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HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' PIVOTAL ROLE IN STRENGTHENING EDUCATION COOPERATION: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH IN ASEAN-ROK AND CENTRAL ASIA-ROK RELATIONSHIPS

This study examines the pivotal role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in strengthening educational cooperation between the Republic of Korea and two strategically important regions: ASEAN and Central Asia. Through comparative analysis of student exchanges, faculty collaboration, and institutional support, the research identifies significant imbalances and challenges in these educational relationships. This study shows that the student mobility outlook exhibits extreme directional asymmetry, with far more students from both regions studying in Korea than vice versa. Faculty collaboration remains limited and narrowly focused on economic and political topics rather than comprehensive academic partnerships. Institutional support varies considerably, with both regions receiving less attention than East Asian studies in Korean academia. The paper argues that addressing these challenges through targeted interventions at student, faculty, and institutional levels can transform these predominantly elite-driven relationships into more balanced partnerships with broader societal engagement. By adopting a multi-stakeholder approach that emphasizes agency rather than structural constraints, this research demonstrates how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can serve as crucial bridges for sustainable and resilient bilateral relations between Korea and these regions.

Key words: higher education institutions, education cooperation, ASEAN-ROK relations, Central Asia-ROK relations, student mobility, faculty collaboration, institutional support, comparative education, educational diplomacy, soft power.

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Жоғары оқу орындарының білім беру ынтымақтастығын нығайтудағы басты рөлі: Асеан-Корея және Орталық Азия-Корея қатынастарындағы салыстырмалы тәсіл

Бұл зерттеу Корея Республикасы мен екі стратегиялық маңызды аймақ: АСЕАН және Орталық Азия арасындағы білім беру ынтымақтастығын нығайтудағы жоғары оқу орындарының (ЖОО-ның) маңызды рөлін қарастырады. Студенттік алмасулар, оқытушылардың ынтымақтастығы және институционалдық қолдауды салыстырмалы талдау арқылы зерттеу бұл білім беру қатынастарындағы айтарлықтай теңгерімсіздіктер мен қиындықтарды анықтайды. Бұл зерттеу студенттердің ұтқырлық жағдайы бағыттың шамадан тыс асимметриясын көрсетеді, екі аймақтан да Кореяда оқитын студенттер саны керісінше оқитындарға қарағанда әлдеқайда көп. Оқытушылардың ынтымақтастығы шектеулі және жан-жақты академиялық серіктестіктен гөрі экономикалық және саяси тақырыптарға тар шоғырланған күйінде қалып отыр. Институционалдық қолдау айтарлықтай өзгереді, бұл ретте екі аймақ та корей академиялық ортасында Шығыс Азия зерттеулеріне қарағанда аз назар аударады. Мақалада студенттер, оқытушылар және мекемелер деңгейінде мақсатты араласу арқылы осы проблемаларды шешу бұл негізінен элиталық қарым-қатынасты қоғамның кеңірек қатысуымен теңгерімді серіктестікке айналдыра алады делінген. Көптеген мүдделі тараптарды қатыстыру тәсілін қолдана отырып, құрылымдық шектеулерден гөрі агенттікті баса көрсететін, бұл зерттеу жоғары оқу орындары (ЖОО-лар) Корея мен осы аймақтар арасындағы тұрақты және беріктілігі жоғары екіжақты қатынастар үшін маңызды көпір бола алатынын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары оқу орындары, білім беру ынтымақтастығы, АСЕАН-Корея қатынастары, Орталық Азия-Корея қатынастары, студенттердің ұтқырлығы, оқытушылардың ынтымақтастығы, институционалдық қолдау, салыстырмалы білім беру, білім беру дипломатиясы, жұмсақ күш.

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**Ключевая роль высших учебных заведений
в укреплении образовательного сотрудничества:
сравнительный подход в отношениях АСЕАН-РК и Центральная Азия-РК**

Данное исследование рассматривает ключевую роль высших учебных заведений (вузов) в укреплении образовательного сотрудничества между Республикой Корея и двумя стратегически важными регионами: АСЕАН и Центральной Азией. Посредством сравнительного анализа студенческих обменов, сотрудничества преподавателей и институциональной поддержки, исследование выявляет значительные дисбалансы и проблемы в этих образовательных отношениях. Это исследование показывает, что ситуация с мобильностью студентов демонстрирует крайнюю асимметрию направления, когда гораздо больше студентов из обоих регионов учатся в Корею, чем наоборот. Сотрудничество преподавателей остается ограниченным и узко сфокусированным на экономических и политических темах, а не на всестороннем академическом партнерстве. Институциональная поддержка значительно варьируется, при этом оба региона получают меньше внимания, чем восточноазиатские исследования в корейской академической среде. В статье утверждается, что решение этих проблем через целенаправленные вмешательства на уровне студентов, преподавателей и учреждений может трансформировать эти преимущественно элитарные отношения в более сбалансированные партнерства с более широким общественным взаимодействием. Применяя подход с вовлечением множества заинтересованных сторон, который подчеркивает агентность, а не структурные ограничения, это исследование демонстрирует, как высшие учебные заведения (ВУЗы) могут служить ключевыми мостами для устойчивых и стабильных двусторонних отношений между Кореей и этими регионами.

