

Thousands of Dormant Ambassadors: Challenges and Opportunities for Relationship-Building between Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) Recipients and South Koreans

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Through the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program, the government of the Republic of Korea annually invites over a thousand international students to learn the Korean language and obtain a higher education degree from Korean universities. One of the program's goals is positioned within the public diplomacy framework. Korea seeks to cultivate Korea-friendly networks and transform GKS students and alumni into ambassadors to contribute to Korea's promotion abroad. However, there is no clarity on whether this mechanism works as expected. This study examines GKS students' relationship-building experiences with South Koreans during and after the exchange program. Analysis of twenty in-depth interviews with the program's alumni reveals both what facilitates and what obstructs personal and professional relationship-building between scholarship recipients and South Koreans at different stages (language year and degree years) of the program and after graduation. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for universities, GKS administrators, and the South Korean government regarding their policies for scholarship holders.

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Keywords: Global Korea Scholarship, exchange program alumni, public diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, relationship-building, personal relations, professional relations

1. Introduction

Academic and student exchange is a renowned form of public diplomacy that is believed to foster mutual relations between different countries (Scott-Smith, 2005; Snow 2008a; Asada, 2019). Today we witness an increase of students going abroad to undertake studies to obtain tertiary degrees (Kaushal & Lanati, 2019), however, the exact mechanisms that transform student visits into soft power capital and the effectiveness of student exchanges as a public diplomacy instrument remain quite understudied (Wilson, 2014). South Korea (further Korea) is not an exception, by adding public diplomacy to its policy toolbox and adjusting the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program of student exchange according to policy needs, Korea seeks to influence the overseas public's attitude and behavior towards the country. Even though the importance of relationship- and network-building for public diplomacy efficiency was previously highlighted (e.g., Zaharna 2008), there is a lack of understanding of how relationships between arriving scholarship students and local citizens are formed. In this qualitative case study of the GKS program, I delve into the relationship- and network-building processes that GKS students are part of while they are in Korea and after graduation and I discuss the role of personal and professional relationship-building mechanisms in regard to Korea's public diplomacy goals assigned to this scholarship.

After the introduction of the scholarship program as a case study and an overview of previous relevant studies, the paper proceeds as follows: section two describes relational public diplomacy as a key-analytical framework and introduces the research questions. Section three covers methodology. Section four explains findings and makes a transition to section five that is devoted to discussion and practical recommendations based on research findings. The final section sums up the article and provides a conclusion.

1.1 Global Korea Scholarship: content and goals

The scholarship program was established in 1967 and until the mid-2000s, it worked in a limited mode. In the mid-2000s, the Korean government decided to internationalize higher education (Byun & Kim, 2011). Attracting foreign students through scholarship programs was

chosen as a way to promote Korean higher education abroad. In addition to the marketing function for higher education in Korea, the scholarship was assigned a foreign policy function. In particular, the students that graduate from Korea were supposed to become “ambassadors” of Korea (Byun & Kim, 2011; MEST, 2012) that would contribute to the creation of Korea-friendly circumstances for Korea’s promotion in their home countries. This goal was pronounced during Lee Myung-Bak’s term by the newly established President’s Council on Korea’s Nation Branding (PCNB), a coordinating body for Korea’s country image promotion-related activities (Markessinis, 2009). PCNB introduced the 10-Action Plan on Branding Korea to Lee Myung-Bak and the exchange program was included in it (Dinnie, 2009). The GKS is now a flagship program among the existing scholarships available for international students in Korea. Approximately 1000 new students from more than 150 countries are admitted to the program annually. Students receive free higher education (undergraduate, associate degrees, master’s and doctoral degrees, and a non-degree research scholarship) as well as Korean language training. Typically, the program lasts for two-to-five years depending on the pursued academic degree and completion of language requirements. As a part of the scholarship, the Korean government covers tuition fees, a monthly allowance, round-trip plane tickets, health insurance, and some other minor expenses.

This program is operated by the National Institution of International Education (NIIED) under the Ministry of Education (MOE). Korea accepted a record 1106 graduate students (including seven research scholarships for a period from 6 months to 1 year) (Study in Korea, 2020a), 179 undergraduate students (Study in Korea, 2020b), and 35 associate degree students (Study in Korea, 2020c) to the program in 2020.

Under the scholarship, GKS students enroll pre-selected by the NIIED Korean institutions to do language year before pursuing an academic degree. The language school is chosen for an arriving student by NIIED and is located in a province different from the institution that was chosen for an academic degree. For example, if a GKS student will study in one of Seoul universities for an academic degree, his or her language year will take place in Busan or Daegu. By the end of the language year, students should acquire at least level three in the Korean language proficiency test (TOPIK 3) to proceed with academic degree studies. Student can be exempted from the language year if he or she demonstrates level five or six. Typically, an absolute majority of recruited students participate in both parts of the program: language year and degree study. For instance, in 2021, out of 1130 recruited graduate students, about 18% were exempted from language study (NIIED, 2021a). The university where a GKS program participant plans to obtain an academic degree is chosen by the student among approximately 70 higher education institutions that qualified for the GKS program.

The current goal of the scholarship that appears on the guidelines of the program “is to provide international students with opportunities to study at higher educational institutions in Korea at graduate-level degrees, which will enhance international education exchange and deepen mutual friendship between Korea and participating countries” (NIIED, 2021b). The webpage of the scholarship in Korean says that the goal is the “establishment of an international

friendly network through inviting and cultivating world-class talents” (NIIED, n.d.). The scholarship goals described in the Ministry of Education report are more explicit about public diplomacy and pro-Korean network-building assignment of the program, namely, stating that graduates are expected to become “a bridge” between Korea and GKS student’s home country (MOE, 2018, p. 1776) and the scholarship program should facilitate “establishment and development of a Korea-friendly global human network” (p. 1802) and enhance “national brand value” (MOE, 2018, p.1803). Moreover, under the GKS section in the report, it is highlighted that this program is a tool to attract “excellent human capital” and it is important to develop scholarship exchange programs because of the declining amount of working population in Korea (MOE, 2018, p.1803).

The public diplomacy goals were confirmed by former and current policymakers in charge of GKS. They indicated such political goals of the scholarship program as raising the image of Korea in international relations, creating friendships, friendly networks, business partnerships for Korea abroad, and contributing to the national branding of Korea (Varpahovskis, 2019).

GKS also appears in the Diplomatic White Paper by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in the section describing public diplomacy activities and indicates that GKS (MOFA, 2019, p.312; 2020, p.296) serves for global education cooperation. Korea’s First Public Diplomacy Master Plan developed by a set of scholars commissioned by MOFA briefly mentions GKS as an instrument of cultural diplomacy within the education field. It is important though that in this plan the ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy is described as an expansion of political influence. While other two intermediate goals are enhancement of bilateral ties through culture and facilitation of Korea’s products entry to the global market (MOFA, 2017, p.66-67).

