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IS MASKING INFORMATION A PATH TO EQUITY? EXAMINING THE *GOGYO BLIND* POLICY IN KOREAN HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS

BK Byun and Michael N. Bastedo

How to equitably evaluate applicants from vastly different backgrounds with access to vastly different levels of resources is a challenge shared by higher education systems across the world. Interestingly, respective countries have adopted markedly different strategies to address this issue. In the United States, for example, initiatives like the College Board's Landscape provide admissions officers with richer contextual data with the aim of helping them evaluate applicant achievement in light of the opportunities and constraints they faced (College Board, 2021). Underlying this approach is the recognition that each applicant comes from a unique context, and that evaluating their achievements in light of the opportunities that had been available to them can therefore promote more equitable evaluation of students from widely varying backgrounds (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). In stark contrast, South Korea (hereby Korea) has taken a completely opposite approach to address the same challenge, embodied in its *Gogyo Blind* policy.

Inspired by U.S. practices, holistic admissions was first introduced in Korea in 2007 as part of a government-led effort to reduce overreliance on high-stakes standardized testing and give students more diverse ways to demonstrate their potential (Kim, 2024). However, the policy quickly became a source of controversy as students from selective exam high schools—who often come from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds—dominated admissions at the country's most selective universities (Lee, 2022). For example, 60% of students admitted to Seoul National University, 53.7% of students admitted to Korea University, and 36.4%

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of students admitted to Yonsei University—the country's three top-ranked universities—were from exam schools (Lim, 2022), even though exam schools only about 10% of total high schools in the country (Choi, 2022). These trends fueled widespread public accusations that selective institutions unfairly favor exam school students (Byun & Bastedo, 2023; Choi, 2021). The government thus enacted a series of admissions reforms that progressively prohibited the inclusion of specific pieces of information in applications, which were criticized to give exam school students an unfair advantage. In 2019, these reforms ultimately culminated in the *Gogyo Blind* policy (literally translated as "masking high schools" in Korean), which mandates that applicants' high school names and types remain masked throughout the admissions process. The government claimed this policy would "preclude halo effects associated with high school type from influencing evaluations of an applicant" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 8) and help level the holistic admissions playing field for students from non-exam schools.

However, the literature on decision-making in low-information contexts raises concerns about the efficacy of this approach. Research shows that missing information can both trigger and interact with cognitive biases (Ebenbach & Moore, 2000; Jagacinski, 1994; Yamagishi & Hill, 1981; Yates et al., 1978). Rather than treating missing information as completely unavailable and evaluating candidates solely on other available information, decision makers often unconsciously attempt to fill in these gaps in unexpected ways. For instance, some may substitute missing individual-level information with group-level stereotypes about the missing attribute (Agan & Starr, 2018; Bertrand & Duflo, 2016), while others rely on priors about the relationship between missing and available information to draw inferences (Huber & McCann, 1982; Jagacinski, 1994). When the missing information pertains to the context in which a person's behavior occurred, decision makers are more likely to attribute observed behavior to the person's inherent personal traits or abilities, even when the observed behavior was in fact highly influenced by situational factors (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017; Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). The ambiguity brought about by missing information amplifies these various cognitive biases, encouraging risk-averse strategies that prioritize reducing uncertainty—often at the expense of fairness and equity Snow, 2010; Trautmann & Van De Kuilen, 2015). Together, these dynamics raise critical questions about how admissions personnel under the *Gogyo Blind* policy navigate the absence of high school-level contextual information, and how cognitive biases resulting from this dearth of information shape equity in admissions decisions.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with 51 admissions personnel at Korea's most selective institutions, this chapter examines how cognitive

biases manifest under the *Gogyo Blind* policy and their unintended consequences for equity in college admissions. Findings reveal that masking high school information makes easily-identifiable proxies on exam schools particularly salient, and this in turn often triggered existing stereotypes about exam schools. Findings also suggest evidence of correspondence bias, which refers to a cognitive tendency to attribute an individual's performance to their inherent ability—overlooking situational factors that likely also shaped the individual's performance (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Correspondence bias, amplified by the *Gogyo Blind* policy, led evaluators to misattribute raw performance solely to applicants' individual ability and drive. The increased ambiguity brought about by the *Gogyo Blind* policy further increased evaluators' reliance on these two evaluation tendencies, as risk-averse decision makers preferred making judgments that they considered "safer bets." These findings suggest that *Gogyo Blind*, rather than leveling the playing field, disproportionately disadvantages applicants from rural and lower-resourced general academic high schools—the very populations the policy aimed to protect.

