

Proposals for Reform to Strengthen Korea's International Competitiveness in Education

Ja Song, Korea

When we speak of the ability to compete internationally we mean to strengthen the competitiveness of one nation compared to another and at the same time to expand and put into effect activities that enhance superiority through educational content, methods, and diversified systems. In order for one nation to attain comparative educational superiority over another it must improve the quality and management of its educational system resulting in the improved quality of its human minds. This improvement must not take place in a vacuum, but in the context of global education - What are other nations doing to improve their educational systems? Have they been successful? What can we learn from them? Only then can a nation begin to export brainpower.

Historically, the international competitive strength of Chinese, European, Japanese, and American education could be seen in the fact that their education systems, and their policies of technical manpower development were the models for many underdeveloped countries. Compared to

an European or American education it is hard to say that Korea's educational system has been satisfactory. In order to strengthen its international educational competitiveness, the United States announced a new educational initiative, "Toward 2000: Educate America," last March. This is a U.S. policy effort aimed at improving America's competitiveness internationally through the discovery and development of its manpower through education. Our country, too, has put into effect many programs for educating her people. Despite all of these efforts, the educational problems we are facing are still those of an underdeveloped country. For example, whether we speak of the public attitude toward vocational education or the rigid educational administrative system or the examinations based on memory, it is apparent that we have all the marks of an educational system that wastes human potential. In this paper, I will outline a few basic problems in Korea's educational system and offer some suggestions for reforms

to strengthen our international competitiveness in education.

Three Problems of Korean Education

Our educational system has many problems, but the worst is that it destroys the creative power of our young people. Young people of similar age are lumped together indiscriminately. Schools that are supposed to help mature minds gather students of similar age together without regard for their personal abilities. What a particular student can absorb depends on his or her physical, mental, and social situation. However, instead of recognizing individual differences, Korean schools emphasize uniformity and collectiveness in students, completely ignoring individuality and different learning abilities. In our schools there is no way for an Einstein to survive. In fact, at every graduation, the "adults" who have passed through the schools and are sent out into society can be divided into "Failed Adults" and "Semi-successful Adults" (Han Chun Sang, 1992). Schools are nothing but factories for producing such "Failed" or "Semi-successful" adults.

Producing Standardized Students in Factories.

The similarity of our schools to factories can be seen in their administration, management, and operating system. For example, such concepts as scientific school administration, the program of uniform course progression, and "rational" personnel policies have been introduced into the schools of academic administration. Administrating schools scientifically, uniformly, and rationally are not problems in themselves. However, by placing the emphasis on maintaining a "scientific production system," our schools have become manufacturing plants that take raw materials and stamp out a uniform product. Students who pass through such a system become standardized products rather than persons with individuality and initiative. Even in a tightly controlled production line there can be many faulty products, resulting in the need to alter factory procedure. This is the case with our schools, they are producing faulty products and must be changed to produce quality products. Currently, faulty-product students are either simply thrown away or pushed off into the unskilled job market. A factory must produce a quality product, for

only quality products can be packaged and become salesworthy. If you have salesworthy products, you do not need to worry about over-production: you can increase distribution through marketing and brand recognition. When we compare schools to production lines, students are raw materials to be scientifically shaped into various products. Students become nothing more than goods that have been mechanically squeezed, shaped, assembled, packaged, and shipped out. They are simply standardized goods. Defective products are simply discarded without a second thought.

Deterioration of Student Brainpower.

We have become accustomed to the fact that our schools are giving a less than stimulating education to our children, seriously impoverishing their minds. The bottom line is that our children spend 30% of their time in a glorified detention center. Students spend eight hours a day in school, and if you add extracurricular activities, the individual student spends about 50% of his time in school-related activities. If you leave out the time spent sleeping, a student spends almost all of his time in school-related education. Some students

spend eighteen years in this type of stifling education to earn a diploma. Approximately 25% of Korean students consider school a detention center. Under these circumstances, children learn the wrong things and come to scorn school in comparison to education received at home. Furthermore, in such circumstances, students usually learn less and come to distrust schooling.

Under the present circumstances, expanding equalization of educational opportunity simply means more students spending time in detention. Lengthening schooling also means weakening home education. When the function and nature of home education is taken over by the schools it merely institutionalizes the schools as jails and detention centers (Jackson 1968: Holt 1969).