The absence of the “ambassador-cultivating” and Korea promotion goals from the formal guidelines of the program can be explained by the will of public diplomacy authorities to distance themselves from association with political goals even though public diplomacy instruments fulfill them (Brown, 2014).

1.2 Previous studies of exchange scholarships as public diplomacy instruments

1.2.1. Exchange scholarships as a public diplomacy tool around the world

Internationalization of higher education accompanied by the increase of the number of international students (OECD, 2018) and the development of cross-border communication means bolster active involvement of non-state actors in the global political process and decision-making, that were previously monopolized by state actors (Fitzpatrick, 2014; Leonard, Stead & Smewing, 2002; Melissen, 2005; Snow, 1992, 2008a, 2008b; Zaharna, 2008; Zaharna, Fisher, & Arsenault, 2014). Student mobility is often considered by scholars and politicians in the framework of public diplomacy (e.g., Byrne, 2016; Altbach & Peterson, 2008; McConachie, 2019). It is commonly believed that a student’s immersion in the host country’s culture contributes to a better understanding of local culture. Also, exchange students carry and spread a sending nation’s culture, which further should improve cooperation between countries (De Lima,

2007). It is often assumed that experience in the host country leads to greater attraction with the country's image, which further encourages a more favorable attitude and behavior towards the host country (Wilson, 2014; Yun, 2014).

Even though there are plenty of government-sponsored scholarship programs for international students exercised by various countries around the world (e.g., German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) scholarships, Erasmus scholarships by the European Union, Russian governmental scholarships for international students, Turkish scholarships for international students (Türkiye Bursları) and others), the most well-studied exchange programs in terms of effects on bilateral relations and personal and professional development are American exchange programs (e.g., Fulbright, International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program and others).

Studies of Fulbrighters like one by Demir, Aksu, and Paykoç who surveyed over 270 Turkish participants of Fulbright scholarship for teachers and students report some public diplomacy-relevant observations. For example, in their study, Demir and colleagues find that besides changes in the personal and professional development about the fifth part of respondents stated that they contributed to Turkish-American relations (2000). From this study, it is unclear what hindered other 80% of program participants from contributing to Turkish-American relations. Furthermore, the investigation of the exact mechanisms of relationship- and network-building between Turkish scholarship participants and American citizens is out of the scope of this study.

Sunal and Sunal (1991, p. 98) in their study devoted to US Fulbright scholars who visited Africa highlight that abundance of information about US exchange programs provided little help “in generalizing about the possible effects of the overseas experience on the individuals involved or in determining relationships between important variables in the Fulbright experience.” In the study by Sunal and Sunal, the Fulbright exchange program participants reported: “a lasting interest in Africa, scholarly activity relating to African topics, and long-term professional contact with African academics” (Sunal & Sunal 1991, p. 118) as a result of the program. Even though this study does not concentrate on scrutiny of Fulbright scholarship as an instrument of public diplomacy, the quantitative findings suggest that the scholarship facilitated a better understanding between American and African peers and enhanced professional networks for some of the participants: “earlier Fulbrighters reported better established professional networking with overseas contacts than did more recent Fulbrighters. For many, this was the result of continued effort by the Fulbrighter to foster such contacts. As the contacts develop, a built-in reward system encourages the Fulbrighter and African peers to continue to build the network” (Ibid.). This finding is crucial because it unveils the importance of contextual factors and individual motivations for network-building and relationship re-cultivation.

Atkinson purposefully investigates the American military exchange program from the perspective of its suitability as an instrument that allows the US to gain some soft power benefits through spreading liberal values among participants. She compares military exchange programs

against civil exchange programs and declares greater efficiency of former ones (2010). The scholar pays special attention to “understanding of micro-processes of political socialization and norm diffusion inherent in the idea of soft power” (2010, p. 19) and comes up with several contextual socialization-oriented mechanisms that may pre-determine efficiency of the exchange program. First of all, she outlines that shared life experiences are central to the effective socialization of participants. The similarity in experiences leads to shared identity among participants what strengthens the social network (2010). Secondly, Atkinson emphasizes the design of the program, which should provide “explicit socialization opportunities”. On the contrary, less structured exchanges show lower efficiency for socialization. The second factor somewhat confirms Sunal and Sunal’s finding of the importance of the context for relationship-building. The third factor is the necessity to return to the home country after the completion of the program to be able to impact the political system at home. Finally, she concludes that it is essential to “engage potential political elites, such as military officers and other government, business, and academic professionals” (Atkinson, 2010, p. 19). The study by Atkinson is especially important because she explores “micro-processes” of socialization among participants as possible determining factors of exchange program success.

Atkinson evaluates the efficiency from the perspective of soft power and changes in political regime. In this context her assumptions that the exchange participant who belongs to a government-based military organization and has the potential of becoming an elite should return home is undebatable. GKS is a civilian exchange program that pursues different goals, hence the third and fourth factors can be discussed. South Korea does not aim to change the political regime through GKS but rather improve the global pro-Korean network for the country’s international promotion. Taking into consideration the globalization, informatization, and variety of academic backgrounds (from humanities and arts to technology and natural science) that international students pursue, as well as Korea’s interest in adopting “excellent human capital” due to demographic challenges it might be not necessary for civilian international students to return to home countries to contribute to GKS program’s goals fulfillment. Unlike military exchanges (Atkinson, 2010) or exchanges for policymakers (e.g. Korean International Cooperation Agency’s scholarship program) where recruiters can spot mid-career participant who has the explicit potential of professional growth at home country, the claim on the necessity of focusing on potential elites is less relevant in civilian exchanges for young people. The organizing authority performs as a contributor to the development of personal and professional skills and should assist a young person to become an internationally recognized professional with an established network.

The very active newcomer in the utilization of exchange scholarships as a public diplomacy instrument is China. D’Hooghe analyzes Chinese public diplomacy through Zaharna’s concept of public diplomacy frameworks, which distinguishes between relationship- and network-oriented public diplomacy strategy and information-oriented state-centric strategy. D’Hooghe highlights in her study of Chinese public diplomacy that incorporates international student exchange, that the Chinese government exercises a paradoxical approach. Despite employing the state-centric model when exercising public diplomacy it still focuses on relationship- and network-building goals of public diplomacy (d’Hooghe, 2015). On the one hand, such an approach indicates that

the relational framework of public diplomacy is considered and exercised not only by democratic states, on the other hand, it is relevant to expect utilization of a hybrid approach since the state-centric component in public diplomacy is still present. Also, as is mentioned in this study China, as the majority of public diplomacy-implementing states faces difficulties in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of public diplomacy (d'Hooghe, 2015). Among multiple reasons d'Hooghe names three previously mentioned by Banks (2011) – intangibility of the measured concept, the problem of attribution of effects to public diplomacy, and difficulties related to the evaluation of long-term results. The issue of proper evaluation of the effectiveness of the scholarship goes in line with Sevin's call to move the focus from the investigation of outputs of public diplomacy programs to outcomes and impacts instead (2017).