Introduction and Subsequent Expansion of Holistic Admissions in Korea

Korea presents a particularly interesting context to examine equity-oriented admissions reforms given the profound and lasting impact of one's individual's undergraduate pedigree. Social mobility in Korea is heavily shaped by *hakbeol*, a unique Korean concept likened to a "degree-caste system" (Kim, 2011, p. 118) where the prestige of one's undergraduate institution disproportionately influences career opportunities, social status, and even marital prospects (Grubb et al., 2009; Kim, 2011). This issue is further exacerbated by the rigid hierarchy characterizing the country's higher education system. The overwhelming majority of institutions deemed to confer prestigious *hakbeol* are all located in Seoul, with three institutions collectively known as "SKY" (Seoul National University, Korea University, Yonsei University) sitting at the top of this hierarchy. The social importance of *hakbeol*—coupled with the scarcity of institutions regarded as offering prestigious *hakbeol*—has made competition for admission to Seoul-based universities in general and SKY universities in particular extraordinarily intense. Given the intense competition and public scrutiny surrounding access to these institutions, the government heavily regulates the admissions processes of both public and private universities.

The introduction and subsequent expansion of holistic admissions in Korea was also in large part a government-led initiative. Prior to the adoption of holistic admissions, college admission depended heavily on the

suneung, a grueling eight-hour standardized exam taken once a year during students' senior year of high school. Over time, criticism of the *suneung*-based admissions system grew, with students, parents, and teachers alike arguing that it placed undue stress on students, narrowly defined "merit" in ways that excluded diverse talent and potential, and perpetuated socioeconomic inequities by benefiting students who had access to expensive test preparation (Byoun, 2012; Seo & Bae, 2022). Holistic review was introduced to the country in 2007 in an effort to assuage these criticisms (Byoun, 2012). The policy was seen as a means to reduce excessive stress from high-stakes standardized testing, provide opportunities for students to demonstrate skills beyond test scores, and address inequities stemming from disparities in access to resources (Bastedo, 2021; Seo & Bae, 2022).

Following consultations with the U.S. College Board as well as a flurry of studies benchmarking holistic admissions in other countries (Park, 2006; Yang, 2007; Yang, 2019), the Roh administration tentatively introduced holistic admissions on a small scale. It provided government funding to 10 pilot universities, enabling them to hire admissions officers and implement this new admissions approach to admit 2.5% of their incoming class. The pilot was largely well-received by both implementing universities and the general public (Lee, 2018; Song, 2017). Subsequent administrations adopted a significantly bolder approach to holistic admissions. The Lee administration, as well as the Park administration that followed it, aggressively used a combination of sticks and carrots to encourage selective institutions to expand holistic admissions (Seo & Bae, 2022). As a result, Seoul-based universities have seen a rapid expansion of holistic admissions since its introduction in 2007. As of 2024, approximately 40% of students admitted to the country's top-ranking institutions are selected through this approach (Oh, 2024).

However, this rapid, top-down implementation gave rise to various criticisms, particularly regarding how to fairly evaluate student achievement across different types of high schools (Kim & Shin, 2020). Most students in the country attend general academic high schools (hereby *non-exam schools*), which are government-funded, open-access institutions that are free, but offer a largely standardized curriculum and less access to customized educational opportunities. In contrast, *exam schools* (including foreign language, global, science, and autonomous private high schools) admit top-performing middle school students around the country based on entrance exams and middle school grades. These schools also provide their students with more plentiful educational opportunities and resources, which are oftentimes more specialized and advanced: For example, science high schools offer more rigorous, structured courses and extracurriculars in science and math, and have more specialized teaching staff to guide these activities. In exchange for more autonomy in the school

curriculum, exam schools receive less funding from the government—and instead shift these costs onto students and their parents: the cost of attendance (tuition and associated fees) ranges from $6,100 to $25,000/year (Kim, 2022).

