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Isn't it a pyrrhic victory?: over-privatization and universal access in tertiary education of Korea

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Abstract This article analyzes the Korean passage to tertiary education for all. With a specific focus on traditional form of higher education, it tries to answer the questions of how and why this extra-ordinary phenomenon happens in a short period of time. Applying a historical sociology method, it attempts to explain the mechanism and consequences of the simultaneous transition to universal access to both the secondary and tertiary education. Over-privatization has been the primary mechanism behind the simultaneous transition since the late 1960s. Such a heavy overflow of privatization in achieving universal access places a significant financial burden on families, particularly those of a disadvantaged socioeconomic status. The more financial resources that come from the private sector, the more difficult it becomes to attain equitable access. There is no sign of a narrowing in the gap which exists among regions, socioeconomic status, gender, and family background, all of which have led to the inequality of access to universities and colleges. My final reflections are put on a simple question: "is this a story of victory or a pyrrhic one?"

Keywords Tertiary education for all · Over-privatization · Universal access · The Gates

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Introduction

The Korean rate of progression to tertiary education has recently reached 81%, the highest in the world (Grubb et al. 2006, p. 7). This transition from elite to universal access to tertiary education has been achieved in less than three decades, an achievement that took the U.S. almost half a century (Trow 1961) As recently as 2000, Korean high school graduates were 5% more likely to pursue tertiary education in one form or another than their counterparts in the U.S., a leading country with universal higher education. Korea has also become one of the first countries to have achieved almost universal completion of secondary education, and this rate of growth was the highest of any of the OECD countries (OECD 2003; Grubb et al. 2006, p. 16).[1] The rapid transition to universal access to higher education in Korea occurred almost immediately after, or simultaneously with, the swift transition to universal secondary education. This phenomenon can be viewed, as I have done previously (Kim 2007a, p. 3), as an unprecedented simultaneous transition to universal access to secondary and tertiary education. Grubb and his colleague made a telling point in their report that "the idea of "tertiary education for all" is closer to reality in Korea than in any other country" (p. 16). Is this a story of victory? In this article,[2] I will address this question by explaining the mechanism and consequences of this simultaneous transition.

[1] Table A.1.2, p. 37.

[2] This article is a slight revision of my keynote speech at the ICER 8 in 2007, Educational Research Institute, Seoul National University. Funding of this research was in part provided by New Century Scholar of Higher Education for 2007–2008, Fulbright Foundation. Special thanks should go to Jane Knight and other members of working group three who would do more collaboration later.

The speed and rate of expansion of higher education in Korea exceeded the government's willingness and ability to provide financial support for it, which has resulted in extreme privatization and the erosion of the meaning of the "public good" in tertiary education. This is a unique point worth noting in the case of Korea, namely, that the main driving force behind the rapid expansion of higher education was not a concerted central planning effort by the government, but rather the zeal and willingness to financially support their children's studies on the part of parents. As will be shown later, over-privatization has been the primary mechanism behind the simultaneous transition since the late 1960s. Due to a heavy reliance on private funds, parents and students must pay higher prices. Among these prices, "education fever," "examination-hell," and "cut-throat competition" are just the most obvious costs. Some trends reflect a set of deep-rooted cultural norms conducive to this rapid double transition. Such a heavy overflow of privatization in achieving universal access places a significant financial burden on families, particularly those of a disadvantaged socioeconomic status. Therefore, the more financial resources that come from the private sector, the more difficult it becomes to attain equitable access. Nevertheless, there is no sign of a narrowing in the gap which exists among regions, socioeconomic status, gender, and family background, all of which have led to the inequality of access to universities and colleges.

Privatization is also a worldwide trend in higher education. Recently, various privatization policies have been put into effect in Western societies and even in former socialist countries where the public higher education had previously been dominant. Altbach (2002) concurs in more general terms in his view that "while many look to America's impressive private higher education sector, it is more useful to draw on the Asian experience." Countries that allow the private sector to develop can look to Japan's, Philippine's, and Korea's experiences for reflection. More than 80% of students are currently enrolled at private universities and colleges in Korea, compared to only about 20% in America. Indeed, 83% of the national budget for higher education comes from family funds (Kim 2007a), an unparalleled phenomenon unseen in America, where the private sector is far more dominant than the public sector. Presently, in Korea, even the most selective national universities still rely on tuition and fees for more than one-third of their revenue. The distinction between public and private sectors has been blurred.

The vigor and speed of development of Korean higher education is remarkable indeed, especially when taking into consideration the extremely limited public financial resources and infrastructural support given to it. Korea has played such an archetypal role before, such as when the Chinese government scrutinized Korea's privatization efforts before launching its own. Thus, putting forward the Korean experience as an exemplary case is warranted and indeed could be beneficial to other countries, especially as it could provide fertile ground for drawing analogous implications for those other cases which approximate the Korean context more closely than the American. This article will unearth some valuable insights, policy implications, and conditions under which universal access and equity can be attained by other countries.

Cultural clash and the compromise between the eastern and western forms of higher education

Private education has always played an enormous role in the shaping of higher education, both in terms of quantity and quality. Privatization began long before the open-door era, when a western form of private education was imposed with the arrival of Western missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century (Lee 2004). It also continued to develop as an alternative system of tertiary and adult education during the Colonial Period (1910–1945), since Japanese rulers provided only extremely limited opportunities for tertiary education. From 1948, when the independent Korean Republic was founded, privatization was further intensified as the country experienced rapid educational expansion in the absence of the central government's financial commitment as well as an inability to shape or influence the expansion. In countries where private universities were founded and sponsored by huge philanthropical donations, Korean private universities are sponsored and financially sustained mainly by private citizens and organizations such as religious ones with more limited sources of funding. Even in missionary schools, students' fees and tuition charges were the major sources of their revenues. The private universities still rely upon about 70% of their revenue from tuition fees (Grubb et al., p. 11).

