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The Faults of Neoliberal Education: Examining International Students' Experiences within Korean Higher Education

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Abstract

The overwhelming negativity towards neoliberalism has focused on policies that have reduced academic life to strictly corporate terms and how the customer education model has led to the demise of civic and democratic values. Following Western universities' models, Korean education has adopted the same values and policies, inheriting the subsequent issues and problems that lie therein. This paper continues the call for resisting neoliberalism by exposing its negative impact on the acculturation experiences of international students in Korea. The study participants used transactional language to describe their feelings of marginalization and invisibility and the impoverished ways their host university treated them. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology set within the framework of neoliberalism, this paper documents how neoliberal policies have been ideologically ingrained in Korean higher education. It highlights the necessity of reforming current policies to deter acculturative stress. It is hoped that the findings inspire resistance to the neoliberal ideology that Korean policymakers have subconsciously followed.

Keywords: neoliberalism; higher education; international students; acculturation; South Korea

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have undergone tremendous changes that have impacted the very nature of tertiary education worldwide. "Once considered a public good, education is becoming increasingly market-driven as public funding decreases and universities 'chase' tuition dollars" (Slocum et al., 2019, p. 33). Swayed by the need to become market-oriented due to insufficient public funding, many universities have resorted to entrepreneurial and profit-oriented mindsets to survive. Many HEIs worldwide, including South Korea (Hereafter, Korea), are aggressively recruiting international students to compensate for the domestic enrollment deficit (Byun et al., 2011). Due to the decrease in the national birth rate (Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world) and the desire to increase its rankings on a global scale (Chung, 2021), Korean higher education in the private sector has made a more significant push toward the internationalization of higher education and emulation of Western higher education (Shin & Chung, 2020). Government policy has spurred its growth and expansion on a mass scale (Yeom, 2016), along with the need to emulate the academic models of American and European universities (Jung, 2018). The market principles of neoliberalism adopted by

many Korean HEIs correlate with those institutions heavily dependent on government aid (Shin & Chung, 2020). This means the neoliberal education model, which venerates financial success over enlightenment, has become a normative principle in Korean HEIs.

The neoliberal education model is tied to Korea's stake in global student mobility (Jung, 2018; Park, 2017). In the last thirty years, there has been a trend in which more students boldly choose to study abroad (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). However, moving to another country to study is no easy feat as it entails many new potential challenges including acculturative stress and adjustment issues (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In particular, international students encounter many hardships stemming from institutional conditions. The kind of institutional environment plays a salient factor in the positive (or negative) acculturation of international students (Merola et al., 2019). Hence, it is in the institutions' best interests to ensure that international students are given a voice to be heard and understood (Cordier & Alemu, 2017; Kazakova et al., 2021). The issue with neoliberal education is that it reduces education to simple economics (Rousseau, 2020) with the consequence of treating the student as a customer and the teacher as a factory worker (Cerro Santamaría, 2020).

The ethical imperative of moving away from a strictly profit-based mindset will significantly benefit the students to fully realize their educational potential (Killam, 2023), become better social agents of democracy and social justice (Giroux, 2010), and find ways to resist and critique their current socioeconomic formation (Newson, 2021). This paper attempts to move towards that critical direction by investigating how a Korean university's profit-model strategy has negatively impacted its international students' acculturative experiences, given the rise of neoliberal educational policies. Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher hopes the findings contribute to a large-scale resistance to market adherence that many policymakers subconsciously follow.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Acculturation of international students in higher education institutions

