






## FAIRNESS PERCEPTION OF POLICY STAKEHOLDERS IN COLLEGE ADMISSION IN KOREA

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### ABSTRACT

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It has been known that Korea has the highest college enrollment rate due to the role that college entrance plays in determining the socioeconomic status of students in their future. About 10 years ago, the Ministry of Education in Korea initiated the Comprehensive School Report-based Admission (CSRA) under the recognition that the college admission system needs to be diversified. Since then, the fairness of the CSRA has been at the center of controversy. This study aimed to draw the implications for college admission policies by comparing the perception of the main stakeholders (students and parents, teachers, admission officers, and faculty admission committee) on the CSRA. The perception data of 150 participants on the six aspects of the CSRA were gathered through a questionnaire and the results were analyzed for group differences. A FGI was additionally administered with 12 participants. This study found that the stakeholders perceived the CSRA as important and necessary. However, the perception of the stakeholders on the fairness of the CSRA presented itself differently depending on the interests each group holds. The results of this study showed that close examination of the multifaceted perceptions and individualized experiences of the stakeholders should be taken into consideration when the perception of fairness in the CSRA is examined. It also implied that the government should provide stakeholders with the opportunities to be informed of the CSRA to promote trust in the policy.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study presents a comparative analysis of the perceptions of stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, admission officers, etc.) on a college admissions policy through questionnaires and interviews. The results of this study would contribute to providing theoretical insight for fairness and trust-building for education policy in policymakers and education policy analysts.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Korea, college entrance exams mean a lot more than just going to college. College entrance exams serve not only as a method of recruiting social talents but also as a crucial factor in determining the socioeconomic status of students in future. In particular, the introduction of the admission officer system in 2008 by the Korea Ministry of Education, which had long persisted with a test-based evaluation system, dramatically changed the policies on the college admission system. As the admission officer system was introduced, high school reports, which provide

descriptive information on students' growth and achievement at school along with ordinal subject scores, have been used as an important reference point for college admission. Some of the previous research welcomed this change. For instance, Kang (2014) acknowledged the outstanding achievements of the admission officer system in expanding the Comprehensive School Report-based Admission (CSRA, hereafter) as well as achieving the goal of simplifying the college admission system, which eventually came down to proliferating high school curriculum-based admission system.

However, a lot of negative feedback and disappointments on the CSRA, which was first implemented 10 years ago, coexisted and the system became a hot potato in the education sector in Korea. The most-debated topic is the fairness of the CSRA system. The system was tainted as a "silver spoon admission form" which works to the upper class's advantage and was also pegged as the main culprit of spreading private education. In a similar vein, some scholars (e.g., An (2017), Cha (2016)) argue that compared to other admission forms, in the CSRA, the socioeconomic status of the parents plays a relatively more important role in students' admission to the college. It was also argued that the system gives more burden on students since students need to prepare the school report throughout the whole high school year.

An (2018) pointed out that the CSRA not only raised the admission rate of those students who lived in the Gangnam areas and those from special-purpose high schools, but it also worsened the equity of college admission opportunities as it was shown that those students from the families of a high-income upper class fared far better in this admission form. It is, therefore, still far from clearing the name of the "silver spoon admission form". The parents' socioeconomic status in this admission form is very much influential in students' admission rate since the CSRA includes non-credit activities, the preparedness of which is much dependent on the parents' interests and cultural competency, in its evaluation criteria along with the scores of credit courses. In addition, students from upper-class families are likely to spend a large sum of money in receiving consultation to prepare for students' cover letters, which makes the family background of students contribute as much to the college admission rate in the CSRA as a scholastic aptitude test does.

To make matters worse, such issues as the manipulation of school reports by high school teachers cast doubts on the fairness and reliability of the CSRA. The correction of school reports has been steadily increasing every year, marking 251,495 in 2013, 278,985 in 2014, 296,170 in 2015, and already reaching the record of 284,548 in 2021.

Despite the ongoing debate over the fairness of the CSRA, there is not enough research on the given topic. The previous research was weighted towards discussing the positive outcomes of the CSRA and analyzing the merits and demerits of the admission form. In this study, we investigated the perception of the main stakeholders in the CSRA such as students, parents, teachers, admission officers, and the faculty admission committee. In particular, this study aimed to investigate the perception of fairness by each stakeholder and to reveal who, among stakeholders, perceived the lack of fairness in the CSRA and in what aspects each stakeholder perceived that the CSRA was not fair.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Changes in Korea's College Admission Policy

Korea's state-led college admission system has been 'exam-oriented' for a long time. The written exam, in the form of multiple-choice questions, evaluated students based on the content of subjects learned during their high school years. There were times when essay-type exams or school performance grades were partially adopted for evaluations, but test scores were still the main method for evaluating students. Such an 'exam-oriented' method of selecting students has often been criticized for giving rise to academic elitism, making it difficult to operate high school education with stability and encouraging private education. In addition, it has been endlessly pointed out that the student selection method based on school grades measures only a student's ability to memorize fragments and the non-essentials, and that it cannot assess his or her ability of deeper thinking, such as creativity and problem-solving skills.