Ключевые слова: высшие учебные заведения, образовательное сотрудничество, отношения АСЕАН-РК, отношения Центральная Азия-РК, мобильность студентов, сотрудничество преподавателей, институциональная поддержка, сравнительное образование, образовательная дипломатия, мягкая сила.

Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK) has progressively intensified its diplomatic and economic engagement with both Southeast Asian and Central Asian regions through strategic foreign policy initiatives. With the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), this relationship accelerated with the New Southern Policy (NSP) under President Moon Jae In and the subsequent Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) under President Yoon Suk Yeol. Similarly, Korea has strengthened ties with Central Asian countries through the “K-silk Road” initiative—the third regional strategy announced by the Yoon administration following the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” and KASI—which aims to enhance the region’s connection between Asia and Europe (KOCIS, 2024).

Within the last five years, progress has been apparent on all fronts. Economic achievements are highly celebrated both by academicians and poli-

cymakers. Data from the ASEAN Korea Center (2021) stated that the total trade in 2021 between Korea and ASEAN reached 177 billion USD, up from 142 billion USD in 2020. The 2021 number exceeded the pre-COVID number, with trade being only 160 billion USD in 2018. The number correlates with the number of Korean enterprises that reside in ASEAN, reaching 16,694 in three quarters of 2020 (ASEAN Korea Center, 2021). Achievements in security and political cooperation especially highlight the success of bilateral responses regarding health security during the pandemic. The NSP Plus strongly emphasizes broad-based healthcare collaboration as the cornerstone of cooperation between ROK and ASEAN. Korea has provided more than 30 billion USD as part of pandemic management (Kim, 2021). Furthermore, The ASEAN ROK Plan 2021–2025 will place a substantial focus on cooperation in times of medical emergency. Under Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, climate change and

green energy are added to the focus of collaboration (Yoon, 2022).

Meanwhile, Korea-Central Asia economic relations remain somewhat one-sided, with imports standing at just \$1.1 billion—98% of which comes from Kazakhstan in the form of crude oil and raw materials. Despite this modest trade volume, Korea is playing a more active business role in the region, with 76 newly established Korean companies in Uzbekistan in 2019 and a further 20 in 2020 (Korea and Japan in Central Asia, 2021)

The success of the people pillar is less celebrated, as similar positive trends take place in people exchanges. Southeast Asia has become the birthplace of Hallyu enthusiasts as a result of the popularity of the genre. Southeast Asia dominates K-pop tweeting on a worldwide scale. According to Tweet volume, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia come in the first place (Rakhmat & Tarahita, 2020). Additionally, the Hallyu Index Sentiment and Popularity are overgrowing in the ASEAN 4 (Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand), opening up a potential export market for Hallyu goods (KOFICE, 2020).

A critical aspect of the historical and cultural affinity between Korea and Central Asia is the presence of an ethnic Korean diaspora in the region. During the Soviet era, many Koreans were forcibly relocated to Central Asia, creating a significant Korean community in countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This diaspora has played a vital role in fostering South Korea's interest in developing relations with Central Asian countries. The Korean diaspora's shared experiences and cultural ties have provided a unique bridge between South Korea and Central Asia, contributing to mutual understanding and collaboration (Oh & Zholamanova, 2021).

Even though the number plummeted due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions, ASEAN is still the top destination for Korean Outbound Travelers in 2019-2020, exceeding that of China, Japan, and the US. A more resilient trend in people exchanges takes place in the education sector. Unlike the short-term sector, the long-term exchange is unwavering. The number of ASEAN students studying in Korea keeps increasing even during the pandemic. The top 5 student numbers rose incrementally from 62.359 in 2019, 62.825 in 2020, and 70.820 in 2021 (ASEAN Korea Centre, 2021).

A notable challenge in both regional relationships is the perception gap between state actors and the general public. Surveys reveal that while over 90% of ASEAN youth express interest in Korea,

only 52% of Korean youth show interest in ASEAN-related topics. Similarly, knowledge about Central Asian countries in Korea remains limited despite historical connections through the ethnic Korean diaspora in Central Asia (AKC, 2022).