There are several unique characteristics of Korean higher education, and they have evolved during the course of an equally unique historical development. In traditional Korean society, the ruling elites were the main benefactors of the educational system. A good number of academic networks, or what Korean scholars may call "Gates," was loosely formed with a prominent scholar of Confucianism as a central figure. The term "gate" originated from and was widely used in the Buddhist academic traditions and practices from thousands of years ago. The Buddha himself is, for example was the "gate" to the Buddhist Way for his many thousands of disciples and greater number of faithful followers. Likewise, Confucius (551–479 B.C.) himself is also the "gate" to the Confucius Way for the cultivation of the personality in its

highest from. For Korean intellectuals, a "gate" signifies the highest degree of intellectual excellence combined with the same degree of moral integrity of a prominent mentor. Entering a certain gate means positioning oneself as a lifetime disciple of the mentor. A Korean scholar often acknowledge himself as "a student under a certain gate" to reveal his identity and his serious commitment to an academic lineage from a particular, prominent scholar. Here "under" means referring to himself as a humble disciple. Heated debates among competing gates reinforce their own intellectual standings among scholars with and without civil service jobs. Sometimes a group evolves into a political party, especially when national security is in danger. These schools of Confucius thought constitute non-formal and less-institutionalized (NFLI) scholarly networks between mentors and disciples. The relations have neither a formal institutional base as in European universities nor an organizational base in medieval guilds among artisans. Min (2004) is right in his assertion that indigenous higher learning of Asia had "a long tradition going back three thousand years, compassing both the public and private sectors (p. 56)," but his is not crystal-clear in pinpointing the fact that it was the latter, rather than the former, which was the center of academic excellence. This was quite the opposite case to that of the medieval University. In other words, it refers not to a state run institute of *tai-xue* (which literally means "higher learning"), but to a private gate of Confucian disciples was the center of excellence in higher learning. It was also true in Korea.

In Europe, formal educational institutions like the "*universitas*" served as the institutional basis of intellectual life and scholarly activities. That was not the case in Korea. During the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910), although there was a system of formal governmental educational institutions that could be readily found in China (Min 2004), intellectuals participated in academic activities through informal channels of communication between mentors and their disciples. Indigenousness scholastic traditions were cultivated and maintained through academic discussions and the extended exchange of manuscripts, correspondence, and letters. They, however, had been the center of excellence in research in keeping with the Confucian way and training of the power elites of the Kingdom. If the University Paris was where Western Scholasticism blossomed in the medieval period, then it is the gate, through which a distinctive academic lineage was formed, where the renaissance of Korean Confucianism has taken place since the early sixteenth century. The gates and their associated academic lineages which passed through them were Korea's equivalent to the medieval university, and not a formal institution set by either the central or local government. Interestingly, these traditions and practices are found even in today's modern westernized universities in Korea, and serve as a powerful and effective driving force for successful academic achievement (Kim 2007a). Moreover, it was against this cultural heritage that the Western ideas of the university were introduced, clashed, and were then implemented first by American protestant missionaries (Lee 2004) and later by Japanese colonizers.

During the Colonial Era (1910–1945), the Japanese colonizers imposed their own idea of the university, which was copied from Germany, based on Humboldt's model. This Japanese version of a research university was transplanted to Korea in the 1920s (Kim 2007a), which has for a while been regarded as "the University," among graduates of Japanese colonial universities and colleges. The Japanese colonial system of higher education in Chosun included one imperial university and a number of professional colleges. The pecking order between the university and other collages was so hierarchical and rigid that the colleges were treated as second-tier institutes, as they were in Japan. This system was made and run, not for Koreans from the beginning, but primarily for the Japanese colonizers. In order to disguise their total dominance in higher education, only a small number of Koreans were admitted into this system. Some intellectuals became voluntarily assimilated and were employed as a kind of middle-level management for the colonial officers. American missionaries, tacitly gave legitimacy to Japanese political rule from 1910, and earned some space in return to keep their own schools including a couple of colleges for their cultural and moral dominance over Koreans. However, the vast number of Confucian scholars, followed by nationalist intellectuals, avoided the political and colonial dominance of the two systems and set up a variety of alternative NFLI centers of higher learning. At the periphery of colonial power, there were a good number of rudimentary private schools including indigenous family schools and Letter Hall, night schools, laborers schools, and short-term learning centers for adults. A great number of Korean students of post secondary schools in the early 1930s launched various literacy campaigns, which Koreans referred to as the *vnarod*[3] movement, across the country during the vacation seasons. Such students' voluntary activities for the well-being of peasants or laborers have continued up until the present day. A socialist college was established and run by a group of progressive intellectuals to produce revolutionaries for about 10 years (Nam 2002). The colonial higher education system did not succeed in assimilating Koreans, let alone Confucius scholars and progressive intellectuals. Its so-called assimilation policy "played a central role in the formation of a modern Korean nationalist consciousness which was bitterly anti-Japanese." (Tsurumi 1984, p. 302)

[3] As a Russian term, *Vnarod* literally means "to the people."

The current system of higher education in Korea was established during the U.S. Military Government (1945–1948). Dr. Paul Auh, a Columbia University graduate in the 1920s, who worked as a Deputy Director at the Bureau of Education under the Military Government, introduced an American idea of the university with a whole system of modern public education in 1946. In order to make a powerhouse of elite training, which was essential for nation building, he proposed to integrate the old imperial university and nine colleges into one comprehensive university. This was the American style of university with departments as a unit of the school and a Carnegie unit system for academic grading. However, a group of faculty members who graduated from the imperial universities and professional colleges either at home or abroad made persistent efforts to maintain the colonial legacy of the Japanese–German idea of "the University" which was in fact a "faculty republic."(Musselin 2001) Since they also wanted to keep the old academic order between the university and other professional colleges, Dr. Auh's proposal for integration was heavily contested by a combined group of anti-American nationalist and socialists.

This battle was raged under the same banners of "decolonialization" and "democratic" reforms for more than a year (Kim 2007b). The real issue was indeed whether to implement internal (faculty-autonomy) or external (Board of Directors) governance into the university system. The debates and power struggles among professors ended up a no-win situation when the Education Act was passed in 1950. The new law resulted in neither internal nor external governance but tight central bureaucratic control by the Ministry of Education over the public and private universities as well. The Ministry has exerted enormous power to impose limits on students and faculty quotas, tuitions, and salaries since then. Recently, the American model was reinforced by the educational background of the faculty. Since most professors in Korean universities earned doctoral degrees from university in the U.S., their idea of the university is influenced by their Alma Mater. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the American pattern has served as a bench mark in recent self-conscious efforts to restructure Korean higher education (Kim 2007a). In short, the current structures and operational environment of Korean universities reflect various systems and models. They included a traditional mentor-disciple ("gates") relationship, a German model of a research university adopted and altered by Japan, and an American system of tertiary education.

