INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

This report provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the interviews with Mason Korea students during the Fall 2015 semester. Participants were asked to share their thoughts about their experiences and provide feedback related to their first semester at the Mason Fairfax campus.

METHOD

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with eight Mason Korea students at the Fairfax campus during October and November 2015. An email invitation was sent by Stephanie Hazel, Acting Director of the Office of Institutional Assessment to all 11 Mason Korea students who were enrolled at the Fairfax campus. The participants included four female and four male Mason Korea students. The interviews were conducted in-person by one of two Education doctoral students: Jennifer Charleston Mursaloglu, Graduate Professional Assistant from the Office of Institutional Assessment and John Dooris, Senior Research Associate from the Office of Institutional Research and Reporting. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researchers. Participants were told that their information would be kept confidential. Responses included in this report are presented in aggregate and do not include participants' identifying information. Using the transcriptions as data, the researchers analyzed the information by using open coding and thematic data analysis techniques.

A draft of this report was shared with the interview participants. They were asked to make corrections, provide feedback on the report, and provide additional clarifying information, as they wished. Their comments have been incorporated into this final report.

FINDINGS

There were three main organizing categories resulting from this analysis: Academics, Program Related, and Social Relationships. The data are reported by each of the main categories and subcategories below.

Academics

Academics are by far the biggest area of concern for Mason Korea students. The psychological and financial effects of having to pass all of the core courses within a short amount of time have created an emotional hardship for some students. Students feel that if they do not pass their required core courses within the allotted time frame, they will have to extend their stay in the U.S. to re-take the required course, which in turn will require their family to pay additional associated costs. Students are questioning their ability to graduate within four years while maintaining a good grade point average. Students feel that the current program structure does not provide a “buffer” so that students do not get further behind in their studies if they do not pass a course while at Mason Fairfax. One student mentioned, “to maintain a campus overseas, I think that it is really a requirement to have core courses also in MK.”
**Curriculum**

Students across all of the interviews expressed concerns related to the academic curriculum. Several students voiced concerns with the course offerings at Mason Korea. Students mentioned, “there are not many elective courses in Mason Korea. There are maybe three or four courses we can take.” Most importantly, students would like to see more variety of elective courses offered at Mason Korea. This is a big issue for Mason Korea students. Moreover, students feel that it is “unfair” that the current program structure does not allow for students to take elective courses while enrolled at the Fairfax campus.

The pressure to complete and pass all required major core courses within one year is a struggle and concern for almost all of the students. An overwhelming number of students mentioned that having to take all required core courses in a short amount of time is difficult, and they are feeling pressure to perform well; especially since there are limited courses offered at the Incheon campus.

> “Having five core courses here in one semester is tough. I asked other students [on] this campus and they have two electives, three electives and maybe two, three core courses. But for us, it’s really mandatory to have all of the core courses in one year. That makes [it] really challenging.” – MK student

> “Academically it’s a struggle for me because I figured that it’s actually a little bit harder than Korea, cause Mason Korea is a relatively small school, so the faculty members, staff members, professors, they’re very supportive to students.” – MK student

**Class Structure and Size**

Nearly all of the Mason Korea students mentioned the class size difference between the two campuses. Students mentioned that in Mason Korea the class size is smaller and the professors give them more personalized attention. However, in Fairfax the class size is larger and for some students it may become a barrier in seeking help from professors. Some students feel more comfortable going to visit their professor with another Mason Korea student. Other students choose not to ask professors for help.

> “I was kind of worried. How should I come to the professor if I need help because there’s so many students? There’s lots just waiting in line after the class so…if I’m not really urgent, I’ll just search it by myself.” – MK student

**Program Related**

**Student Support and Student Services**

When students were asked about the people who have been the most helpful here at Mason Fairfax, all of the students mentioned Jim Burke, Events Director for the Office of Global Strategy. Jim has played an instrumental role in their transition to Fairfax by being readily available and responsive to their questions and concerns. One student mentioned that “he’s the guy that I will count on right now. If I need a ride, maybe I need to get to the ER, I’ll probably call him. He’s kind of the guy who is in charge of Mason Korea students right now.” Multiple students mentioned they participated in a field trip to Washington, DC, that Jim organized during the holiday break. A few students mentioned that Accounting Professor Karen Kitching has been very helpful and kind during their time in Fairfax. She invited the Mason Korea students to her house for Thanksgiving dinner. Students did not mention any other individuals or departments who have been helpful to them while in Fairfax.
A few of the students shared that they felt that the University was more focused on recruiting incoming students than working toward improving the current Mason Korea students’ experience. “They’re concentrating on the gathering of new students. I don’t think they are concentrating on first-generation students because of the incoming students. They are focusing on them more than us.” A couple of students mentioned that a few former Mason Korea students decided to transfer to a different university because they felt that the system was disorganized.