Acculturation is the collective process that occurs when people of different cultural backgrounds interact, causing a change in those involved (Sam & Berry, 2006). The acculturation process is often interpreted along the lines of the sojourner and the host country. Global student mobility has added another complex layer whereby the sojourner's acculturative process depends on a host institution. Acculturation is the process whereby different cultures interact to create changes in both the host country members and the sojourner (Sam & Berry, 2006). The effects of acculturation can become amplified as the process moves further and further in one direction, with accumulative advantages attained by higher levels of cultural competency (Jin et al., 2022). Positive acculturation increases with more profound familiarity, and negative acculturation becomes more damaging when the individual is estranged from the host culture (Jung, 2022). Studies in acculturation and global education have demonstrated the critical function of HEIs in familiarizing students with the host country's culture (Kim et al., 2021; Penman et al., 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). For example, in Merola et al.'s (2019) study, the principal findings demonstrate the vital role HEIs have in creating integrative environments, thereby increasing social capital and greater student well-being.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the all-inclusive economic ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the economic practice where entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, free markets, and free trade are advocated and at the same time, there is a reduction in government spending on social services, including healthcare and education (Desierto & de Maio, 2020; Slocum et al., 2019). Neoliberalism emphasizes material growth, privatization, competition, and individual entrepreneurship (Slocum et al., 2019) at the expense of democracy and social solidarity (Giroux, 2010; Newson, 2021). Neoliberalism combined with sociodemographic changes has contributed to the

dramatic change in the higher education landscape on a global scale (Newson, 2021). "Neoliberalism affects the telos of higher education by redefining the meaning of higher education" (Cerro Santamaría, 2020, p. 22). As an ideology, neoliberalism commodifies the intrinsic value of education by emphasizing directly transferable skills and competencies (Cerro Santamaría, 2020). Rather than universities becoming the source of human advancement in knowledge and self-development, there has been a shift to turn education into a commodity and social capital where students are viewed as consumers and customers (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021). Neoliberalism has affected higher education by commodifying its institutions' policies and procedures as if the university were a corporation (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023), thus homogenizing HEIs under the guise of global outreach and competitiveness (Park, 2017). There has been a multiplicity of policies and strategies implemented in Korean universities for the commercialization and internationalization of their institutions (Shin & Chung, 2020) along with ubiquitous acceptance of Western education models in Korean higher education (Jung, 2018) in the belief that applying neoliberal approaches will increase domestic social mobility (Yeom, 2016).

2.3 *Neoliberalism in Korean higher education*

The neoliberal policies in Korean HEIs can be recognized in their rapid and aggressive recruitment tactics by adopting English as a medium of instruction for global prestige (Kim, 2017). The current number of international students is over 150,000 (Korean Education Statistics Service, 2023) which will only increase given that the domestic Korean student population is rapidly decreasing (Byun et al., 2011; Jon et al., 2020; Kim, 2017). The current climate of Korean HEIs, in terms of fierce competition for survival, was predicted a decade ago. Piller and Cho (2013) warned of the increased competition by adopting neoliberal policies in Korean HEIs, which they stated would lead to few winners and many feeling left out. The policies adopted by many Korean HEIs in hopes of recruiting international students often emulate the academic models of Western universities (Jung, 2018; Kim, 2021; Park, 2017) to the detriment of its domestic students. Kim (2017) has highlighted the adverse effects on domestic students, with Korean students and instructors vehemently opposed to the expansion of English medium in content courses and internationalization of university curriculum which have led to increased rates of depression and even suicide in Korean universities. As an economic ideology, neoliberalism in higher education overstates the need for financial gain over the civic function of higher education (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021; Rousseau, 2020). In Korea, there has been substantial evidence of how HEIs have negatively impacted the well-being of its domestic students. The question then is how these aggressively recruiting Korean HEIs have affected the lives of its international students.

3. Rationale of the Study

International students encounter many issues when they first arrive in their host country and undergo the trials of living in an unfamiliar place which further adds to their stress. The rationale for the study is based on accounts that cultural and racial factors produce adverse experiences for international students; the apparent blame appears to rest on the discriminatory practices and perceptions of domestic Koreans (Kim, 2020; Lee et al., 2017). However, a broader investigation of HEIs' effect on student acculturation is required, highlighting the duties and responsibilities of the host institution and the host country's socioeconomic context. The increased implementation of neoliberal policies prioritizing profit over enlightenment correlates with the global outreach of Korean HEIs as more international students arrive in a country that has a relatively new multicultural framework (Denney & Green, 2021). What needs to be examined are the conditions to which their neoliberal policies have affected the well-being of international students in Korea, especially during the acculturation journey. The value of this study is answering the following question regarding how HEIs function in a neoliberal for-profit model: How do neoliberal for-profit-driven policies in Korean HEIs affect international students' experiences?

