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Protectionism in South Korean Universities

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Any economist will tell you that the past attitude of the South Korean government with regard to foreign trade was anything but non-protectionist with high tariffs imposed on imports while pushing to export a wide range of products to as many countries as possible. In effect, the Korean government was exercising a lopsided trading policy. Nonetheless, the attitudes of both leading parties in South Korea have drastically changed over the last couple of years, vowing to eliminate protectionism since they realized that it is counterproductive to their global ambitions.

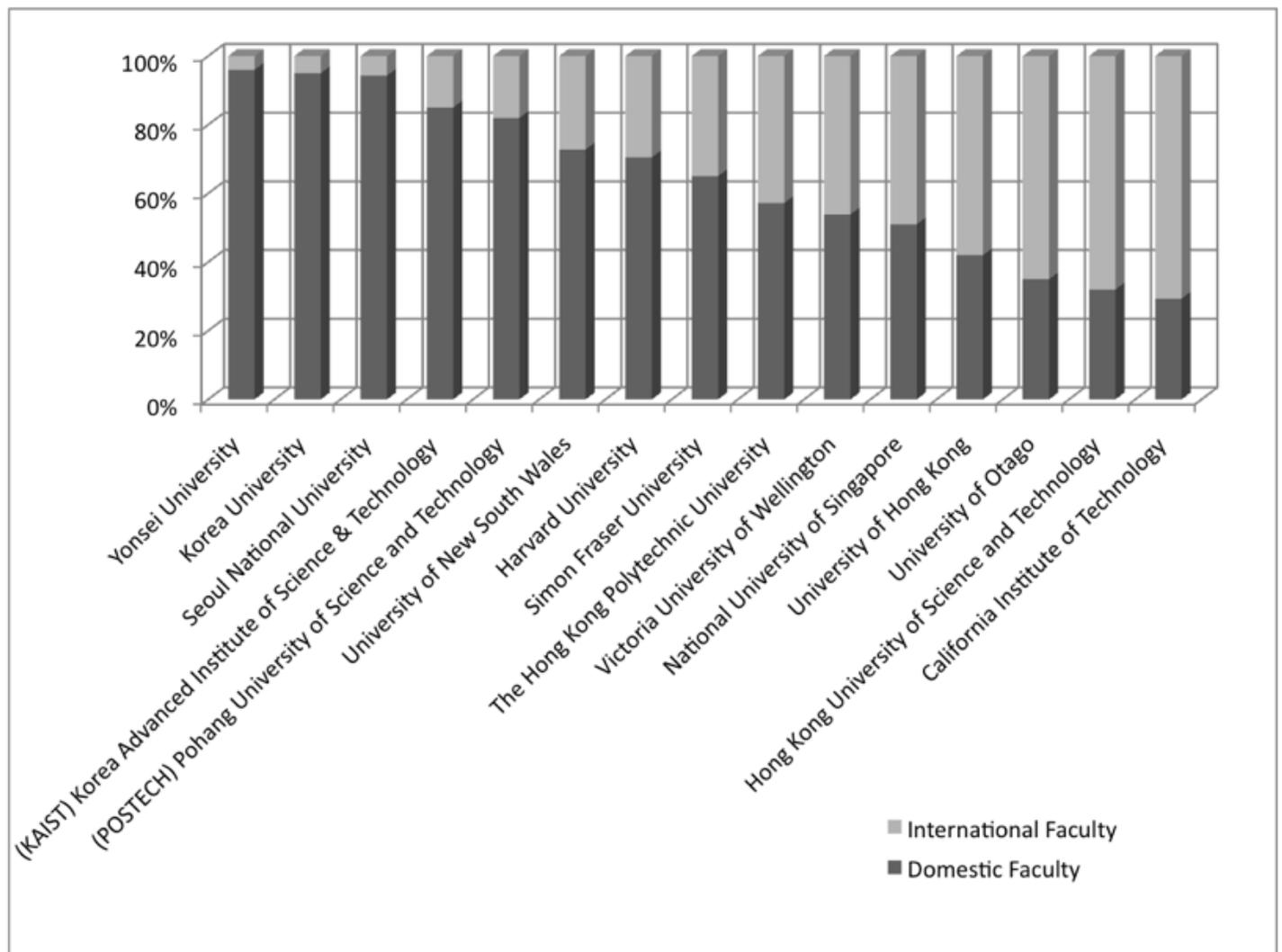
All in all, the Korean government's promise to eliminate protectionism in South Korea has not even had a slight effect on the Korean university system. Given that universities are private and state run educational institutions that are in essence businesses in their own right, it should be a government priority to eliminate protectionism within, at all levels. That is, to create equal opportunities to people of all backgrounds, not just Koreans. After all, since Koreans who teach at universities worldwide expect equal treatment and opportunities, and they often do get it, should Korea not afford the same kind of courtesy and equal opportunities to internationals who seek professorial positions at Korean universities?