However, despite these promising developments, both the ROK-ASEAN and ROK-Central Asia relationships have faced criticism. Most analyses have focused on structural approaches emphasizing the influence of the international system, particularly the dynamics of great power rivalry. This has resulted in limited discussions about the role of agency in shaping these relations. Furthermore, critics argue that bilateral relationships remain elitist, following a top-down approach that fails to engage broader populations adequately.

Hence, this paper adopts an agency approach, arguing that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can play a crucial role in strengthening Korea's relationships with both ASEAN and Central Asian regions through the people-to-people dimension. By focusing on education as a long-term investment, this research examines how HEIs foster mutual understanding and positive perceptions among the youth who represent the future of these interregional relations.

Relevance of the topics, goals and objectives

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the role of higher education institutions in fostering international relations, particularly between Korea and two strategically important regions: Southeast Asia and Central Asia. The relevance of this topic lies in several key aspects:

First, while the Korean government has adopted “people-centered approaches” in its frameworks for cooperation with both regions, in practice, significant improvements are required to achieve meaningful people-to-people connections. This research aims to investigate how HEIs can fulfill this gap by facilitating increased exposure and familiarity between Korean people and citizens of ASEAN and Central Asian countries, particularly youth.

Second, the research moves beyond the dominant structural explanations of ROK's international relations by focusing on agency, particularly the role of higher education institutions. Unlike structural arguments that suggest these relationships are shaped exogenously, an agency approach argues that relationships are driven endogenously. This perspective provides greater space for proactive initiatives and changes, making future relations less vulnerable to

disruptions from external factors such as US-China tensions in East Asia.

Third, comparing ASEAN and Central Asian regions in their educational cooperation with Korea offers valuable insights into the different trajectories, challenges, and opportunities that exist in each relationship. By examining these parallel yet distinct relationships, this study can identify best practices and transferable strategies to enhance Korea's educational cooperation with both regions.

The goals and objectives of this paper are:

1. To analyze the current state of educational cooperation between Korea and both ASEAN and Central Asian regions across three key HEI sectors: institutions, students, and faculty (researchers/lecturers).

2. To identify persistent challenges and imbalances in educational exchanges between Korea and these regions.

3. To provide practical recommendations for strengthening academic cooperation through grassroots initiatives.

4. To demonstrate how enhanced educational cooperation can contribute to more sustainable and resilient bilateral relations between Korea and both ASEAN and Central Asian countries.

Methods and methodology

This research employs a multi-stakeholder approach focusing on the triad of institutions, students, and faculty (researchers) within higher education. The methodology adopts a sector-based analytical framework to examine each component of higher education institutions separately before reconnecting them to provide a comprehensive view of both unit and sub-unit levels.

Data collection for this study involved:

1. Analysis of statistical data from the ASEAN-Korea Center, the Korean Ministry of Education, Korea Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), and other institutional sources to track student exchanges, enrollment patterns, and educational preferences between Korea and both regions from 2019-2023.

2. Literature review of academic publications on education cooperation and bilateral relations between Korea and both ASEAN and Central Asian countries, with particular attention to how higher education contributes to foreign policy and soft power initiatives.

3. Bibliometric analysis using the Herzing Publish and Perish App to examine publication patterns

in Google Scholar and Scopus repositories regarding ASEAN-Korea and Central Asia-Korea research.

4. Comparative analysis of educational infrastructure, particularly language departments and area studies programs focused on ASEAN and Central Asian/Turkic studies within Korean universities.

The research is framed by theories of soft power and epistemic communities to understand how educational exchanges can generate attraction and affinity between countries and how professional groups who share common values can influence bilateral relations.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, the study segments the HEI sector into three components (institution, students, and faculty) while recognizing their interdependence. This segmentation allows for targeted analysis and recommendations while acknowledging that developments in one sector inevitably impact others due to the interconnected nature of the academic environment.

Literature review

Various scholars have explored the role of higher education institutions in international relations, with particular emphasis on their soft power potential. Previous studies on ASEAN-Korea and Central Asia-Korea relationships provide an important context for understanding these educational exchanges' current dynamics and challenges.