The aforementioned social atmosphere and pressure from the academic community called for a new method of college admission. On October 28, 2004, the Ministry of Education announced the Improvement Plan for Admission Officer System for College Admissions after 2008 to normalize School Education. The new policy was suggested for the first time to replace the standard selection of students based on grades. It advised selecting students based on their potential and possibilities, the founding philosophy of a university, the characteristics of admission categories, and the talents of students. Since 2008, universities have been adopting the Admission Officer System, but the exam-oriented system still remains the primary method to evaluate students.

The Admission Officer System was modeled after the admission method of universities in the United States. The system has been established in the higher education sector of the US for a long time, which is mostly shaped by private universities, and most universities are at liberty when selecting students according to their own standards (Yang & Chung, 2007). Accordingly, the admission system in Korea also adopted a method to select students by employing admission specialists who can interpret and utilize various factors of admission, such as school reports, students' cover letters, and other documents. Some in the academic community believe that the introduction of the Admission Officer System has allowed universities to freely select students according to their unique standards, and that high schools can now run various specialized curricula that can support and enhance students' talents. In 2015, the Ministry of Education changed the name of the Admission Officer System to the Comprehensive School Report-based Admission System.

However, except for reemphasizing school reports as student evaluation data, the purpose and method of selection are practically identical to those of the Admission Officer System. Ultimately, the college admission policy in Korea is to select students based on the CSRA, and the other is through the exam method.

## 2.2. Analysis of Previous Studies

There have been numerous studies on various areas of Korea's college admission system in the past 10 years. Kim, Park, and Lee (2018) in 'A Trend Analysis of Research on the Admission Officer System', classified the research topics on the college admission officer system as follows: 1) study on the Admission Officer policy, 2) study on university grades and levels of adaptation of students admitted through the Admission Officer policy, 3) study on the effect of the Admission Officer policy on private tutoring and high school education, 4) study on the expertise and ethics of admissions officers. Kim et al. (2018) found that there had been more research on admissions officer policy than other topics. In particular, various studies have been carried out, from studies on the admissions officer policy itself, to the management of the admission method, and its evaluation criteria and method.

Studies on the fairness of college admission policies have been actively conducted (An, 2016; Choe, 2016; Kim, 2018; Yoon, Jeon, & Kim, 2015). Yoon et al. (2015), for instance, conducted the fairness of the CSRA policy in 31 universities. In this study, the fairness perception of admission officers was measured by survey and focus group interviews (FGI). The results indicated that the following factors could interfere with securing fairness in the CSRA: 1) not adjusting the evaluation deviation in an interview, 2) not enforcing separation for the organization managing the system of excluding an admission officer in the case of familial links, 3) not stabilizing the status of admission officers, and 4) not analyzing an evaluator's evaluation tendency.

In Choe (2016), 11 university students who participated in the college admissions system were observed to explore the fairness of the system. How the students felt toward Korea's college admissions system was analyzed using the grounded theory method, and it turned out that they found the system to be unfair. Interpretations of the result can be divided into two categories: first, distributional unfairness stemming from disparities in parents' incomes and the gap between Seoul and provincial regions; second, procedural unfairness caused by frequent changes in the college admissions system.

On the other hand, An (2016) suggested that, from the perspective of students and parents, the cause of the problems in college admissions can be found in the expansion of the CSRA system. The provided evidence was the

state of each admission type between 2015 and 2018 (4 years), the state of each admission type in eight major universities in Seoul, and the results of surveys taken by parents in 2016 regarding the CSRA. The study by Kim (2019), which carried out a qualitative case study on teachers, analyzed teachers' perception of the CSRA under the special circumstance of high schools in non-High School Equalization Policy areas. According to the results, the teachers perceived fairness as "something that can be accepted by all" and "admitted to college according to one's ability." They also found that the CSRA did not properly reflect the gaps in school levels, and that problems in fairness occurred owing to varying school reports and extracurricular activities depending on differences in teachers and external factors.

