

Education: Korea's class act faces new tests

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Korea's transformation into an economic powerhouse in just 20 years is largely due to what is often claimed to be its only natural resource—its people. Huge investments in education and training boosted productivity and growth, turning the country into an international player with a booming high-tech, export-led economy.

Between 1970 and 2000, Korea achieved universal primary and secondary education, and by 2010 it had the largest proportion of 25-34 year olds with at least an upper secondary education among OECD countries. Korea's 15 year olds are also high performers. The average student scored 542 in reading literacy, maths and science in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), higher than the OECD average of 497 and topping the tables.

Korea's excellent academic achievements have laid strong foundations for economic growth, but its education system is not making citizens as happy as they might be, nor is it necessarily helping them to find jobs. Pressure to succeed in school is relentless. The single college entrance exam, the *suneung*, is so critical that planes are grounded on the day of the listening test to avoid disturbing the

children. Only 60% of Korea's children answered yes to feeling happy at school, placing it at the bottom of the league table; the OECD average is 80%. The country's 11 to 15 year olds report the highest amount of stress out of 30 developed nations, and suicide is the biggest cause of death among teens.

Young people also find it hard to make the transition from school to work, primarily because of a mismatch between the relevance of their education and skills with the workplace. Despite being among the best performers in terms of their skills proficiencies, as measured by the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), less than half of those in the 15-29 age range participated in the labour force in 2013—42% for men and 44.4% for women, which is low compared with OECD averages of 64.1% and 53% respectively.

Youth unemployment has risen since the end of 2012, reaching 10.9% in 2015, plus a high number of young people aged 15-24 are neither in employment nor in education and training, particularly those with tertiary degrees. Under the creative economy initiative, the government now needs to offer alternative routes, such as vocational education and training (VET), which would introduce work-based learning, and initiate more involvement from employers with relevant industry experience in the design of programmes and training in the classroom.

Korea has been developing National Competency Standards (NCS) since 2013 with learning modules based on NCS for VET schools and Junior Colleges. It also introduced “free semester” programmes for middle school students to enhance motivation, well-being and happiness by offering the likes of discussions, experiments, projects, physical exercise, arts, and other activities without written exams.

The network of Meister high schools has already started aligning students' potential with the real world. Established in 2010, these institutes have an industry-supported curriculum design, with a focus on developing skills that expose students to the workplace. They offer a near-guarantee of employment to graduates. Another interesting initiative is Job World, which opened in the city of Seongnam-si in 2012. It provides career guidance in an interactive way, with the aim of providing its 3,000 daily visitors with a realistic view about possible professional choices.

Developing a more relevant skill set would help create a more inclusive workforce, which in turn could offset the future financial burden of the country's aging population. Older workers have low skills-literacy proficiency among those over 45 is significantly below average—and they struggle to find work if forced to take early retirement. Employers should be encouraged to change their approach to this age group, which is often excluded from training programmes due to the perception of lower long-term employability.

Korea's children, however, are already showing their ability to adapt to a more relevant environment. In the 2012 OECD PISA first assessment of creative problem solving, Korea's students were among the top performers, showing themselves to be quick learners, highly inquisitive and able to solve unstructured problems in unfamiliar contexts.

The future seems bright, therefore, suggesting no further need for the kind of intensive education system that has propelled Korea so headily forward since 1996, but rather a more rounded experience that hones problem-solving skills and includes hands-on experience, as well as an understanding of the value of just letting children play.

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