These disparities in early selection, training, and resources naturally translate into stark differences in admissions outcomes for students from different types of high schools. Descriptive reports show that for holistic admissions for the 2022 academic year, 60% of students admitted to Seoul National University, 53.7% of students admitted to Korea University, and 36.4% of students admitted to Yonsei University—the country's three top-ranked universities—were from exam schools (Lim, 2022). This is particularly striking as exam schools account for only 10% of all high schools in the country (Choi, 2022). Such disparities are further underscored by annual media coverage, which lists high schools with the highest number of admits to prestigious universities, as well as high schools with the highest average *suneung* performance (Cho, 2014; Cho, 2024; Kwon, 2020). For instance, one article reports that 11 of the top 20 high schools sending the most students to Seoul National University were exam schools, while the remaining 9 were all non-exam schools located in affluent neighborhoods in Seoul (Cho, 2024). Together, these patterns reinforce pervasive social stereotypes regarding the academic rigor and excellence of students attending exam schools.

Yet critics question the extent to which exam school students' academic success reflects individual merit versus the concerted cultivation of their higher-SES parents (Kim & Woo, 2020; Shim & Kim, 2017). Research shows that higher-SES parents are more likely to guide their children into exam schools, even when comparing middle school students with comparable levels of academic performance (Kim & Woo, 2020). Moreover, studies also indicate that while students from exam schools often outperform their non-exam school peers in various academic metrics, these disparities are largely attributable to differences in parental SES (Byun & Joo, 2012; Shim & Kim, 2017). These criticisms have made the disproportionately high representation of exam school students at Korea's most selective universities a focal point in equity debates.

Masking Information as a Strategy to Promote Equity in Holistic Admissions

As described in Figure 5.1, the government's response to these ongoing criticisms has been straightforward: To remove any components of the admissions process that critics argued unfairly advantaged students from exam school and/or higher-SES backgrounds. Initial reforms targeted extramural

	'07-'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16-'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23	'24
High School Transcripts														
Extramural Awards	o	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Standardized Language Proficiency Tests	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Extramural Volunteer Work	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Patents	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Book Publications	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Journal Publications	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Info Alluding to Parental SES	-	-	-	-	-	-		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
High School Context (e.g. name, type, region)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x
High School Profile Sheets														
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x
Recommendation Letters from High School Teachers														
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	x	x
College Essays														
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	x

Notes. O: Inclusion approved by government, X: Inclusion banned, - : No guidelines
Source: Adapted from Korean Ministry of Education (2019).

FIGURE 5.1 Government admissions reforms for fairness and equity.

activities, addressing concerns that students' ability to participate and excel in these activities was heavily influenced by parental SES. Other credentials criticized for reflecting high school or parental privilege—such as standardized language proficiency test scores, extramural volunteer work, patents, book publications, and journal publications—were promptly banned as well. Subsequent reforms sought to limit information that could reveal parental SES. To "minimize the influence of external factors such as parental background on college admissions" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a, p.5), the government prohibited including information on parental SES in applicants' high school transcripts, college essays, or teacher recommendation letters. Soon after, government audits found evidence of some high schools using high school profiles to indirectly communicate banned information, such as lists of students who had participated in extramural curricular activities like research with college professors (Song, 2019). In response, the government also banned the use of high school profiles. College essays and recommendation letters followed shortly after, citing concerns that these documents could also potentially be used to convey restricted information (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a).

The *Gogyo Blind* policy is the pinnacle of this trend. It was introduced to address widespread public backlash stemming from a highly publicized admissions scandal involving the daughter of the then-Minister of Justice, who attended a well-known exam school. The scandal further fueled fierce

debates about the impact of parental SES and high school type on college admissions. The government thus came up with the *Gogyo Blind* policy in addition to earlier reforms banning the consideration of parental SES and high school profiles. The *Gogyo Blind* policy mandated that applicants' high school names and types remain masked throughout the admissions process to eliminate potential "high school halo effects" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 8).