The Inflation of Learning and the Waste of Ability.

In Korea, we do not have an appropriate labor market for our youth, nor do we have a university admissions policy to cope with the huge imbalance between those wanting to go to university and the spaces available. Without educational reform there is no way to escape from cram courses and repeaters. Every year manpower of

superior ability is left in storage because of our college admissions system. This out-moded cram-school system raises its head even higher in our country as it takes on ever increasing new forms. It not only cripples high school education, but also translates into approximately eight or nine trillion won that is wasted each year in the commercial education market. (KEDI, 1993; KTF, 1992)

Every time the university admissions problem becomes a social issue the parents' zeal for their children's education is regarded as a sort of crime that puts reform on the chopping block, and the reform movement ends by saying that nothing can be done until the parents' mindset is changed. Actually, this call for changing the mindset of parents is a meaningless chant. Parents have focused all their energy on ensuring their child will obtain a position at a prestigious university. Once this has been achieved, they stop being concerned about their child's education. Therefore, it is not realistic for educational reformers to count on the assistance of parents to achieve reform.

Another obstacle to fostering a parental desire for educational reform in the undeniable success that zealous parents in the past have had in placing

their children in prestigious universities, which in turn has secured the child's place in society. Of course, parental investment in education is not to further national development, but to assure individual "life success". However, such parental efforts have been indirectly influential in the development of society. The parents' reasons for sending their children to university and the children's reasons for going are purely practical: to obtain specialized knowledge and skill and therefore a good job.

Seventy-seven percent of parents and 76% of students think that a university degree is the road to a good position in life. In fact, the reason behind the university admissions scandals last year is that parents are very aware that 60% of the employees of major companies and 70% of professors and top level civil servants are graduates of the first-tier universities. Therefore, parents regard university admission as a speculative investment. According to Dr. Becker (?), the 1992 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, parental zeal for education and the investment in education are economic matters. During the past year, the investment in corrupt admissions was approximately ten million won per person. If by making this

investment their child can finish university and through the school and personal networks obtain a good job, find an appropriate mate, generate an adequate income and so on, then it is stamped on their brains that this is logically a good investment. By 1993 prices, a repeater going to cram school for one year will spend about fifteen million won, with no guarantee that he will get into university. Under these circumstances, and looking ahead ten years, investing as much as a hundred million won in a child's education is well worth considering. Thus in our "academy-ism" society, where employment and social status remain constant and the remuneration gap between high school graduates and college entrants does not change greatly, the number of repeaters will only increase.

Basic Directions for Educational Reform

In a nutshell, the necessary reforms for strengthening educational competitiveness can be found only in the systematization of support for variety, individuality, and excellence. In order to bring about this reform for individuality and variety two additional things are necessary. First, parents must have the

freedom to choose their child's education, and second, there must be an equalization of the opportunity for education. In order to improve educational competitiveness, basic educational reform must be for all citizens, without regard for wealth or gender. Everyone must be able to receive an education tailored to their abilities. (Ref. KIM Young Sam 1992) and be guaranteed the right to select their own education. When this is accomplished, education for excellence will be systematized, freedom of choice will be realized, and social discord will cease. When equalization of opportunity and freedom of choice in education are attained, variety will naturally occur due to the installation of competition between schools, teachers, and administrators to satisfy their customer - the student. Due to educational reforms in Japan, Europe, and the United States (Woolridge, 1992) our primary, secondary, and tertiary schools have no choice but to reform or be left behind. To do this parents must be given the freedom to choose schools for their children. In this way, schools that strive to offer an excellent education will survive and those that do not, will not.

Changing to a Multi-course System.

The school system must be altered to promote educational excellence. Our system, adopted by the U.S. Military Government after Liberation has at least two problems. First, the present system does not permit the variety and individuality necessary for the development of the variety of human abilities and functions. Our present system is legally designed to foster administrative convenience and has tended to cripple secondary education. By regulating variety and choice for the individual it limits individual abilities and the possibilities of options.