With an increasing amount of scholarships offered by governments around the world to international students and a growing assumption that scholarship programs may contribute to the development of bilateral ties as public diplomacy instruments, there is a limited discussion about the actual process of transformation of exchange experience into outcomes expected by foreign affairs agencies of scholarship implementing countries. There is a certain degree of disentanglement between public diplomacy scholarship and the study of international students' experiences impact on relationship-building.

In this study, I concentrate on the investigation of relationship- and network-building between scholarship students and local citizens. Hence this paper is embedded in several social and political science fields. Besides public diplomacy, this study touches upon migrant studies dealing with social network-building and adjustment to host country society, as well as relates to international students' experiences.

The topic of international students' adjustment to hosting countries is widely researched. There are several generations of explorers of international students' experiences in hosting countries. The following sub-section allows a better understanding of the context and uncovers the issue of the formation of social networks among international students.

1.2.2. Formation of social networks among international students

The formation of relationship networks among international students is a relatively well-studied phenomenon. It was previously found and confirmed with multiple studies that international students face adaptation problems when they arrive (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Factors that aggravate adaptation problems include the potential language barrier (Yeh & Inose, 2003), difficulties in befriending locals (Gareis, 2012), the lack of involvement in extracurricular activities (Hendrickson, 2018), and others (Zimmermann, 1995). The studies that explore international student adaptation do not address the issue from the perspective of public diplomacy. However, if we look at possible public diplomacy consequences of poor adaptation of international students in the host country (due to lack of knowledge about the local culture and language, or other factors), unsuccessful adaptation might

cause inability of a student to become “a cultural mediator” for host and home countries, as it was noticed in a study by Nancy Snow who surveyed Fulbright Scholarship holders (1992).

One of the key ways to address difficulties in adaptation is making social networks. Typically, there are three types of networks that international students form when he or she arrives. These are friendships with compatriots, local friendships, and international friendships (Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977). Each type of friendship has some positive effects on the adaptation of the student. Thus, friendship with compatriots helps to get the necessary emotional support, avoid the feeling of loneliness, and surpass adaptation difficulties (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Maundeni, 2001; Kim, 2001). On the other hand, friendship with compatriot circles reduces the possibility of learning the language and immersion into the culture of the host country (Maundeni, 2001; Brown, 2009).

Several studies confirm that well-developed and often practiced friendships with locals contribute to greater integration and psychological adjustment (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). However, building friendships with locals can be more challenging because of language barriers, racial and ethnic prejudices, and the potential coldness of host country nationals (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Multi-cultural friendship allows one to complicate and expand the cognitive understanding of the world (Yum, 2001). These relationships also enrich the student’s knowledge of cultures and countries other than their own and the host country (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011). International students who are in similar situations help each other and feel less alone through international friendships.

Despite the previous studies on friendship- and network-building among international students there remains an unaddressed and overlooked contextual factor of students being self-funded or sponsored via the scholarship program. This distinction can have a significant impact on how students adapt and on their academic and social experiences (Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2009). In the context of GKS, there is a certain design of the program that can pre-determine social network-building. A dissertation by Kim (2018) explores the interaction of GKS policy with assimilation and multiculturalism goals. In particular, Kim demonstrates that poor knowledge of Korean at initial stages, GKS language year policy, and placing in the language schools with a certain degree of segregation from Korean students and Korean citizens living around the university form a socially engineered community – “a multinational enclave”. This “enclave” becomes spatially mobile after language year completion, in other words, “enclave” members maintain their connections after they move to other cities of Korea (Kim, 2018). The scholar did not discuss much on how “enclave” formation impacts the public diplomacy goals fulfillment, but this study is important to illustrate how program design, especially at the language year stage, is crucial for the formation of networks between scholarship students arriving in Korea.

The literature on building and maintaining relationships between international students and local denizens in host countries is limited in some respects. While the processes of adaptation by

international students are well understood and many studies confirm that international students face adaptation problems in host countries (e.g., Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), the relationship-building and social network maintenance conducted after graduation are rarely explored phenomena (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020). Several studies (Yun, 2014; Yousaf, Fan & Laber, 2020) only examine student intentions to maintain relations after graduation rather than actual behavior.

There is also a professional dimension in the social relation types that exchange students can engage in. Besides the fact that exchange students can build social ties with co-nationals, host country nationals, and international individuals, the ties can be established in personal and professional dimensions. In the given research personal relations are treated as relations that are built within academic or extra-curricular circumstances and ties that are established at work are regarded as professional. This type of relationship is also covered in this study because part-time or full-time employment can also serve as a source for social network building.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of international students' employment is rather unstudied, but there is some evidence that international university students during their studies tend to take jobs with limited working hours and underpaid conditions (e.g., Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Ramia, Sawir & Smith, 2009), and face discriminatory employment practices because of the ethnicity they represent (e.g., Chinese students in South Korea) (Lee, Jon & Byun, 2017). Some studies explore the maintenance of professional networks by former international students but they mainly operate without a well-built concept of professional relationship networks. Typically, they focus on the evaluation of attitude-behavior dependency. For example, previous studies conceptualized nurturing relations with the country at a professional level as a construct of country behavior (Yun, 2014; Yousaf et al., 2020). I analyze GKS students' experiences in Korea to understand how GKS students build their personal and professional relations during the scholarship period and how these relationships are maintained and used within the public diplomacy framework after graduation.

Since this research seeks to highlight the case of international students who arrived in a non-Anglophone country with a hosting country scholarship program I focus on the case of GKS students and alumni, a Korean government-sponsored scholarship program. The following subsection talks about previous research about GKS, that has received limited attention from scholars of exchange diplomacy so far.

1.2.3. Previous studies about GKS

Although the GKS started in 1967, the previous research conducted on the GKS is quite limited in number. The overall literature about GKS can be divided into two major segments: academic and life experiences of GKS students (e.g., Lee, 2014; Masimli & Jeong, 2017; Kim & Moon, 2014; Moon & Kim, 2014; Istad, Varpahovskis, Miezan & Ayhan, 2021; Jon & Ayhan, 2021) and studies that explore GKS from public diplomacy perspective (e.g., Bader, 2016;

Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020; Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Ayhan, Gouda & Lee, 2021; Tam & Ayhan, 2021, Lee & Snow, 2021; Perez, Chon, Vibber & Kim, 2021).

