1   **Acculturation stressors and academic adjustment among Nepalese students in South**

2   **Korean higher education institutions**

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10   **Abstract**

11   **Introduction**

12   International students are steadily increasing in South Korean higher education institutions. How

13   well international students in South Korea are adjusted academically and the relationship

14   between acculturation stressors and academic adjustment has not yet been determined. The study

15   aimed to fill this research gap by examining the relationship between acculturation stressors and

16   academic adjustment among Nepalese international students in South Korean higher education

17   institutions.

18   **Methods**

19   The sample of the study consisted of Nepalese international students who enrolled in 36

20   universities in South Korea. Students' background characteristics and acculturation stressors

21   (e.g., discrimination, homesickness, hate/rejection, fear, cultural shock, and guilt) were selected

22   to assess the association of these characteristics and stressors with academic adjustment. Pearson

23   correlation and hierarchical multiple regression were utilized to examine the association between

24   acculturation stressors and academic adjustment**.**

25   **Results**

26   The results from the Pearson correlation revealed the negative correlation of perceived

27   discrimination (r = -.23, p< 0.01), perceived hate/rejection (r = -.18, p< 0.05), perceived fear (r =

28   -.24, p< 0.01), and perceived cultural shock (r = -.17, p< 0.05) with academic adjustment.

29   Further, the hierarchical regression model revealed that marital status (β = .223, p <.01) had a

30   positive association with academic adjustment, whereas perceived fear (β = -.206, p <.05) had a

31   negative association with academic adjustment even after including students' background

32   characteristics and other acculturation stressors.

33   **Conclusion**

34   Addressing acculturation stressors among international students in higher education institutions

35   is essential to facilitate positive academic adjustment. Mainly, perceived fear has negatively

36   affected students' academic adjustment. Based on these findings, tailored programs must be

37   developed to curtail students' perceived fear in order to enhance their academic performance in

38   South Korean higher education institutions.

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40   *Key words***:** Acculturation stressors, Academic adjustment, Higher education institutions, South

41   Korea, Nepalese students

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Introduction

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46   International students' social and ethnic identities, backgrounds, communication skills,

47   and acculturation levels and the effects of these aspects on their academic performance and

48   adjustment in host cultures have become an essential concern in higher education institutions

49   worldwide [1]. Evidence from Western higher education institutions has suggested that

50   international students experience a higher level of psychological, social, and academic distress

51   [2-5]. Therefore, the extent to which acculturation stressors affect academic adjustment among

52   international students in different cultural settings (i.e., non-Western contexts) requires similar

53   scrutiny in order to better adapt the increasing number of international students to their host

54   culture, such as the Republic of Korea (henceforth South Korea).

55   Acculturation is a critical factor that affects immigrants' health status (including

56   psychological, somatic, and social aspects) while they are in the process of adjusting to a

57   dominant culture [6]. Furthermore, acculturation stressors cause a high level of distress for an

58   individual in achieving desired outcomes in new cultural settings [6]. For international students

59   from non-English-speaking countries with lower socioeconomic status, they have increased

60   difficulty in academic adjustment due to language-related barriers, cultural differences, and

61   economic hardships. These students experience a significant level of acculturation stress, suffer

62   from poor physical and mental health, and encounter challenges in academic achievement [7–9].

63   For instance, in the United States of America, a growing number of studies demonstrated that

64   ethnic minority students have a higher level of acculturation stress and difficulty in academic

65   adjustment to mainstream US educational institutions. Evidence suggested that Latina/o and

66   Native American students are disadvantaged groups with lower academic adjustment potential

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67   due to their cultural heritage, speaking English in their native accent or dialects, and their sense

68   of exclusion from US educational institutions [10–13]. Similar findings in Australia and Europe

69   report that a substantial number of students expressed distress, felt unconnected, encountered

70   lower levels of social and academic integration, and experienced poor emotional wellbeing [4].