4. Materials and Methods

The qualitative methodological design utilized for this study was Merriam's (1998) case study approach. The case study approach is appropriate for the participants because it allows for rich, in-depth narrative accounts of the participants' lived-in experiences, espousing the philosophical assumption "that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Thus, this approach raises and brings to light the voices of the participants as they provide their lived-in experiences as international students in Korea.

4.1 The participants' backgrounds and research context

Of 103 participants who took a preliminary survey, 14 students agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Their details are outlined in Table 1 below. The researcher contacted these participants because they fulfilled the requirements for purposeful sampling: they were international students who have resided in Korea for at least the last three months, were not ethnically Korean, could communicate in English, and were full-time students.

Table 1. The participants' demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Year of Study	Length of Residence in Korea
Ansar	Male	Uzbekistan	4th year	Four years
Kamala	Female	India	1st year	< three months
Muzzafar	Male	Uzbekistan	1st year	< three months
Valerie	Female	Indonesia	2nd year	< three months
Sarika	Female	India	2nd year	> Two years
Raj	Male	India	2nd year	One year
Illa	Female	Nepal	4th year	Four years
Adam	Male	Bangladesh	2nd year	< three months
Daniela	Female	Kyrgyzstan	2nd year	One year
Wong	Male	China	Graduate	> Two years
Shen	Female	China	Graduate	> Two years
Sabrina	Female	France	1st year	< three months
Samuel	Male	Nepal	4th year	> Five years
Zeke	Male	Uzbekistan	4th year	Four years

4.2 The researcher's positionality

The researcher has had foreigner status in Korea for ten years and is a native English speaker currently teaching at a tertiary institution in Korea. As a sojourner who has personally experienced an acculturation journey in Korea, the researcher brings the emic perspective by situating herself within the participants' cultural and institutional environment. However, from an etic perspective, over ten years have passed since the researcher experienced first-hand the acculturation process and has made observations from an outsider's viewpoint of the participants in their environment. The researcher has also experienced the changes in labor conditions at the university that have made the effects of neoliberal policies more salient as HEIs further resemble corporations instead of public institutions (Killam, 2023; Rousseau, 2020). As such, the researcher possesses both an emic and etic perspective, allowing for greater insight during the data collection and analysis process.

4.3 Data collection

The data collection process lasted for one year from March 2022 to February 2023. The data were collected in numerous ways: (a) six classroom observations and interviews with the instructor, eight

extracurricular club activity observations of international students' interactions with Korean students and other international students (b) 103 participants who filled out a survey; (c) 14 semi-structured interviews; and (d) one focus group. A summary of the data collected can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. The data sources used for triangulation

Data source	Time spent collecting data	Purpose of data
1. International student survey	March 2022-January 2023	To identify key characteristics and variables regarding international students at the school
2. Participant observations: a) Classroom observations b) Extracurricular club activities	a) 4 hours per month (12 hours in total) b) 4 hours per month (12 hours in total)	To observe firsthand how international students engage and interact with their peers
3. Semi-structured interviews	June 2022-January 2023 (14 interviews in total)	To examine in detail the experiences and perspectives of international students' acculturative experiences
4. Focus group	June 2022 (1 hour in total)	To act as a follow-up of what was said in the interviews and obtain greater clarification and details regarding their experiences studying at the school and in Korea

4.4 Data analysis

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparison method in grounded theory was utilized to analyze the data inductively and recursively. The semi-structured interviews, focus group transcripts, and observation notes were analyzed using the three stages of coding: open, axial, and selective. Table 3 below shows how the data were coded and some exemplars.

Table 3. Coding schemes and data exemplars

Coding stage	Codes and themes	Data exemplars
Open coding	Lack of satisfaction; neoliberal stressor	"Why do we pay the money if we are unsatisfied with the product? University is a business, but this business should be fair."
	A sense of a divide among Korean students	"Initially, they did not send any invitation to try out for the different categories. Ultimately, they sent us an email to create an international team. That defeats the whole purpose. We are all the same university students."
Axial coding	Acculturative stress	"There is not a much more cooperative environment for the Korean students."
	Institutional issues	"The administrators are very rude. Moreover, they do not want to take responsibility for anything."
Selective coding	Broken promises & false advertising	"Although it is not a famous university in Korea, if I graduate from this university and return to Nepal, I will not get a job, that is for sure. No matter how good I am at my studies."