The Korean universities and colleges are outcomes of these cultural clashes, confrontation, and adaptation between the Eastern and Western forms of higher education. More specifically, the collision of three conflicting ideas of the university may explain the enormous difficulties in producing a working consensus among professors about how to run universities and colleges of their own on a daily basis, let alone how to reform their schools. One of the biggest drawbacks of the lack of consensus was a failure to make a variety of tertiary institution as a system of higher education with a clear-cut diversification and functional differentiation among schools. Instead, people's demands for opportunities to get more and longer tertiary education started to drastically expand or explore ways to increase the number of institutes and students within them without a concerted overall master plan or any long-term forecasting plans.

The origins, development, and consequences of privatization

The historical origins of private higher education

It was true that, as Min (2004) has stated above, both the public and private sectors played important roles in indigenous higher learning in Asia. As was the case in China, there existed in Korea a dual system of education: public education run by the Central and local government, and a system of various private education institutes. It was long a common practice among historians of Korean higher education to argue that the first public college, *Taehak* (Great Learning), founded in 372 A.D. and its heir institute, *Sungkyunkwan*, established by the government in 1398, as the centers of indigenous higher education, were the Asian counterparts to the Western medieval University. However, this argument has served to obscure rather than illuminate our knowledge of one of the most distinguishing characteristics of traditional higher education. Unlike the University of Paris in the twelfth Century, *Sungkyunkwan* was not the center of excellence of Neo-Confucian studies, but a governmental institute for lesser degree holders to reside for a certain period of time to prepare for their final national examination to be selected as civil officers. It was also the center of memorial ceremonies for the Great Saint Confucius and his 12 Sages. As time went by, the ceremonial function prevailed over the educational function. It was, however, at a variety of NFLI institutes where most of the training of the Korean literati was carried out, ranging from a family school, to the Letter Hall, and to the private seminary known as *Sowon,* the most institutionalized private school with governmental authorization.

The origin of such private education in Asia can be traced back to the Confucius legend and his practices of teaching of around 500 BC. He became a teacher at the age of 29, and his house became a site of pilgrimage and a center of learning for his followers. According to the text *Confucius Analeptics* (Legge 1892), an early form of his teaching began as follows:

> The Master (Confucius) said. "From the men bringing his bundles of dried flesh for my teaching, I have never refused instruction to anyone." VII. 7

Dr. Legge, the highest authority on Chinese Classics in the English-speaking world, interpreted this phrase as follows: "However small the fee his pupils were able to afford, he never refused instruction. All that he required was an ardent desire for improvement, and some degree of capacity." (Legge 1892, p. 61) His teaching was not carried out in any formal school or teaching institute established by the government. It was an archetype of private education for a great scholar to offer lessons at his house. This form of NFLI private higher education continued to persist as a long-standing practice in the Eastern civilizations (Lee 1984, p. 220).

While making the teaching available to almost anyone who had desire to learn and could pay a nominal fee for tuition, Confucius rigorously selected a small number of disciples amongst his followers. According to the original legend, there were at least 3,000 followers. He formally handpicked only 77, it being recorded thus: "The Disciples who received my instructions, and could comprehend them, were 77 individuals. They were all scholars of extraordinary ability." (p. 62). Among those selected, only 12 sages were further selected. These 12 disciples were placed, only one level below Confucius, at the Shrine of Confucius the Saint, where a ritual memorializing him had been observed. Thanks to their continuing scholastic efforts, Confucius's teachings survived various historical vicissitudes and ordeals and maintain their place amongst the greatest classics of higher learning in Asia, right up until the present day.

Korean Confucianism was in fact Chu His's (1128–1200) Neo-Confucianism, which was revived during the Song Dynasty. The Korean literati found it most appealing, for it sought to establish an ethical base for an enlightened political world with fully fledged speculative and theoretical studies (Lee, p. 217). The Korean scholar, T'oegye (Yi Hwang, 1501–1570), developed a full explication of *i* (*li* in Chinese) philosophy,[4] which accounts for what things are and how they behave. As a result of his philosophical endeavors, he was revered as a Korean Chu His, a Confucius, or sometimes as both. He presented a philosophical doctrine emphasizing moral self-cultivation as the essence of learning. He was the greatest figure in the history of philosophy in Korea and exerted a huge influence on the shaping of Japanese Confucian doctrine as well.

Under T'oegye, a group of the brilliant Neo-Confucian literati living in the Southern area gathered, who devoted their energy to pursuits mainly at the private academies or *Sowon*. They remained in the South for a very long period, to avoid being involved in the vortex of court politics. The succession of the utmost level of scholarship was made by the development of an academic lineage. Among the Southerners, Sungho (Yi Ik, 1681–1763) was the exemplar Confucius literati, who was flexible enough to embrace Western Scholasticism and made a great contribution to the renaissance of Korean Confucianism in his later days. When he passed away, one of his disciples and the statesman of the time, Prime Minster Chae, wrote the following memorial words on his tombstone.

> Our scholarship had always grown from an academic lineage. The Korean Confucius, T'oegye, taught his Way to Hangang who taught it in turn to Misu. As a disciple of Misu, Sungho inherited the legitimate academic lineage of T'oegye.

That academic lineage was nothing to do with *Sungkyunkwan* or the *Four Schools* established and run by the government. This lineage was made through private education. The academic linage was transferred to the next generation of scholars. The East and West cultural collision in the early eighteenth century lead to the birth of various new schools of thought, ranging form voluntary conversion to Catholicism, to the birth of a movement rejecting heterodoxy, and to the rise of practical learning.