Second, because the system has not adapted to the changes in our industry, the schools cannot produce the trained manpower demanded by industry. Furthermore, because our education is shackled to the "respect for learning" psychology of our society it has emphasized a single road to success, blocking all attempts to control the over-heated entrance examination system. Preserving the national zeal for education and at the same time fostering excellence and intelligence are essential for an industry-centered Korean society in the 21st century. Our industries, as in other developed societies, are already

requiring some 40,000 - 50,000 different skills. The times demand that the school system properly teach the knowledge, attitudes, and functions for effectively filling these tasks. To do this we must develop the manpower needed for these new positions beginning at the primary school level, and we must emphasize excellence at all levels.

However, our present education system does not encourage a philosophy of productivity. Job education and job training are limited to accommodating drop-outs. In a new educational system, job training should mean technical education, and at the same time must develop broad, socially desirable personalities who can contribute to society as a whole. Job selection is not something to be assigned mechanically. Rather, an educational system that guarantees good individual selections in other words, a multi-faceted system, is needed (Ja Song, 1992).

Tasks to Strengthen International Competitiveness.

To strengthen technical education we must reform the education system. The purpose of technical training must be to strengthen industrial competitiveness. It must produce technicians and scientists

that can be used in the marketplace. To do this, the first thing we must do is to conduct a scientific survey of the middle- and long-term manpower projections. We must determine the manpower pool and the job pool as it relates to the rapid development of our country. We must expand the basic information on our demographics, job distribution, and other factors in our industrial structure. Once this is done the data must be analyzed and only then can we reform our technical training system efficiently and effectively.

Second, technical training organizations must be supported structurally and legally. From the view of technical training and technical education, a concept of continuing education must be adopted, and every effort must be made to ensure that the educational task will stem from the development task. Achieving this will require that structures and laws be adopted and put into effect.

Third, as a means of strengthening long-term technical training we must emphasize the technical training of the general populace. At present in our country, industry, although concerned about technical training, has been more concerned with costs than with putting

training into effect. Despite the knowledge that there is a great need for technical training, the government has not given this facet of economic development much support. Management has had to bear sole responsibility for technical training, leaving it very dissatisfied with the government. Instead of the wide gap between jobs and training organs, jobs and secondary schools, there must be a direct connection between them. As we can see, in many successful models of cooperation between industry and schools in other developed countries, investment in both theoretical and practical education directly supports industrial and national development.

Fourth, the ambience of technical education needs to be appropriate for quality and effectiveness. When we take into account the rapid development of scientific technology, including both its specialization and automation, we need better facilities and equipment and need to make much better use of them, which in turn necessitates the reorganization of preparatory education.

***Strengthening Local Educational
Autonomy and Responsibility.***

In order to strengthen the development of regional manpower, educational autonomy must be effected. Beginning in 1995, citizens will directly elect local educational organization leaders. Clearly, the purpose behind these direct elections is the establishment of local autonomy. With the establishment of local autonomy, reforms of the educational system and other related social legislation will gain center stage. These local committees must also help their local universities prepare to compete on a national and international level by the year 2000 when the education market will be opened, or suffer the consequences of losing them. In order for educational autonomy to take root it is of utmost importance that the local councils give real power to the education committees, and that the education committees have real decision-making power over education matters. The authority of the central government must be reduced. In other words, the directives of the central government education officials to local committees must be decreased to a minimum.

"Many-faceted, High Quality Higher Education"

In order to avoid wasted manpower in human development, the opportunities for higher education must be increased. The general concept that the expansion of the universities would lower the quality of university education and the development of advanced techniques should not be carried over to the new industrial society. In the industrial society of the 21st century as educated citizens look toward the future, it is obvious that education is an important aspect of national strength. There is no need to systematically limit the people's desire to learn. The negative effects of expanding university quotas will be offset by the quality control of higher education that will come from inter-university competition and by careful management (Yonsei 1993). Moreover, by broadening admissions, primary, middle, and high school education will be forced to improve. Training in research universities and the training of general manpower suitable for the 21st century industrial society will bring about a "many-faceted, high quality higher education".

In this sense, the adjustment of university quotas and entrance exams should be left to university personnel. Whether admission is determined through exams or not, should be left to each

university. It would be wise for the universities to avoid the present system, which wastes both students' and universities' resources due to duplication of efforts stemming from each. Each university should have its own Office of Admissions and develop its own admissions policy and means of recruiting students. The universities should be responsible for handling their own admissions processes properly. As the Ministry of Education recognized the universities ability to govern themselves when they approved their establishment, it must give the responsibility for admissions to the universities, and the universities must assume this responsibility for themselves. Admissions procedures and the principle of marketplace competition will naturally follow. Educational opportunity should be widened not simply on the basis of individual ability, but for training superior manpower with a mixture of ability and function.