The raw data was read and reread several times during the open coding stage. The initial label tags were based on keywords from the extant literature and taken directly from the data in vivo. Some initial tag labels included "convenient," "unsatisfied," "unfair," and "support." These labels were later organized and categorized into emergent codes. The codes that were later developed were more encompassing to form more extensive codes such as "lack of satisfaction."

Next, during axial coding, the codes were further compared, contrasted, and reorganized to create more significant categories that brought to light the connection between the international students' acculturation process and instances of stress due to the school environment. A connection

was discovered between the impact of the school conditions and the students' trajectory of negative acculturation. Thus, the categories of acculturative stress and institutional issues were created.

Finally, during the selective coding stage, the categories were further analyzed and compared to form higher core categories. Categories were subsumed into higher categories that expressed what was lacking in the institutional environment and the connection with the international students' perceptions of how the school treated them. Hence, the category of "negative acculturation conditions" was created.

5. Findings

The following themes reveal how financially-driven decisions made by the host institution affected student acculturation. During the transcription and data analysis process, the researcher found that the students used the transactional language of neoliberalism to describe their acculturation experiences. Four thematic categories emerged that highlight the effects of neoliberal HEI policies and decisions on student acculturation.

5.1 International recruitment: False advertising and broken promises

Students felt that what they were told before arriving in Korea differed significantly from what they experienced. The programs as they were marketed were not what the school provided. Two fourth-year students voiced their dissatisfaction and disappointment with the gap between their initial expectations and the reality of their university experience. The first account was shared by Ansar, who came to a Korean university expecting a Western education. Not long after, Ansar revealed that he felt disillusioned and described his university experience using a transactional metaphor:

> *I think the university's main focus is on making money unscrupulously. We are paying the tuition fee. We are also the customers. Why do we pay money if we are unsatisfied with the product? University is a business, but this business should be fair.*

Neoliberal ideology manifests not only in policy decisions but in student responses. Many of the participants believed that false marketing was utilized to bring students like Ansar here. He felt he was recruited under pretenses about what he would receive from the school. He felt that the cost is incommensurable to the perceived value of his education. Ansar saw that the focus was on money and building an enterprise, not enabling him to build a foundation for his future career. Ansar had believed that his university would be an international institution, but the quality of his education was subpar.

> *We are paying tuition. The university should hire high-quality professors. One professor should not be taught for different classes. One professor taught programming one semester and then writing and reading next semester. We should have more high-quality professors from the USA and European countries. They should hire specific professors. For example, an IT professor should teach all the IT classes and no other classes.*

Ansar's critique of the school is based on his observation that the value of his paid tuition was not honored. He recognized how the university cut corners by making professors do multiple courses beyond their specialty and competence. Not only did they lack technical skills, but he thought they did not have the appropriate communication skills as well. Ansar explained, "We have many professors whose English level is relatively low, and their vocabulary is awful. The professors should take the IELTS exam." Ansar's words may be insensitive and unfair, but another student echoed the same feelings of being deceived and cheated; the education they received was not good enough.

Samuel had a more positive outlook on his Korean experience; he had Korean friends, and Samuel aspired to settle in Korea in the long term. Although he will never speak fluently, he wants to

communicate deeper with local Koreans. Nevertheless, Samuel shared the same disappointment as Ansar; his degree was not worth his investment.

> *It was weird. Once I came here, I was surprised to find out about this university. Although it is not a famous university in Korea, if I graduate from this university and go to Nepal, I will not get a job, that is for sure. No matter how good I am at my studies. What can I do with my degree in a few years?*

Samuel did not expect a good return on the investment of his Korean degree. The neoliberal expectation that a degree would be a stepping stone towards a successful career was unlikely, which was very different from Samuel's initial expectation that his degree would be worth something. For Samuel, the explanation for the worthlessness of his degree is relatively simple: to him, his university education was not good at all.