A group of early converters led by Yi Pyok (1754–1785) and Sung-hun Yi (1756–1801) started to emerge not through the works of Catholic missions abroad, but rather on their own through reading, discussions, and their critiques of works brought back from Churches in Beijing, such as the *True Principles of Catholicism* (written by a Jesuit monk called Mateo Ricci) or the *First Steps in Catholic Doctrine* (Lee, p. 239). All the scholastic activities and serious pursuits which sought a new way, took place at the private Letter hall run by Yi Pyok (or Byok). They even followed an establishment of what became to be called St. Joseph Seminary to train Korean priests in 1864. As an aftermath of the French Revolution, Jesuit priests working at Beijing Churches were expelled and replaced by priests from the Society of Foreign Missionary of Paris. It was the latter group who gave specific instructions to the Korean church not to observe traditional rites. It was only after they faithfully followed these instructions and started to challenge the political order through the Rites Controversy that the chain of events which led to the Catholic Persecution of 1801 actually began. The Letter Hall established by Yi at a secluded place near to the Buddhist

[4] The other contrasting but inseparable component of Confucius philosophy is *ki* (*Ch'i* in Chinese) which emphasizes the energizing component. See, "The Culture of the Neo-Confucian Literati," (Lee 1984, pp. 217–220), for the detailed discussion of Korean Confucian tradition.

temple of Chonjin Am in the deep mountains is regarded now as the birthplace of Korean Catholicism.[5]

The second faction of Sungho's disciples went on to firmly preserve the values of Neo-Confucian doctrine. The historical records indicate that this group read a vast amount of books on Scholasticism. A leading literati of this group wrote to his mentor, Sungho, letters severely criticizing the drawbacks of the European University system, especially the order of knowledge. For him, feeding technical and professional knowledge to pupils without a sound base of character building was not education at all. After this group proposed a political position rejecting heterodoxy, in fact which meant an effective rejection of the values and thoughts of the West, including that of later westernized Japan, this faction advanced their position to vehemently oppose the opening of the doors to the West by raging a righteous war against the regime and the Japanese invaders.

The *Sirak* (Practical Leaning) scholars led by Dasan (Chong Yag-yong, 1762–1836) put a specific focus, not on theoretical discourse, but on natural and social sciences with a pragmatic method of inquiry into the real conditions of society. He, like-minded scholars, and disciples all sought a corruption-free government, national wealth, and utilitarian land reforms. There were no records showing him having entered *Sungkyunkwan*, but he was remembered to be the best of the best literati who built a springboard for the modern political and social reforms in the later days. Led by him and succeeded by his academic lineage, the *Sirak* scholars "propelled the Yi Dynasty scholarship rapidly ahead in new directions."(Lee, pp. 232–243)

In sum, some major characteristics of private education in the Chosun Dynasty can be specified as follows. It did not take a form of formal or institutionalized education. The use of the Letter Halls made study possible anytime and anyplace, if there were a scholarly teacher and a group of students with a minimal level of financial resources but having desire and capacity for learning. The Hall was virtually open to all men with a few exceptions. Co-existing with a network of public education institutes, private education functioned as the center of excellence in research and higher learning. Family, not government, was a major actor in increasing educational opportunities. This archetype of private higher education repeatedly appeared to meet peoples' demands for higher learning under the Japanese occupation which tried systematically to destroy indigenous private higher education.

The historical development of privatization

The current "modern" education of Korea started from the 1894 Education Reform. Figure 1 shows the shape of school expansions at each level over one hundred years. The transition from mass to universal access to tertiary education took place only after 1980. As shown in the graph, the indigenous forms of private education like Letter halls persisted during the colonial period. It was impossible to calculate a reliable participation rate of students attending halls, for they took a NFLI form of education which hardly produced any statistics. However, Japanese statistics showed the number of Korean students attending indigenous schools exceeded that of colonized schools until the middle of the 1920s. Heated debates were going on among historical sociologists of colonial education to explain why the Korean supremacy collapsed at that particular time.

Quite contrary to the "official" and propaganda claims of the Japanese, the colonial education was not a core of its assimilation policy but rather that of the liquidation of Korean values, culture, and identity. As seen above in Fig. 1, the colonizers severely limited the opportunity of higher education for Korean people. This policy of enslaving Koreans led to a distorted development of the secondary education, which functioned as a preparatory program for universities and colleges. Since the late 1920s and early 1930s, primary education seemingly started to expand not because of the provision of free and compulsory education for all Koreans by the Japanese, but because of its enforcing privatization at the level of primary education. The privatization of elementary education was a rare and unusual policy in a nation-state building process. From the beginning, Japanese colonizers shifted their responsibility of the financing of education to Korean parents so that the principle of financial responsibility on the part of the so-called "beneficiaries" was made and maintained during the whole period of occupation. As long as we are using the term of "beneficiaries," it should be pointed out that there was no public education per se, since Japanese colonial education could not be part of the "common good." In his brilliant historical sociology of the elementary school expansion in the 1930s, Prof. Sung-Cheol Oh (2004) made the point that Korean parents and their children, strongly resisting Japanese policy to implement rudimentary vocational education to the Ordinary School (i.e., elementary schools) for producing docile peasants, pay instead the costs of non-vocation general education by themselves and encourage their children to prepare for the entrance examination to the next level of education. Their financial commitment led to school expansion and an early form of examination-hell in the 1930s.

[5] For historical records on the birth place of Korean Catholic Church and Yi Byok's pioneering activities and advanced scholarship, please refer to the following website at http://www.chonjinam.or.kr/english/

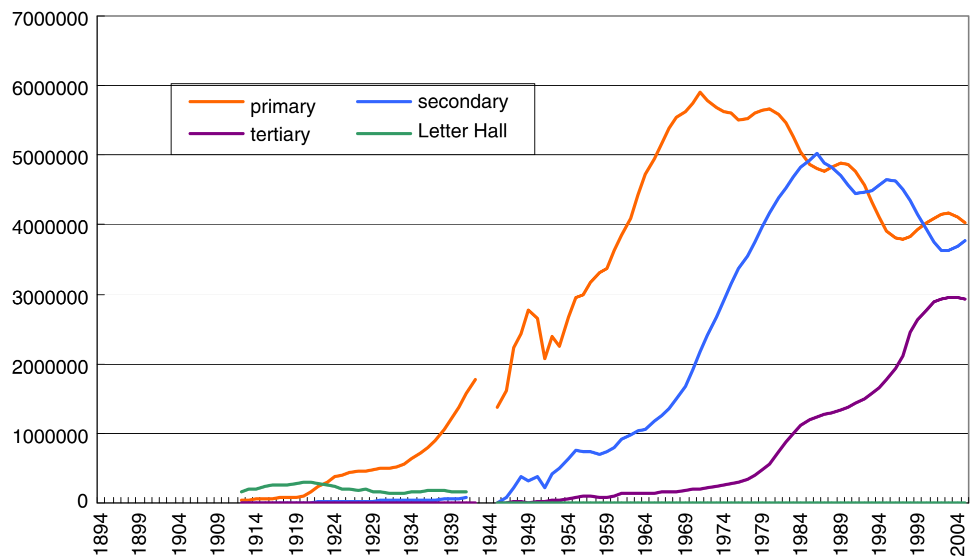

Fig. 1 Education expansion by the level of education, 1894–2004. *Source*: Kim (1999, p. 3). Number of students of Letter halls were superimposed on the original Figure <1-1>