One of the most data-rich research on GKS was conducted by Oh Jun-Eun on behalf of the Migration Research and Training Centre of the International Organization for Migration. This study surveyed over 2,500 GKS students and aimed to present an overview of the scholarship and the experiences of international student recipients of the scholarship. Even though this study did not evaluate GKS from the perspective of public diplomacy it reported that most scholarship receivers maintained long-lasting relations with South Korean friends (Oh, 2014).

There has been a noticeable influx of research on the role of GKS as a public diplomacy instrument. For example, several studies discuss the historical development of the scholarship system for international students in Korea and discuss the GKS as Korea's public diplomacy tool (e.g., Bader, 2016; Ayhan, Gouda & Lee, 2021; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020; Lee & Snow, 2021).

Several recent studies surveyed GKS students and alumni and focus on the exploration of perceived country image influence on actual and intended behavior. The study by Ayhan, Gouda and Lee employs a four-dimensional construct of the perceived country image and indicates that both alumni and current GKS students evaluate the country image of Korea generally more positively after arrival. However, factor analysis demonstrates that students from developing countries tend to evaluate a country's image more positively, than those who come from developed countries (Ayhan, Gouda & Lee, 2021). This study indicates that the GKS scholarship fulfills the most basic public diplomacy-related function of awareness-raising and country perception improvement. Other studies use the same publicly available dataset (Ayhan, Gouda, Lee, Varpahovskis & Snow, 2021) but explore the perceived country image impacts on various behavior types.

In particular, Varpahovskis and Ayhan discovered that the four-dimensional construct of the country image has some limited but statistically significant impact on GKS alumni's relationship maintenance behavior with South Korean friends, professors, acquaintances, and professional contacts. In other words, their analysis hints that even though the positive perception of some of the dimensions of Korea's country image partly determines the relationship maintenance behavior of GKS alumni there are unexplained determining factors unrelated to country image (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020).

The study of GKS students by Ayhan and Gouda who employ the same four-dimensional construct of the perceived country image reveals that country image dimensions have a significant impact on both positive and negative online and offline word-of-mouth behavior among GKS holders (Ayhan & Gouda, 2021).

Even though GKS is actively discussed from the perspective of public diplomacy and GKS scholarship holder's relationship-maintenance and network-building behavior were partly discussed the social micro-processes and mechanisms of relationship-building with South

Korean citizens during the program as well as the impact of relationship-building on the success of the GKS program as a public diplomacy instrument have been overlooked.

2. Theoretical background and Research Questions

2.1 Relational public diplomacy

The relational dimension of public diplomacy is an analytical framework for the given research. The relational component of public diplomacy has been emphasized by several scholars.

International students are discussed within a framework of relational public diplomacy by Yun (2012), who highlights the growing mobility of different types of citizen diplomats, and describes international students, that come both with governmental scholarships and self-funded, as temporary migrants, who are going to grow in terms of quantity and strategic value to a hosting state. Moreover, Yun and Toth recommend governments to pay attention to migrant (both permanent and temporary, including international students) groups as targets of public diplomacy because they can be somewhat a double-edged sword for public diplomacy implementing country. It may occur because “a country’s soft power resources are nakedly exposed to migrants’ living experiences, which make the quality of these resources more substantial in the conduct of public diplomacy. Thus, migration can be either the most conducive or destructive channel of communication” (Yun & Toth, 2009, p.500).

Zaharna proposes a conceptualization of public diplomacy within two communication frameworks: information and relational. The former concentrates on advancing political objectives by disseminating designed and mediated messages. The latter concentrates on relationship-building processes and “the construction of social structures to advance political objectives” (Zaharna, 2008, p. 86).

While those frameworks of communication can be complementary, there are some distinctions between them. Unlike the information framework, public diplomacy based on a relational framework tends to focus on relationship-building as the goal itself because it gives fruitful soil for cooperative projects between a variety of public diplomacy actors, including non-state actors. In the relational framework approach, the government can facilitate engagement between the country and the foreign public by acting indirectly or by focusing on the coordination of the process, rather than pushing a polished national image (Zaharna, 2008). In the case of information framework, the state might have the advantage of having greater access to channels to deliver a message, for example, through media, but the quality, sincerity, and intention of this message may be questioned by the targeted foreign public (Zaharna, 2008).

Zaharna when elaborating relational public diplomacy outlines three major tiers of relationship-building strategies: tier one is represented by such elementary initiatives as cultural and educational exchanges. Second, the more advanced tier encompasses more organization-based and permanent initiatives, like cultural institutes establishment, development aid projects,

non-political network schemes, and others. The third, the most advanced, tier entails coalition building with other countries and non-state actors to achieve policy goals (Zaharna, 2008).

Zaharna's outlined mapping of those tiers is rather inaugural in the development of relational public diplomacy and there are plenty of other layers that can describe relational public diplomacy initiatives including the degree of participation, scope, degree of coordination, duration, and goals. The GKS initiative falls into the tier one initiative, according to Zaharna's taxonomy. The three tiers are interconnected though and education exchanges can be a useful source for relationship-building and a cornerstone for further cooperation (Zaharna, 2008).

The given research explores the GKS program, as a first-tier initiative, but concentrates on mechanisms of individual network- and relationship-building and maintenance. Lee and Ayhan highlight the importance of non-state actors of public diplomacy for relational and networked public diplomacy because non-state actors can have greater expertise and social capital to execute collaborative projects and non-state actors are often perceived as more credible agents than government-based ones. Furthermore, non-state actors may demonstrate a greater commitment to long-term projects (2015).

Zaharna (2008) and Lee and Ayhan (2015) discuss relational and networked diplomacy rather from an organizational level. I suggest looking at the GKS program as a tier-one initiative of relational diplomacy but concentrating on the mechanism for relational public diplomacy – building relationships and networks at the person-to-person level.

Taking into consideration some of the goals of the GKS program, including transforming graduates into informal ambassadors and fostering Korea's promotion overseas through them, the GKS graduates are expected to become “network weavers”² serving goals shared with South Korea, or at least an active part of pro-Korean community abroad. And those “network weavers” are essential for tier two, since they can organize a community around themselves (Zaharna, 2008).