Figure 5.2 illustrates what remains in the holistic admissions process after these extensive reforms. During first-stage file evaluations, applicants are assessed solely on their high school transcripts, which include their class rank in nine categories (1 being the highest and 9 the lowest); government-approved extracurriculars offered within their own schools; and brief teacher comments on student performance. Applicants who pass the first stage proceed to on-campus interviews, which delve further into their high school transcripts and, at some institutions, also evaluate their academic competence. At least two evaluators are assigned to assess each applicant in both stages. Evaluators consist of not only full-time admissions officers but also of tenure-track faculty from each institution. Given that college applicants in Korea typically apply for admission to specific majors, faculty members primarily assess applicants within their respective majors, while admissions officers evaluate candidates across various disciplines.

In addition to first-stage file evaluations and second-stage on-campus interviews, many institutions also impose a *suneung* cutoff, where applicants

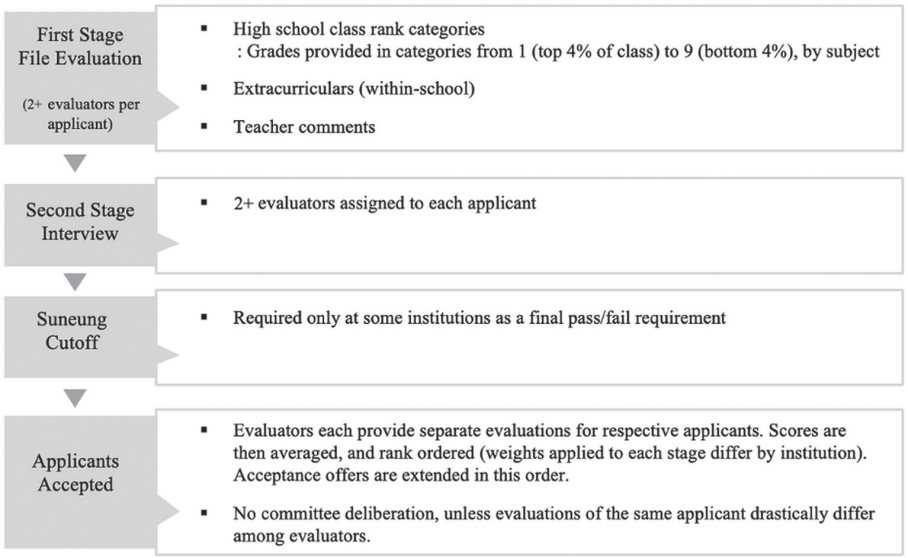

FIGURE 5.2 Components of Korean holistic admissions (2024).

must meet a minimum threshold as a final pass/fail requirement. Importantly, there is no committee deliberation at any stage of the admissions process; Instead, evaluators are explicitly instructed to refrain from deliberating with any of their colleagues, in the name of providing independent, unbiased evaluations. Scores from each stage are weighted, rank-ordered, and acceptance offers are extended based on this order. More details on each stage of the admissions process are provided in Figure 5.2.

Our Data

The data used in this chapter is drawn from a larger project that examined how admissions officers and faculty at Korea's most selective universities enact holistic admissions practices, with a particular focus on their use of discretion and its implications for equity. Since directory information about evaluators in selective institutions is not publicly accessible in Korea, the first author leveraged her alumni networks to identify participants, obtain consent, and build rapport. These initial connections enabled further recruitment through referrals, culminating in interviews with 51 participants from 14 different institutions. These institutions represent Korea's most prestigious, as reflected in their domestic and international rankings, public reputation, and highly competitive admissions rates of approximately 10% or lower.

Of the 51 participants, 39.2% were affiliated with highly selective institutions (generally defined as institutions with admit rates of around 4% or lower), while 60.8% were from selective institutions (admit rates around 10% or lower). We purposefully oversampled interviewees from highly selective institutions, as equity debates surrounding the representation of students from exam versus non-exam schools are particularly prominent at these universities. Full-time admissions officers accounted for 49.0% of the sample, and faculty made up 51.0%. Interviewees also represented a diverse range of admissions experience: 29.4% had 1–3 years of experience, 31.4% had 4–7 years, and 39.2% had more than 8 years of experience. Gender differences among participants mirrored national trends, with 80% of interviewed admissions officers being women, while 77% of faculty were men. These patterns align with broader statistics showing that the majority of admissions officers in Korea are women (70%; Korean Ministry of Education, 2019b), while the majority of faculty at Korean universities are men (70%).