It follows that the regulations governing university admissions must of course be abolished. Except for a very few universities that intemperately try to increase enrollments, our universities are mature. To argue that because a few universities have had corrupt admissions

all the universities are incapable of autonomy is no help for university development. It is self-evident that corrupt admissions are an internal matter which the university itself must correct. In any case, there are very few instances of corruption to avoid quotas.

The second reason for eliminating quotas, as has already been pointed out, is that the entrance examination system forces students to become repeaters, which financially bleeds the parents to such an extent that 3% of the GNP is spent on private cram education. Nationally, it wastes manpower, spoils good materials, and is unproductive. What legalizes this situation is the government's quota regulations, which leads to the conclusion that quota regulation must be eliminated. Of course, to do so requires various basic reforms in the university system. For example, each region has numerous local universities. Each of these universities must find and develop its own market niche in order to achieve the needed mix of specialized and general education that will be necessary for them to survive.

Promoting High School Student Scholarship and Reforming Secondary Education.

Entrance examinations that concentrate on the three subjects of Korean, English, and Mathematics, must be changed. Under the present system, in order for 25% of the high school students to enter university, 75% are wasted. If there is no change, secondary education will continue to be crippled and it will be difficult for universities to reach the level necessary to compete internationally. The system also lowers the achievement of high school students while again the accumulation of repeaters wastes national resources. As long as such a wasteful admissions system continues, it will be difficult to improve our children's education and correct its continuing adverse effects so as to introduce the variety and superiority necessary for global competition.

If we want international level education, our secondary education must be reformed to look to future needs. It is the tragedy of our education that we select the best high school students and send them to a university, who then, although they successfully graduate, are judged entirely on what school they

graduated from. As long as this kind of university culture continues, we cannot expect our universities to attain international prominence.

Western students read ten to twelve books a semester, and Japanese read six, but our students do not read more than three. As long as this continues, it will be difficult for Korean education to reach international standards. Even though the new evaluated-grade that combines high school standing and an examination grade may administratively promote academic achievement and increase competition between various levels of schools and administrations, its effects need to be re-evaluated.

Increasing Financial Support for Universities.

My final remarks have to do with finances. In order to maintain an international level of study and research, the financial support of education must be strengthened. It is a fact that our universities are dying of thirst for financial support, and have recently turned to the government. Of all the countries that maintain an international standard of education, not one supports private education by as little as 1%, yet Korean private universities receive only

0.7% of their budgets from the government. In comparison, U.S. universities received 18.5% of their budgets from the government in 1985, and Japanese private universities received 12.1% of their budgets from their government. More recent data is not available, but it is estimated that in the U.S., universities now receive about 25% of their budgets from the government. In comparison, we are severely lacking in monetary support (Won Ung, 1993).

In short, to raise higher education to international levels, the sense of support for education within the nation must be raised to international levels. The assets of our universities, whether private or public, are about the same but the pay scales in regional universities show great differences between public and private. In public universities, 59% of the budget goes for salaries and research. In comparison, in private universities, this figure is under 56%. This is clear evidence that private universities lack funds and therefore are unable to employ able researchers and professors. To prevent such great gaps, large amounts of government funds are needed to strengthen faculty. Of course, the schools should not blindly demand

government funds without carefully planning how they will be used. The universities themselves, by professional and rational administration, must learn to use their facilities and funds in the most efficient way, responsibly doing their best for their customers, the students.

When universities effectively raise academic standards and promote zeal for study, government and society should not quibble about providing adequate support for them. The government must move toward helping the universities stand on their own feet by eliminating the various heavy taxes levied at present and giving them various tax breaks. The government should not push for an admission-by-donation system as it is highly criticized by the public. One option is the establishment of a two trillion won fund to be used specifically for the development of higher education. Other options include the establishment of lotteries or the issuing of bonds to provide funds for education. Whatever method is chosen, the nation must greatly expand its support for education in order to help raise it to international levels, thus committing itself anew to reform and revitalization.