The majority of recent publications on how education cooperation contributes towards bilateral relationship link works on higher education with soft power conception. Gallarotti pursued the correlation between soft power, higher education, and foreign policy. He argued that the state has long utilized higher education programs as an instrument of foreign policy. He attempted to see how government scholarship programs raise the state's global influence (Gallarotti, 2022). Gonondo & Mangué for example look at the effect of short-term seminars in strengthening China's international relations (Gonondo & Mangué, 2020). Similarly, Wahab & Harza look at the role of HEI in shaping foreign policy between Indonesia and Malaysia. They adopt the internationalization of HEI as part of the soft power framework in curbing the bilateral relationship between the two countries (Abd Wahab & Harza, 2020). On the other side, Hong focuses on the role of outbound students' mobility in building an educational soft power framework (Hong, 2022). Meanwhile Oh and Zholamanova (2021) examined the socio-economic relationship between Korea and

Kazakhstan, focusing on the unique role of the Korean diaspora in Central Asia as a bridge for cultural and educational exchange.

Zholamanova and Oh (2024) explored the challenges and prospects of Turkic language education in South Korea, noting that despite historical connections through the Altaic language family theory, institutional support for Turkic language education remains limited. This parallels Ha's findings regarding Southeast Asian studies in Korea, which identified inadequate emphasis on ASEAN-related education in Korean institutions (Ha, 2018).

The concept of soft power through educational exchange has been widely recognized in international relations literature. Byrne & Hall noted that exchange programs allow foreign publics to socialize and integrate with host communities, creating a mutual understanding that contributes to attraction and affinity (Byrne & Hall, 2014). Zaharna et al. (2014) described these exchanges as "the most effective and preferred method for building and sustaining relationships" (Zaharna et al., 2014).

Another important theoretical framework is that of epistemic communities, defined by Haas (2015) as professional groups that share common values and understanding of problems and their solutions. While Haas emphasized the role of epistemic communities in maintaining relationships rather than initiating them, this concept highlights how academic researchers can pursue cooperation between states through shared expertise (Haas, 2015).

Studies on the specific challenges in ASEAN-Korea educational relations have identified significant perception gaps. Won found that the term "ASEAN" is less familiar to the Korean public than "Southeast Asia," with Koreans having a limited understanding of ASEAN countries despite their diverse cultures. Similarly, research on Central Asian studies in Korea has identified several limitations (Won, 2018). Eom (2012) pointed to the early stage of Central Asian studies in Korea, criticizing the lack of interdisciplinary research and inadequate financial support. Li (2015) noted a significant imbalance in research focus, with Turkic languages like Kazakh being underrepresented.

A comparative analysis of these studies reveals common challenges across both regional relationships: limited institutional support, asymmetric student exchanges, insufficient faculty collaboration, and narrow research focus.

This paper builds on these studies by adopting a comparative approach to examine how HEIs can address the identified challenges and leverage existing opportunities to strengthen Korea's educational cooperation with both ASEAN and Central Asian regions.

Results and discussion

The analysis of student exchange data reveals distinct patterns and significant imbalances in the Republic of Korea's educational relationships with both ASEAN and Central Asian countries, highlighting the current state of educational exchanges between these regions.

1. Student Exchanges: Patterns and Imbalances

Analysis of student exchange data reveals several important patterns and imbalances in Korea's educational relationships with both ASEAN and Central Asian countries.

ASEAN-Korea Student Exchanges

ASEAN student enrollment in Korean institutions has consistently grown, increasing from 61,258 students in 2019 to 89,695 students in 2023, representing a remarkable 46.4% increase over these five years. This upward trajectory suggests Korea's increasing attractiveness as an educational destination for Southeast Asian students. While ASEAN students initially concentrated on language training programs (D-4 visas), a significant shift occurred in 2021, with more students enrolling in degree programs (D-2 visas). This transition indicates a deepening educational engagement and Korea's strengthening position as a competitive study destination that could potentially challenge Japan and China's traditionally dominant position in the region.

Vietnam maintains overwhelming dominance as Korea's primary source of ASEAN students, accounting for approximately 89% of all ASEAN students in 2023. Other significant contributors include Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines, though their numbers remain comparatively modest. Perhaps the most striking finding is the severe asymmetry in student flows. While nearly 90,000 ASEAN students studied in Korea in 2023, only 1,759 Korean students pursued education in ASEAN countries during the same period. This represents an exchange ratio of approximately 51:1, indicating a profound imbalance in educational mobility patterns.