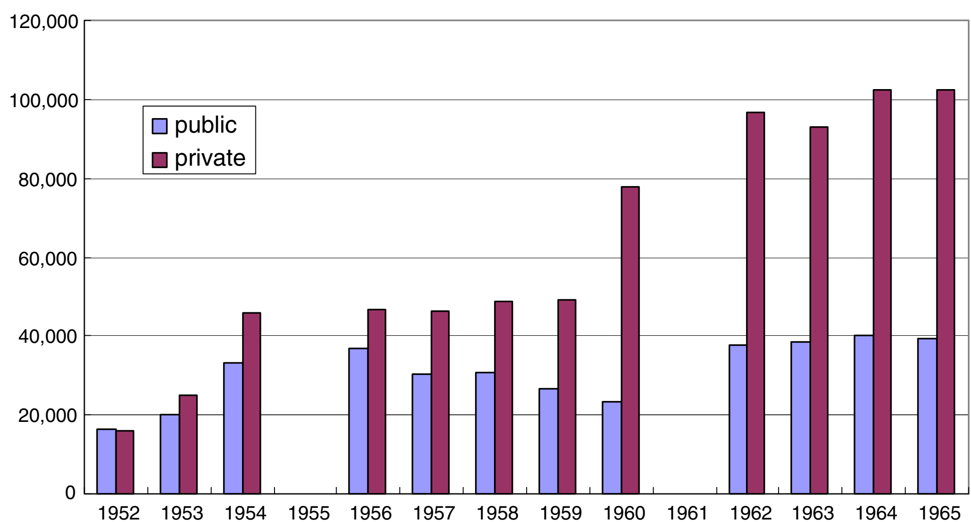

Fig. 2 Number of higher education students by control of school before massification, 1952–1965. *Source*: KEDI and MOE (each year), *Education Statistics Yearbook*

In spite of a serious of education reforms to de-colonize immediately after liberation, the colonial principle of shifting financial responsibility to the so-called beneficiaries that resulted in privatization of elementary education was kept and further extended to secondary and higher education. As shown in Fig. 2, as early as 1952, the number of students attending private universities and colleges exceeded that of the national and public ones. This tendency never ceased but continued to develop, and led to an extreme dependence on private education.

Privatization accelerated school expansions and led to the simultaneous transition to universal access. Its speed was so rapid and swift that no other countries can be compared with the Korean case. The following Fig. 3 is a composite graphic of Trow's numbers and ours on the transition to universal access. Korean statistics were superimposed on American ones to compare some contrasting differences between America's "parallel transition" (Trow 1961) and Korea's "simultaneous transition." (Kim 2007a).

As a result of the simultaneous transition since the 1980s, the educational attainment level of Korea reached the top level among OECD countries. Figure 4 shows an international comparison of the attainment rate.

The top level of tertiary education attainment was possible for the recent expansion of 2-year private college. As shown in Fig. 5, the majority of tertiary students are attending private universities and vocational colleges.

While all higher educational institutions in Korea rely on private funds, the vocational colleges have the highest degree of reliance on the private sector. This pattern differs sharply from the American model where large research universities and liberal arts Ivy League schools show a higher level of reliance upon the private sector than

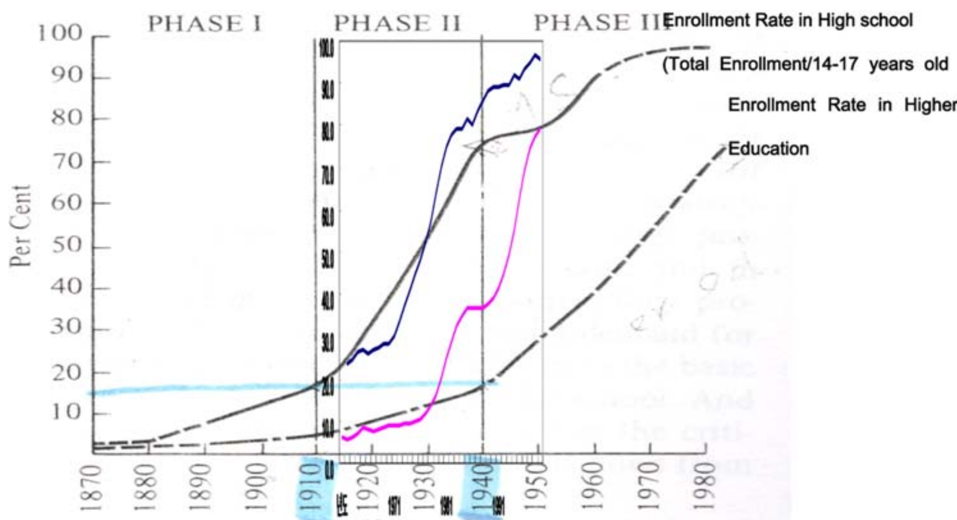

Fig. 3 A composite graphic of Trow's numbers and Korea's on the transition to universal access