What is more, there are fewer international students at South Korean universities than there are at most of their international counterparts. All in all, the situation at Korean universities is a stark reminder of the Korean protectionist values of the past few decades.

There Are Few International Faculty at Korean Post Secondary Institutions

The number of international faculty at Korean institutions, as compared to other institutions worldwide is, without a doubt, quite troubling (Figure 1). Not to mention the unequal treatment, opportunities and pay given to international faculty at Korean universities, the number of actual foreign faculty in comparison to the number of Korean faculty should raise some serious concerns, especially given the tendency of Korean universities to hire foreign nationals of Korean descent instead of teachers/professors of other backgrounds to fill the available 'foreign faculty' positions. It is true that Korea is a largely Confucian society (Underwood, 1998:85) and Confucianism has no devised conduct for the treatment of foreigners (Yum, 1987:84). However, the goal of the Korean government to eliminate protectionism in all sectors of its economy, including the education sector, should no doubt be realized in order to providing people of diverse backgrounds the kind of equal opportunities which Korean professors themselves are afforded when they search for work at universities worldwide. In fact, South Korean Finance Minister Yoon Jeung-hyun was quoted saying : "As you know, it is a fact that within some major countries, the signs of protectionism are on the rise. The dangers that this ultimately create a cycle retaliation and lead the world economy down the road to devastation." (MOFE, 2009) Then why is South Korea not following suit of its own newfound hardliner economic policy when it comes to its own universities? As evident proof, Figure 1 clearly indicates how truly protectionist South Korean universities are compared to their international counterparts.

Figure 1 Percentage of International Faculty



(Data Compiled from QS World, 2008)

SNU, Yonsei Korea, KAIST and POSTECH are the top universities in Korea, therefore, it is evident that they are the ones included in the graph above. When all is said and done, looking at Figure 1, it would seem that South Korea should take the universities in Hong Kong as prime examples, given that the percentages of their international faculty are outstanding and worthy of praise.

An, Seok-Bae wrote an article for Chosun News about a South Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology survey conducted in April 2008, on the number of ‘foreign professors’ at Korean universities nationwide (An, 2008). Even the government itself was said to be unimpressed by its own findings according to the English version of the article available on the website of Korea Beat (See An, 2008) Overall, the findings indicate that:

Of 172 four-year colleges and universities nationwide, just 4.6% of full-time faculty are foreigners, and at 177 Hongik University employs the most, a study has found. Hanguk University of Foreign Studies employs 129, Korea University 109, and Hanyang University 105. Seoul National University has just 11, significantly below the average for private universities. 39 institutions, or 22.6%, have not even one foreigner on the full-time faculty. The number and rate of foreign faculty are indicators of the degree of

globalization at a university, and this means that Korean universities are still not globalized.

