Trading the Country for Tuition

Harrison Keller had barely started his second year running the University of North Texas when the numbers stopped adding up. Roughly 2,800 international students the campus had counted on simply never arrived. Visas were denied or revoked, travel bans landed, and the tuition they would have paid vanished with them. A single missing group opened a hole of about $45 million, and closing it meant cutting 71 academic programs.

His campus was not unlucky in isolation. Over the past 15 years, universities across the United States rebuilt their finances around foreign students, the ones who pay full price and then some. As enrollment fell and public funding thinned, recruiting from abroad kept the books balanced without charging local families more. Economists found the pattern almost mechanical: for every 10 percent a state cut from a public university's budget, that university enrolled roughly 16 percent more foreign students to cover the difference.

The scale is easy to underestimate. Researchers at Princeton found that international students, only about 6 percent of enrollment, supplied close to twice that share of tuition revenue, and more than a third of it at some schools. That money is not idle: it holds down local tuition, funds financial aid, and pays the staff nobody notices until they are gone. Britain leaned the same way after freezing home tuition for years, and its own regulators now warn the dependence is dangerous.

The weakness of a plan resting on other people's willingness to show up is that the willingness can evaporate. In the United States, visa denials and travel restrictions cut student arrivals by nearly 25 percent in a single summer. The University of Southern California shed close to 1,000 jobs. At one Chicago university, incoming international graduate enrollment dropped by two-thirds. Canada offers the starkest preview: after the government capped enrollment, foreign numbers fell by roughly 73 percent, and Ontario, which had drawn most of its tuition income from them, now faces losses in the billions.

South Korea faces the same danger from the opposite direction. Its threat is not political but demographic. The number of children starting elementary school is about to fall below 300,000 for the first time, in a system whose universities were built for closer to 500,000 a year. More than 60 percent of Korean university presidents recently said they expect at least 30 four-year institutions to close within a decade; in some provinces, demographers guess only 3 to 5 will survive. So Korea has reached for the now-familiar cure. Foreign student visas have climbed by half in a few years, past 300,000, and the government now runs recruitment drives and a Seoul program to keep foreign graduates as permanent residents rather than send them home.

That reach for a cure is where the uncomfortable question surfaces, the one the budget meetings tend to skip. Korea has more than 330 universities because it was once a younger, more crowded country, with enough 18-year-olds to fill them. That country is disappearing. If the generation that packed those lecture halls has shrunk, there is a plausible case that the number of lecture halls should shrink too, and that importing students to keep half-empty

campuses lit only postpones a reckoning it cannot prevent. Korean demographers have said much the same, calling foreign recruitment a stopgap that keeps struggling schools breathing without fixing what ails them, a painkiller for the symptom that does nothing for the cause.

Notice what that fix actually is. When a university stays open by filling seats with foreigners, and the government then works to keep those graduates for good, the rescue of the institution and a quiet act of immigration policy turn out to be the same transaction seen from two distances. The Seoul program is not built to send these students home. It is built to keep them, carried out through admissions offices rather than a visible immigration debate. To some, that is the whole problem: a country filling its classrooms with outsiders to survive a baby shortage is, in the same motion, changing who its residents are. Critics ask whether immigration should patch a demographic hole at all, and whether a society leaning on newcomers this fast becomes, over a generation, a noticeably different one. Supporters answer that a country aging this fast has little choice: it needs workers from somewhere, and a graduate who already knows the language is the most prepared newcomer it could ask for. Both can be true at once, which is what makes the argument so hard to end.

The fear may even be overblown. Where closures have already begun, they have mostly involved small, long-shrinking schools few students will miss, and clearing some away is arguably healthy. The real damage rarely arrives as a clean shutdown. It comes as a slow hollowing: a department cut here, a shrunken campus there, jobs vanishing in towns that cannot spare them. A regional university is often the economic heart of its town, and when it fades, the young people and the work drain away with it. And these students are not entries in a ledger. Many of those arriving in Korea come from Vietnam, trading one country's narrowing horizons for another's, betting a degree becomes a job and the job a life. Whether or not the school needed saving, the person walking through its gates is building something real.

So the sharper question is not whether these universities have earned the right to survive. It is what a country owes the strangers it recruits to survive them, whether a school kept alive by newcomers is being rescued or simply handed a longer goodbye, and whether the students filling those seats will stay to become the country's future or leave the moment the degree is in hand. Right now, in some half-empty campus in a thinning province, a lecture is being delivered to a room of students who crossed the planet to fill seats that local children were never born to sit in. The lights are still on. What no one can yet say is who they are on for.

1) Why do you think so many international students have come to Korea in recent years?
2) What are the risks of a university surviving mainly on money from foreign students?
3) Should the government bail out a struggling university when a small local economy depends on it?
4) Should we make it easier for international students to stay in the country after graduation, or expect them to return home?
5) Is it possible for a country to welcome many newcomers quickly without changing its national identity?

6) Should a university recruit international students to stay open, or shut down when the demand is not there, like a business?