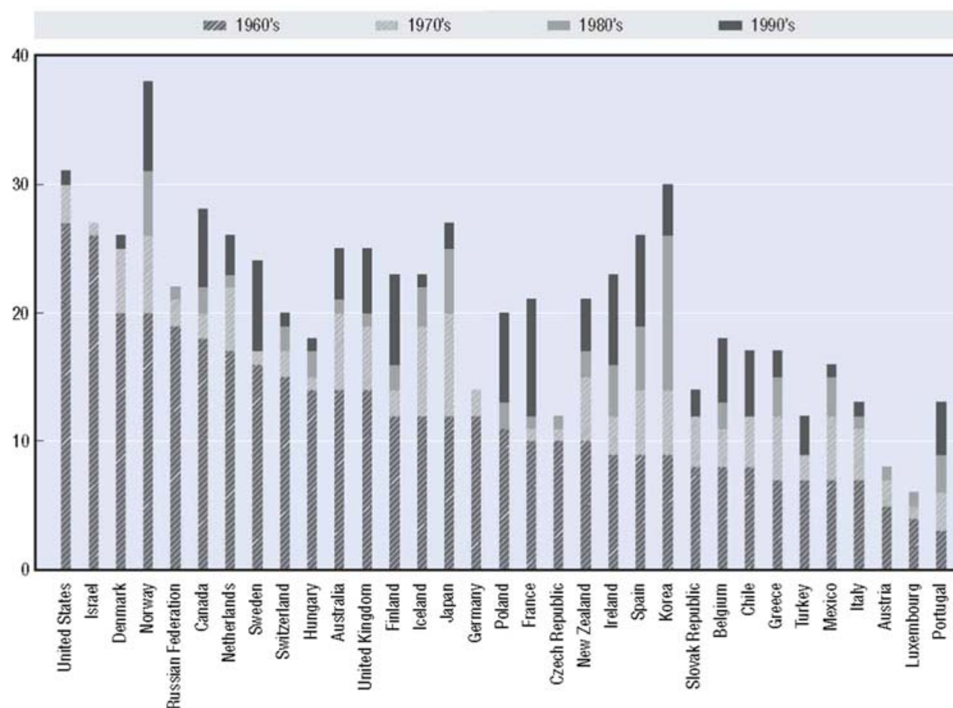

Fig. 4 Growth in university-level qualifications. *Source*: OECD (2003)

community colleges which are mostly state-funded public institutions. This dominance of private vocational training implied that the financial burden from the lower SES parents was getting bigger and deeper so that the idea of higher education as "public good" seemed to have been seriously eroded.

This erosion is not a new but is in fact a very old phenomenon. It started to appear as early as 1950, when the supremacy of private over public education occurred. In the early 1950s, UNESCO and UNKRA jointly sent for an Education Planning Mission to study the situation of Korean education and made recommendations needed for a rebuilding of the education system from the total ruins of the Korean War. The Mission made a report underscoring the fact that a "striking feature of the financing of education in Korea is that secondary and higher education are financed to the extent of at least 75% by voluntary contribution from parents. (UNESCO 1952, p. 103) It continued to report that "Even the unsatisfactory program of education today is maintained, not as a charge upon the whole people through public taxation, but largely through the voluntary support of these families who have at present members to be enrolled in a school or college."(p. 127) Based on those facts and realities, the Mission offered a very specific recommendation about educational financing as follows (UNESCO 1953, p. 103):

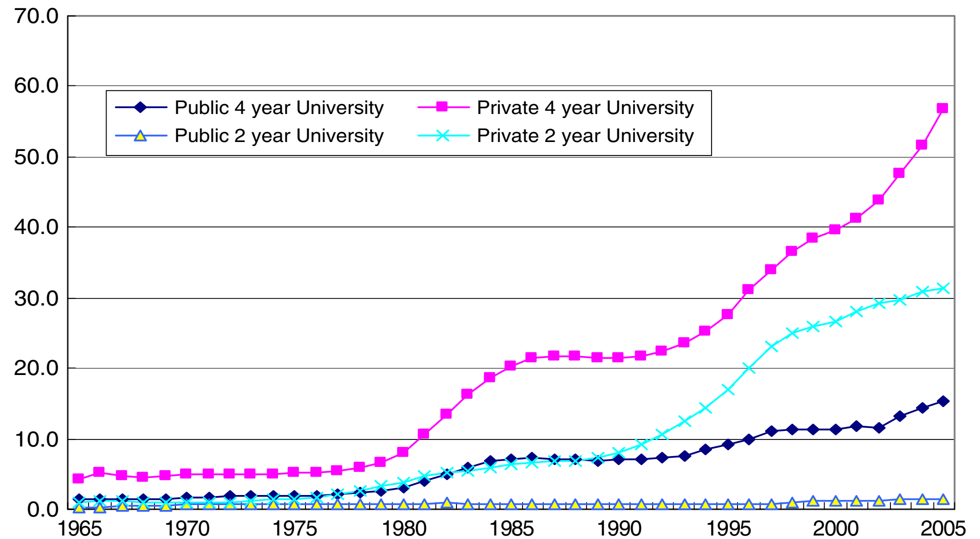

Fig. 5 Trends of an increase in student population by school type, 1965–2005. *Source*: KEDI and MOE (each year), *Education Statistics Yearbook*

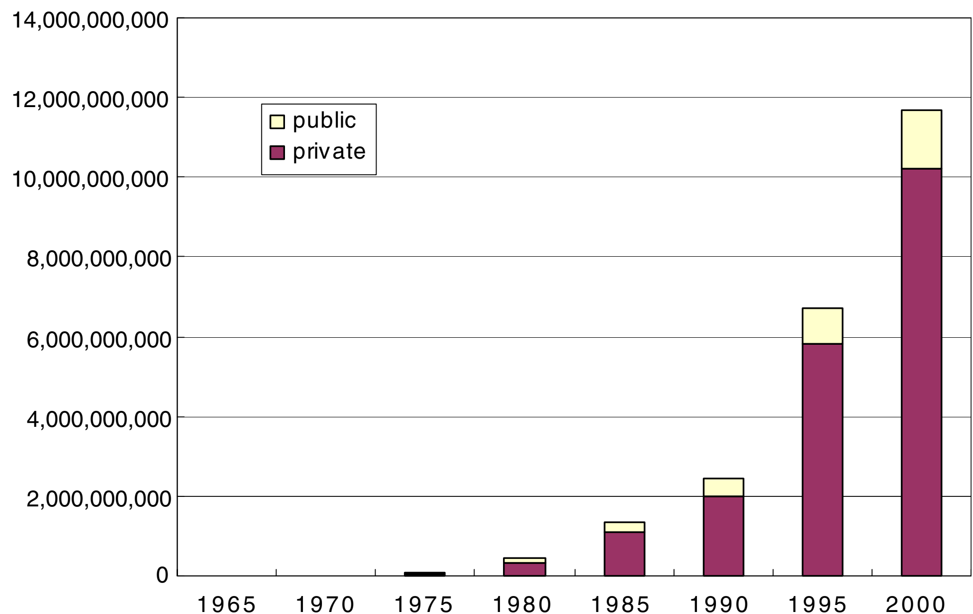

Fig. 6 Expenditure of higher education by source of funds, 1965–2000. *Source*: KEDI and MOE (each year), *Education Statistics Yearbook*

> The full cost of primary education and at least 50% of the costs of public secondary and higher education should be supplied as soon as possible from tax sources.

