

UNESCO National Commission Country Report Template

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference ([WHEC2022](#))

[Section for Higher Education](#) | Division for Education 2030

Higher Education Report: [Republic of Korea]

Korean National Commission for UNESCO in alliance with Jeonbuk National University

Ban, Sang-Jin, Professor, Jeonbuk National University
Seoul, 18 April 2022

Abstract

Higher education in South Korea has greatly expanded in scale in recent history, contributing to the country's social development both at individual and national level. South Korea's higher education, however, is faced with challenges – both domestic and global. The country faces population decline, while further intensification of the structural hierarchy in South Korea's higher education system is worsening the already competitive nature of the system. Globally, the world continues to witness various challenges, including widening inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate crisis. To counter these complex challenges, South Korea's higher education system is seeking a new paradigm.

In this context, this report presents the following policy recommendations for the government: 1) Designate a "distance learning support center" by region in order to alleviate digital and learning gaps and support schools' development of excellent content, curriculums, and programs to increase both quality and accessibility of distance education; 2) Enact a 'Higher Education Finance Grant Act' to provide stable financial support in the medium- to long-term in order to increase higher education finances to be commensurate with the country's economic prowess; 3) Design and establish a shared growth-based university coalition system as a new paradigm for the higher education ecosystem to transform the existing system of competition among individual institutions into a cooperative system in which universities grow together, fostering win-win development and upward standardization of quality.

These recommendations are aimed at bringing institutional transitions to address the challenges emanating from the hierarchical nature of the higher education system, alleviate the polarization of higher education institutions, and improve balanced national development.

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Issues in Higher Education in South Korea and Policy Recommendations for Reform

Introduction

The world is currently at an inflection point. It is faced with exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, environmental and climate crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine inequity, and job insecurity, among other challenges. The rapid development of science and technology (e.g., artificial intelligence and robotics) is also bringing drastic changes to people's lifestyles.

Despite these challenges, higher education should remain a priority for governments, especially in the context of the 4th Industrial Revolution. It serves a critical role in generating new social orders and values – and in strengthening new, young talent to co-create and present opportunities for creative, inclusive solutions for the future growth for the country.

Higher education in South Korea has expanded massively in scale in recent history, contributing to the country's social development at both the individual and the national level. South Korea's higher education, however, is faced with challenges – both domestic and global. Firstly, within South Korea, further intensification of the structural hierarchy in the higher education system is worsening the already competitive nature of the education system. The country also faces an aging and declining population.

Globally, the world continues to witness a variety of challenges, including widening inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate crises. To counter these complex challenges, South Korea's higher education system is seeking a new paradigm. Higher education institutions often serve as a key mechanism for fostering future talent, training and strengthening values and knowledge production for the future. They are also the key driver in generating a country's development and growth. OECD's [Trends Shaping Education 2022](#) also points to the competitiveness of higher education in generating the capacities for research and for national growth and development. Therefore, the higher education system in South Korea is in a transitional phase, in which it must be made fit to serve as a cornerstone for the sustainable development of education.

In this context, the report explores the current situation regarding higher education in South Korea, related challenges, and policy recommendations for a sustainable future of higher education.

Current situation regarding higher education in South Korea

Higher education in South Korea has expanded rapidly in its scale and scope. Recognizing that universities are critical for strengthening knowledge and fostering new values, the government has steadily pushed for great transformation in university education to meet the new demands of today. To this end, the South Korean government has been prioritizing the financing of universities to strengthen their overall competitiveness in the country.

The report looks deeper into the historical changes in higher education in South Korea, such as enrolment and graduation rates, quantity and types of higher education institutions, and the legal and institutional frameworks for higher education.

1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates

The enrolment rate of higher education institutions in South Korea has risen dramatically since the 1990s. Due to the so-called “education fever” in the country, university enrolment (see Note 1 below) rose sharply from 27.1% in 1990 to 70.8% in 2015 to 73.7% in 2021. Applying Martin Trow's concept of three stages of higher education development (1973), South Korea rapidly transformed from “elite higher education” to “universal systems” in recent years.