Table 1 – The Number of ASEAN Students in Korea from the top 5 ASEAN member states (2019-2023)

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
Visa Type	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4
Vietnam	18,337	39,202	23,767	34,178	30,885	32,606	32,111	38,927	33,797	46,546
Indonesia	1,269	192	1,114	228	1,348	213	2,007	332	2,175	336
Myanmar	684	336	680	363	790	714	1,055	1,838	1,790	3,274
Thailand	441	184	335	230	436	345	585	434	587	147
Philippines	515	98	380	72	345	130	565	129	659	384
Total	21,246	40,012	26,276	35,071	33,804	34,008	36,323	41,660	39,008	50,687
Overall students	61,258		61,347		67,812		77,983		89,695	

Table 2 – The Number of Korean Students in the top 5 ASEAN member states (2019-2023)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Vietnam	390	1,040	625	601	969
Indonesia	110	70	107	107	289
Myanmar	100	84	-	2	18
Philippines	476	272	498	129	204
Thailand	377	372	390	311	279

Central Asia-Korea Student Exchanges

Student exchanges between Central Asia and Korea demonstrate similar growth and directional imbalance patterns, though with some distinctive characteristics. The number of Central Asian students in Korea has increased steadily, though at a slower pace than observed in ASEAN-Korea exchanges. Unlike ASEAN students, Central Asian students have consistently preferred degree programs over language

training, suggesting a more academically oriented approach to studying in Korea. Uzbekistan dominates as the primary source of Central Asian students in Korea, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan contributing smaller numbers. Similar to ASEAN-Korea exchanges, there is a significant imbalance in mobility patterns, with substantially more Central Asian students in Korea than Korean students in Central Asia.

Table 3 – The Number of Central Asian Students in Korea (2019-2023)

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
Visa Type	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4	D-2	D-4
Uzbekistan	7,026	3,473	6,733	2,344	7,566	1,938	9,525	2,030	10,581	1,949
Kazakhstan	807	162	515	64	645	208	854	271	1,004	345
Kyrgyzstan	257	130	217	86	302	123	418	217	551	449
Tajikistan	83	45	92	40	97	42	135	66	174	102
Turkmenistan	44	16	41	8	31	5	37	23	52	13
Total	8,217	3,826	7,598	2,542	8,641	2,316	10,969	2,607	12,362	2,858
Overall students	12,043		10,140		10,957		13,576		15,220	

Table 4 – The Number of Korean Students in Central Asia (2019-2023)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Uzbekistan	35	75	84	80	94
Kazakhstan	65	39	27	25	22
Kyrgyzstan	100	64	77	61	15
Tajikistan	10	3	8	8	4
Turkmenistan	-	-	-	-	-

2. Faculty Exchanges: Collaborative Challenges

Faculty exchanges between Korea and both regions follow similar patterns of imbalance but at lower overall numbers compared to student exchanges.

ASEAN-Korea Faculty Collaboration

Due to the fragmentation of public and private reports, exact data on faculty exchanges between Korea and ASEAN are yet to be found. Nevertheless, in a general sense, in comparison to students' exchanges, the number of faculty exchanges is still far below. Not only is the number of faculty exchanges between Indonesia and Korea lower than that of students, but ASEAN and Korean faculties' interest in working together in research is also still limited.

Similarly, data on Korean and ASEAN educational cooperation grant budgets are still separated at the public and private levels. However, trends among cooperation offices in higher education institutions in the region show that the majority of education grants come from Western countries, especially within the Erasmus framework. Even if there are grants related to issues between ASEAN and Korea, the majority of research is carried out separately. Where Korean researchers conduct research on ASEAN issues without involving ASEAN researchers and vice versa, ASEAN researchers conduct research on Korean issues without involving Korean researchers.

One of the reasons that prevented this joint research collaboration between ASEAN and Korean scholars is the language barrier. Big data analysis using Herzing Publish and Perish App found that there are 997 published research articles on Google Scholar using "ASEAN-KOREA" as the keywords. The publication years dated back as early as 1975, with the majority of publication language in English. A more narrowed research based on the Scopus repository shows that in one year (2022-2023), there

are only seven publications with seven citations on the "Korea – ASEAN" keyword. This number is meager considering a similar search on the "Korea-Japan" reached 193 with 190 citations per year, and "Korea-China" reached 184 publications with 223 citations per year. From this limited number of publications on Korea-ASEAN, 98% of the collection addresses the economic relations between ROK and ASEAN regarding FTA, industry, and currency cooperation. Meanwhile, research on politics and international relations addresses issues on the balance of power, foreign policy, and middle power.

The ensuing challenge is the separation between faculty and student research in Korean and ASEAN institutions. This has resulted in a sharper gap between academic stakeholders and hindered rapid research publications. Yet, progress is available. The number of theses on Southeast Asian studies produced by ASEAN students in Korea is now higher than that of Korean students (Jeon, 2018). Meaning there is an increased interest among Korean students.

On the faculty level, the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies (KASEAS) hosts over 100 academic members. At the same time, a study suggests that as of 2018, there are around 280 academicians researching Southeast Asia based on the publication of academic papers (Jeon, 2018). In 2023 there are about 250 members of KASEAN, again signifying Korean scholars' increasing interest in ASEAN.