The Korean government never took UNESCO's recommendation for higher education seriously up to now. For a very long time, it never set up policy of funding basic education from tax until the 1990s, let alone for higher education. For education experts from abroad or home, the core problem was in the shifting from private funds to public taxation as a basis for the financial support of public education, including tertiary education. Figures 6 and 7 show that dependency on the private funds was getting worse over time at home and turned out be the worst among the OECD member countries.

Both Japan and Korea were the two countries that spent the least amount of pubic funds on higher education, but Korea's dependence was a lot worse than Japan. Korea is the only country that has let privatization prevail in the terrain of public education and especially in tertiary education. The loss of the meaning of education as for the "public good" boosted the spending of private funds. The ever-growing increase in the size of private funds that were invested in the education market by parents in turn further broke down the meaning of the "public good." This vicious circle of privatization was the mechanism of the

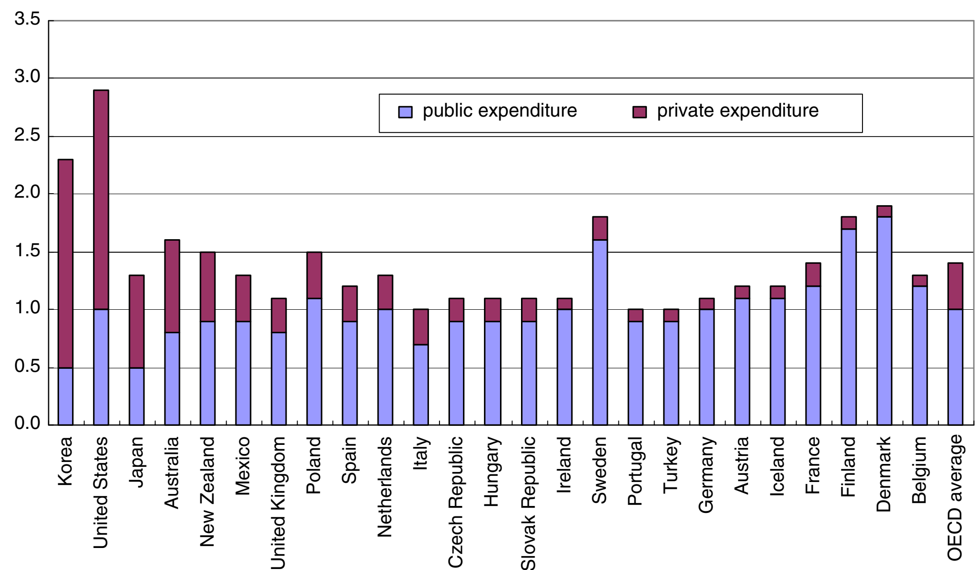

Fig. 7 Expenditure on higher education as percentage of GDP, by source of fund (2003). *Source*: OECD (2007, p. 208), *Education at a glance: OECD Indicators*

simultaneous transition. An interesting question remains: what are the costs that all stock holders should pay for privatization?

The consequences of privatization

The speed of expansion of Korean higher education can only be described as explosive, and has been particularly rapid since the 1980s, as illustrated in Fig. 1. One of the consequences of the simultaneous transition was that there was very little time to build up an efficient university system with adequate functional differentiation between public and private institutions, between metropolitan and provincial universities, between 4-year universities and junior colleges, and between research-oriented and teaching-oriented institutions. This process was reflected also in the secondary educational system, which also failed to develop a reasonable differentiation between college preparatory schools and vocational schools. No efforts were made to make secondary education comprehensive. Instead, vocational high schools were separated from academic schools, and were allowed to provide a college-bound track for their students, who in turn eventually went on to receive some type of tertiary education.

Therefore, different universities and colleges in Korea did not develop their own unique missions and functions. All universities aspired to be major flagship universities. It is perhaps understandable that a newly established school chooses to model itself after a top ranking university as its defining institute. Many universities in the U.S. have attempted to model themselves on Harvard University. However, in Korea, all universities (public, private, metropolitan, as well as provincial universities) model themselves upon Seoul National University. As a result, there has been very little differentiation of functions and purposes amongst various institutions. One example of the negative consequences of such a process is that several private universities have offered doctoral programs without adequate academic and institutional preparation and support.

The absence of a well-coordinated higher educational system has also critically affected the Korean economy and impacted upon the labor market. The higher educational institutions were not able to adequately meet the specific and strategic needs of human resources of Korea's rapidly growing knowledge intensive industries. There was a serious mismatch between the "end products" of higher education and the real needs of the labor market. (Grubb et al. 2006, pp. 20–29) Some large corporations have responded to this by establishing their own educational training facilities where they are able to retrain their college graduate employees.

The 60-year long history of Korean higher education can be summed up as lowest costs education. In 2004, the Ministry of Education allocated 12.4% of its budget to higher education. This amount is about 0.43% of the Korean gross domestic product (GDP), which in comparison to other OECD member countries is less than half of the average allocation (0.9%) of GDP spent on higher education. Despite the government's inability and unwillingness to provide adequate resources, the Korean higher education system has expanded rapidly, largely due to extreme privatization.

What has been compromised in this record-breaking growth of higher education in Korea is the value of the "public good" in education. The Korean government has transferred its responsibility and commitments to educate the general public onto the private sector, more specifically,

to the parents and students themselves. This pattern is particularly noticeable in the tertiary education system. As shown in Fig. 6, only a little more of 10% of the Korean higher educational budget was provided by public funds. Figure 7 shows that the Korean case is one of the worst among OECD countries. The degree of financial responsibility on the part of parents and students far exceeds the case of Japan and the U.S., which are known to have the most well-developed private educational system. This pattern of over-privatization is currently intensifying in Korea.

Lessons from the Korean model

Korea has transformed itself into the world's 11th largest economy, virtually from the total ruins of the civil war, over the last five decades or so. In this rapid and impressive transformation, the higher education system as a whole has played an essential role. The salient characteristics of this system can be summarized in the following three statements: The quantity is impressive, privatization is incredible, and the quality is diverse. We may draw some lesions from this Korean model.

