

## A Foreigner's Observations on Korean Higher Education

Edward R. Beauchamp

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- ◇ 이다. 이 글에서 필자는 외국인에게 비친 韓國 大學教育의 ◇
- ◇ 모습에 대하여 논의하면서 지나친 科學 및 技術教育 편중 현 ◇
- ◇ 상을 가장 심각한 문제로 지적하고, 과학기술교육과 人文 및 ◇
- ◇ 敎養教育의 균형 있는 발전을 역설하고 있다. …〈編輯者 註〉 ◇

Only one steeped in the language, culture and educational ethos of a country can truly understand its educational system. The historical context, the political and social realities of the society, and the numerous technical intricacies of an educational system are all beyond the ability of the non-specialist examining Korean higher education. These factors are exacerbated when an outsider suddenly appears to make a whirlwind tour of universities, research institutes, and government agencies; collects and quickly reads various reports and statistical data; and talks with a relatively small group of policymakers—all with vested interests to protect and advance. To comment on Korean higher education, within this kind of context, is an excellent example of the saying that “fools rush in where angels fear to tread,” or even what my Jewish colleagues call “chutzpah.”

Nevertheless, I propose to do just that. I do so because I believe that, despite all of the disadvantages that I have mentioned, a non-specialist looking at Korean higher education may be unencumbered by the mass of detail which inevitably is the intellectual baggage of the specialist. The outsider may be able to see the broad outlines and problems of a system more clearly because he is not burdened by detail, or personal friendships which inevitably tends to transform everything into a uniform gray. Also, being his first impression it tends to be his clearest one; further experience and greater knowledge will lead him away from clarity and towards complexity.

So it is with a good deal of trepidation that I offer the following observations, in a spirit of friendship and an attempt to be both honest and helpful. First, there is no doubt in my mind that the Republic of Korea has accomplished a wonderful thing in expanding education at all levels. This has resulted in an increasing number of boys and girls who not only complete the compulsory level of education, but scores of whom go on to graduate from secondary school. In addition, each year a greater proportion of these recent graduates continue their education by attending an impressive and varied number of institutions of higher education. A second accomplishment, in which all Koreans can take great pride, is the role that education has played in the rapid economic development that has characterized the country in the past two decades. But rather than dwell on these and other achievements, I propose to use the remainder of the space allotted to me to discuss some of what I perceive to be the major problem area within Korean higher education. Before doing so, however, I wish to make it clear that I am neither passing judgement on Korean higher education, nor am I advocating American solutions to these problems. Indeed, Korean problems must be met with Korean solutions.

As I understand higher education policy in Korea, its dual cornerstones are the enhancement of national security and the continuous and systematic development of the nation's economic base, and the government has wisely chosen to use higher education to serve these ends. This, then, is one of the basic strengths of Korean higher education, but at the same time one of its greatest weaknesses. Today, the Republic of Korea is determined not only to develop economically, but to become a leading economic power in the world of the twenty-first century. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, the government of President Chun Doo Hwan is emphasizing the role of science and technology and, therefore, education to achieve this end. This far-sighted policy of preparing Korean society for a leading role in the twenty-first century is one that should be applauded. To visualize the next century as one increasingly dominated by science and technology is also probably justified, and just as in much of the West including the United States, the buzz words are "high tech," "artificial intelligence," "computer literacy," etc.

My major concern in observing the current higher education scene in Korea, however, is over the questions of quality and balance. The expansion of Korean higher education since independence has been phenomenal. From a mere 19 institutions of higher education in 1945, Korea could boast of 233 by 1984. In 1945 there were only 7,819 Korean students attending post-secondary schools while in 1984 the numbers had swollen to 1,177,597, or more than 150 times more than in the earlier period. This virtual enrollment explosion has, however, resulted in serious financial problems, terribly overcrowded institutions and high faculty-student ratios, an increasingly serious entrance examination and student selection process, a shortage of high quality faculty, poor plant facilities, a controversial quota system, etc. These are all problems that need immediate attention but, understandably, limited economic resources mitigate against their rapid solution. They are also problems that are not uncommon in many countries of the world.

In my considered judgement, however, the role of general or liberal education in Korean

higher education is the single most important question that needs to be addressed by politicians, policymakers at all levels, and above all by the academic community itself. The proper role of liberal education in the education of the young has been a perennial question in the history of education throughout most of the world. This question has been hotly debated in Korea as well. In recent years a very large proportion of the government's resources have been devoted to fields which seem best able to contribute to Korea's economic development, and it must be conceded that this approach has been successful. On the other hand, one may question whether many of the graduates of institutions of higher learning are truly "educated" or merely "trained" in a narrow field of specialization.

In studying contemporary Korean higher education one gets the impression that although the government sometimes talks about the importance of liberal education, it does so somewhat as an afterthought. The political and economic pressures exerted on education policymakers often dictate that the real focus in higher education be on the manpower development needed to meet the insistent demands of an expanding economy. Therefore, most of the resources are channeled, into scientific and technological fields. On one level the manpower demands of an expanding economy requires qualified people to fill specific needs, and the temptation to use higher education as an instrument to meet those needs is difficult, if not impossible, to resist. The major problem with this approach is that the university is likely to produce graduates with very high levels of technical competence, but lacking a sense of the past, humane attitudes, and moral values.

