*, 18(1), 93–112. <https://doi.org/10.5934/kjhe.2009.18.1.093>
- Merola, R. H., Coelen, R. J., & Hofman, W. H. A. (2019). The role of integration in understanding differences in satisfaction among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(5), 535–553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319861355>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Penman, J., Malik, G., Chu, E., Kett, G., Hampton, K., Thomacos, N., Ebrahimi-Zanjani, M., Zhong, Y., & McKenzie, W. (2021). Empowering international students to succeed. *Journal of International Students*, 11(4), 832–852. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2226>
- Ryu, H. W. (2024). DEA analysis of higher education in Korea. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Convergent Research Interchange*, 10(12), 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.47116/apjcri.2024.12.04>
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.

- Song, H., Lee, C., & Kim, S. (2020). Study on interaction students who are trying to fit in Korean culture and university life-focus on Chinese students at Hongik university. *Journal of Communication Design*, 71(0), 165–177. <https://doi.org/10.25111/jcd.2020.71.12>
- Simion, A. (2023). The impact of socioemotional learning (SEL) on academic evaluation in higher education. *Educatia 21 Journal*, (24), 109–117. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2023.24.11>
- Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699–713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>
- Sullivan, C., & Kashubeck-West, S. (2015). The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5 i1.438>
- Wang, X.-C., Zhang, M., & Wang, J.-X. (2024). The effect of university students' academic self- efficacy on academic burnout: The chain mediating role of intrinsic motivation and learning engagement. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 42(7), 798–812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829241252863>
- Yang, J., & Kim, S. (2019). A qualitative study on the experience of Mongolian students' dropout from the college in Korea. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Multimedia Services Convergent with Art, Humanities, and Sociology*, 9(5), 219-226. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21742/AJMAHS.2019.05.21>
- Yang D., & Zeng, X. (2026). "I love China, but...": The imbalanced interplay of demand, control, and support in the adaptation of Ethiopian students in China. *Journal of International Students*, 16(11), 1-22. <http://doi.org/10.32674/c105j621>
- Yoo, J., & Kim, H. (2022). A study on the adaptation of Chinese international students to college life: Focusing on non-face-to-face satisfaction and student support services. *The Korea Journal of Chinese Social Science*, 62, 122-147. <https://doi.org/10.36527/KCSSS.20.1.5>

Author bios

Sookyung Min, EdD, is an Assistant Professor at the Endicott College of International Studies, Woosong University, South Korea. Her major research interests lie in the areas of higher education research and multiculturalism, international comparative analysis of education policy and practice, cultural diversity and social-emotional experiences. Email: sookyungmin@woosong.org.

Kinsley Titchener, EdD, is an Assistant Professor at Endicott College of International Studies, Woosong University, and SolBridge International School of Business. She earned her Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Educational

Leadership from Fielding Graduate University. Her research focuses on special education, cultural diversity in educational contexts, inclusive and equitable pedagogical practices, and the integration of social–emotional learning to support student development. ORCID: 0009-0005-2812-945X
