



Country Brief — Republic of Korea

Overview

Korean society, which has its roots in Confucian culture, puts a great deal of emphasis on the belief that the best education leads to the brightest future for both the student and the family. There is much pressure on students to perform highly particularly in high school. In her inauguration address on 25 February this year, incoming President Park signaled a change in learning models and said “The future holds little promise when individual ability is stifled and when the only name of the game is rigid competition that smothers creativity. There is no place for an individual’s dreams, talents or hopes in a society where everything is determined by one’s academic background and list of credentials. Our educational system will be improved so that students can discover their talents and strengths, fulfill their precious dreams and are judged on that basis”.

Currently at the tertiary level, the first choice for Korean students is often famous Korean universities followed by foreign institutions. The United States at 25% is still the biggest draw card for approximately 300,000 Korean students studying overseas followed closely by China. Australia is the second most popular English speaking country for Korean students after the US. In 2012 the number of Korean students studying overseas went down by almost 9%, the first drop in the last 60 years. This is in part due to exchange rates and prevailing economic conditions but also reflects the increased number of university places available locally due to a falling student population. Additionally, there has been government policy driving the internationalization of universities, making them more attractive to local students.

Internationalisation

The internationalisation of education from a policy perspective is something relatively new for Korea, a country once known as the “Hermit Culture” for its desire to keep all things foreign outside its borders. As aforementioned, Korea has traditionally been a country that sends large numbers of students offshore each year. Only in recent times has there been a government objective to internationalise in the reverse and much of the policy has focused on student numbers.

The Korean government’s ‘Study in Korea Project’ was designed to increase the number of international students from a relatively low base, 20,000 in 2005 to 80,000 by 2012. Due to the success of the program, the original target was reached in 2009. A revised target of 100,000 was reached in 2012. Two thirds of these students were from China. A new plan calls for a more diverse international student population of 200,000 by 2020. This will see the proportion of international students at higher education institutions in Korea increase from 2.0% in 2009 to 5.4% by 2020. The rationale for the need to increase student numbers has been articulated as follows: To enhance the competitiveness of Korean universities by creating an open and internationalised environment; To cultivate global citizenship by changing the culture of Korean universities; To cope with a reduction of productive labour force in the future due to Korea’s low fertility rate; and To reduce balance of payment deficits due to outflows on education expenditure (currently US\$4.4 billion with a reduced amount of US\$ 3 billion being targeted for 2020).

Mobility and AsiaBound

While internationalisation has largely focused on increasing the number of foreign students and faculty on-campus, there has also been an explosion of courses taught in English. This has great potential for student mobility from Australia. Ten years ago there were virtually no courses available at Korean universities in English. Now there are thousands of opportunities for Australian students to study in Korea. The AsiaBound grants program has been well received in Korea and to facilitate increased numbers of Australians in Korean universities and colleges, an AsiaBound reference group has been formed of eminent Korean international education leaders. The first recommendation from the group was to consider the development of the *On-Campus Internship*. These internships for Australian students will focus on projects commissioned by well-known Korean companies such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai. This model has some key advantages over the traditional in-company model. Firstly, having the students work on supervised projects on-campus alleviates the need for Korean language usually required in the workplace. Secondly, Australian students will benefit from connections made with well-known Korean companies, not to mention an impressive addition to their resume.

As well as short-term students, Korean Institutions are also looking to partner with Australia for joint research and joint degree programs. A number of joint postgraduate programs have recently been concluded at both the PhD and masters levels. Additionally, key research projects are already in place with more in the pipeline.

Science, Research and Industry Policy

In her inauguration address President Park focussed on economic revitalization being propelled by the creative economy and said "A creative economy is defined by the convergence of science and technology with industry, the fusion of culture with industry... At the very heart of a creative economy lie science technology and the IT industry, areas that I have earmarked as key priorities. I will raise our science and technology to world-class levels. The new administration's Ministry of Future Planning and Science will be tasked to lead the emergence of a creative economy". This firmly signals the importance of new mega-science ministry over the next 5 years. Korea is already a top tier nation in terms of research intensity (5th highest in the world) with 3.74 per cent of GDP spent on R&D. The government is committed to large spending plans on infrastructure and collaborative research development. It will continue to support the development of local S& T capabilities. A huge investment is currently underway through the development of the so-called *International Science Business Belt* which is designed to become a global hub for basic research. Additionally, universities that are already linked heavily to industry, are being encouraged to seek international research partners to increase citation rates and better develop overall collaboration.

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