**Campus Living**

None of the Mason Korea students indicated that they received their first choice for on-campus housing. Some students contacted the housing office at the Fairfax campus via email prior to arrival to inquire which of the residence halls will remain open during the winter holiday break. Some of the students selected a residence hall that would allow them to stay on campus during the holiday break. However, not all of the students selected residence halls that will remain open during the break. One student mentioned that they were going to return home to Korea because “dorms that don’t have kitchens, apparently you have to move out.”

**Communication**

Communication between the University and Mason Korea students appears to be an area needing improvement. Nearly every student mentioned that there was limited information available to them about the Mason Fairfax campus prior to arrival. A few students mentioned that there was no individual at Mason Korea who had the “knowledge” or “experience” needed to address their questions about the Mason Fairfax campus. Students mentioned that while there is information about academics (degree related information, structure of lectures) available online, there is limited information available to them about campus living and college life at Mason Fairfax. A few students mentioned that it would be helpful to provide pictures of the campus, study rooms, and the insides of the residence halls.

Almost all of the students shared grievances about the tuition payment process. Participants said that “the tuition paying process was not really a smooth process. They didn’t give the proper payment options for international students to make the payments. They gave [it] after we arrived.” There was a lack of information provided about the tuition payment process and the ways in which students can pay their tuition prior to arriving at Mason Fairfax. As a result, students recommend that the University provide Mason Korea students with tuition payment details coupled with payment deadlines prior to their arrival at Mason Fairfax. Some students voiced their concerns about the lack of prior notice about the additional health insurance charge that appeared on their student account near the payment deadline.

“The tuition was hard to pay. We had to ask our parents to have a wire transfer and I think that should be really clear for the next group. By this date you should [have] a wire transfer, by this date, with this bank account. You can pay by this method or this method. It should be pretty clear for them so that they will not struggle. Because for us, we had to mail, and we had to ask Jim Burke, and it was hard. It was really challenging. And then the deadline for the health insurance was added later, almost near the deadline. That was also really surprise for us. We had to pay tomorrow and then suddenly it was a new amount that was really challenging for us.” – MK student

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1 A term used by MK students that refers to the first Mason Korea cohort
Finances

Some of the students mentioned that the cost of tuition was an issue. Mason Korea is less expensive than Mason Fairfax but more expensive than other Korean universities. Students are aware of the recent credit hour changes that impact their tuition costs. One student explained that, in the past, Mason Korea students were considered to be enrolled full-time if they were registered for at least 18 credit hours per semester at the Incheon campus. However, the university recently changed this policy to mirror the policy at Mason Fairfax, and students who are registered for at least 16 credit hours are considered full-time. Thus, if Mason Korea students decide to take 18 credit hours while enrolled at Mason Fairfax, they have to pay additional fees. Students also mentioned that the cost of tuition was a major reason why some students left Mason Korea and transferred to a Korean university. A couple of students mentioned that they would like to see more scholarship opportunities for Mason Korea students: “There aren’t scholarships that we can register. There’s only one scholarship that if you maintain 3.0 we get a scholarship of $2,000, I think. But other than that there aren’t any scholarships offered for us.”

Social Relationships

Friendships and Student Communities

Some students expressed that they are active on campus and are trying to make the best out of their time in Fairfax by joining clubs on campus, taking part in internships, and joining sports clubs: “I always try to find an event or something to do on campus right after dinner.” For the most part, students who are involved on campus find out about activities and events either through getconnected.gmu.edu or by reading flyers posted around campus. A couple of students mentioned that they did participate in clubs and student organizations but opted to stop participating so that they can focus on their studies.

On the other hand, there were a few students who mentioned that they were not currently involved in clubs on campus but are planning to join in the future. Some students claim that it is difficult to make friends even though they attend events on campus.

“I was hoping to get more social here but I don’t think I will have a chance. I’m trying to attend as many events as I can attend but I don’t think it’s going to help in my relationship with others.” – MK student

It appears that the Mason Korea students who have visited or lived in the United States for a substantial period of time (e.g., attended high school in the U.S.) are more comfortable befriending other non-Mason Korea students on campus. These particular Mason Korea students seem to consciously make an effort to become involved on campus by attending campus activities and events and joining student organizations and clubs on campus. However, a large number of the Mason Korea students appear to hang out with one another and have few outside friends. One student admitted, “I don’t speak any English since I don’t have relationship[s] yet and I only hang out with the MK students; we only talk in Korean.”