Interviews explored (among other issues) how admissions officers and faculty navigated challenges posed by the *Gogyo Blind* policy, their evaluation processes, and their perceptions of the policy's impact on equity in admissions outcomes. This rich dataset provides rare insights into the

internal dynamics inside admissions offices under the *Gogyo Blind* policy, revealing how the policy shaped decision-making and equity outcomes (Byun & Bastedo, 2023).

Challenges Imposed by the *Gogyo Blind* Policy

All 51 admissions officers and faculty we interviewed strongly criticized the *Gogyo Blind* policy. Their reactions underscored a shared frustration with the contradictory demands imposed by the policy: Institutions were expected to "evaluate students' achievements and potential holistically" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 4) while simultaneously being denied access to detailed high school context in the name of precluding "high school halo effects" (p. 8). Many interviewees found this inconsistency exasperating, arguing that policymakers had fundamentally misunderstood the essence of holistic review. One interviewee dismissed the policymakers behind it as "bird-brained"; another referred to it as a "lame showcase of performative administration." A third, reflecting on his recent experience evaluating applicants under the policy, bitterly remarked, "I really wanted to quit."

Admissions leadership, however, were also acutely aware of the high stakes of noncompliance. The government threatened heavy-handed sanctions against any institution found in violation of the *Gogyo Blind* policy (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a). Many admissions officers therefore seemed extremely wary of providing specific guidance on how to proceed with evaluations during training and norming sessions, especially if the guidance could be construed as favoring one type of high school over another. One seasoned admissions officer in charge of training other evaluators shared that the best—although imperfect—remedy she had found thus far was to "accept the *Gogyo Blind* policy's constraints, but actively make use of whatever other remaining information that is still available." For example, masked high school transcripts allowed evaluators to observe course names and their hours of instruction. During trainings, she therefore explained that exam schools tended to offer distinct curricular foci and instructional hours, in ways that differed from the typical non-exam school. For example, science high schools required students to take longer instructional hours in science and math, and foreign language high schools required their students to take longer instructional hours in foreign languages. In addition, masked high school transcripts still included an applicant's high school class averages and standard deviations for each subject. Trainings communicated that schools with a high concentration of academically driven, high-performing students often exhibited high class averages alongside low standard deviations.

Admissions officers at many other institutions similarly reported incorporating these "tips" into their training sessions. They were quick to add, however, that this information was only communicated to inform evaluators of the broader high school landscape. "We don't tell readers to evaluate applicants from certain high school types more favorably," said one admissions officer firmly, "We're only sharing this information to help readers make informed judgments. It's ultimately up to them to decide how to use this information."

Relying on Proxies and Stereotypes to Navigate Missing Context

The cognitive bias literature highlights that salient information—namely, information that is particularly distinctive and noticeable—disproportionately affects decision making (Taylor et al., 1979). Salience directs decision makers' attention to more conspicuous pieces of information, leading them to place disproportionate weight on these factors. What constitutes salient information, however, is highly dependent on the situation (Orquin et al., 2018). Under the *Gogyo Blind* policy, where detailed high school context was unavailable, interviewees reported the aforementioned proxies—such as curricular foci, instructional hours, high school-level standard deviations, and class averages—stood out as particularly salient. With little else to guide them, evaluators leaned heavily on these proxies when evaluating applicants. "I couldn't help but cling to whatever little bits of information were left," admitted one admissions officer.

Relying on proxies to navigate missing context, however, gave rise to its own set of problems. Proxies offered clear, easily recognizable signals that allowed evaluators to identify exam schools with specialized programs (such as foreign language, science, and global high schools). For instance, proxies such as curricular foci and instructional hours allowed evaluators to immediately identify that an applicant was from a foreign language high school. "Granted, you can't tell whether this applicant is from Daewon Foreign Language High School or Daeil Foreign Language High School, but the fact that the applicant is from a foreign language high school sticks out a mile," admitted one interviewee. "Whether the applicant is from a special-purpose high school is the easiest piece of contextual information you can glean from masked transcripts," added another.