71   Several aspects have been revealed as risk factors for academic adjustment among

72   international students. Studies have found these risk factors to include cultural norms, language

73   barriers, perceived discrimination, financial problems, work restrictions, higher tuition fees,

74   accommodation, and transportation problems [5]. For example, Turkish Muslim students who

75   participated in the Erasmus student exchange to a European country had difficulty adjusting due

76   to fear of the unknown, loneliness, food shock, and being an object of suspicion [2]. These risk

77   factors, or stressors, further exacerbate international students' acculturation stress, impacting

78   their academic adjustment capability and performance in higher education institutions.

79   Abundant evidence from previous studies has shown that among immigrants, refugees,

80   and international students, there is an association of acculturation stressors with ill (mental)

81   health status, substance dependency, social maladaptation, and hindrances to achieving desired

82   preference in a host society[14]. For instance, a study conducted among Korean international

83   students living in the Pittsburgh area found that acculturation stressors were strongly correlated

84   to poor mental health status [15].

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86   **Context of South Korea**

87   With a population of around 51.63 million, South Korea historically emphasized

88   educational attainment for its citizens even in times of economic hardship. By the end of the

89   Korean War (1950–1953), the Korean Peninsula gradually overcame its absolute poverty and has

90   now transformed into a prosperous country. Today, South Korea is known as the "Asian Tiger,"

91   ranking third in Asia and 13th in the world economy. The socioeconomic transformation from

92   poverty-stricken society to prosperity is a result of Confucian values of diligence and importance

93   given to educational attainment and rapid expansion of higher education institutions [16].

94   Economic advancement in South Korea led to the internationalization of South Korean

95   higher education institutions, adding to Korean higher education's global competency.

96   Consequently, South Korea experienced a quantitative expansion of international students, as

97   there were 4,000 international students in 2004, which increased to 85,923 in 2011 [17]. As of

98   January 2020, a total of 118,342 international students were in South Korea, the majority of them

99   from Asia, including China (59,720), Vietnam (18,640), Mongolia (5,788), Nepal (1,964), and

100   Japan (1,919) – ranking Nepal as the fourth-largest contributor to the population of international

101   students in South Korea [18]. Moreover, the South Korean government has announced a plan to

102   increase the number of international students to 200,000 by 2023 with the goal of making South

103   Korea an educational hub in Asia.

104   Along with the increasing number of international students in South Korea and

105   positioning South Korea as an educational hub, the South Korean government attempted to

106   improve academic competencies via various policy innovations, including Brain Korea 21

107   Project, World Class University Project, Humanity Korea, Social Science Korea , University for

108   Creative Korea, Brain Korea 21, and BrainKorea21 Plus [19]. Additionally, the National

109   Research Foundation of Korea provides various research funds to assist university professors and

110   students (including international students) in enhancing their academic performance and

111   competency in South Korean higher education institutions. Specifically, South Korea attempts to

112   extend itself in knowledge economics by strengthening its academic competitiveness at different

113   levels (including at the university, faculty, and student level). To do so, the country invested

114   US$73.3 billion for research and development to strengthen higher education institutions to a

115   "global standard" [20]. Along with all these efforts, how well international students are adjusted

116   in South Korean academic institutions is an essential concern for policymakers and educational

117   researchers.

118   Jon [21] recognized that with the increasing number of international students in South

119   Korea, international students' academic adjustment is critical to ensuring that Korean students

120   may develop intercultural learning. However, international students' academic adjustment issues

121   in South Korea have not been well documented. Specifically, most relevant studies were

122   conducted in the Korean language and emphasized Chinese students' acculturation issues; of

123   these studies, results were mixed in terms of acculturation levels [22-24]. For example, Lee, Jon,

124   and Byun [24] mentioned that Chinese students in South Korea were less accepted, felt

125   discriminated against, and experienced negative stereotypes in comparison to students from

126   North America and Europe. In contrast, Jon, Lee, and Byun [23] revealed that Chinese students

127   think of South Korea as an attractive destination due to scholarship opportunities, geographical

128   proximity with China, employability after graduation, safety and security, and easier visa

129   accessibility than Japan and other Western countries. Consequently, Chinese students expressed

130   increased academic satisfaction in terms of academic resources, facilities, and quality of

131   instruction in South Korean higher education institutions. Similarly, Alemu and Cordier [25]

132   demonstrated that international students are generally satisfied in South Korean higher education

133   institutions.