Table 1: Historical enrollment rate in higher education institutions

Year	No. of High School Graduates	No. of Enrollments in Higher Education Institutions	Enrollment Rate in Higher Education
2021	437,515	322,246	73.7
2020	500,373	362,888	72.5
2019	568,736	400,218	70.4
2018	566,545	394,923	69.7
2017	583,608	401,923	68.9
2016	607,598	423,997	69.8
2015	615,462	435,650	70.8
2014	632,983	448,817	70.9
2013	631,197	446,474	70.7
2012	636,724	453,899	71.3
2010	633,539	477,384	75.4
2005	569,272	417,835	73.4
2000	764,712	473,803	62.0
1990	761,922	206,790	27.1

Note 1) Enrollment rate (%) = Advancement among high school graduates in the year / High school graduates in the year * 100

2) From 2011, the standard for college admissions has been changed to include all university registrants in an academic year (previously the numbers only included university registrants in February of the same year)

In terms of the number of graduates of higher education institutions, South Korea experienced a slight decline in numbers last year. The total number of graduates of higher education institutions was 656,237 in 2021, reflecting a decline of 9,846 (1.5%) compared to 2020. When disaggregating by the type of higher education, however, there are varying degrees of change in the number of graduates. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of 4-year university graduates increased by 1,428 (or 0.4%), while that of 2-year college graduates decreased by 4,685 (or 2.9%) and the number of those graduating from graduate school (i.e., Master's degree or higher) decreased by 2,735 (or 2.8%). It is also observed that the number of graduates from higher education institutions increased until 2016 and has gradually declined since then.

Table 2. Historical numbers of graduates of higher education institutions

Year	Total No. of Higher Education Graduates	No. of Undergraduate Students				No. of Graduate Students
		University	University of Education	Junior College	Other	
2021	656,237	325,432	3,818	163,472	67,065	96,450
2020	666,083	324,004	3,717	168,157	71,020	99,185
2019	653,388	323,883	3,824	166,327	61,909	97,445
2018	660,772	323,735	3,792	168,780	66,933	97,532
2017	678,845	335,650	3,857	171,210	70,207	97,921
2016	685,089	334,643	3,833	178,482	72,789	95,342
2015	680,698	322,413	4,357	182,424	76,763	94,741
2014	667,056	301,606	4,690	183,557	81,467	95,736
2013	657,013	294,952	5,055	184,817	76,626	95,563
2012	665,057	298,727	5,225	188,468	77,629	95,008
2011	653,118	293,967	5,574	188,216	74,313	91,048
2010	628,689	279,603	5,956	190,033	65,227	87,870
2000	542,184	214,498	5,233	223,489	45,585	53,379

Note 1) Higher education institutions include universities, industrial colleges, colleges of education, junior colleges, broadcasting and communications colleges, cyber universities, technical colleges, graduate school of colleges, distance universities, lifelong education facilities.

2) Graduate schools include university-affiliated graduate schools and graduate schools

Most of the adult population of South Korea aged 25-34 years old completes higher education in South Korea. In 2020, 70% of South Korea's population aged 25-34 had completed higher education, which is much higher than the OECD average of 45%. The percentage of South Korean adults who completed higher education increased from 65% in 2010 to 70% in 2020. This is largely explained by the country's enthusiasm for education, a phenomenon described as "education fever." The high level of education has also been an important factor in helping the country secure high-quality human resources.

Table 3. Trends in tertiary educational attainment among those aged 25-34 years

Year	South Korea (%)	OECD Average (%)
2020	70	45
2019	70	45
2018	70	44
2017	70	44
2016	70	43
2015	69	42
2010	65	37

Source: OECD (2000~2021). *Education at a Glance*.

1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions

Higher education institutions in South Korea can be grouped into 12 categories: 1) universities, 2) industrial universities, 3) universities of education, 4) junior colleges, 5) open universities, 6) technical colleges, 7) miscellaneous institutions, 8) distance universities, 9) cyber universities, 10) colleges within companies, 11) polytechnic colleges, and 12) graduate school colleges.

Between 2000 and 2021, the number of higher education institutions increased by 14.5%, from 372 schools to 426. It is notable that the proportion of private universities is higher than that of public national universities. In fact, out of total 426 higher education institutions, 57 of them are national and public universities and 369 (or 86.6% of total) are private universities.