What policymakers in many countries often fail to understand is that liberal and vocational education are not mutually exclusive, but are two sides of the same coin. Surely, very few who have read C.P. Snow would seriously argue that a society can progress without the skilled manpower that provides the economic development resulting in more and better food, housing and clothing for an increasingly larger proportion of the population. On the other hand, "man does not live by bread alone," and the quality of life in any society is, in large measure, a reflection of the value placed on a liberal education. What are often referred to as the humanities (history, literature, philosophy, art, music, etc.) are essential to a healthy quality of life. They transmit the basic means of communication that enable individuals to share languages, histories, and values. They extend memory, thus liberating people from the tyranny of the present. Through scholarly, artistic and literary works, they reflect the many-faceted relations of individuals in society. The humanities are the bearers of tradition and of second thoughts about the use and significance of that tradition. Because they keep the records, the humanities permit affirmation of government by law, declarations of national independence, and celebrations of individual rights. They enable people to write and learn about doubt and awe and all the unutterable and most cherished resources of a people intent upon building a good and just society.

Further, there is a critical need to equip students with the intellectual resources to prepare a nation for the coming technological age of international competition. In addition to acquiring the necessary technological competence to compete in the new environment that

is rapidly being constructed, it is important that students also be provided with the threads of continuity that sustain and enrich memory, common sense, and the capacity to form values. The humanities enable a society's citizens with different specialized interests to speak and listen to each other, while providing a forum for asking questions relevant to all disciplines. They link technological skills and scientific reasoning in a broader chain of intelligence. They permit the strengthening of citizenship and broadening of ethical values. Through the humanities, students can compare different forms and types of reasoning and thus deepen their capacity for critical thinking and innovation. Through study in the humanities, students can not only learn to read, speak, and write convincingly in all areas of knowledge, but also master the more complex tasks of analysis, inference and evaluation. The humanities nurture a tolerance for ambiguity as they reveal contradictory aspects of human experience. A greater emphasis on the humanities can transform *collections* of courses into a *coherent* curriculum, helping to prepare young people so that they are ready to face the unpredictable technical and moral challenges of the future.

Placing a greater emphasis on the humanities, particularly for those majoring in science and technology, is especially important since the best students tend to gravitate toward those fields which offer the most promising opportunities for lucrative and secure employment. Although it may appear that a firm grounding in the humanities, of necessity, detracts from the time needed by the budding physicist or engineer to master his field, the alternative may be a scientifically or technically brilliant graduate unable "to link technological skills and scientific reasoning in a broader range of intelligence." In a more extreme form a society may end up with a generation of "technological peasants." It is interesting to note that the Korean government will provide scholarship assistance for 100 students to study overseas in 1985. About 90 of these students, according to the *Korea Herald* (January 20), "will be selected from among natural science and engineering majors." The remaining 10 slots will go "to humanities and social science students, with preference given to education and language majors." This allocation speaks clearly about the perceived value of the humanities in national development.

Educators are beginning to recognize that all higher education does not take place on the campuses of traditional colleges and universities. Indeed, the Korean government has experimented with other forms of higher education that deserve to be examined more closely. An example of what many perceive to be an unbalanced approach to education can be seen in an exciting, innovative and apparently successful scheme to raise the technical competence of workers in an important sector of the Korean economy. Since 1974, in the southern part of the Korean peninsula, a few miles southwest of Pusan, a very large industrial complex has been built on virtual wasteland. The Changwon Industrial Complex, covering 13,635 acres, and located in the center of a coastal belt of chemical and heavy industry, specializes in the production of machinery and ironware of all sorts. Several vocational schools, created to supply a wide variety of skilled labor were established in this complex. Perhaps, the single most interesting institution of this type located in the complex is the Changwon Industrial Masters' College (CIMC) whose goal is the train-

ing of master craftsmen to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding Korean economy. Established in 1977, the CIMC has received considerable governmental support, in addition to generous financial support from the West German Government since 1979. A five-man German Advisory Team provides on-the-spot technical "know-how" through advice and teaching specialized classes.

Unlike other Korean institutions of higher education (it is the only one of its kind), CIMC is responsible to the Ministry of Labor rather than the Ministry of Education. A faculty of 128 full-time faculty, including 67 professors and 42 technicians, services approximately 580 students in both day and evening courses, divided into departments of general education, mechanical production, sheet metal and welding, metallurgy, vehicle maintenance, electricity, electronics and common practical studies.

What makes this institution unique is that it is charged with the training of master craftsmen who, upon returning to their positions, become a kind of "intermediate manager" who has a foot in both the management and worker's sides of the production process. This particular project is important for several other reasons, not the least of which is that it is symbolic of the government's emphasis on science and technology. Although the curriculum of CIMC consists of both "subjects for general education" (28% of the total) and "subjects for major study" (72% of the total), the reality is that even the "general" subjects are overwhelmingly technical in nature. For example, they include technical mathematics, technical physics, technical chemistry, technical English, industrial law, time and motion studies, industrial safety, cost control, process control, industrial psychology, industrial law, economics and sociology, etc.

CIMC provides its graduates with an excellent technical background, but virtually no exposure to those subjects which help free man from his narrow present interests while fostering his creativity and individual self realization. There is widespread agreement that social change over the next decades is likely to be rapid take us in directions that we cannot predict. The specific task for which we train people today may, in fact probably will, be obsolete in a few years. A truly educated man, that is one possessing both a technical and a humanistic background is likely to adjust to society's changing needs more easily and efficiently than the narrowly trained technocrat.

In talking with policymakers and educational administrators, most of the problems that they discuss focus on such important issues as the rapid expansion of higher education, the lack of resources devoted to higher education, the widening faculty-student ratio, the decline in the quality of instruction and academic counseling, the "quota" system for university admissions, etc. While recognizing their importance, however, it is this observer's conclusion that they are secondary to the problems inherent in the general vs. vocational education issue.

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