> *Our universities in Nepal are much better than those in Korea; It is just that Korea has good facilities. But the education is better in Nepal. Do you know what they teach here? If I am studying marketing here for my master's, it is a whole different thing compared to my country. You do not learn much here.*

Comparing Samuel to Ansar, a polarized account of acculturation was discovered. Ansar exemplifies an individual who has experienced high levels of acculturative stress. While Samuel has had similar experiences, the critical difference is that Samuel overcame his acculturative stressors and found a way to integrate. However, the fact that his university presented what he perceived as a false impression and lied about the value of his degree was a sore point for him. Samuel's comparison between Korea and Nepal may appear hyperbolic, but many of the other participants were in accordance that the quality of education was insufficient.

5.2 *Administrative incompetence: Student observations of quantity over quality*

The language used by the participants to describe the quality of their learning experience is in neoliberal terms. Zeke, an Uzbek fourth-year student, was honest about his low expectations, given the cheaper tuition rate compared to American and European universities.

> *Regarding this university, classes and the quality of education are not good here. I didn't expect it to be the top because of what we pay. It was a smooth and easy process to get into this university.*

Zeke was not as shocked by the lower quality of classes, and he rationalized his decision to continue his studies because of the relative ease of the courses. However, for other students, this was a problem. One of the focus group participants was disappointed that her university did not try to conceal what she viewed as unscrupulous and incompetent curriculum management. She imparted:

> *I'm in my 4th year, and I'm taking classes that I already took in my second year. They just changed the name. They said, 'Oh yeah, it's the same curriculum, but we just changed the name of the course so you can get the credit to graduate.' They did not offer me new classes.*

It appears that the factory system of this university prioritized recruitment over the quality of education. Not only were unqualified professors teaching these students, but they were also served by administrators who lacked the necessary training or skills to design and implement an international program. The language used in the classroom further confirmed the lack of preparation and planning. Although the students were promised English content courses, many complained that most courses were in Korean. A fourth-year student from Nepal named Illa stated that she had to delay her graduation because there were not enough courses every semester for her degree program. She elaborated:

> *They do not offer enough courses in our department. Koreans can get extra courses from another*

department because they are Korean and they can understand Korean easily. However, international students cannot. So, it takes longer for us to fulfill our graduation requirements.

More than half of the participants stated that the school informed them that Korean competence was not compulsory. They were reassured that international students were only required to have a certain level of English because the university courses would be in English. However, upon arriving in Korea, the reality was different. Not only were the classes not in English, but daily life in Korea required an international student to have a basic knowledge of Korean. Illa explained:

We did not take any Korean language classes before coming here because they said that we only had to know English. But we had difficulties in our dormitory communicating because the staff didn't speak English. We had many group projects and we needed to talk but couldn't. It was not a cooperative environment for us and the Korean students.

For students, the evidence of minimal effort to be accountable demonstrated indifference and incompetence. Their university officials lacked moral scruples, and their policies only cared about recruitment numbers instead of fostering an intercultural environment that would benefit both domestic and international students. Ansar's verdict was echoed by many of his fellow senior students that school officials "do not pay attention to quality; they only pay attention to quantity."

5.3 A divided campus: Feelings of exclusion and invisibility

Institutional indifference and incompetence came at a high cost. The participants expressed difficulties navigating the Korean cultural landscape and wished they had someone to help and guide them in the right direction; someone to assist them in reducing the stress of adaptation as they learned to settle into their host country. For example, Shen stated:

The school should arrange for some Korean students to help us. It would save much time. If we have questions, we can ask them, and if they have an activity, they can bring us together; we need a mentor.

This Korean mentor is mentioned by those participants who admitted to having very few opportunities for social interaction with Korean students. They wanted the university to make more official opportunities to assist with intercultural interaction between international and domestic Korean students. Said Sarika:

We had a school event last October. There was a different session for international students and a different session for Korean students. There is always this divide.

Specifically, the participants strongly desired to be included in more social events at the school. International students were often excluded from taking part in school-wide events and festivals. Sarika continued:

In terms of internships or any user announcements on the website or even events that Koreans go to, most of the time, it is assumed that we do not speak Korean, so we will not be able to participate. Or sometimes they think we would not want to participate.

