

# Another look at Korea's education crisis

Last week's report by the OECD on Korea's university system provides important reading. For one, it focuses on the part of Korea's education system that needs changes most. The report also provides a broader, historic perspective, duly recognizing the tremendous strides Korea has made in extending its tertiary education.

Finally, it points out the right steps that need to be taken to improve the country's university system: above all, providing greater autonomy for universities and reducing the reliance on the counterproductive, state-run university entrance exam.

For all its impressive contents, statistics and explanations (or maybe just because of them), the report does not fully convey the state of Korea's education system. It cautiously notes that "we suspect that a broader range of changes, within a comprehensive framework of changes, will be necessary to address the issues we raise."

Most Koreans would find stronger words to describe the current state. In November 2003, members of the Society of Korean-American Scholars published an open letter which was published in the Korean-American Science and Technology News. The letter, which was covered widely in the local media, notes that "the failure of education spells a doomsday disaster for the future of the Korean society" and calls for immediate and funda-

## An outsider's insight

By Tariq Hussain



mental reform.

Maybe the best indicator of Korea's education crisis is the ongoing "exodus" of young Koreans, reflected in its dismal "university trade balance". For every foreign student who comes to Korea, there are 18 Koreans leaving the country to study abroad. This is the worst ratio of any OECD country.

### Brain drain or brain gain?

Recognizing that schooling at a foreign institutions may increase the chances of getting into a reputable global university, Korean parents are sending their children abroad at ever younger ages (the number of overseas students at primary, middle and high-school has skyrocketed from less than 8000 in 2001 to more than 20000 in 2005).

In popular destinations such as New Zealand, Koreans reportedly account for one sixth or more of the student body at some schools. In the Philippines and Malaysia, Koreans have driven up property prices by creating Korean hubs in urban areas close to reputable schools. No country seems too exotic.

In a recent article, Chosun Ilbo gave Fiji, South Africa and Ecuador as examples of remote corners being affected by the "Korean wave" of students. A friend of mine sent his 10-year old son to Calcutta in India to learn English quickly, experience a British-style education and get immersed into the diversity of India.

This education exodus is as a reflection of Koreans' tremendous drive and dedication, as well as the strong focus on education. Yet the impact on students can be dramatic. One well-known Korean who has advised many Korean families in the United States notes, "Of course there are great success stories of Korean students who came here and went on to top universities such as Harvard. Yet at the same time, there are many untold stories of Korean kids struggling at school since the transition from the Korean to the U.S. environment and education system is so challenging.

"But what makes it really serious is the fact that when Dad comes over from Korea to visit, Mom and children need to show a perfect world — good man-

ners at home and good results at school, as the family is sacrificing so much for them."

Representatives of SKAS were blunt in their assessment of the impact. "We know of no other country in the world where so many middle-class people simply uproot themselves from their homeland primarily in search of better education for their young ones. In many instances, this results in 'split' families, mothers moving to another country with children while fathers stay behind in Korea to carry the crushing financial burden. The inordinate amount of the education pressure on students, family, educational system, societal and economic fabric is incalculable." Quantifying the economic impact is almost as difficult as assessing the social impact. One indicator is the lost revenue on domestic spending that goes along with the massive exodus. A recent study estimated such loss to be 4.4trillion KRW annually (as per 2002).

### Rude awakening

Some point out that, by sending out children to the world, Koreans will benefit from an influx of globalized resources a few years later. Yet that logic is shaky at best. Many of those going overseas return after a while, not able to cope with the new environment. My friend's son found living in Calcutta too overwhelming and returned after five months. Of those who succeed and make it to a top

university, many have no intention to return, seeking careers in the United States or other countries which offer more flexibility and opportunities.

The worst awakening is reserved for those who return to Korea. Eager to apply their skills and broader perspective, they quickly hit the wall of Korea's organizational hierarchies and established practices. In addition, graduates from local top universities have spent years nurturing their relationships throughout society, and have little interest in opening up their network to outsiders.

One young Korean who had left at middle-school to return to Korea after graduating from a world-class university told me: "When I joined the export department of a chaebol company, I really thought I could make a difference. But people did not appreciate my different perspective, made fun of my less-than-perfect Korean, and forced me to drink to 'get used to Korean business practices.'" With each such experience, Korea loses the bit of competitiveness that could have resulted from its massive investment in the education exodus.

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