Table 4. Institutions of higher education

Year	Institutions of Higher Education	No. of institutions at the undergraduate level				No. of graduate school colleges	
		university	university of education	junior college	other		
2021	426	190	10	134	47	45	<1,129>
2020	429	191	10	136	47	45	<1,124>
2019	430	191	10	137	47	45	<1,138>
2018	430	191	10	137	47	45	<1,153>
2017	430	189	10	138	47	46	<1,153>
2016	430	189	10	138	47	46	<1,149>
2015	431	189	10	138	47	47	<1,150>
2014	431	189	10	139	49	44	<1,165>
2013	431	188	10	140	50	43	<1,157>
2012	430	189	10	142	46	43	<1,134>
2011	432	183	10	147	51	41	<1,126>
2010	411	179	10	145	37	40	<1,098>
2000	372	161	11	158	25	17	<812>

Note: 1) Others include industrial colleges, broadcasting and communications colleges, cyber universities, technical colleges, distance colleges, lifelong education facilities in the form of in-house universities, and technical colleges

2) < > means a graduate school affiliated with a university and is not separately included in the number of schools of higher education institutions.

1.3 Legal and institutional framework for higher education

The Ministry of Education (MOE) of South Korea is the government body responsible for the formulation and implementation of education policies. The Ministry's vision is aimed at advancing civic education and democratic engagement through education. As such, the functions of the MOE are multifaceted; it is responsible for planning, and coordinating educational policies for elementary, secondary, and higher educational institutions and providing administrative and financial support for all levels of the school system.

The South Korean government has steadily expanded educational expenditure in order to improve the quality of higher education commensurate with its growth in scale (e.g., the increasing number of institutions built). To that end, the government has revised the rules and regulations for higher education accordingly in order to support institutions' human resources and research capacities.

Founding standards for the establishment of departments, enrolment rates, faculty appointment, curriculum development, credits, and degrees follow relevant national regulations and standards; those not provided in the national regulations are under the purview of each institution's own rules, standards, and regulations.

The legal basis for higher education financial support in South Korea is under the Constitution, the Basic Law on Education, the Higher Education Act, the Private School Act, and the National University Accounting Establishment and Financial Management Act, which provide that the central and provincial governments are primarily responsible for overseeing and managing financial assistance to higher education institutions in South Korea.

Current challenges in higher education

Challenges to today's higher education system in South Korea emanate from both internal (domestic) and external (global) factors. Taking these factors into account, the report specifies four key current challenges to South Korea's higher education

Challenge 1.

Students in South Korea experience inequalities in higher education. The inequalities are largely driven by regional gaps and the hierarchical nature of the higher education system, where particular "cliques" of universities (mostly located in the capital area) are perceived by many South Koreans to be more prestigious or competitive. This ultimately results in financial crisis for some universities – especially those located in less metropolitan areas.

As a result, people in South Korea experience intense competition both in education and employment opportunities, since for many South Koreans, employment opportunities largely depend on the perceived status of their higher education history. This ultimately leads to further intensification of the hierarchical nature of higher education institutions and the competitive system based on standardized tests and exams. Thus, South Korean students spend excessive resources and time – for example, on attending private after-school academies – to survive in an educational climate that is highly test-oriented, competitive, and urban, which results in emotional and financial burdens on parents as well.

In this regard, the government can – and should – introduce a policy framework to replace the existing higher education structure. The government should also look to expand its financial assistance to enable students to afford higher education and to alleviate the polarization of higher education institutions. Currently the South Korean government's financial support for higher education is 0.6% of GDP, which is far below the OECD average of 1%. It is time for the government to take active measures to bring balanced university development by expanding governmental financial support and assistance for higher education.

Challenge 2.

The decline in the school-age population as a result of the country's low fertility rate is leading to a decrease in the number of university students in South Korea. This ultimately leads to financial crisis for universities, especially those that rely heavily on tuition fees as their source of income. In 2021, South Korea's total fertility rate was 0.81, and the country's population cliff is one of the most serious emerging social problems. Already, the number of university students has declined from 3.6 million in 2010 to 3.2 million in 2021, a decrease of 442,597 (or 12.1%) in students. This decrease in the number of university students is accelerating the financial crisis for universities and widening the gap between universities in the metropolitan area and non-metropolitan areas.

Challenge 3.

The unprecedented challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic call for fundamental changes in the higher education environment, such as the introduction of virtual education to support students' learning experience without time and space restrictions. But students are also expressing dissatisfaction with the new virtual, remote arrangements for various reasons, including their potential to create learning difficulties, exacerbate students' learning disabilities, and to widen digital divides. In response, the government should take into consideration the "new normal" in students' learning experience in the context of COVID-19 and provide adequate support, such as investing in infrastructure and curriculum development, to ensure that remote classes are conducted reliably.