It is yet early to call it “diplomacy” when an international student and host country student meet and have a chat, but through repeated shared experiences and ritualization individuals representing different countries would share some symbols, emotional bonds, interests, and understandings (Pacher, 2018) and it would convert into greater trust between subjects. If both individuals trust each other they can facilitate the expansion of the networks by including other trusted individuals with shared interests (Krebs & Holley, 2006; Chua, Morris & Ingram, 2009; Wang & Handy, 2014).

For being a successful “network weaver” is essential to be engaged with other actors to facilitate their cooperation. If we extrapolate it on the GKS it means that without having networks with both sides (e.g., home country and South Korea) it would be problematic to

² The term was used by Krebs and Holley (2006) and cited by Zaharna (2008)

bolster cooperation. The building of relations and networks starts at an individual level. Hence, creating and maintaining personal and professional relationships among students and local citizens is an important component of successful relational public diplomacy through exchange programs.

I use the concept of relational diplomacy as a departure point for testing the appropriateness of the current format and configuration of the GKS fellowship program for meeting public diplomacy-related goals. Rather than exploring how created relationships and connections transit into the relational diplomacy of second and third tiers, as identified by Zaharna, I focus on tier one. Moreover, I look at the very root of this level, at the incipient processes of relationship formation between the subjects (individuals). This paper seeks to explore in-depth the context in which the main actors in relationship building are situated and to identify the factors that influence the success of relationship building between international scholarship holders and South Koreans.

This study contributes to the development of relational public diplomacy because it focuses on previously unexplored social micro-processes from a public diplomacy perspective. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that even for a scholarship program to be effective at tier one, defined by Zaharna, significant efforts must be invested to create a context to stimulate the cultivation of personal and professional relationships.

2.2 Research questions

By conducting this research, I respond to Wilson's call to investigate the actual effects of the scholarship programs (2014) and the call to disregard the blind belief that scholarships are, by default, effective channels of public diplomacy. Zaharna's relational public diplomacy concept (2008) entails the importance of personal engagement and relationship-building as a starting point for successful cooperation within a mutually beneficial public diplomacy framework. Investigation of exchange scholarship effects as public diplomacy is impossible without an understanding of social mechanisms and social micro-processes that determine relationship- and network-building at the individual level.

Firstly, by doing qualitative research I attempt to conduct a rigorous exploration of relationship maintenance mechanisms, which should shed light on how personal and professional relationships are formed. Hence the first research (RQ1) question is formulated as follows:

How do GKS students form personal and professional relationships with South Korean nationals?

Secondly, I address the quest on how GKS alumni maintain relationships with South Koreans after the scholarship program is over. Hence the second research question (RQ2) is:

How do GKS alumni of the scholarship program maintain relationships with South Korea after graduation?

Finally, I inquire whether the existing scholarship exchange program format addresses the public diplomacy goals, assigned to the scholarship program. Thus the third research (RQ3) is:

How does the GKS program design contribute to the fulfillment of the public diplomacy goals?

3. Methodology

Table 1 summarizes information about methodology and data sample for the given research.

*Table 1.
Methodology summary*

Sample features	Number of interviews	GKS status	Gender	Sojourn status	The economic development level of countries of interviewees' citizenship	Employment status	Regions
	20	Graduate GKS alumni: 19 Undergraduate GKS alumni: 1	Female: 11 Male: 9	Live in Korea: 12 Live abroad: 8	Developing economies: 15 Transition economies: 2 Developed economies: 3	Full-time employed: 15 Continuing students: 4 Part-time employed: 1	South-East Asia: 6 Africa: 4 Russia and CIS: 4 Europe: 2 Latin America: 2 North America: 1 South Asia: 1
Research method	Case study, in-depth interviews						
Applied software	Excel and QDA Miner Lite						

3.1 In-depth interviews

I applied cross-case case-oriented analysis (Babbie, 2015) to analyze in-depth interviews of GKS alumni. In this context, GKS alumni are representing a specific case, and by applying qualitative analysis I tried to investigate and understand how personal and professional

relationships with South Koreans are built, maintained, and how program design facilitates the fulfillment of public diplomacy objectives of Korea.

3.2 Sampling

The period for the in-depth interviews with GKS alumni was December 2018-October 2020. The GKS alumni pool of interviewees consisted of 20 individuals. The criteria for the selection of the alumni for in-depth interviews were willingness to participate in the research, graduation status (the person should have a degree as a result of GKS³), and sojourn status (in Korea or overseas). Additionally, individuals were selected following demographic criteria to mirror the overall selection of GKS students done by the NIIED. The selection was made based on such criteria as gender, country economy type⁴, region. Details regarding the interviews are presented in table 1.

The recruitment of interviewees was done in multiple stages. First, I made quotas based on the demographic criteria. Another criterion was the diversity of the language institution and university attended. I estimated the approximate number of alumni in each group following the available statistics about the GKS alumni. Then I approached GKS alumni who previously participated in a survey for another research project and who had agreed to be contacted for further research.

Two primary means of communication were used to conduct interviews. For those interviewees who were available for a meeting in Seoul, there was organized a face-to-face interview. With interviewees who were not available for an offline meeting, online calls through Skype, Facebook, Kakao, and Zoom were organized.

3.3 Coding and analyzing data

The coding of data was done with the help of Microsoft Excel and QDA Miner Lite, the free qualitative data analysis software used for textual analysis. After reading all transcriptions, I coded text pieces of the interviews that were relevant to this research. The information in the coded pieces was categorized by the type of question. Further, I made subcategories based on themes and the content of the answers. The subcategories included new information and repeating information (previously mentioned by another interviewee) about particular issues. Finally, the results were analyzed in terms of relation to the research questions. The most relevant findings are presented in the following sections.

³ There are graduates who could not complete the degree within a necessary time limit. If a GKS student exceeds number of allowed extensions he or she will not receive an allowance anymore and will not be considered as a GKS scholarship holder.

⁴ Developed economy, economy in transition, developing economy ranks according to World Economic Situation and Prospects report by the United Nations (UNDESA, 2019).

4. Findings

4.1. Building social networks with Koreans while studying at the language school is hindered

The majority of incoming GKS students are obliged to take a Korean language course. It usually takes one year to complete it and reach the necessary Korean level (TOPIK 3) to continue with the degree study. During the language year for GKS students who start learning Korean from zero or basic levels, it is difficult to make friends with local Koreans due to the language barrier.

Poor knowledge of Korean at this stage is a serious obstacle for making social ties and these conditions may overlap with South Koreans' coldness and reluctance to use English. As an alumnus from East African country highlighted:

If you contact them [South Koreans] on the first time, if you start talking and if you get in contact with them, they are too cool. [...] They are scared of English, and they are a little bit shy.