It is evident from analyzing precedent studies that the number of works examining the fairness of college admission policy has been increasing steadily. When comprehensively observing the results of studies on fairness, the fairness of the CSRA was perceived differently by students, teachers, and admission officers. However, it is difficult to compare directly how each stakeholder perceives the same issue differently since previous research only included a particular stakeholder group in each study, not all of them. For example, Yoon et al. (2015) showed that admissions officers perceive that the CSRA is not fair enough, but it tells us nothing about how different this response is from those of teachers, students, and parents.

In this regard, the current study aims to investigate the perception of fairness by each stakeholder and to reveal who, among stakeholders, perceives the lack of fairness in the CSRA and in what aspects each stakeholder perceives that the CSRA is not fair.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1. A Questionnaire

An initial questionnaire was developed based on the previous research and literature review, and a complete set of items in the questionnaire was decided by the researchers in the study. The questionnaire was composed of 27 items and a five-point Likert type scale was used to collect responses.

The questionnaire was administered from November 26, 2018 to December 5, 2018. An official notice for the participation in the study was dispatched to the universities undertaking the "Projects to Support Universities that Contribute to Normalization of High School Education" and the admission officers and faculty admission committee in each university agreed to participate in the study. Besides, students, parents, and teachers were recruited by the participating universities to join the study. In total, responses from 540 subjects were analyzed for the study. The number and proportion of each group were as follows: 165 students and parents (30.3%), 111 teachers (20.4%), 175 college admission officers (32.2%), and 89 faculty admission committee members (16.4%).

Descriptive statistics in SPSS 23 were used to analyze the perception of participants in each questionnaire item and ANOVA was implemented to test group differences in each item.

#### 3.2. Focus Group Interview

FGI was administered to key stakeholders to delve more deeply into the perception of those concerned with college admission policies. Since this study was about college admission policies, it was judged that the opinions of key stakeholders of the policies would be crucial. In this regard, FGI was administered to create an environment where the interviewees talked freely about their experiences, circumstances, perceptions, concerns, and needs. FGI is deemed to be an efficient interview technique to understand the perception, thoughts, and emotions of the interviewees on sensitive topics more deeply (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). To increase the validity of FGI in this study, separate interviews were administered with three groups of key stakeholders of the CSRA: 4 students and parents, 4 teachers, and 4 admission officers and faculty admission committee officers. The participants, under their pseudonyms, in the FGI are shown in Table 1.

The length of the interview varied, depending on the circumstances, by the groups from 1.5 hour to 2 hours. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. In the semi-structured interviews, participants were given interview guides beforehand and specific instances and opinions were later elicited as the interview proceeded. Semi-structured interviews with purposeful conversations enable the interviewers to identify the information suited for the purpose of the study and to elicit the experiences of the interviewees efficiently and extensively (Yu, Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2018). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed under the informed consent of the interviewees.

Table 1. FGI interviews.

Stakeholders	Name	Year of College / Job Experience
Students	Byun, S-Y	A third-year college student
	Lee, J-Y	A second-year college student
Parents	Kim, K-S	A parent of a first-year college student
	Jeon, Y-A	A parent of a second-year high school student
Teachers	Kim, N-K	More than 10 years
	Cho, S-J	More than 10 years
	Jung, H-R	More than 10 years
	Kim, N-S	More than 20 years
Admission officer	Jin, E-J	8 years
	Jung, Y-R	2 years
Faculty admission committee officer	Shin, H-J	6 years
	Hwang, Y-Y	7 years

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Difference in the Stakeholders' Perception of the Necessity of CSRA

Table 2 shows that the key stakeholders in college admission generally agreed on the importance and necessity of the CSRA despite its fairness having been highly controversial. The level of agreement of the participants on policy of the CSRA was high (3.98/5.00). Specifically, the level of agreement on whether the CSRA needs to be retained or not turned out to be high (3.85). ANOVA analysis was implemented to examine the differences in the degree of agreement among stakeholders. Statistically significant differences among groups were found as follows: admission officers (4.31), students and parents (3.79), teachers (3.94), and faculty admission committee members (3.69). The results showed that admission officers perceived the CSRA system far more positively than other groups. A similar pattern of responses across groups was demonstrated regarding the question of whether the CSRA needs to be retained. The admission officers more strongly agreed on the item than any other group.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on the CSRA.