134   However, South Asian international students' academic adjustment and integration in

135   South Korea has not yet been considered outside of a study by Bhandari [26], which analyzed the

136   association between acculturation stressors and health-related quality of life. The current study

137   attempts to fill this research gap by examining the acculturation stressors experienced by South

138   Asian international students' in South Korea. More specifically, the study examines the extent to

139   which certain acculturation stressors affect Nepalese international students' academic adjustment

140   in South Korean higher education institutions.

141   **Methods**

142   **Procedure**

143   The researcher distributed questionnaires to Nepalese students during the 12th Annual

144   General Meeting (AGM) of a Nepalese students' organization called the Society of Nepalese

145   Students in South Korea (SONSIK). The SONSIK's 12th AGM was organized at Sunmoon

146   University, Asan, Korea, on 22nd–23rd of August 2015. The questionnaires were distributed

147   before the formal program started on the 22nd of August, and the researcher collected them on

148   another day after the end of the program. All the questionnaires were administered in the English

149   language.

150   **Participants**

151   Most Nepalese students attended the SONSIK AGM, as the SONSIK executive

152   committee members asked all Nepalese students to attend the annual meeting. The AGM is an

153   opportunity to meet friends at one place once in a year. Of these Nepalese students, 174 from

154   36 universities in South Korea participated in the study. Among them, 136 students returned the

155   self-administered questionnaire. Four cases were removed due to missing information.

156   Ultimately, a sample size of 132 was analyzed. In 2015, a total of 580 Nepalese students enrolled

157   in all South Korean universities [27]. Therefore, the study sample is acceptable for data analysis

158   with 7.36% margin of error at the 95% confidence interval.

159   **Ethics Statement**

160   Ethical consideration was concerned for the data collection process to maintain the

161   respondents' privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. For instance, in the cover letter

162   of the questionnaire, the researcher mentioned the following statement — "Your information will

163   remain confidential; please do not include your name. If you choose to participate, please answer

164   all questions as honestly as possible and return the completed questionnaire promptly.

165   Participation is strictly voluntary." The questionnaires were placed at a specific place to maintain

166   privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation and asked to return the questionnaires

167   voluntarily another day. Adhering to these ethical considerations, questionnaires were collected

168   on another day. The questionnaires were anonymized, and the data collection process was

169   completely voluntary.

170   **Instruments**

171   *Acculturative stressor*. The researcher used the Acculturative Stress Scale for

172   International Students (ASSIS), created by Sandhu and Asrabadi [28]. The ASSIS consists of 36

173   items in total, including perceived discrimination (13 items), homesickness (4 items), perceived

174   hate/rejection (5 items), fear (4 items) and stress due to cultural change (3 items), guilt (2 items),

175   and non-specific concerns (5 items). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to

176   5 (strongly agree), where a higher score represents a higher level of acculturative stress, was

177   incorporated. The reliability Cronbach's alpha for the 36-item scale was .92; the reliability

178   Cronbach's alpha for each stressor ranged from .70 to .92.

179   *Academic adjustment.* The researcher used Baker and Siryk's [29] scale to measure

180   academic adjustment with slight modifications. The researcher created Cluster 2 questions that

181   referred to students' motivation, while Cluster 3 referred to students' performance. Then, Cluster

182   2 and Cluster 3 were combined to measure students' academic adjustment. Cluster 2 had the

183   questions as: I am definite about reasons for being in Korea to study; I have well-defined

184   academic goals; I consider a college/university degree important; I enjoy academic work, my

185   interests are related to current research work; I doubt the value of college/university degree in

186   Korea. Cluster 3 included: I find academic work difficult; I do not function well during exams or

187   experiments; I am not satisfied with academic performance; I do not feel smart enough for

188   course/research work; I do not use study time efficiently; I do not enjoy writing papers for

189   courses/research; I have trouble concentrating when studying; I do not do well academically

190   considering the effort; I have trouble getting started on homework. The rating scale was Yes, No,

191   and Do Not Know. Positive attitudes on academic adjustment were coded as 1, and non-positive

192   attitudes towards their academic adjustment were coded as 0. The reliability Cronbach's alpha

193   for the academic adjustment scale was .75.