During this year, GKS students often find themselves parts of two bubbles: co-national and international. After completing language school, these relationships are transferred throughout their life in Korea. As several interviewees outlined, they continued their relations with peers from the language institution after they moved to Seoul to pursue degrees. In other words, if a GKS student built ties with other international students in one of the language schools outside of Seoul there is a high probability that these relations will be nurtured further, especially in the case when both students are enrolling in universities in the same city (i.e., Seoul).

There are successful cases when GKS students were able to build social networks with Koreans during the language year but it is not common. Several international students met Koreans during non-study time through extracurricular activities by joining sports or hobby clubs (i.e., *dongari* – in Korean 동아리, a student hobby club in Korean universities) organized within the university where the language institute is based.

Nevertheless, some clubs employ quite restrictive policies towards GKS students and obstruct the enrolment in the *dongaris* on the grounds of poor knowledge of Korean, or even on the grounds of being a foreigner. As an alumna from a country that belongs to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) noted:

During the language year, I joined a dongari which was a tennis club. [...]. I did not have issues with enrolling in the dongari during the first semester and tennis practice was open to us. The next semester, after the winter break, they told us [international students] that now we are not allowed to attend club exercises and continue tennis training. The formal reason was that their new club president's main policy was not to accept foreigners. [...] They [administration] told that the main reason was that equipment started being stolen. So we assumed that they [Koreans] expected that it happened because of foreigners who joined the club.

Some GKS recipients made Korean friends before arriving in Korea for the year of language study. As interviewees explained, these ties were made during previous tourist or educational trips in Korea or abroad. As one of the alumni representing Southeast Asian country notes:

I met them [South Korean friends] in Japan. We mingled in Japan. Well, obviously, we were both foreigners then in Japan, and came back. Friendship is still very strong. [We] meet occasionally and all that.

Some students who belong and practice religion met Koreans in religious institutions (typically churches) that conduct service either in English or Korean. While answering the question on the composition and building of the social network in South Korea a Southeast Asian alumnus noted that:

I joined the church. Some church activities also need me to talk with Korean people in other places.

During the language year due to certain reasons that are explained above, GKS grantees' engagement with co-national, local and international is rather asymmetrical, leaving local networks least elaborated. The formation of networks starts during the first year of study, though some GKS students have pre-existent networks that were made during prior experiences.

4.2. Difficulties in building relationships during degree study

After completion of the language course, GKS students are transferred to the institutions where they pursue their degrees. Typically, GKS students spend up to four years, depending on the type of degree. The findings suggest that for GKS students it was hard to make friends with Koreans during the degree study period.

Findings indicate that difficulties in making ties with Koreans were related to a set of personal and contextual factors. Among personal factors, respondents mentioned their personal characteristics, such as not being an "outgoing" person, as was noted by a South Caucasian alumnus. Personal characteristics also worked in the opposite as a South Asian alumnus recalled:

I'm like a person, who likes gathering people. So I used to call my Korean friends, my foreigner friends, "Hey, let's hang out together."

The given study not only provides support to previous research on the influence of personality features influence on the adjustment of international students (e.g., Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac & Elsayed, 2012) but also highlights that personality features impact GKS students' ability to establish networks with South Koreans.

Another highlighted personal factor is that by arriving in Korea as a GKS holder they already had some Korean friends, hence similar to the language year GKS students tended to communicate mostly with Korean friends they met before coming to Korea.

Others highlighted that they were unable to find friends among classmates and laboratory mates because of the competitive and unfriendly atmosphere. As one of alumna from Latin America noted:

We entered her [Professor's] lab and I think four girls [Korean students] started with me. And they were very competitive. And they were really mean.

While the previous studies showed that non-inclusive attitudes towards foreign students can be caused by cultural or language barriers (e.g. Trice, 2003; Lin & Scherz, 2014) as well as indifference towards international students (Lee & Bailey, 2020), the given study suggests that non-inclusion attitude can be caused by organization-related reasons and academic culture. Previously it was found that a relative grading system can cause competition between students (Kristensen, Troeng, Safavi, & Narayanan, 2015). The relative grading system creates tension between all students in the class because they are competing for limited resources (i.e., a limited number of A+ grades) hence such a system can hinder friendship-building among classmates. This certainly affects social networks between Korean students and international students as well.

This competition can also be aggravated by the professor's demonstrative prioritization of international students. The GKS alumna from the Latin American region recalled:

For example, a professor from abroad would come for a conference she [student's professor] and be like, "Yeah this is [student's name omitted]. She's my best student. She speaks Korean like a Korean person." [...] That was a lie because when I started I was not even that good. You know that made other people get really jealous of me because foreigner gets everything and then, for example, I had exams that I know I studied like crazy and I did very well. But she [Korean classmate] was saying "Oh you get an A because you're the foreigner." comments like this.

Or even by Korean students' intentional behavior that might make an international student look bad in the eyes of a professor:

They [classmates] would do awful stuff like telling me "Ah, there's no exam." And then the next day there was an exam.

The latter example of unfair treatment of international students by Korean classmates was previously outlined by Kim (2016) who claimed that such treatment can derive from institutional racism and the lack of inclusive policies towards international students despite Korea's eagerness to internationalize its higher education system.

Such an exclusive attitude might be linked to a negative perception of foreign students who come to Korea for entertainment and less competition (Jon, 2012) as they can easily join top Korean universities, while Korean students have to compete fiercely with compatriots to enroll at such top universities.

The exclusion of foreign students by classmates is peculiar in terms of social network building in the sense that while Korean classmates enjoy university-based networks that are built outside of class (for example, *dongaris*), the international students are left out and must strengthen their networks with compatriots or other international students. Again, this leads to poor network building with Koreans.

Also, the absence of advertisement for opportunities to join clubs or study groups leads to a situation when only pro-active students manage to join *dongaris* or study clubs, as an alumna from one of the CIS countries mentioned:

They form study groups internally and I found about it too late and by that time there were no free spots to join. So next semester when I came to the classroom, I took initiative into my own hands asked how I can join study clubs now. And my classmates told me that it is very free and I can join at any time, and that's how I joined study clubs.

The role of extracurricular activities should be highlighted when discussing successful cases of the establishment of social network relations between Koreans and GKS students. In-depth interviews analysis shows that long-lasting close ties between Koreans and GKS students were made during extracurricular activities and usually these ties were not with classmates or laboratory co-workers. GKS alumni reported that close friendships and good relations were made during community activities through *dongaris*, churches, language exchange clubs, student football teams, study groups, part-time jobs, and activity clubs organized by municipalities.