The salience of these proxies seemed to activate widespread social stereotypes about special-purpose high schools, which in turn colored evaluators' decisions. For instance, many faculty working in admissions tend to be empathetic to the challenges faced by applicants from highly selective special-purpose high schools, given perceptions of merit deriving from their personal and professional lived experience (Byun & Bastedo, 2023).

It was thus unsurprising that many faculty avowed that they used proxies to identify applicants from special-purpose high schools and adjusted evaluations accordingly. For example, many faculty interviewees shared how they elevated class rank categories for applicants from special-purpose high schools. "Say there's an applicant from a foreign language high school with a level 4 class rank category, and another applicant from a general academic high school with a level 1 class rank category. I gave the former higher academic ratings," said one professor unapologetically. Advocates of this approach asserted that this was a practical way to guard against the limitations of the *Gogyo Blind* policy and ensure applicants from these stereotypically higher-performing schools received due consideration.

Other interviewees—including the vast majority of admissions officers—condemned this approach as overly simplistic. They criticized the widespread stereotype that special-purpose high schools were uniformly high-performing, noting variation in rigor and performance among these schools. However, they lacked a decisively better alternative. While these interviewees tried their best to scrape together any other remaining information (such as school-level averages and standard deviations) and read through masked lines, they acknowledged with regret that these proxies could not replicate the depth of information required to truly evaluate applicant performance in context.

Misattributing Raw Performance to Individual Ability

These issues in assessing context in the face of the *Gogyo Blind* policy give rise to concerns about correspondence bias in admissions officers' decision-making. Correspondence bias refers to the human tendency to attribute a person's behavior to their inherent traits or dispositions, even when the observed behavior was in fact highly influenced by situational factors (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Studies show that providing detailed, high-quality information about situational factors can mitigate correspondence bias (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017; Moore et al., 2010). For example, Bastedo and Bowman (2017) report that admissions officers were more likely to admit a low-SES applicant from a lower-resourced high school when provided with detailed school-level information, as this allowed them to contextualize the applicant's achievement in light of available opportunities.

Given these dynamics, removing detailed high school context under the *Gogyo Blind* policy inevitably created conditions for correspondence bias among Korean admissions personnel. Without detailed information on high school context, evaluators had little choice but to assess applicant's achievements as if they solely reflected individual ability and drive, even

though these achievements were likely also shaped by the resources and opportunities available at their high schools. Similarly, the lack of high school context posed significant challenges when evaluating applicants with comparatively lower raw performance. As one admissions officer mused, "Does lower raw performance reflect lower ability and drive, or was the student's performance simply constrained by the dearth of opportunities available at their school? I honestly can't tell." Under these conditions, even the strongest advocates of contextualized evaluation found themselves assessing raw performance at face value.

Many interviewees believed that this shift toward evaluating raw performance at face value disproportionately disadvantaged applicants from non-exam schools, especially those in rural areas. Students from these schools often lacked access to extracurricular and academic opportunities that were more readily available to their peers in higher-resourced exam schools. One admissions officer explained, "Let's be real here: A lot of students in non-exam schools—especially those in rural areas—just can't participate in all these tailored, structured extracurriculars. The range of extracurriculars their schools offer is just so limited." The same applied to access to advanced coursework. Higher-resourced schools not only offered a wider range of extracurriculars, but also baked advanced curricular options into their core curriculum. "Special-purpose high school students end up taking many more advanced courses than their peers attending non-exam schools, even without making much effort on their part. Merely following what their school tells them to do will allow them to accumulate significantly more achievements," explained one admissions officer.

Without contextual information to assess whether applicants had maximized the limited opportunities available to them, however, correspondence bias led evaluators to conflate systemic disparities with individual shortcomings. "I hate to say this, but to be very frank, applications from these [lower-resourced non-exam] schools looked pretty lackluster devoid of context," admitted one admissions officer with a sigh. Despite being one of the strongest supporters of evaluating in context among our interviewees, he continued on to say, "Their applications just didn't have much that caught the eye—there just wasn't a lot to work with."