Items	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD) by subjects				ANOVA Results
		Students /parents	Teachers	Admission officers	Faculty admission committee	
State your opinions about the CSRA in the following areas.						
Importance of the CSRA	3.98 (0.948)	3.79 (0.894)	3.94 (0.975)	4.31 (0.815)	3.69 (1.072)	T<A, S<A,F<A
Necessity of the CSRA	3.85 (1.068)	3.69 (0.979)	3.67 (1.193)	4.29 (0.843)	3.51 (1.188)	T<A, S<A,F<A
Fairness of the CSRA (In comparison with subject based admission and regular admission)	3.27 (1.053)	3.18 (1.018)	2.99 (1.124)	3.58 (0.899)	3.18 (1.134)	T<A,F<A

Note: T: Teachers, A: Admission officers, S: Students and Parents, F: Faculty administration committee.

The results of the FGI demonstrated a similar pattern to the statistical results above. The parents and student group in the FGI stated that the CSRA played the role of complementing the deficiency of the test-centered college admission, and therefore it was improper to abolish the policy just because of its fairness issue. Those students who were admitted to the college through the CSRA highly praised the CSRA. They also added that the regular admission, which gives admission to the students solely based on test scores regardless of the students' performance such as attendance and attitude at school was unfair. They thought the CSRA mattered in college admission since it took the students' diligence and hard-working throughout the whole high school year.

"In my case, I think the CSRA is important because I would not keep on studying if there was only school-subject-based admission. It's like there is no hope. I mean, if high school had been all about studying, it would not have motivated me at all. If I had been judged just based on my school grades, not based on my whole characteristics, I would not have decided to keep on studying." (student, Lee, J-Y).

In a similar vein, the CSRA was seen a driving force to shift test preparation-centered classrooms to the place where students' learning and growth mattered most. This shift in classroom dynamics drew changes in student evaluation as well. The teachers unanimously agreed that the comprehensive evaluation of student performance became possible owing to the CSRA. They all fully acknowledged that the CSRA had its own limits and fairness issues, but still, they strongly objected to abolishing the admission form.

On the other hand, the faculty admission committee members pointed out that the intent of the CSRA was meaningful, but it was difficult to select the students as it was originally intended. In other words, when there is a little difference in students' non-credit activities, the students' academic performance serves as a deciding factor for the admission. This is what makes the CSRA non-distinct from school subject-based admission.

"I think some universities can select the students at their pleasure and for those universities, the CSRA is an excellent way of selecting prospective students. However, in local private universities like us, it feels like there is no difference between the CSRA and school subject-based admission. We got to do something about it if we really want to select students as the CSRA is originally intended for. The current measures and criteria of the CSRA seem quite similar to the school subject-based admission." (teacher, Kim, N-K).

#### *4.2. The Perceptual Difference in The Fairness of the Management of the CSRA*

The key stakeholders in college admission generally agreed on the items asking about the fairness of the management of the CSRA. Table 3 shows that the means of the items in the fairness system, 'avoidance/exclusion' and 'similarity verification' are 3.98 and 3.85 respectively. The means of the items in the evaluation process, 'majority/multi-level', 'committee inspection system', 'appeal process' are 3.27, 3.94, and 3.83, respectively. 'The expertise of admission officers' which belongs to the management of experts demonstrated a mean lower than other areas, but overall, the perception of the fairness in the management of the CSRA remains high.

#### *4.3. Stakeholders' Perceptual Difference in the Fairness of Evaluation Process*

The analysis of the fairness level of the evaluation process of the CSRA showed that the level of perception among key stakeholders was rather low compared to that of other items (mean: 3.46). When asked about the fairness of specific measures, school reports and cover letters were given mean scores of 3.47 and 3.31 respectively, while teacher recommendation letters were given mean scores of 2.93, indicating the lowest fairness level among the measures. Table 4 presents that there is a statistically significant difference among groups in the perception of the fairness of the evaluation process. The mean score of the admission officers is 3.89, the highest among the groups, while that of the faculty admission committee members is 3.35, students and parents, 3.25, and teachers, 3.16. Regarding the teacher recommendation letters, which was given the lowest mean scores in the fairness level, the mean score of the student and parent group is the lowest (2.68), followed by the faculty admission committee

members (2.79). It is interesting to note that the teachers, who write the recommendation letters for students, also have a low level (3.05) of perception in the fairness of recommendation letters as a means for student evaluation. With regard to the level of perception of fairness in school reports, a similar pattern was noted. There was a big gap between the admission officers and the rest of the stakeholder groups in the level of perception of fairness: admission officers (3.89), students and parents (3.33), teachers (3.24), and faculty admission committee members (3.18).

Table 3. The perception in the fairness of the management of the CSRA.