194   **Data Analysis**

195   First, descriptive statistics were performed. Then, Pearson correlation testing was

196   conducted to examine the associations between students' background characteristics, the five

197   dimensions of acculturative stress (e.g., discrimination, homesickness, hate/rejection, fear,

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198   cultural shock, and guilt), and students' academic adjustment. Finally, hierarchical multiple

199   regression was conducted using SPSS.

200   **Results**

201   Table 1 presents the demographic information of Nepalese students' who were enrolled

202   in 36 Korean higher education institutions. Most students (78.8%) were male, whereas only

203   21.2 % of students were female. There was an almost equal proportion of married (48.5%) to

204   never married (51.5%) students. Approximately 53.8% of students did not feel comfortable using

205   the Korean language in everyday communication. Most of the students (72.7%) received a full

206   scholarship to pursue their higher education in South Korea.

207   ***Table 1.*** *Demographic Information of the Sample (Sample = 132)*

Variables	Number	%	Mean (SD)
Age			29.50 (3.59)
Male	104	78.8	
Female	28	21.2	
Marital Status			
Single	68	51.5	
Ever Married	64	48.5	
Korean Language			
Not comfortable	71	53.8	
Comfortable	61	46.2	
Scholarship Status			
Not full scholarship	36	27.3	

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Full Scholarship	96	72.7

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209   Table 2 presents the correlation for background characteristics, acculturation stressors,

210   and academic adjustment. As shown in Table 2, students' full scholarship (r = -.18, p< 0.05) was

211   negatively correlated with the level of Korean language comfort level. Homesickness (r = .17, p<

212   0.05) had negative correlation with Korean language comfort level. Homesickness (r = .22, p<

213   0.01) and perceived discrimination had positive correlation. Similarly, perceived hate/rejection (r

214   = .75, p< 0.01), fear (r = .38, p< 0.01), cultural shock (r = .31, p< 0.01), and guilt (r = .20, p<

215   0.05) had positive correlation with perceived discrimination, respectively. Perceived

216   hate/rejection (r = .30, p< 0.01), cultural shock (r = .36, p< 0.01, and guilt (r = .37, p< 0.01) had

217   positive correlation with homesickness, respectively. Perceived fear, cultural shock, and guilt

218   had positive correlation. Moreover, academic adjustment (r = .19, p< 0.05) had positive

219   association with married students. However, academic adjustment (r = -.23, p< 0.01) had

220   negative correlation with perceived discrimination (r = -.23, p< 0.01). Academic adjustment (r =

221   -.18, p< 0.05) had negative correlation with perceived hate/rejection. Academic adjustment (r = -

222   .24, p< 0.01) had negative correlation with perceived fear. Similarly, academic adjustment (r = -

223   .17, p< 0.05) had negative correlation with cultural shock.

224   **Table 2.** *Correlation of Statistical Control, Independent, and Dependent Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.Female	_										
2. Married	0.12	_									
3. Korean language	0.03	-0.04	_								

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
4. Full scholarship	-0.14	-0.08	-.18*	_							
5. Discrimination	-0.07	0.03	-0.13	0.05	_						
6. Homesickness	0.09	0.03	-.17*	0.07	.22**	_					
7. Hate/Rejection	-0.08	0.04	-0.12	0.07	.75**	.30**	_				
8. Fear	-0.09	0.06	-0.08	-0.01	.38**	0.14	.48**	_			
9. Culture shock	0.01	-0.06	-0.12	0.13	.31**	.36**	.26**	.20*	_		
10. Guilt	-0.15	0.05	-0.05	-0.05	.20*	.37**	.32**	.23**	.28**	_	
11. Academic Adjustment	-0.01	.19*	-0.02	-0.00	-.23**	-0.16	-.18*	-.24**	-.17*	-0.13	_