GKS students rarely joined municipality activities conducted for residents of local areas. These activities include various sports, arts, and hobby clubs. These opportunities are available to foreign students as well, but awareness among foreign students is very low. Among all interviewees, only one alumna, from the Western Africa region, mentioned that she made social ties with locals through municipal clubs and she highlighted the strength and closeness of ties that are made in these community groups:

So at first, the only people I knew were the people in school. But when I was looking for things to come out of, it was community service, hiking, groups with communities, basically. So those groups, they're all close to each other. They care for one another.

4.3. Different patterns of relationship-building and maintenance with South Korea and South Koreans after graduation

There are different possible paths for the GKS program graduates after they complete their degrees. Since there is no strict regulation to return to the home country, some alumni choose to stay in Korea to work if they find a permanent full-time, high-paying job that covers working visa requirements. Alternatively, the GKS alumni might choose to stay in Korea to continue their study on a self-funded basis or by applying one more time for the GKS scholarship. If an alumnus or alumna decides to leave Korea, he or she can go back to their homeland or a third country.

Finding suggests that depending on alumni's decision to stay or leave Korea and type of education the relationship maintenance with South Korean evolves differently.

Science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) graduates tend to stick to university laboratory-related networks, mainly through a supervising professor. While doing a Master's or Ph.D. in STEM fields, students are *de facto* employed, and supervising professors can provide either job opportunity or funding for further studies for a higher degree like it was outlined by one of Latin American alumna:

My lab told me to apply for the PhD. My professor told me like, "Look, stay. We'll give you the money. You don't need a scholarship and whatever, whatever."

Furthermore, after graduation some of the professors keep in touch with GKS graduates from STEM fields as was highlighted by an East African alumnus:

So he always asking me where I am and where I'm working, how is work? He always asking about that.

Besides being employed and continuing study in Korea after graduation from the GKS program, some of the alumni reported established professional relationships with Korea through employment in one of the embassies of one of Southeast countries in Seoul, in the Korean embassy in one of the Central Asian countries, and through providing translation services to Korean private and governmental organizations operating in Central Europe and West Africa. Some respondents highlighted that they have no professional connections with Korea because they either have no Korean clients or they are working for non-Korean organizations.

It should be noted that there are two distinct patterns when it comes to the relationship maintenance within Korea-related entities and individuals after graduation: pro-active and re-active. Some alumni are pro-active on both professional and personal levels when they maintain relationships with South Korean citizens.

The findings show that after graduation, the involvement in relationships between a home country and Korea can strongly decrease. This also happens not only because GKS alumni are becoming employed and have no ties with Korea at the professional level, but also because local Korean offices (e.g., Korean Culture Center) have changed their strategy towards GKS alumni and are rarely approaching them. An alumnus from a Central European country stated:

Now, I'm not a KGSP [The previous name of the GKS scholarship was Korean Government Scholarship Program (KGSP)] ambassador. That was a one-year appointment. And since we have a new director at the Korean Culture Center, there were no more KGSP alumni meetings or dinners. [...] So it always depends on the director.

This case illustrates that there is a need to maintain relationships between GKS alumni and Korea's formal bodies operating across the globe. The GKS alumni might wish to be engaged by the Korean authorities and volunteer for a common good, but they are reluctant to act first because they consider government-sponsored organizations like the ones who should take the initiative.

5. Discussion and practical recommendations

Analysis showed that certain factors hinder GKS alumni's capacity to contribute to the fulfillment of Korean public diplomacy goals. The findings revealed that, at all three stages (language year, degree years, post-graduation), GKS students and GKS alumni face difficulties in relationship building and maintenance, at the personal and professional levels. The overall findings suggest GKS students and Korean citizens may have poor or absence of social personal or professional ties because there are limited opportunities for cultivation and recreation of shared identities, life experiences, and interests.

5.1 Adjustment to local culture and improvement of linguistic skills

The analysis results confirmed the previously discussed phenomenon that greater involvement in relations and social interactions with host country individuals can facilitate and ease international students' adjustment to local culture and contribute to language proficiency (Toyokawa & Toyokawa 2002; Asada 2019). Atkinson's observations about the importance of the structured design of the scholarship program that would provide opportunities to facilitate deeper socialization with locals (2010) are somewhat relevant for GKS. In the case of GKS, the structured design of the exchange program plays against public diplomacy goals. A certain degree of segregation at the language study stage limits opportunities to socialize with locals (Kim, 2018). Moreover, the absence of social ties with locals during a student's first year can cause issues in adaptation during following years. The research results illustrated that interactions with host country individuals can expand the social network of a GKS student. However, obstacles that prevent GKS students from making personal ties with local citizens convert into GKS students' re-cultivation of co-national and international 'bubbles', that are strengthened with similar shared life experiences and identities.

A possible solution for this situation would be imposing more foreign student-friendly policies on student clubs and *dongaris* as well the increase of international students' awareness about the possibility and importance of joining various informal activities conducted at the

university or municipality levels. Informal social ties are known for enhancing trust among participating individuals (Glanville, Andersson & Paxton, 2013). This policy suggestion is also relevant for universities that host GKS students during their degree years.

Alternatively, scholarship-administrating organizations can experiment by matching scholarship awardees with Korean host families. The study by Asada, which explored the Study Japan exchange program, demonstrated that such an approach contributed to the language and cultural fluency of American exchange students in Japan, and some students were able to establish life-long ties with Japanese host-families (2019); the study on German-US exchange program by Bachner and Zeutschel also highlights the importance of the host family placement for exchange program success (2009).

Mutual understanding between public diplomacy agents, in the framework of relational public diplomacy, is a decisive condition. The study shows that cultural and linguistic fluency between South Korean students and GKS students is crucial for relationship development because without them mutual understanding is hard to achieve, even less possible is to build trust for the development of further relations.

The study demonstrates that besides having difficulties related to cultural and linguistic factors, the relationship-building between GKS students and South Korean peers suffers from contextual factors, like competition, that poisons relationships not only between GKS and South Korean students but among South Korean students too.

5.2 Unfriendly and competitive atmosphere in class and laboratory

The findings indicated that during the university years, GKS students continue having trouble with building social networks with Koreans. Difficulties occur due to the inability of GKS students to befriend classmates and laboratory mates, who often consider international students as competitors. This complication might occur due to diverse life experiences and the inability to share an identity that would help socialization (e.g., see Atkinson, 2010). Unlike GKS students Korean students experience other hardships (e.g., severe competition for places at top Korean universities) and do not have common experiences with arriving international students. Hence by the time when international students join the same class or laboratory GKS students might be perceived as “other” or even an adversarial stranger and a competitor.