These constraints applied to even the most experienced admissions personnel, who struggled with the idea that they could not and therefore were not fairly evaluating applicants without the ability to account for context. One interviewee, an admissions dean with over a decade of experience in admissions, noted that while evaluating under *Gogyo Blind*, "I found myself thinking time and again that applicants from lower-resourced non-exam schools—particularly those in rural areas—were being dealt the worst hand." Another admissions officer, also with over a decade

of admissions experience explained, "In my eyes, applicants from lower-resourced schools who don't have the highest raw performance still have a strong case, as long as they've maximized what limited opportunities they had." The *Gogyo Blind* policy, however, no longer made such an evaluation possible. "I *want* to evaluate the applicant in context, but there's not much left in the application that I can use," he lamented.

Risk Aversion and the Preference for "Safer Bets"

Risk aversion refers to the human tendency to prefer options that minimize uncertainty (Kahneman, 2011). Importantly, ambiguity exacerbates risk-averse tendencies (Posselt, 2016; Trautmann & Van De Kuilen, 2015). In her study of graduate admissions, for example, Posselt (2016) highlights how ambiguity often drove faculty to rely on more traditional metrics of student performance to mitigate risk. In a related vein, many admissions officers in the Korean context expressed concerns about making "mistakes" under *Gogyo Blind*—namely, decisions that could be difficult to justify if challenged later on. One admissions officer explained that such mistakes carried significant risks for both individual admissions officers as well as their institution. On an institutional level, errors in judgment could result in severe consequences such as government sanctions or cuts to funding. On an individual level, these mistakes could jeopardize admissions officers' careers, including losing their jobs. "I need to be able to defend my evaluations," emphasized one admissions officer. "If someone asks why I accepted a certain student, I can't just go, honestly I'm wondering the same thing! He seemed promising, but I take that back—sorry, I blame it on *Gogyo Blind*," she said, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

Faced with this uncertainty, evaluators gravitated toward decision-making strategies that reduced ambiguity (Snow, 2010; Trautmann & Van De Kuilen, 2015). For some, this meant leaning on stereotypes about special-purpose high schools. These schools' reputations for rigor and selectivity made their applicants appear to be, as one admissions officer put it, a "safer bet." This tendency became particularly pronounced when comparing top-performing students from special-purpose high schools to other top-performing students from high schools with ambiguous levels of rigor and resources. Without detailed contextual information on the latter, admissions officers acknowledged that they often ended up gravitating toward applicants from special-purpose high schools. As one admissions officer reflected:

> There were times when it came down to choosing between a student who was top-performing at a high school where I was unsure about

> the rigor of their curriculum, and a student who was also top-performing, but from a school that I knew from proxies was clearly a special-purpose high school. Granted, I don't know exactly from which special-purpose high school, but I also know that generally speaking, special-purpose high schools tend to have higher concentrations of strong students. I found myself… leaning toward the option that seemed safer.

For other evaluators, the desire to minimize uncertainty led them to place greater weight on raw performance metrics, especially if they were from schools that proxies indicated were competitive. In particular, raw performance in academics (high class rank categories) was perceived as more objective and therefore less vulnerable to criticism. As one interviewee observed, "It's like we're falling back on numbers, because numbers feel fair."

In this way, the heightened risk aversion due to the *Gogyo Blind* policy further amplified the two evaluation tendencies described earlier: relying on stereotypes about special-purpose high schools, and relying on raw performance metrics. Put together, these tendencies benefited students from exam schools in general, and special-purpose high schools in particular. This came at the cost of perpetuating systemic inequities for students from rural, lower-resourced, general academic high schools.