SUMMARY AND STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

On the whole, students are pleased with the resources available and the diversity at the Mason Fairfax campus. Some Mason Korea students seem to make the social transition smoothly while others have had difficulty making new friends. One of the major adjustments for most of the Mason Korea students has been related to academics, specifically the curriculum and the larger class size at Mason Fairfax. Most of
the students expressed awareness of having to perform well academically and having to take their core curriculum courses while at Mason Fairfax, and voiced their concern regarding the lack of core courses offered at the Incheon campus.

Below are program recommendations provided by the Mason Korea students.

- Students would like to receive more academic support services at the Incheon Global Campus.
- Students would like help from the University with the visa paperwork process. Currently the University just provides the forms but there is no individual that can help students navigate the process on campus in Mason Korea.
- Students would like to receive tuition payment instructions accompanied with appropriate payment deadlines prior to arriving at Mason Fairfax.
- Mason Korea students would like more financial support and scholarships.
- The University may want to consider moving up the arrival date for Mason Korea students. Students would like more time to settle in and become acclimated with the Mason Fairfax campus. They would like time to also explore and visit tourist attractions in the Washington, DC metropolitan area before the beginning of the semester.
- The University may want to provide a separate on-campus orientation for Mason Korea students. Most MK students felt that the new international student orientation was repetitive, as it was directed toward freshmen and covered a lot of material that MK students were already exposed to in orientation at Mason Korea.
APPENDIX A

Mason Korea Assessment Interviews
Verbal Consent Language

My name is ________ and I am a PhD Education student here at GMU. I am conducting this interview to learn more about the experiences of Mason Korea students. If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions about your experiences here at the Mason Fairfax campus.

There are no risks for participating in this interview and there are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further Mason’s understanding of your experience and to help future Mason Korea students.

The information in this study is confidential and your name will be removed from any future reports. If it is ok with you, I would like to audiotape this interview so that I may later transcribe what was said. The audio tape will be kept in a locked office in the Office of Assessment and will be destroyed after the interview. If you do not want to be audio taped there is no penalty, and you may still participate. The only people who will have access to the audio tape are the researchers and the Office of Assessment.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop the interview at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate you will not be penalized and there are no costs to you for participating in this study.

If you have any questions you may contact Stephanie Hazel in the Office of Assessment at George Mason University. She may be reached via phone or email for questions, concerns, or to report a problem. If you would like to receive a copy of the final report you may contact Stephanie Hazel.

Do you agree to participate in this study?

Do I have your permission to audio tape this interview?
APPENDIX B

Mason Korea Assessment Interviews
Interview Protocol

Research Questions:
How are Mason Korea students transitioning at Mason Fairfax campus?
Why are students choosing to attend Mason Korea?

General Mason Korea
Can you talk about why you chose to attend Mason Korea?…Did you want to stay in Korea for college?
Did you want to take classes in English? Did you want an international experience? What other colleges
did you consider attending?

Pre-Arrival & Arrival Experiences
What did you think when you first arrived at the Mason Fairfax campus?…How does this compare to
your expectations of what it would be like?
What kinds of challenges, if any, did you experience when you arrived?…Were you surprised?
Who or what has been most helpful here?…How did you find out about these services on campus?
How can GMU better prepare Mason Korea students for their arrival to Fairfax?

Academic Transition
How are your classes at Mason Fairfax?…What types of challenges, if any, have you experienced in your
classes here?
What are the academic support services that you have used here? …Library? Writing Center? Advisors?
Office of International Programs and Services?
Where do you study on campus? …Have your study habits changed since being here? How?

Social Transition
Can you walk me through a typical day here on the Fairfax campus?
What kinds of activities or events have you participated in?…Orientation? How did you find out about
these events? Clubs/activities? Why did you join or participate in this club/activity?
Can you tell me about any friends you’ve made since being here?…What are they like?…How did you
meet them?…What do you think about the US Students?
Where are your favorite places to hang out?

Campus Living Transition
What is it like living in the residence halls?
How do you plan to spend your time during the holidays & school breaks when campus is closed this
semester?

General Recommendations
What recommendations would you have for Mason Korea students attending Fairfax for the first time
next semester?…Campus services?

Do you have anything else that you would like to share?