Central Asia-Korea Faculty Collaboration

Analysis of publication data reveals a similar pattern of challenges in Korea-Central Asia academic collaboration. Bibliometric analysis shows approximately 94 scholarly publications on Korea-Central Asia relations, receiving a total of 552 citations with an average of 5.87 citations per paper. This relatively modest output spans several decades, with publication years ranging from 1970 to 2024, though increased publication activity has been observed since 2017.

Country-specific publication patterns reveal varying degrees of scholarly attention. Kazakhstan leads with 125 publications and 200 citations, followed closely by Uzbekistan with 113 publications and 298 citations. The remaining Central Asian nations receive considerably less scholarly focus: Kyrgyzstan (33 publications, 43 citations), Tajikistan (17 publications, 4 citations), and Turkmenistan (14 publications, 11 citations). This uneven distribution mirrors the pattern seen in student exchanges, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan dominating the academic discourse.

The subject matter of these publications predominantly focuses on economic and political relationships, with limited attention to educational and cultural exchanges. This narrow thematic scope restricts the development of comprehensive academic partnerships that could address broader societal needs.

Li (2015) identifies a significant imbalance in research focus, with Turkic languages like Kazakh being underrepresented compared to Mongolic languages. The limited number of specialized researchers in this field further compounds the challenge. Jeong's (2015) analysis demonstrates a predominance of Korean scholars and a lack of international collaboration in Central Asian studies, indicating a narrow academic perspective. Despite increasing publications, the field's development appears more surface-level than substantial, with limited interdisciplinary integration. Oh (2021) notes increasing economic and academic exchanges between Korean and Turkic states but criticizes the narrow focus of current research on politics and economics. The study highlights the important role of educational and research centers in bridging cultural and social gaps but argues for diversification into educational and geographical studies, emphasizing the importance of international collaboration.

3. Institutional Support: Comparative Analysis

Institutions play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation between students and faculty through various initiatives such as providing matching funds, promoting study abroad programs, and offering bureaucratic assistance in university-to-university networks.

ASEAN Studies in Korean Institutions

Institutions can support establishing a study center specialized in Korean and ASEAN area study to enhance research quality. Meanwhile, institutions can enact classes and programs on ASEAN-Korea to fill the gap in asymmetrical exposure. There is general agreement that educational methods help to alleviate the perception gap. In reality, the signs of progress are varied.

Opening courses on topics related to ASEAN and Korea is necessary. Although ASEAN students are more exposed to Korean issues, their understanding narrowly focuses on the popular genre and language. Diversification of courses on topics such as politics, human rights, and climate change must be provided. Jeon stated that there were around 450 courses on Southeast Asian studies taught in Korean universities (Jeon, 2009). Unfortunately, these courses are part of the elective component instead of the mandatory program. This means that only interested students are enrolled in such a program. This leaves out the primarily targeted students without prior exposure and no interest in ASEAN study. Hence, it is imperative to open mandatory courses on ASEAN to allow Korean students who lack exposure to ASEAN to gain more information.

An additional challenge is the unclear differentiation between ASEAN as a regional bloc and ASEAN Member States comprising 10 Southeast Asian states. Due to familiarity and high level of economic and people-to-people exchanges with a specific nation, the study of ASEAN often focused on one country. For example, the Vietnam and Singapore area study is highly linked with economic and business research, and Myanmar is referred to as a human rights study. Meanwhile, the Philippines and Thailand have high tourism studies. Indonesia only recently received attention despite its high potential for natural resources, market, and supply chain. Similarly, the interest in the small states of Indo-China (ASEAN 4) has only surfaced among policymakers and advanced academicians. On the regional level, the public conception of ASEAN has lower exposure than that of Southeast Asia (Won, 2018). Even for scholars of politics and international relations, discussion on Korea-ASEAN cooperation stands in the shadow of Korean relations with the United States and North Korea.

Table 5 – The Language Department in Korea Education

Area	Department	Number	Total
East Asia	East Asian Studies	2	2
China	Chinese Studies	43	190
	Chinese Language and Literature	97	
	Chinese Language	50	
Japan	Japanese Studies	43	168
	Japanese Language and Literature	96	
	Japanese Language	29	
Southeast Asia	Southeast Asian Studies	3	11
	Vietnamese Language	3	
	Thai Language	2	
	Malay-Indonesian Language	2	
	Myanmar Language	1	

Source: Curriculum Development on East Asian Studies: The Case of Korea (Park 2008, pp. 258)

Ha (2018) found out that there is a tendency within Korean academia to focus heavily on Northeast Asia. The gap is reflected in the courses provided by Korean Universities. Courses related to China retain their top ranking, followed by courses about Japan. Not only leading in the individual country study but Korean academics also are more interested in East Asia regional study. This preference is understood as Korea's national interest lies in its security assurance against North Korea. Hence, relations with the East Asia region are a priority in Seoul's foreign policy.