Implications for Equitable Policy and Practice

Findings from this chapter highlight the unintended consequences of the High School Blind policy. By removing detailed high school context, the policy introduced substantial ambiguity into the admissions process, fostering conditions that triggered various cognitive biases (Ebenbach & Moore, 2000; Jagacinski, 1994; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Snow, 2010). Instead of treating high school type as irrelevant—as intended by the policy—admissions personnel consciously and unconsciously sought to fill the missing information with whatever information that was left. Evaluators relied on easily recognizable proxies, which made it straightforward to identify special-purpose high schools, and activated widespread social stereotypes about their selectivity and rigor. Correspondence bias further compounded these issues, as evaluators misattributed raw performance metrics to inherent individual ability, overlooking the critical role of school-level resources in shaping applicants' opportunities and outcomes. Additionally, heightened uncertainty under the *Gogyo Blind* policy fueled risk aversion, prompting evaluators to favor applicants whom they perceived to be "safer bets," who were more often than not students from exam schools with more traditional forms of merit. Taken together,

these cognitive biases reinforced—rather than disrupted—the systemic advantages enjoyed by students from exam schools in general, and special-purpose high schools in particular. At the same time, these biases disproportionately disadvantaged students from rural, lower-resourced general academic high schools—the very demographic the *Gogyo Blind* policy sought to uplift.

This outcome is particularly ironic when taken in light of how Korean admissions personnel at selective institutions approached admissions prior to *Gogyo Blind*. As Byun and Bastedo (2023) document, admissions personnel held varying evaluative logics shaped by their personal and professional lived experiences. Some evaluators unapologetically admitted that they favored applicants from selective exam schools, and reflected this in their evaluations; Others did not share this preference, and conducted contextualized evaluation to account for the fact that applicants came from backgrounds with varying levels of educational opportunities and resources—a practice that allowed for more equitable evaluation of students across different types of high schools, including those from lower-resourced non-exam schools. However, the *Gogyo Blind* policy in effect stripped admissions personnel of the tools necessary to conduct contextualized evaluations. As a result, even those admissions personnel who did not particularly favor exam school applicants were left with little choice but to rely on proxies, stereotypes, and raw performance metrics—a dynamic that clearly advantaged applicants from exam schools over those from non-exam schools. In doing so, the *Gogyo Blind* policy eroded the very practices that allowed for more equitable evaluation of the population it sought to protect.

Taken together, findings from this chapter add weight to increasing criticism that the Korean government should reconsider the *Gogyo Blind* policy (Kim, 2024). Outside of Korea, initiatives such as the College Board's Landscape in the United States illustrate an alternative approach to addressing disparities in educational opportunities. Landscape provides admissions officers with detailed, standardized data about applicants' high schools, including metrics on school resources, curricular rigor, and average student performance (College Board, 2021). By doing so, initiatives such as Landscape help increase admission rates for students from lower-resourced backgrounds by helping contextualize their achievements (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017; Mabel et al., 2022). This aligns with a key tenet of holistic review, namely that applicants should be evaluated in light of the opportunities and constraints they faced in achieving them (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). Future admissions reforms may benefit from approaches that provide detailed data on each applicant's high school context in a standardized,

easily digestible form. This will provide advocates of contextualized review with better tools to make fair and equitable assessments across diverse applicant populations.

In addition to informing discussions about contextualized admissions in higher education, this work also informs policy discussions on masking information in the holistic admissions process to improve fairness, access, or equity. Korea's *Gogyo Blind* policy is just one example of such an approach. In the U.S., for instance, admissions officers are no longer allowed categorical considerations of race in the admissions process due to the *SFFA* decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2023 (Liptak, 2023). As a result, many universities no longer allow racial categories to be presented to admissions officers during application scoring or deliberations. Similarly, in China, the "Strong Foundation" reforms banned consideration of extracurricular activities, scientific research, patents/publications, or interviews that were allowed under the Independent Freshman Admission Program (IFAP), the previous iteration of holistic admissions (Bastedo, 2021; Wu et al., 2019). In Ireland, family names are redacted from applications to prevent admissions decisions from being influenced by social networks in its small, interconnected country (Geoghegan, 2015). While these policies aim to address inequities by removing information perceived as potentially inducing bias, the Korean case demonstrates that missing information intersects with cognitive biases, creating unanticipated consequences with potentially negative effects on access and equity. This highlights the need for policymakers to critically evaluate whether masking information truly mitigates inequities as intended, or inadvertently amplifies them.

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