The university's failure to integrate international students can be recognized in its assumption that students like Sarika lack the linguistic competence to understand, and their decisions assume that international students will not be interested in participating. The school does not conceal the fact that the campus is divided and perpetuates such division. This is evident in student events like festivals and extracurriculars such as the student council which are only available to Korean students. Because of language barriers, international students cannot join the Korean student council or other clubs. Sarika described the university situation:

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At the orientation and in lots of other school events, they separate us. Even club activities and some kinds of stuff are for Koreans like the sports day activities. Initially, they did not send any invitation to try out for the different categories. Ultimately, they sent us an email to create an international team. That defeats the whole purpose. We are all the same university students.

The great divide would be improved if the school provided more official opportunities to improve the relations between Korean and international students. Such divides also often occur in the classroom. For example, Illa related:

If we talk in Korean with our Korean classmates about anything they want to discuss with us, they just speak in Korean. However, if I do not know any Korean, they do not want to say anything. So, it is very painful because we want to talk to them and the professor wants us to be in a group. But they do not want to be with us. It is a problem.

Better institutional support would have reduced the participants' stress by preparing them for their arrival and settlement in Korea. Participants' negative experiences revealed that a lack of student services and facilities in English had stymied positive acculturation. Consequently, they wished the school would provide more student services and facilities. Illa had a powerful way of describing her sense of invisibility and lack of status when dealing with school administrators:

I want them to appreciate international students and how they adjust in Korea. Furthermore, I want them to understand us more and try to help. Instead of getting angry or frustrated, try to listen to our voices and what we are trying to say. However, they do not want to hear us.

Thus, the policies implemented at this university do not foster unity and solidarity but perpetuate divisions. Failure to address the need for intercultural understanding has resulted in perceptions of unfairness and inequality as if their university only caters to the needs of Korean students and not them.

5.4   *Buyer's remorse: Do not come to Korea*

One of the lasting impressions that the interviews, survey comments, and focus group discussion left the researcher was the regret stated by the participants. A critical moment during the focus group discussion was the last moment when the researcher had this exchange with three participants:

Student #5: People from back home and friends ask how you are enjoying Korea. How is life in Korea? I usually tell them it is not what you see in the movies. I come home from work at 9 pm. Moreover, I must do my homework in the morning and have classes again. They cannot imagine this kind of situation. It looks like I am happy because I usually post photos on Instagram when I go somewhere. They usually see these photos and tell me Korea is good, I want to come. However, when they ask me if they should come, I say no.

The irony of the neoliberal model implemented at this university is that prioritizing profit over student well-being resulted in adverse publicity undermining its capitalist pursuit. Attempting to recruit students without the infrastructure or strategy to encourage acculturation has led to an unhappy clientele that eagerly discourages their friends and loved ones from attending this university and visiting Korea. Samuel echoed the same sentiment when asked if he could go back in time, he would learn more about Korean higher education.

C: Would you have changed your mind about coming if you heard something negative?
S: Of course, I would have tried another country.

This belief that coming to Korea was a mistake was not an exception but a common theme. Illa wanted the researcher to heed her words, her warning to the school.

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They should be very careful because if every student feels like this, and if this continues, then there will be no more international students.

In sum, a profit-driven model in education exemplified by neoliberal policies is far from the best practice. The student experiences documented here reveal the repercussions of neoliberal approaches in HEIs which are detrimental to student acculturation and well-being. Ironically, the same policy is also bad for business.

6. Discussion and Implications

Based on the participants' perceptions of their experiences, it is apparent that HEIs in Korea have failed international students in many ways. The participants have clarified that they are not receiving the necessary support to adapt and learn successfully in the school environment which is critical for acculturation and adaptation (Kim et al., 2021; Merola et al., 2019; Penman et al., 2021). While they have successfully enrolled students in the school, the university has failed to live up to its promises. This is evident with the incoherent curricula and poorly designed policies, the consequences of which these students had to endure. Ansar, Samuel, and Illa's accounts constitute the negative publicity Korean HEIs want to avoid. However, the model implemented by their host university does not facilitate their acculturative journey, or worse, it is a precondition of their acculturative stress. Institutional conditions are critical to positive acculturation (Jin et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). The key finding from this study is that institutional support, feelings of belonging or inclusivity, and improvements in communication are pivotal in fostering positive acculturation; these findings were discovered by the fact that the participants did not receive adequate support. The accounts here are consistent with previous studies such as Merola et al. (2019) and Kim et al. (2021). It is apparent from the focus group and student interviews that the experiences demonstrate how the host institution is not accommodating or aware of the acculturation struggles of international students. The absence of social support in the cases of Illa and Ansar confirms the significance of Lee et al. (2020) and Jung's (2022) recommendations that friendship, community, and other forms of social capital can buffer acculturative stress. Without such support, the inverse of the findings of Jin et al. (2022) was found in which case the students' positive experiences of the host institution led to an acceptance of the host country's cultures and values.