Items	Mean (SD.)	Mean (SD) by subjects				ANOVA Results
		Students /parents	Teachers	Admission officers	Faculty admission committee	
Avoidance/exclusion (fairness system)	3.98 (0.948)	3.79 (0.894)	3.94 (0.975)	4.31 (0.815)	3.69 (1.072)	T<A,S<A, S>F,T>F
Similarity verification (fairness system)	3.85 (1.068)	3.69 (0.979)	3.67 (1.193)	4.29 (0.843)	3.51 (1.188)	T<A,S<A, F<A
Majority/multi-level (evaluation process)	3.27 (1.053)	3.18 (1.018)	2.99 (1.124)	3.58 (0.899)	3.18 (1.134)	T<A,S<A
Committee inspection system (evaluation process)	3.94 (0.865)	3.70 (0.892)	3.66 (0.949)	4.25 (0.671)	4.10 (0.812)	T<A,T<F, S<A,S<F
Appeal process (evaluation process)	3.83 (0.929)	3.68 (0.923)	3.50 (1.078)	4.06 (0.811)	4.01 (0.790)	T<A,T<F, S<A
Management of experts (expertise of admission officers)	3.86 (0.914)	3.79 (0.909)	3.59 (1.013)	3.98 (0.802)	4.06 (0.921)	T<A,T<F

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on the perception of fairness in the evaluation process.

Items	Total Mean (SD)	Mean (SD) by subjects				ANOVA Results
		Students /parents	Teachers	Admission officers	Faculty admission committee	
Evaluation process	3.46 (0.989)	3.25 (0.959)	3.16 (1.075)	3.89 (0.769)	3.35 (1.035)	T<A, S<A,F<A
School report	3.47 (0.967)	3.33 (1.001)	3.24 (0.965)	3.89 (0.762)	3.18 (0.995)	T<A, S<A,F<A
Cover letter	3.31 (0.946)	3.36 (1.000)	3.10 (1.000)	3.49 (0.823)	3.08 (0.907)	T<A, F<A
Teacher recommendation letter	2.93 (0.989)	2.68 (1.041)	3.05 (1.060)	3.15 (0.925)	2.79 (0.804)	S<T, S<A,
Blind interview	3.94 (0.909)	3.95 (0.899)	3.89 (0.824)	3.91 (0.978)	4.03 (0.898)	-
No mention of parents' occupation in the cover letter	4.10 (0.870)	4.13 (0.880)	4.34 (0.757)	3.90 (0.929)	4.10 (0.784)	A<T
Non-disclosure of a school	3.70 (1.082)	3.95 (1.029)	4.08 (0.926)	3.40 (1.056)	3.34 (1.148)	T>A, T>F, S>A,S>F

The students and parents in the focus group interview pointed out that the evaluation measures employed in the CSRA were excessively different across the school and teachers to the point that their reliability becomes questionable. In particular, there exists a big gap, according to the students and parents, between top-ranked students and the others in the way that teachers state the student performance and in the content they describe.

Besides, the students and parents strongly felt that such school events as contests and science camps were designed to give top-ranked students opportunities to show off their academic performance in the school reports. Through this whole process, students became frustrated to find that their chances to succeed in society became deprived even before they get a foot in the door.

“Top-ranked students are privileged to take part in camps and clubs at school. Those other students who had hoped to join the science camp say that they can’t go to the camp because of their low grades. When I heard of this, I felt that something really went wrong. Is the CSRA really for students? I have a feeling that students may feel frustrated to hit the enormous wall even before they enter society.” (parent, Kim, K-S).

One parent pointed out that contests are so competitive that students should be assisted by private tutoring to reach a level to be cited in the school reports. If this is the case, the parent added, the achievements are only made possible by the power of private tutoring, not by students’ talents, which is why the CSRA which includes school reports in its criteria is not fair. However, not every student in the focus group interview claimed that school records are not fair. One student said that the school records written by his/her teacher are fair, because he/she thinks that the evaluation reflects students’ performance. If students make a mistake and make little effort, then they will get a low evaluation.

“I think the merit of the CSRA is that every detail of my school performance can be used for evaluation. There are students whose attendance is not good and who do not participate in-class activities, but who still get good grades. Some students are selfish. These students may apply for the college in school subject-based admission and regular admission forms. But things like hard-working at school, non-credit activities, service work, and reading books to prepare for a major in college are not considered for evaluation in these admission forms. On the other hand, in the CSRA, other criteria such as non-credit activities than school grades are used for evaluation, and this is a good admission form for those students who prefer using various aspects of school performance for evaluation.” (student, Byun, S-Y).

The teachers generally viewed the fairness of the evaluation measures of the CSRA positively. The teachers, while acknowledging the shortcomings of the CSRA, take the position that the CSRA has positive effects in that it supplements the quantitative evaluation of college admission.