Add up	(phr v)	to make sense or seem reasonable when all the facts are considered	Her story just didn't add up, and the more questions we asked, the more confused everyone became.
Count on (sb/sth)	(phr v)	to rely on someone or something with confidence that they will not fail you	Small businesses count on a steady stream of regular customers to get them through the quiet winter months.
Revoke	(v)	to officially cancel a decision, permission, or legal document so it no longer has effect	His driving license was revoked after the third serious offense, and he had to rely on public transport for a year.
In isolation	(exp)	considered separately, without taking related things or wider context into account	You can't judge a single test score in isolation; it only means something once you see the student's whole record.
Full price	(n)	the complete original amount charged for something, with no discount or reduction	By waiting a week she avoided the crowds, but she had to pay full price for the tickets.
And then some	(idm)	and considerably more than the amount just mentioned (informal)	The renovation cost us everything we had saved and then some, so we were paying it off for years.
Enrollment	(n)	the number of people officially registered at a school, course, or program	The new language school kept its fees low in the first year to build up enrollment before raising prices.
Balance the books	(idm)	to make sure that the money coming in and the money going out are equal	After two bad quarters, the manager struggled to balance the books without laying anyone off.
Idle	(adj)	not being used, active, or put to any productive purpose	Millions of dollars sat idle in the account while the committee argued about how to spend it.
Hold (sth) down	(phr v)	to keep something, such as a cost or level, from rising	The government introduced price controls to hold down the cost of basic food during the crisis.
Financial aid	(n)	money given to students, usually as grants or loans, to help them pay for their education	Without financial aid, many talented students from poorer families would never be able to afford university.

Freeze	(v)	to fix a price, wage, or amount at its current level and not allow it to change	The company froze all salaries for a year, which frustrated staff who had expected a raise.
Regulator	(n)	an official body or person that supervises and controls a particular industry or activity	The financial regulator fined the bank heavily for misleading its customers about the risks.
Dependence	(n)	the state of needing something or someone in order to survive or function	The country's heavy dependence on a single export left its economy exposed when prices collapsed.
Evaporate	(v)	to disappear quickly and completely (figurative)	Public support for the project evaporated the moment people saw how much it would raise their taxes.
Shed	(v)	to get rid of something that is no longer wanted or affordable	The airline shed thousands of jobs during the downturn and only slowly rehired once travel recovered.
Stark	(adj)	very clear and obvious, especially an unpleasant difference or contrast	There is a stark gap between the wealthy districts downtown and the struggling neighborhoods on the edge of the city.
Cap	(v)	to set an upper limit on an amount or number	The university capped first-year enrollment to stop class sizes from growing out of control.
Demographic	(adj)	relating to the size, structure, and characteristics of a human population	The town is facing a demographic problem, with too many retirees and not enough young workers to support them.
Surface	(v)	to become known or noticeable after being hidden or ignored	Old disagreements between the two departments surfaced as soon as the budget had to be shared.
Plausible	(adj)	seeming reasonable or likely to be true	It's a plausible explanation, but we shouldn't accept it until we've checked the actual figures.
Reckoning	(n)	a moment when you are forced to deal with the results of your past actions	Years of ignoring the aging pipes finally led to a reckoning when the whole system failed in one winter.
Stopgap	(n)	a temporary solution used until a proper one can be found	Hiring extra staff for the holidays was only a stopgap; the warehouse really needed a bigger building.
For good	(idm)	permanently; forever	After the third flood, they decided to leave the coast for good and move inland.

Carry out	(phr v)	to do or complete something that has been planned or ordered	The team carried out the survey over three months and presented its findings to the city council.
Motion	(n)	a single continuous movement or action	In one smooth motion, she picked up the tray and pushed the door open with her hip.
Patch	(v)	to fix a problem temporarily or roughly, without solving it properly	The city keeps patching the same stretch of road instead of rebuilding it once and for all.
Lean on (sb/sth)	(phr v)	to rely on someone or something for support	Startups often lean on a handful of loyal clients until they can attract a wider market.
Newcomer	(n)	a person who has recently arrived in a place	The town set up a small center to help newcomers register for services and learn the local language.
Overblown	(adj)	made to seem more serious, important, or alarming than it really is	The media coverage was overblown, and the storm turned out to be little more than heavy rain.
Hollow (sth) out	(phr v)	to gradually remove or weaken the important, useful, or living parts of something	Decades of factory closures had hollowed out the region, leaving empty buildings and shrinking towns.
Spare	(v)	to be able to afford to give or lose something without difficulty	The team was so short-staffed that it couldn't spare a single person for the new project.
Fade	(v)	to gradually become weaker, less important, or less visible	As the highway drew traffic elsewhere, the once-busy main street slowly faded.
Drain away	(phr v)	to gradually flow out or disappear until little or nothing is left	As the factory closed, jobs and young families slowly drained away from the small town.
Entry	(n)	a single item recorded in a list, account, or register	Each entry in the record had a date, an amount, and a short note explaining the payment.
Ledger	(n)	a book or record in which financial accounts are kept	The old family shop still tracked every sale by hand in a thick leather ledger.
Earn the right	(exp)	to gain something through effort or merit, so that you deserve it	After years of reliable work, she felt she had earned the right to a say in how the company was run.
In hand	(exp)	in one's possession, especially something already obtained or secured	With the signed contract in hand, the builders were finally willing to start work.