(Korea Beat; See An, 2008)

Although the results of the survey performed by the Korean Ministry of Education and Technology is somewhat different than the data available from the QS World website, most likely due to the research criteria (perhaps because the Ministry only counts the full-time faculty while the QS World statistics include even the part-timers), it nevertheless has the potential to paint an even bleaker picture of Korean universities with regard to the ratio of international faculty employed by them. For Seoul National University to have only 11 full-time foreign professors employed is a disgrace to say the least. More importantly, even the foreign faculty tends to include Korean descendents of foreign nationalities. For instance, Seoul National University (SNU), invited “American scholar Eugene Park [a Korean by heritage] to teach a [Korean Studies course exclusively in English](#)” (Korea Beat, 2008) starting at the first semester of 2008. Therefore, if the survey results of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, stating that there are only 11 full-time ‘foreign’ professors at SNU, is true then it is safe to state that only 10 ‘foreign’ professors are really ‘foreign’ from a Korean cultural point of view. Additionally, the fact that the Ministry survey revealed that nearly a quarter of Korean universities have no international full-time faculty is no less disconcerting.

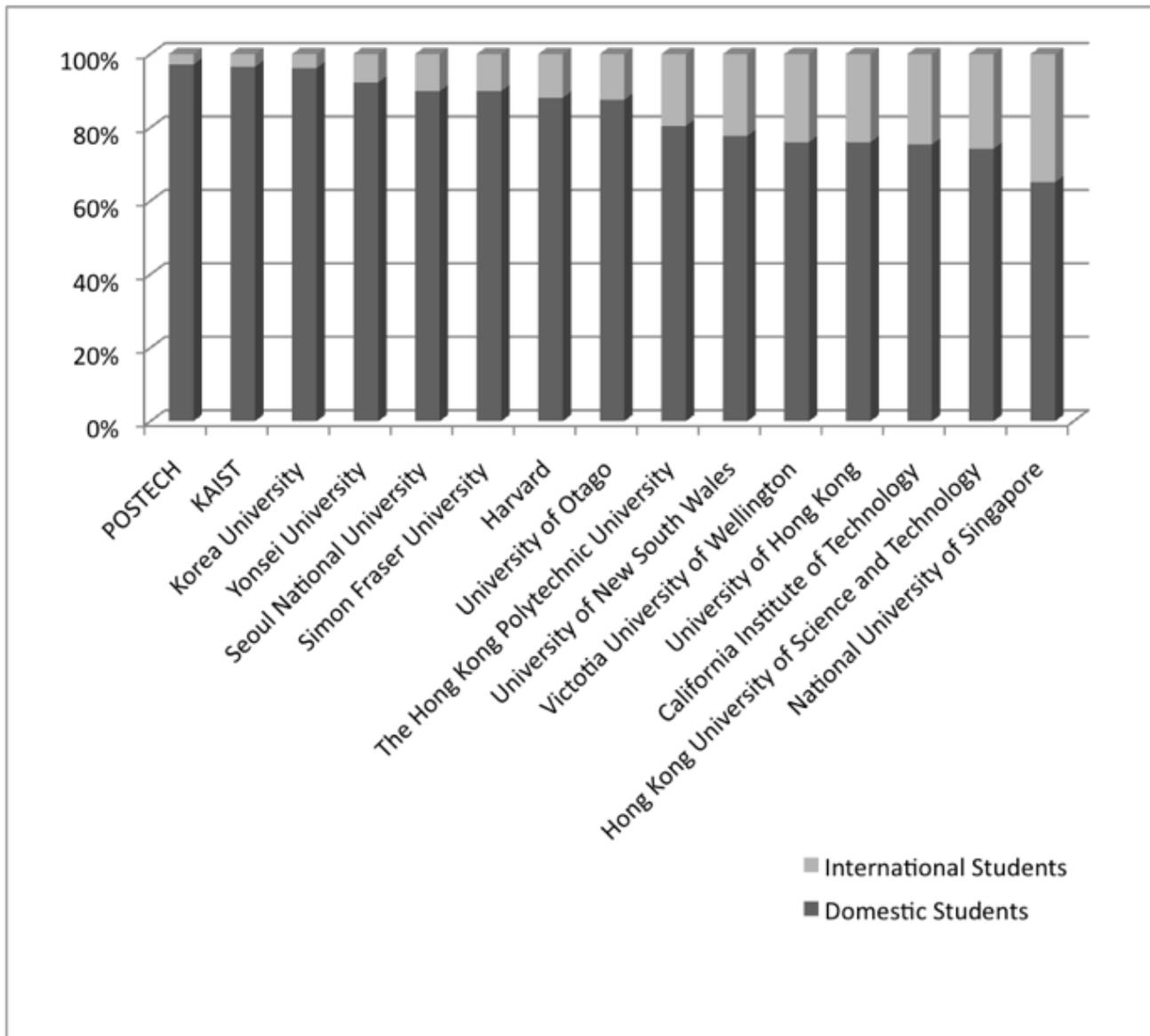
Overall, this apparent reluctance of Korean universities to hire ‘foreign faculty’ with the same conditions given to Koreans is somewhat disturbing. After all, Korean professors demand to be treated equally wherever they go, as they should, but Korean universities are evidently reluctant to afford others the same standard of treatment. Consequently, the hypocrisy must stop if the rest of the academic world is to take Korean universities seriously. That is to say, Karma is inevitable, given the nature of the transparency of borders and the walls of the academic institutions in today’s global world. All things considered, the argument often presented by Koreans, stating that it is much harder for Korean faculty to get university teaching positions than it is for foreigners therefore justifying them being treated with higher standards and given higher pay, is getting really old and absolutely groundless. More importantly it is highly biased.