“At schools when teachers write school reports, they write them faithfully based on the actual student performance and achievements. Taking this student’s case as an example, since his/her performance in school report was fairly stated, and he/she got accepted to the college. I mean the teacher’s evaluation of this student is correct, at least when it comes to what is stated in the school report.” (teacher, Kim, N-K).

However, the teachers conceded, despite their positive stance on the CSRA, that given that the quality of school reports depends heavily on school atmosphere and teacher competency, it is possible that some students can be disadvantaged.

#### *4.4. Stakeholders’ Perceptual Difference in the Fairness of the Acquisition of College Admission Information*

Table 5 shows that the mean score of the question of whether they are well acquainted with the CSRA is 4.29, showing the respondents’ high level of understanding of the CSRA. In contrast, the mean score of whether the CSRA is an easy admission form to understand is 3.55 (0 to 5). To investigate the perceptual difference among groups, Sheffé test was implemented as a post hoc test. The results imply that there is a statistically significant difference between the admission officers, students and parents, teachers, and faculty admission committee members. The mean score of the admission officers is 3.78, followed by the faculty admission committee members (3.53), students and parents (3.53), and teachers (3.23). The two groups, the admission officers (3.78) and teachers (3.23), demonstrate a statistically significant difference in the comprehensibility of the CSRA.



Table 5. Descriptive statistics on the acquisition of college admission information.

Items	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD) by subjects				ANOVA Results
		Students/parents	Teachers	Admission officers	Faculty admission committee	
State the level of your understanding of the CSRA.						
Are you well acquainted with the CSRA?	4.29 (0.967)	3.97 (1.062)	4.21 (1.019)	4.61 (0.787)	4.38 (0.776)	T<A,S<A,S<F
Is the CSRA easy to understand?	3.55 (1.003)	3.53 (0.972)	3.23 (1.068)	3.78 (0.934)	3.53 (0.978)	T<A

From the perspective of principal agents offering the information on college admission, the admission officers in the focus interview feel that the college admission information is abundant and easily accessible. The college websites provide detailed up-to-date information on the admission and besides, the website “dahak, adiga (Which university do you go to)” offers the admission forms and events of the universities across the nation.

The students and parents in the focus group interview, however, told that the information on the application procedures for the CSRA, which they received from the college admission information sessions, was not helpful enough. The information they got through these channels seems perfunctory, not substantial enough to be admitted to the college. The teachers also told that the information on the CSRA was not sufficient. The lack of information on the CSRA is the main cause for the students and parents’ relying on private consulting for college admission.

In general, the teachers acquired the information on the CSRA through teacher training sessions and college admission information sessions. Guidance and career counselors are required to receive 600-hour counseling training. Much information can be acquired through this channel and this information is shared with other teachers. Unlike the case of the guidance and career counselors in the focus group interview, most of the teachers do not feel keenly the necessity of being well informed of the CRSA, which results in teachers’ low participation in a workshop.

#### 4.5. Stakeholders’ Perceptual Difference in the Fairness of Opinion Gathering Process

The mean score of the degree of national consensus on the CSRA is 3.13 (0 to 5). The mean score of whether the opinions from all walks of life and regions were reflected when the college admission policy was set up is 2.89 and the mean score of whether the parents’ and students’ opinions were reflected in the college admission policy is 2.91. These results show that the respondents viewed the opinion gathering process negatively.

When the parents were asked whether the college admission policies were set up after gathering the public opinions of various social and economic classes, they complained that the voice of specific interest groups is more weighted by the government than that of students and parents.

“I am wondering whether the government is paying attention to both the voice of the students and parents on the ground and that of interest groups and experts. The government seems unable to make out heads or tails when some members of society and some interest groups raise their voices, which turns the whole nation upside down. After all, it is the students who suffer the greatest damage under this circumstance.” (parent, Kim, K-S).

The teachers, while generally agreeing that the CSRA itself is a valuable admission policy, raised dissatisfaction with the policy that there is no channel to really listen to the opinions of teachers and students. They feel that the voice of teachers and students needs to be taken seriously as a part of promoting the policy. They view that the college admission policy is often washed up by interest groups due to the lack of an opinion gathering process.

The views of interest groups are solicited in a public hearing. However, it is usually the case that the hearing is not systematically well designed to hear and organize the voices from various groups, and therefore each interest group only keeps asserting their own point of view, leaving the hearing end without any particular results. In short, the opinion gathering process is performed in a perfunctory way.