Note: *p < 0.05. **p.< 0.01

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226   Table 3 presents the hierarchical linear regression model with students' background

227   characteristics and acculturation stressors predicting academic adjustment. Model 1 (R^2 = .041)

228   presents the effect of students' background characteristics (e.g., gender, marital status, Korean

229   language use, and full scholarships) on academic adjustment. The results revealed that marital

230   status (β = .202, p <.05) was positively associated with academic adjustment. However, other

231   background characteristics (i.e., gender, Korean language use, and full scholarships) were not

232   associated with academic adjustment. Model 2 included all background characteristics and

233   academic stresses to examine their effects on academic adjustment. As such, Model 2 (R^2

234   = .157) demonstrates that marital status (β = .203, p <.01) remained a positive association with

235   academic adjustment. However, perceived fear (β = -.206, p <.05) was negatively associated

236   with academic adjustment. Other acculturation stressors (i.e., discrimination, homesickness,

237   hate/rejection, cultural shock) did not have a statistically significant effect on academic

238   adjustment.

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239 **Table 3**. *Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	$SE\ B$	β	B	$SE\ B$	β
Constant	9.438	.740		13.859	1.397	
Gender	-.267	.695	-.034	-.456	.694	-.058
Marital Status	1.298	.566	.202*	1.430	.549	.223**
Korean language	-.081	.571	-.013	-.456	.559	-.071
Full scholarship	.016	.646	.002	.014	.633	.002
Discrimination				-.058	.035	-.215
Homesickness				-.085	.083	-.101
Hate/Rejection				.073	.088	.115
Fear				-.178	.084	-.206*
Culture shock				-.042	.095	-.042
Guilt				-.076	.134	-.055
R^2		.041			.157	
Adjusted R^2		.010			.087	
R^2 change		.041			.116	
F for change in R^2		1.343			2.774*	

240 *Note: *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.*

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Discussion

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242   Understanding the factors that affect academic adjustment among international students is

243 essential for enhancing academic competitiveness. In order to strengthen international students'

244 academic adjustment capabilities and the academic competency of higher education institutions,

245 policymakers and practitioners must be well-informed of these factors. However, to the best of

246 the researcher's knowledge, studies on these factors as barriers toward academic adjustment have

247 not yet been conducted in a South Korean context.

248   Academic adjustment is crucial, as students with better academic adjustment capabilities

249 possess a higher level of personal satisfaction and academic success, yielding better output in a

250 competitive educational environment. In South Korea, universities are experiencing increasing

251 numbers of international students, with most universities in South Korea gradually heading

252 toward global competitiveness, thereby enhancing South Korea universities' global ranking.

253 Moreover, at the macro level, internationalization of higher education in South Korea functions

254 to strengthen "soft power," enriching Korean culture and the academic system globally. In such a

255 context, it is essential to understand the extent to which acculturation stressors impede or

256 facilitate academic adjustment among international students in the South Korean educational

257 environment. Here, the key findings of the study have elucidated Nepalese international students'

258 academic adjustment in South Korean higher education institutions

259   First, the study revealed that marital status had a positive association for academic

260 adjustment among Nepalese students in South Korean higher education institutions. The result is

261 inconsistent with previous studies in the Asian context, which, in the case of Malaysian higher

262 education institutions, found that international students' marital status did not influence

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263   sociocultural adjustment [30]. Similar findings have revealed that international academics'

264   marital status did not influence sociocultural adjustment in Saudi Arabian higher education

265   institutions either [31]. Additionally, inconsistent with other studies' findings [13,32], married

266   Asian students have a lower academic adjustment level in the USA and German universities.

267   However, in the current study, both in bivariate and multivariate hierarchical regression analyses,

268   students' marital status remained a robust positive predictor for academic adjustment. This may

269   suggest that married Nepalese students in South Korea are more motivated and determined to

270   work toward academic achievement.