What is more, since education is a valuable commodity which can be bought and traded internationally, then why should the Korean university system not be subject to the Korean government’s promise to eliminate protectionism in a globalized bid to make the South Korean economy more competitive? Moreover, since most jobs nowadays require at least some level of specialization, and universities are institutions that can readily provide the required set of skills, it should be even more in the interest of the Korean government to eliminate protectionism at all levels of the education sector.

There Are Few International Students at Korean Post Secondary Institutions

In addition to the lack of international faculty at Korean universities, the numbers of international students are also dismal (Figure 2). Aside from Seoul National University, no elite Korean university has more than 10% international students among its student body. This in itself is another protectionist attitude that Korean universities must learn to avoid.

Figure 2 Percentage of International Students



(Data Compiled from QS World, 2008)

According to the New York Times:

South Korea is not the only country sending more students to the United States, but it seems to be a special case. Some 103,000 Korean students study at American schools of all levels, more than from any other country, according to American government statistics. In higher education, only India and China, with populations more than 20 times that of South Korea's, send more students.

(Dillon, 2008)

103,000 South Korean students study at American schools alone, and that is not counting the ones studying in Australia, England, Canada and the rest of the world. Considering that only India and China (both with a population of around a billion people) send more students to study at American universities, while still keeping in mind the data in Figure 2, it should become ever more obvious that

Korea is highly one sided and protectionist with regard to its international student ratios at its universities. That is to say, since Koreans are so willing to send their children to study abroad, and they apparently do, why are they not as willing to accept more foreign students to study at their universities? That would only be fair.

Overall, there would be no universities without students, therefore, since students are the basic building blocks of any university system, it is significantly imperative that the international student ratios are kept at or above internationally acceptable levels.

The Irony Runs Deep

“It seems a bit ironic to me that South Korea is a country calling for an end to protectionism considering their past protectionist history” (ROK Drop, 2009). As a matter of fact, a number of European diplomats, stationed in South Korea, have for the large part made explicit mention, in our personal yet candid conversations, of the “various protectionist mechanisms” South Korea still has in play in order to protect its economy from an inflow of foreign goods and services entering the Korean market. All in all South Korea is changing its protectionist attitude, but perhaps doing so largely for the purposes of appearance. An article in the Wall Street Journal said the following about Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon and his government’s newly found economic stance :

Mr. Kim is a free-trade evangelist – one of a growing breed in South Korea, whose government is emerging as a leading voice against protectionism. This mind-set didn’t come about overnight. For decades after the Korean War, this nation pushed export-led growth and raised barriers to imports that would compete with domestic goods. But in recent years, both major political parties have started recognizing that one-sided trade promotion has limits. They are embracing freer trade as necessary to foster needed domestic reform, and thus more growth.