The admission officers agreed that the opinion gathering process is amateurish and perfunctory and the participating interest groups in the process are not well represented by each stakeholder. Moreover, it is difficult to

address real issues in the opinion gathering process since the views of delegators, not those of working-level staff, are reflected in the policy. The fact that the opinion gathering process mainly involves interest groups, not expert groups, results in another problem. That is, the objectivity of solutions elicited remains questionable because they are drawn based not on justice, but on the interests of each group. The admission officers also argued that more numerous people from a variety of groups should take part in the opinion gathering process so that the views from a variety of circumstances are taken into consideration in the decision-making process.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study open up several meaningful discussions. First, the stakeholders who participated in this study (admission officers, teachers, students and parents, and professors) perceived that the CSRA is important and necessary at this time. Students thought that the CSRA was an evaluation method that took the students' diligence and hard-working throughout the whole high school years into consideration. They also pointed out that the CSRA enabled students to be evaluated based on their whole characteristics, not just on their grades. Teachers also mentioned that the CSRA policy served as a major driving force to shift test preparation-centered classrooms to the place where students' learning and growth mattered the most. This shift in classroom dynamics drew changes in student evaluation as well. That is, more efforts were made to evaluate students comprehensively.

Previous studies also confirm the positive perception of stakeholders on the CSRA policy, even though there still exist disputes over the fairness of the CSRA. For instance, [Park and Lee \(2018\)](#) based on a survey and interview with high school teachers and admissions officers, concluded that it is the CSRA policy that sets conditions to allow multi-faceted evaluation including the potential of students to be implemented in schools and to enable the high school curriculum and teaching methods to be improved. It was also found in [Kim \(2019\)](#) that high school teachers who have long-term experience in the college entrance exam are well acquainted with the CSRA policy. They think that the CSRA is a desirable admission form under which the students' potential can be qualitatively evaluated. Recently, some media have argued for the abolition of this policy, pointing out the concerns about the fairness of the policy. However, the results of this study as well as previous studies on the same topic consistently convey the message that the positive effect of the policy should be maintained through constant improvements and proper management rather than completely putting an end to the policy.

Second, this study found that there are items on which all the stakeholders demonstrated across the board a low level of fairness perception. One is the teacher recommendation letters (an average of 2.93). Another is the opinion-gathering process on the CSRA (an average of 2.89~3.13). The question of whether the opinion-gathering process was fair enough had already been raised in the previous studies. For instance, [Kim \(2011\)](#) argued that more attention should be paid from the beginning of the policy to reflect the voices of various regions and classes.

It is clearly shown in this study that all stakeholders speak in one voice when they feel that there is a serious problem with the fairness of the policy. Given this, policy errors may occur when the government ignores the opinion of stakeholders who try to have their voices heard or when the government only accepts the claims of a specific group. Efforts should be made, by comparing and analyzing all stakeholders at the same time, to find the areas where it is felt that fairness is seriously impaired. In this regard, it is a welcoming change made by the Korean government that the teacher's recommendation letters, in which the issue of fairness was raised by all stakeholders, were excluded from the college admission process for the 2022 academic year.

On the other hand, it was also found in this study that the stakeholders' perception of fairness is different depending on the items. In particular, in the analysis of the fairness level of the evaluation process of the CSRA (e.g., high school reports and student cover letters), there were statistically significant differences among stakeholder groups: the mean score of the admission officers is 3.89, the highest among the groups, while that of the faculty admission committee is 3.35, students and parents, 3.24, and teachers, 3.16, respectively. Furthermore, the

admission officers (3.78) and teachers (3.23) demonstrated a significant difference in the comprehensibility of the CSRA.

Such divided views of the key stakeholders as to the value of fairness in college admission policies were recently pointed out by a few scholars. For example, Kim (2018) indicated that some perceive a number of different college admission forms as “complex” while others perceive them as “diverse.” In contrast, some view a limited number of college admission forms as “undifferentiated” while others view them as “simple and convenient.” In a similar vein, Jin (2018) argued that stakeholders interpret the same phenomenon differently. That is, some put emphasis on fair results, while others put more value on fairness in the procedures. Even among those who value fairness in results, the evaluation of fairness may vary according to whether the fairness is related to competence, income level, or region. The characters of institutions or groups also tend to affect the evaluation of fairness and fairness perception. Finally, the perception of fairness is so much individualized and complex that we should no longer see it as a black and white issue. In a society where excess competition for college entrance still exists, even though positive changes have been made to the admission forms, we should admit that the stakeholders judge the level of fairness from their standpoint.