There is a competition among students of South Korean universities, that is also represented by the relative grading system at the higher education level. An experiment with a relative grading system in Sweden was discussed by Kristensen and colleagues. It was found that a relative grading system causes a negative working environment, higher stress levels, smaller learning capacity, and lower self-esteem among students (2015). The measure that should address the adversarial and competitive atmosphere between students in Korean universities is lifting the relative grading system in the universities. As an interim measure, the NIIED and universities should inform foreign students about a possible unwelcome attitude that they might

face from classmates and laboratory mates and suggest alternative places to make personal social ties.

The competition factor, which thrives on the relative grading system, disentangles subjects of potential relationships or networks (i.e., South Korean students and GKS students). Besides mutual understanding, trust is a core component of strong personal and professional relations (e.g., Ömüriş, Erdem & Aytemur, 2020; Krot & Lewicka, 2012; Gordon, 2017). Until the GKS students are perceived as strangers, competitors, or “others”, long-lasting trust-based relationships with South Korean classmates will not blossom. The potential issue, that should be examined further, is that its lack of trust at the individual level can extrapolate to bi-national politics, levels two and three of relational public diplomacy. In particular, if GKS holder is predominantly and constantly perceived as an “other,” enemy, or competitor throughout his or her sojourn in Korea, will this student feel that the rest of the nation is hostile towards him or her? If so, it can negatively impact an individual’s will to cooperate with Korea and Koreans while being abroad.

However, the study showed that some sub-groups are capable to establish long-lasting professional networks. Namely, STEM alumni, thanks to involvement in the laboratory can demonstrate their skills, earn trust from professors and establish a long-lasting network, that contributes to relational public diplomacy goals.

5.3 Poor professional networks among non-STEM alumni

Unlike in the exchanges for military personnel (e.g., Atkinson, 2010) or governmental policymakers (e.g., Varpahovskis, 2021) the GKS students are not obliged to return home and might not have pre-established professional networks, neither at home country nor in Korea. The findings showed that STEM GKS students have better opportunities to establish professional networks during their degree study years.

If the government of Korea would like non-STEM GKS alumni to benefit from professional networks at the post-graduation stage it must conduct activities to improve awareness about GKS among Korean employers and by offering internships in Korean companies or Korea-based organizations where alumni could show their skills and make long-lasting professional ties before their graduation.

Relationships and networks at all three tiers, identified by Zaharna, require time and commitment. The student exchange program should not be considered as just a two-to-five years program. The networks that are formed during the GKS students’ sojourn in Korea with Koreans should go beyond the period of the scholarship program. Post-graduate relationship maintenance of relations is also an important component of the program. Without further engagement, ties between graduates and Korea may weaken.

5.4 Re-active involvement after graduation

The findings showed that many GKS alumni are reluctant to contribute to relationships between their home country and Korea because the alumni are more re-active than pro-active. The reactivity of GKS alumni is not unique and can be explained by contextual factors (e.g., work in the industry without clients with Korea; lack of deep knowledge about Korean activity at alumni's home country) or absence of motivations to engage with Koreans (networks were not established). Hence, the NIIED should impose strategies that would keep GKS alumni updated about ongoing activities around the world. If the Korean government seeks to maximize the outcomes of the GKS program through alumni network activation it should address issues that are related to personal and professional network building by GKS scholars during their years in a language school and degree programs, and relationship maintenance after graduation.

5.5 Program design and agents of change in charge

Finally, it should be outlined that the conduction of the GKS is a complex process that is organized through the cooperation of at least three organization types: Ministry of Education, NIIED, and hosting university. Each institution is in charge of its contribution to the project. Thanks to the cooperation of these agents GKS has a design that allows some scholarship-holders to engage in personal and professional relations with South Korean citizens before and after graduation from the program. The study demonstrated that the design of the program, as a contextual factor, can play a crucial role in international students' relationship- and network-building activities. Interviewees' responses signalize that there is a potential for greater success in personal and professional relationships- and network-building with South Korean citizens.

If the Korean government would like to make GKS a more efficient instrument from the perspective of relational public diplomacy the challenges should be addressed at all three levels. To foster better cultural adaptation and linguistic skills improvement the program requires re-design that cannot be done without political will from the Korean government represented by the MOE and providing additional budget to the exercising agency (NIIED) that will further siphon it to universities.

Facilitation of network-building between South Koreans and GKS students via extracurricular activities like study clubs and *dongaris* requires universities to follow updated policies, while NIIED will have to strengthen its monitoring duties and increase awareness about network-building opportunities among arriving scholars.

Finally, if the government chooses to introduce internship opportunities for GKS holders in other organizations it will require additional coordination and cooperation efforts from the above-mentioned organizations in charge of program execution and will require inclusion to the dialogue fourth type of actors – private companies that can solicit internship opportunities. The involvement of non-state actors like private companies is important because it not only will enhance or create new networks but because it can add credibility (e.g., Lee & Ayhan, 2015; Zaharna, 2008) to Korea's public diplomacy through exchange scholarship.

6. Conclusions

Relationship-building and relationship maintenance of and with non-state actors are important components of successful and efficient public diplomacy. An information-based one-way public diplomacy approach does not properly address the realms of the globalized world anymore (Zaharna, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2011). Even though there is an acknowledgment of relationship-building processes for public diplomacy goals, there is a lack of clarity in how relationships are formed and function. This study explored the phenomenon of personal and professional relationship building as a part of exchange diplomacy, specifically the case of GKS awardees, who as graduates of the most prestigious government-managed scholarship program in Korea, are expected to facilitate the spread of Korea-friendly attitudes and contribute to Korea's image abroad.

This study makes multiple interdisciplinary contributions. For example, by providing empirical evidence that there are issues with converting participation in the exchange program into established networks, I support Sevin's call to move the focus from the investigation of outputs of public diplomacy programs to outcomes and impacts instead (2017). I also add to the discussion on social micro-processes and mechanisms of conversion of exchange program experience into established personal and professional networks that are essential for relational public diplomacy.

While the study confirms previously outlined international students' adaptation problems like language barriers (Yeh & Inose, 2003), the lack of extracurricular activities (Hendrickson, 2018), and the reluctance of locals to make friendships with incoming international students (Gareis, 2012), this study emphasizes other factors that hinder relationship-building between GKS students and South Koreans.

The principal reasons for poor personal and professional engagement with South Korean citizens are not only language and cultural barriers and a lack of access to extracurricular activities where ties with Koreans could be established but also the relative grading system used by universities which can foster hostile and competitive attitudes towards international students and among Korean classmates. The inability to make social ties with locals reduces the potential of individuals to contribute to Korea's public diplomacy goals and raises doubts about the exchange program's efficiency as a public diplomacy instrument.

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