(Steinberg, 2009)

One would be inclined to overlook such sudden changes of attitudes if the government did in fact show its undoubted commitment in adhering to its new economic plan, but as it is still evident throughout the South Korean system of education much more effort is needed by the Korean government to persuade its domestic universities to rid themselves of their deep-rooted protectionist attitudes in order to keep to its newly found non-protectionist policy if anyone is to take their intent seriously. That is, more international Faculty is needed at Korean universities, whilst having the same rights, pay and opportunities as their Korean counterparts. Additionally, more international students should be accepted to enter Korean universities given the high numbers of Korean students studying at universities worldwide.

Although the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, under the direction of the current Lee Myung-bak government, has taken some of the initiative to attract more foreign professors to Korean universities through the National Project Towards Building World Class Universities (WCU, 2008-2012), it is nonetheless insufficient as it does little more than window dress the current situation (Jambor, 2009) and it moreover fails to hold universities themselves accountable for their biased attitudes toward foreign professors. All in all, more action needs to be taken by the government, in the form of setting up a system of enforceable regulations for the protection of migrant workers, including the foreign professors, in order to make them equal (in all respects, including pay and conditions) to the

Korean faculty in the eyes of the law. Additionally, Korean universities need to lose their deep seated biased attitudes toward their international faculty so as to facilitate their adherence to widely accepted international standards. This would merely make them more desirable institutions for international staff and as a consequence it would go far in attracting more international students as well.

Tougher Actions are Needed if the Aim is to Abolish Protectionism in South Korea

All in all, the buy only Korean mentality Korean sellers still advocate till this day, is in direct opposition to the government's bid to make Korea more globalized. Moreover with the Korean university system so protected from the influx of both international faculty and students, it amazes me that the South Korean Trade Minister still has the audacity to tell US President Barack Obama to refrain from his "Buy American" stipulation as part of his stimulus plan (Steinberg, 2009).

Protectionism has not even begun to exit the Korean mindset, after all this is what has been relentlessly drilled into the average Korean's head for the past few decades. On the whole, it will take more than the South Korean Trade Minister making an anti-protectionist speech at the G-20 summit in November 2008 (Steinberg, 2009) to bring about definitive change. That is, it is not enough to preach anti-protectionism to the rest of the world while allowing protectionism to flourish within the borders of Korea, at the various markets and universities alike. Consequently, tougher actions need to be put into place, and the message of the Korean Trade Minister needs to be put into real practice in all the sectors of the Korean economy. No exceptions should be made, and certainly not in the education sector where the foundations of knowledge are laid for so many children, the seeds of the future, both Koreans and international alike.

Conclusion

On the whole, the Korean government should not only talk the talk but walk the walk, and put into policy the very words it so adamantly preaches to the rest of the world. In general, their past protectionist values could be overlooked if they only put into practice their newly found economic stance in all sectors of the South Korean economy, including the education sector. More importantly, universities themselves need to shake their biased attitudes and eliminate their unfair treatment of international faculty.

When all is said and done, more international faculty needs to be hired at the national standard rates of pay, with the same opportunities and the same conditions overall. Moreover, an increase in the numbers of international students is necessary at the various Korean post secondary institutions. Nothing short of these goals will lessen the protectionist stigma that hangs over the Korean university system today.

All things considered, it is in the interest of the Korean people to provide equal opportunities to people from outside of their country's borders, for if they are to expect equal opportunities abroad, they must learn to provide the same domestically, to those coming to seek work in South Korea from overseas.

All in all, Koreans should not see this kind of article as a direct criticism of their country, and thus take offence to the words within this paper, but rather see its message as a set of guidelines to help South Korean universities adhere to widely accepted international standards. This would certainly benefit Korean universities in the long run as it would go far in raising their international ranks. After all, the

outward image of universities plays a highly decisive role in the international rankings they receive.

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