Functional differentiation among universities and colleges

The most critical issue that the Korean model demonstrates is the strong need for rebuilding a coherent system of tertiary education including lifelong learning that provides higher educational opportunities in more diverse forms and needs than currently is the case. In their recommendation, Grubb and his colleagues defined the system as "a structure that links individual colleges, universities, and other tertiary institutions, rather than simply a group of unrelated institutions."(p. 63) The California State University System is an example of a coherent higher educational system that provides an equal educational opportunity to a student population remarkable for its tremendous diversity in terms of both educational needs and personal backgrounds. As Douglass (2000) points out in his compelling analysis, the Master Plan of the California System, this success is a result of long dialog and hard-won compromise between the various stakeholders with conflicting views and interests. Like the land grant universities of other states, the California System has successfully established a higher educational institution system with reasonable functional differentiation among colleges and universities that successfully meets diverse and unique educational needs. Thus, the California System has been able to not only meet the expanding demands of higher education, but also build several world-class research universities. The California University System has played an essential role in helping the Californian economy become the world's tenth largest economy. This is a truly remarkable achievement in itself.

The difficulty in establishing a higher educational system with efficient functional differentiation stems from the fact that the Korean government relied too heavily upon the private sector to meet the expanding demands for higher educational opportunities. It is as if the market's invisible hand guides the simultaneous massification process of secondary and tertiary education. It is extremely difficult to establish a coherent and well-balanced educational system when about 80% of higher educational needs are met by private institutions and private funds. The comprehensive master plan has to be prepared in advance and used to guide the process of expansion, so that the educational system is able to remain neutral to the private sector's interests.

The Korean experience suggests the following lessons. First, the higher educational system has to clearly differentiate among research universities, teaching universities, and vocational colleges. Each individual college and university should develop their own unique system and structure for finance, curriculum, faculty recruitment, and student admission policy according to their missions and functions. The different levels and types of institutions should coordinated with each other, so that, for example, a vocational college graduate who wishes to transfer to a 4-year university for a doctoral degree should be given such an opportunity. Faculty should be able to transfer between different types of schools, depending on their ability and interests. However, teaching universities should maintain their commitment to the mission of teaching and instruction by carrying out teaching-related research, education, and vocational training.

Second, there has to be a governance system for universities and colleges of similar types and functions. Universities and colleges should be given complete freedom, particularly in the areas of faculty recruitment, curriculum development, classroom instruction, and student admission policy. An autonomous committee of post-secondary education on a central government level should manage the governance system. The committee should be responsible for higher education as well as lifelong education provision for adults and the elderly. In doing so, the committee will be better able to foster and expand the idea of ″public good″ in education. The central or regional government should be responsible for providing and securing finance, while the individual institutions are to manage the funds according to their unique needs and institutional environment.

The renewal of the idea of the "public good" in higher education

The most challenging issue for public education in Korea is to restore the public aspect of public education. After

several decades of the central government being largely unwilling and unable to provide the necessary resources for public education, policy makers, politicians, and even scholars have lost their critical perspective regarding the authentic and real meaning of the "public good" in education. It is the central government's responsibility and commitment to the public to fund and provide adequate public education.

The idea of the "public good" in higher education can be promoted and reinforced by the national government providing necessary resources for all. Ironically the only unchanging policy in Korean public education during the last 60 years has been the principle of exporting financial responsibility from government to the so-called beneficiaries which mean students and parents. The parents have been forced to share the financial burden with the national government. According to this principle, the public's fundamental right to be educated becomes reduced to a form of economic behavior, and major educational decisions are made on the basis of profit motives. The element of the public good in education has been replaced by the market principle. An individual's right to be educated has turned into profit-seeking commercial behavior. This change undermines the legitimacy of the public good in Korean higher education. This trend of privatization was initially introduced during the Japanese colonial era to suppress or limit the public's educational opportunities. Under the American military administration during the second-half of the 1950s, privatization was an inevitable temporary strategy used to cope with the rapidly expanding aspiration for higher education. Unfortunately, what was supposed to be a temporary measure has turned into a permanent one. Privatization has a definite limit when the issues are moving from quantity to quality, especially to the quality of teaching and research. Building a world class university, for example, requires a tremendous amount of funding and resources, which cannot solely be driven from the zeal of Korean parents for their children's education.

The making of an internationally competitive research university

School explosion led by privatization has resulted in a great disparity in the quality of higher education. There co-exists a mixture of a simple custodial institute, a diploma-mill, a vocational college, a comprehensive university, and a top-level research university. As Kim (2007a) shows, a self-conscious and self strengthening program of a particular university can result in the creation of a leading-edge research university in a peripheral country like Korea. Some of the Korean flagship universities are examples of such cases. The graduate programs of SNU, KAIST, and Korea University have recently become very competitive by global standards. *The Times* ranked SNU to be 45th among the world's top 100 science universities in 2005. The overall ranking of SNU has jumped from 93rd to 69th in the 2006 survey. This impressive ascendance in world ranks can be termed as "a great leap forward." (Kim 2007a)

There are many factors that may explain this impressive achievement at the top-level universities in Korea. First of these factors is the fundamental strength of the secondary educational system. Students enter flagship universities only after top quality preparation. According to an international comparison published by the OECD, Korean students in the secondary education level ranked within the top three countries in problem-solving skills and mathematical abilities. Thus, it is not surprising that SNU, which admits only the top-notch students, has the potential of becoming a world-class university. The second factor is the quality of undergraduate programs received by the students while at SNU. According to the "Survey of Earned Doctorates" conducted by NORC in 2004 at the University of Chicago, it surprisingly turns out that SNU, with 1,665 recipients, is *second only to UC-Berkeley*, with 2,175 recipients, in the number of undergraduates who earned doctoral degrees in the United States between 1999 and 2003 (Gravois 2005). The undergraduate programs of SNU have seemed to serve as a second best "University College," which is a preparatory course for graduate programs in American research universities since the 1960s. Third, the Korean intellectual tradition of a strong and committed relationship between a mentor and his disciples becomes a productive and potent academic force for modern graduate programs. It is fascinating to see the indigenous academic tradition and practice playing a useful role as a crucial resource for empowering the international competitiveness of research universities in the knowledge-economy era.

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