These results of this study imply that it is necessary to closely examine the multifaceted perceptions and specific and individualized experiences of the stakeholder groups in examining the perception of fairness in the CSRA policy. The belief that exams can be the only objective criterion for evaluating students has long dominated our society. Under the circumstances where the majority of the people still have fixed value systems and the education fever of the society has never cooled down, it will be difficult for people to accept the value of qualitative evaluations based on subjective and professional judgment. On this account, even for those who admit that a policy change on the college entrance exam is necessary, the fairness perception cannot but be affected by the experiences they have had and situations they are placed. The implication of this study is that it is crucial for the stakeholders to accurately understand the purpose and characteristics of the CSRA policy and to build trust in the college admissions process.

Third, one of the interesting findings in this study is that the teachers have the lowest level of fairness perception among the stakeholders who participated in the study. In most of the items, the teacher group showed a lower level of fairness perception than other stakeholders. Similar results can be found in other studies. One typical case is the study of Kim (2019). In the study, six high school teachers participated in the interview and judged that despite its necessity, the CSRA policy is not fair. Teachers had a view that no matter how the college entrance exam is changed, controversies over fairness will never stop arising due to Korea’s obsession with education. The teachers in Park and Lee (2018), where 84 teachers participated in the survey and in-depth interview, also had a low level of fairness perception. They argued that there are so many merits of the CSRA that it should not be given up. Rather, the evaluation method should be changed to minimize the controversy over its fairness.

At this point, one question arises. Why do teachers have the lowest level of fairness perception of the CSRA? It may be because the teachers, who are the street-level bureaucrats of the policy (Lipsky, 1980) directly experienced and witnessed how this policy had been implemented in school settings and how fairness had been distorted during the process. It is the teachers who are well acquainted with the fact that there are discrepancies among high schools in the preparation for the CSRA. Teachers must have witnessed that some incompetent and unscrupulous teachers write student books or teacher recommendation letters unfaithfully and perfunctorily. According to Park and Song (2006) some 3rd-grade teachers in high schools demonstrated such distorted and insincere behaviors in implementing the CSRA. It is not surprising that those teachers who witnessed and experienced such behaviors perceive that the CSRA policy secures no reliability as an evaluation tool and fails to have discrimination power in the student selection.

It is difficult to expect the success of the policy if teachers, who have to evaluate students in the first place, do not trust the policy (McLaughlin, 1987). It is natural and understandable that teachers feel enormous pressure and

burden to qualitatively evaluate students, considering overheated educational fervor and the importance of college entrance in one's future in Korea. Therefore, it is urgent to support teachers so that they can build trust and confidence in the selection process. In doing so, the first step should be to help teachers fully understand the characteristics of this policy. In addition, practical training on how to write student books should be continuously provided to teachers. Such training should provide teachers with time to reflect on themselves and to realize how dangerous it is to distort student records and write them in biased ways. Such additional support is critical to reducing teachers' burden and increasing their evaluation capacity.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the past 60 years, college admission policies in Korea have been drawing national attention due to their role as a ladder for socio-economic upward mobility. The Korean government had held regular admission for a long time. About ten years ago, the government changed its stance and initiated a new admission system, Comprehensive Student Report based Admission, to reform the high school education that put too much focus on college entrance exams. Despite its well-grounded needs and justification, it is the reality that the fairness of the CSRA has been an ongoing controversy.

The CSRA policy, which is designed to evaluate students qualitatively based on professionals' subjective judgments, may not thoroughly overcome the disparities between schools and teachers. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to bridge the gap as much as possible. To this end, above all, teachers must have a full grasp of the policy and enhance their professional competency in student evaluation in which the characteristics of students are properly reflected. This becomes possible when teachers are allowed to have sufficient opportunities for training and research.

To ensure the reliability of the data for college admission, the accountability of teachers should be enhanced first. The enhanced sense of responsibility will lead teachers to evaluate the potential of students based on objective criteria. Student data accumulated this way can be used justly in college admission. Besides, the format of a student record needs to be revised. That is, the format should be simplified and standardized, eliminating customary items which only increase the burden on teachers. It is necessary to support teachers so that they can focus on describing the characteristics of each student.

On the other hand, it is also important for students and parents to grasp the whole picture of the CSRA policy. In a situation where excessive competition in entrance examination never diminishes and where the level of fairness perception on the policy varies according to the stakeholders, it is crucial to accurately understand the purpose and characteristics of the policy and to build trust in the selection process. In order to promote trust and to improve the perception of the CSRA, the government should provide parents with the opportunities to be informed of the policy and actively publicize the policy. In addition, even in the case that the intent of the CSRA is properly understood, it is necessary to reduce the exposure of inappropriate media reports and direct/indirect negative experience of the policy to build strong trust in the fairness of the CSRA policy.

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