In the language department, research in 2018 shows that 11 departments focus on Southeast Asia languages from only seven universities. This number is low, considering there are around 430 universities in Korea (Ha, 2018). Moreover, mirroring the general trend, the distribution within the ASEAN language department leans on a specific country. The number of established ASEAN Language departments is minuscule compared to departments dedicated to other East Asia countries; the Chinese language is 190, and the Japanese language is 168 (See Table 6)..

Central Asian/Turkic Studies in Korean Institutions

Turkic language education in South Korea primarily occurs at the university level, with institutions like Seoul National University, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Busan University of Foreign Studies offering a range of programs. According to data from 2010 (Oh, 2010), there were

four main departments for Turkic studies in Korea (See Table 6).

Despite the existence of these departments, they represent a small fraction of the total language and area studies departments in Korean universities, highlighting the limited institutional focus on Central Asian and Turkic studies compared to East Asian studies.

Similar to ASEAN studies, Central Asian studies in Korean institutions face significant challenges. The focus tends to be heavily weighted toward CIS and Turkish studies rather than representing the diversity of Central Asian nations. This imbalance reflects both historical diplomatic relationships (Korea established diplomatic relations with Turkey earlier than with Central Asian countries) and practical considerations (greater availability of Turkish language instructors).

The research infrastructure for Central Asian studies also lacks the robust institutional backing seen in East Asian studies. While specialized research centers exist, such as the Central Asian Studies Institute at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, they operate with limited resources and reach compared to institutions focused on China, Japan, or the United States.

Course offerings in Central Asian studies remain primarily elective rather than mandatory, limiting exposure for the broader student population. Additionally, these courses often emphasize historical, political, and economic dimensions while giving less attention to cultural, social, and educational aspects that could foster deeper people-to-people connections.

Table 6 – Asia Focus Department and Major in Korea Academic

Region	Department/Major	Number	Total
East Asia	East Asian Culture	2	28
	East Asian Economy and Business	3	
	East Asian Languages and Literature	5	
	East Asian International Relations	2	
	East Asian Studies (Asian Studies)	16	
Northeast Asia	Northeast Asian Studies	3	3
Southeast Asia & India	Malay-Indonesian Language	2	25
	India-ASEAN Languages and Literature	1	
	India-ASEAN Studies	1	
	Indian Language	3	
	Indian Studies	4	
	Southeast Asian (ASEAN) Studies	4	
	Thai Language and Literature	2	
	Vietnam-Indonesia Studies	1	
	Vietnamese Language	2	
	Vietnamese Studies	4	
	Korea-Vietnam Trades	1	
Central Asia & Mongolia	Central Asian Economy and Business	1	9
	Central Asian Languages	1	
	Central Asian Studies (Turkey/Russia)	3	
	Mongolian Language	1	
	Mongolian Studies	2	
	Turkey/Central Asia/Mongolia Studies	1	
China	Chinese Economy and Business	27	262
	Chinese Language and Literature	178	
	Chinese Law and Politics	2	
	Chinese Studies	55	
Japan	Japanese Culture	17	197
	Japanese Economy and Business	2	
	Japanese Language and Literature	136	
	Japanese Studies	42	
West Asia (Middle East)	Arabian Language and Literature	7	15
	Iranian Language	1	
	Middle East/African Studies	2	
	Middle Eastern Studies	5	

Source: Author's work based on data by Higher Education in Korea

Table 7 – Turkic studies related Departments in Korea

Establishment Year	Department Name	University Name	Research Area	Student Number	Graduate Number
1973 → 2008 ~	Dept. Turkish Studies → Dept. Turkish-Azerbaijani Studies	Hankuk University of Foreign Studies	Turkey Azerbaijan	120	850
1995 → 2015 ~	Dept. Turkey-Central Asia → Dept. Turkish-Azerbaijani Studies	Busan University of Foreign Studies	Turkey Kazakhstan Uzbekistan	160	291
2004	Dept. Central Asian Studies	Hankuk University of Foreign Studies	Kazakhstan Uzbekistan	120	Approx. 100
2006	Kazakhstan Studies division	Kangnam University	Kazakhstan	-	Incorporated into International studies department

4. Comparative Challenges and Opportunities

A comparative analysis of Korea's educational relationships with ASEAN and Central Asia reveals both shared challenges and distinct regional characteristics that higher education institutions must navigate.