Although the findings of this study appear to negatively represent the host institution as if it exemplifies the worst traits of higher education, it is critical to recognize that this institution is reacting to the socioeconomic conditions set in place by current neoliberal government policies. In order for Korean HEIs to survive, they need aid and government assistance to continue, and the more dependent they are on the government, the more neoliberal their organization will be (Shin & Chung, 2020). Furthermore, Korean HEIs have also shown to struggle greatly when it comes to assisting their domestic students through poor planning and mismanagement which have resulted in an oversaturated college market that could not deliver on its promise of social mobility, even perpetuating the social inequities that neo-liberalization was supposed to erase (Yeom, 2016). Thus, applying an American-based education model in Korean HEIs (Jung, 2018) has demonstrated how neoliberalism has harmed both domestic and international students with its capitalist, managerial, and corporate strategies (Cerro Santamaría, 2020; Newson, 2021; Rousseau, 2020).

To resist neoliberalism requires the moral imperative to value civic education over profit (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Rousseau, 2020). In Korea, the necessity of acculturation, which requires a deep intercultural understanding (Sam & Berry, 2006), is primarily overlooked by administrators for profit. Rectifying the current problems requires Korean HEIs to acknowledge the causes of these students' stressors and find possible solutions to help them overcome them. However, our findings confirm that even this slight improvement is difficult, given that a humanistic approach is not readily visible in a neoliberal context (Giroux, 2010). The institution examined reveals the limits of treating

students within the context of customer service, as if students were mere consumers of university knowledge and Korean experiences. University policies were in place only to attract the students, without much thought to their welfare afterward. Participants offered vivid accounts of their acculturative journeys in transactional terms, and their adverse experiences are consistent with the autoethnographic works by Warren (2017) and Killam (2023). Both serve as stark warnings of reducing academic life to neoliberal subjectivity which leads to experiences of marginalization, invisibility, and existential dislocation. The alienation of the study participants could have been prevented. Many salient implications can be made based on the results of this study. For instance, in order to improve the conditions in Korean HEIs, both the Korean government and tertiary institutions must make it a priority to find ways to support international students in order for them to thrive and have a positive educational experience. Past research has shown the positive effects of support networks and mentorship programs to improve international students' acculturation and well-being (Kim et al., 2021; Penman et al., 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Implementing such programs would be greatly beneficial for international students as these programs function with a higher calling than profit by addressing the students' emotional and mental health, not merely their customer status. Unless higher education institutions move away from the consumer-based model of profit-driven education, the problems cited here will continue.

7. Conclusion

Although this study focused on one Korean HEI, the institutional issues stemming from the effects of its neoliberal policies is not just endemic to this particular university, but rather, similar issues are currently impacting many other HEIs in Korea and on a global scale. Thus, the broader significance of this study is that the overwhelming negativity towards neoliberalism pinpoints the current global trend of reducing academic life to corporate terms and, ultimately, how the customer model of education will lead to the demise of academic values (Cerro Santamaría, 2020; Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Warren, 2017). To reiterate, there is a great urgency globally for reform in HEIs as they have an ethical, moral, and institutional responsibility to provide all students with the conditions to positively adapt and learn in an environment conducive to their learning (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2022; Newson, 2021). To make the experiences of international students more positive, HEIs need to work to improve the conditions of the school actively (Penman et al., 2021). This can be done through various ways such as better infrastructure, facilities, opportunities, and social support (Kim et al., 2021; Penman et al., 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Providing such support for students is essential not just from a student's standpoint but also for the tertiary institution's survival both in Korea and worldwide. The reputation of an institution is thus greatly enhanced by using a more humanistic approach as its guide.

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