271   Second, in the bivariate level, the study revealed that perceived discrimination,

272   hate/rejection, fear, and cultural shock had negatively correlated with academic adjustment

273   among Nepalese students in South Korean higher education institutions. Specifically, perceived

274   discrimination ($r = -.23$) and fear ($r = -.24$) had strong negative correlation (**$p < 0.01$) with

275   academic adjustment. Even in the USA, international students experience various discrimination

276   levels based on the regions (or nations) they come to the USA [33]. The level of perceived

277   discrimination negatively impacted educational experience and actual academic performance

278   [34]. Likewise, Nepalese students may perceive themselves as being discriminated against in the

279   South Korean cultural context. Consequently, those who perceived themselves as being

280   discriminated against had their self-esteem negatively affected, thereby leading to decreased

281   competence for educational attainment, including academic adjustment. Indeed, perceived

282   discrimination leads to social and academic marginalization from the mainstream academic

283   culture, such as deterring student engagement from learning outcomes.

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284   Third, perceived fear remained the strongest predictor that negatively affected Nepalese

285   international students' academic adjustment in South Korea in bivariate and hierarchical linear

286   regression analysis. Although a further qualitative study is required to determine the factors that

287   trigger "fear" among international students in South Korea, the study confirmed that perceived

288   fear ultimately negatively affected Nepalese students' academic adjustment. The findings may

289   imply several reasons for triggering this fear, such as the fear of uncertainty in new Korean

290   educational and sociocultural contexts, language changes and cultural differences hindering

291   effective communication, fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, fear of non-native accents, and

292   the fear for the unknown. Perhaps in academia, the hierarchical social structure makes it more

293   challenging to adjust, and that too may create "fear" for international students.

294   Fourth, the study revealed that perceived fear remained a strong predictor for academic

295   adjustment negatively in the hierarchical linear model. Similarly, perceived discrimination,

296   hate/rejection, fear, and cultural shock had negatively affected the academic adjustment at the

297   bivariate level. Higher education institutions have an awareness of students' perceived

298   difficulties, such that universities have initiated several programs to support students' mental

299   health issues. For example, currently, several universities have support centers for international

300   students' mental health through university-centered counseling programs concentrating on topics

301   related to depression, anxiety, emotional difficulties, academic stress, and personal and

302   relationship problems. The findings of the study further provide insight to counseling centers

303   that they must help international students in overcoming perceived fear. However, most

304   international students are unlikely to use university-centered counseling services due to language

305   and cultural barriers since most services are provided in the Korean language. There are some

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306   testimonies of international students who expressed their difficulties effectively communicating

307   with counselors who deliver their services in the Korean language.

308   Fifth, the current study has some limitations. The study used cross-sectional data and

309   only employed Nepalese international students in the South Korean cultural context. Further

310   study is needed to explore adaptation strategies and difficulties in Korean academic culture [35].

311   An additional qualitative study needs to dig deeper into reasons for exploring academic

312   adjustment barriers among students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, as there are several

313   international students from various nations in any given university. Another limitation of the

314   study is that the study is limited to Nepalese international students' experiences. Despite this

315   constraint, the study's findings have merit as they identified acculturation stressors (i.e.,

316   perceived fear) as crucial barriers to academic adjustment. This result helps inform national

317   policies to better adapt international students to South Korean higher education with ease and

318   grace. Well-adapted students and students with fewer acculturation problems could contribute

319   more effective and successful results in a highly competitive educational environment.

320   In conclusion, addressing acculturation stressors among international students may yield

321   higher levels of personal satisfaction, enhance productive academic life, and increase

322   performance among international students living and studying in South Korea. Doing so

323   ultimately enables students to strengthen Korean higher education institutions' academic

324   competitiveness in the long run.

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