Both regions face similar fundamental challenges in developing balanced educational partnerships with Korea. The severe asymmetry in student mobility represents the most significant shared challenge, with minimal interest among Korean students studying in either ASEAN or Central Asian institutions. Educational exchanges in both regions are dominated by a limited number of countries (Vietnam for ASEAN; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for Central Asia), leaving other nations marginalized in the educational relationship. Academic collaboration in both regions suffers from limited thematic diversity, with an overemphasis on economic and political relationships at the expense of broader cultural, social, and educational topics. In both cases, educational cooperation functions primarily through bilateral channels rather than comprehensive regional frameworks, leading to inconsistent implementation and limited impact.

Despite these shared challenges, important distinctions exist between Korea's educational relationships with the two regions. ASEAN-Korea educational exchanges demonstrate significantly larger volume and faster growth compared to Central Asia-Korea exchanges, reflecting ASEAN's greater economic significance and larger population base. While Central Asian students have consistently favored degree programs, ASEAN students have shown an evolution from language-focused to degree-focused study, suggesting different motivations and expectations. ASEAN possesses more developed regional institutions for educational cooperation, particularly through the ASEAN University Network, while Central Asian regional frameworks remain more limited in scope and activity. Though both regions show limited research collaboration with Korea, there appears to be more established academic interest in ASEAN within Korean academia, as evidenced by professional associations like KASEAS.

These comparative insights highlight the need for differentiated approaches to educational cooperation with each region while also addressing the fundamental imbalances that characterize both relationships.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Korea's educational cooperation with ASEAN and Central Asian regions reveals both common challenges and unique opportunities. Both relationships are poised for continued growth with recent policy initiatives. However, to address criticisms that these relationships primarily benefit elites, the Korean government, and its partner countries must expand public participation, particularly among youth.

Higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in this process by facilitating exposure that increases mutual understanding and cultivates favorable perceptions among younger generations. This research has identified several key challenges across student, faculty, and institutional levels and proposes the following recommendations:

For ASEAN-Korea Educational Cooperation, several policies are recommended as follows: (i) Implement hybrid Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to provide digital interaction spaces and overcome mobility issues. (ii) Create customized short-term programs, such as internship exchanges, that align with Korean youth's interests in finance and Industry 4.0 with Southeast Asia's economic potential. (iii) Address imbalances in ASEAN student representation by encouraging non-Vietnamese ASEAN students to study in Korea. (iv) Encourage faculty-student joint research and publications to bridge the gap between student and faculty-level interactions. (v) Develop networking platforms between ASEAN and Korean researchers, building on models like the Council of ASEAN Professors in Korea (CAPK) and KASEAS.

For Central Asia-Korea Educational Cooperation: (i) Establish a Central Asian cultural center in Korea as a strategic move to promote Turkic language education, enhance cultural exchange, and strengthen Korea's relationships with Central Asian nations (Zholamanova & Oh, 2024). (ii) Develop faculty exchange programs to facilitate the exchange of expertise, allowing Korean instructors to enhance their fluency and teaching methodologies in Turkic languages. (iii) Create standardized curriculum frameworks to ensure consistency and quality across educational institutions, thereby enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of Turkic language education in South Korea. (iv) Implement more significant incentives, such as scholarships, research support, and benefits for students and researchers, to attract more Korean students to Central Asian countries.

For Both Regional Relationships: (i) Establish mandatory courses on ASEAN and Central Asian studies for Korean students to increase exposure and understanding. (ii) Support regular academic publications on Korea's relationships with both regions through collaborations between the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and universities. (iii) Create forums for undergraduate and graduate students to voice opinions and share ideas on interregional relations. (iv) Nurture potential researchers through doctoral degree enrollment programs like the Higher Education ASEAN Talent (HEAT) scholarship and develop similar initiatives for Central Asian researchers. (v) Expand language studies beyond basic courses to include specific knowledge domains that can improve state relations on technical matters.

Ultimately, successful cooperation requires thorough collaboration between key stakeholders and governments. As the Indonesian proverb “tak kenal maka tak sayang” (do not know, thus do not love) suggests, creating people-to-people mutual understanding through education will ensure the sustainability of Korea's partnerships with both ASEAN and Central Asian regions.

Higher education institutions, with their unique position at the intersection of knowledge production and human capital development, can serve as crucial agents in deepening and broadening these important regional relationships. By addressing both shared challenges and region-specific opportunities, Korea can develop more balanced, inclusive, and sustainable relationships with these strategically important regions.

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