Challenge 4.

The 4th Industrial Revolution has ushered in a new way for our society to engage, connect, and interact. The radical development of science and technology – with the introduction of artificial intelligence and other technologies – is leading to a "hyper-connected society" based on the Internet of Things, social networking services, and augmented reality.

Such hyper-connectivity brings individuals, organizations, and countries to engage and connect in an incredibly complex ecosystem. As this is largely driven by the rapid scientific and technological development in the wave of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the higher education system must be reborn into a new paradigm as well. It is difficult for anyone to predict how new knowledge and information systems, such as non-human artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, and big data, will transform how people think and perceive ideas and information. What is clear, however, is that higher education will play a critical role in the adaptation to a new era and the reorganization of a new social system for the future. Moving beyond manufacturing-oriented industries, the future will predominantly rely on the non-material production of knowledge, information, and data. And education should revamp its capacities to meet such high-tech future prospects.

Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future

The education system in South Korea is tasked with responding to complex and multidimensional challenges. From challenges at global scale (the COVID-19 pandemic, the 4th Industrial Revolution) to challenges at national scale (the population decline, the hierarchical structure of higher education system, regional gaps and inequalities), the higher education system is tasked with a social responsibility to foster a new social order, values, and talent/human capital. Improving the quality of human capital and labor productivity is key to the country's ability to respond to these challenges and rise above them; and for this purpose, increasing investment in higher education innovation has become an important task for the times. The goal of the great transformation of higher education in South Korea is not only to upgrade the quality of education, but also to reform the country's educational environment by flattening the hierarchy between higher education institutions and preventing further polarization of higher education. In this endeavor, the report presents three recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The South Korean government should expand investments in infrastructure and human resources to strengthen and stabilize the quality of and access to virtual learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government should designate a "distance learning support

center” by region in order to alleviate digital and learning gaps and support schools’ development of excellent content, curriculums, and programs to increase both quality and accessibility of education. Efforts should start from basic education to strengthen students’ digital capacities, and policies should be put in place to encourage students’ acquisition of multiple degrees (e.g., micro-degrees). Digital technology also serves as a catalyst to connect universities from different countries, and a strategic plan to foster more exchange of curriculums, knowledge, and educational opportunities between universities at global level offers an opportunity to develop a ‘Global Core Curriculum’ as a joint curriculum to tackle global issues, such as the climate and environment, epidemics, health, and the economic order.

Recommendation 2

South Korea’s university authorities, students, and parents are all faced with some level of financial difficulties today. This should be a reason for the government to embolden its efforts to strengthen the education system through innovation and investment – to cultivate talent and human capital to lead the 4th Industrial Revolution, and to maximize the economic ripple effects of higher education, such as improving the quality of human resources, creating added value for the local economy, and securing new growth engines.

A ‘Higher Education Finance Grant Act’ should be enacted in order to increase finance for higher education commensurate with the country’s economic prowess (measured by GDP), and provide stable financial support in the medium- to long-term.

Recommendation 3

To address the fundamental challenge of South Korea’s higher education system, the report proposes a “shared growth-based university coalition system” to bring a new paradigm for the higher education environment that fosters shared growth to strengthen the competitiveness of the higher education system and encourage upward standardization of universities’ quality. The new paradigm aims to move away from a system that instigates competition between individual universities, and to secure social credibility of university degrees through the fostering of a win-win growth of education and research capabilities. This will help to alleviate the polarization of higher education institutions and to improve balanced national development

The shared growth system will also allow universities to share and link physical and human resources and to cultivate 21st century capabilities, with the ability of creative and autonomous individuals to solve cooperative problems through collective creativity, mutual collaboration, and communication skills. This can overcome the weakness of the economy of the current scale of university resources and increase the efficient use of educational resources. In addition, the cooperation and coalition system between universities – both public and private – is a paradigm suitable for the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution and a hyper-connected society.

The successful establishment of the shared growth-based university coalition system can also be used internationally. Such an inter-university cooperation system can and should be used by the international community to work together to overcome the common crises in this era of great global transformation.

In the meantime, it is hoped that higher education will serve as a solid basis for national inclusivity and innovation through a process of transformation into a system of education that does not simply prepare for the future, but creates it.

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