

A Study on Measures to Improve Liberal Education Policies, through an Analysis of their Conflict with other Higher Education Policies: The Case of South Korea

Soo-kyung Kim¹ and Sook-Jeong Lee²

¹*Pyeongtaek University, Seodongdae-ro 3825, Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, 17869*

²*Sookmyung Women's University, Cheongpa-ro 47-gil 100, Yongsan-gu, Seoul, Korea, 140-742*

¹*kimsk@kcue.or.kr, ²suzanne@sookmyung.ac.kr*

Abstract

In Korea, reforms in college-level liberal education had a belated start, as they were introduced separately from higher education reforms. College-level liberal education reforms, which began in 2010 with a new emphasis on 'character' and 'convergence education', have still not become firmly established. This study aims to explain why college-level liberal education reforms have failed to revive liberal education in Korea and to offer some suggestions for change in this direction. We found that college-level liberal education reforms—with their emphasis on character and convergence—conflicted with the orientation of other higher education reforms, which emphasized excellence and competitiveness; Korean colleges dealt with financial difficulties after devoting most of their resources to the latter reforms, which brought in much larger sums of government assistance. As a result, college-level liberal education reform in Korea has remained perfunctory at best, relying on scarce financial support and overlooked by individual schools in their prioritization of objectives.

Keywords: *Higher education policies liberal education policies government financial assistance character and convergence fostering talent*

1. Introduction

New trends emerging during the late 20th century and early 21st century have encouraged world nations to pursue liberal education reforms in colleges in various forms to suit their individual situations.

With the recession following the 2008 economic crisis, Korea's colleges faced serious challenges, including the difficulty experienced by graduates in finding jobs (due to the slow economy), as well as the sharp decrease in college enrollment due to low birth rates and an aging population. As the number of high school graduates is expected to decrease by roughly 40% by 2022, colleges' financial difficulties are probably far from over. These factors have led to a scramble by schools to obtain more funding. Korea's colleges and universities have become overly preoccupied with aggressively pursuing keywords such as 'competitiveness', 'excellence', 'evaluation', and 'ranking' in order to secure government financial assistance,

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to the point of becoming one of the most strategy-driven industry in Korea. As a result, foundational courses in the traditional liberal curriculum—literature, history, and philosophy—have become marginalized, while more practical courses demanded by employers have gained prominence.

In 2010, in step with the global trends in liberal education reform and the domestic social demand for ‘character’ education in colleges and universities, the government announced policies aimed at strengthening college-level liberal education. As a part of these efforts, new financial assistance programs such as the ‘Convergence 3.0 project’ and the ‘Character education 3.0 project’ were launched. These programs placed emphasis on fostering talent suited for the global 21st century, with a focus on curricula containing strengthened character education and convergence education, as well as global capacities; the government offered financial assistance to schools that were proactive in instituting such changes.

World nations, led by the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have pursued full-scale efforts for higher education reform in order to enhance their national competitiveness, with a renewal of liberal education playing a prominent role. In the United States, college liberal education reforms have reflected both contemporary demands and traditional approaches, characterized by liberal education that is economic and competitive, balancing humanities and interdisciplinary approaches [1][2]. In the United Kingdom, reforms have begun with a re-conceptualization of traditional liberal education, pursuing a broader and more flexible school system in contrast with other countries’ preoccupation with excellence in teaching/learning [3]. Chinese efforts for liberal education reform, meanwhile, have placed a large emphasis on encouraging liberal arts research within undergraduate programs, developing cultural and educational programs, providing courses for the appreciation of classics and artistic masterpieces, building more culture-friendly campuses, and introducing various practical social [4].

Our study was motivated by one main question: why had Korea’s college liberal education failed while the United States, United Kingdom, and other key nations successfully developed and established their own models of liberal education? We explore the necessary implications for successfully establishing liberal education policies in Korea’s colleges and universities.

2. The history of liberal education in Korea universities

2.1. Separation of universities and settlement of liberal education (~1994)

Institutions of higher learning in Korea first appeared in their modern form following the liberation of Korea from the Japanese Empire on Aug. 15th, 1945 [5]. Korea’s college and university liberal education curricula were formed through the successive ‘legislation’ of curricula from 1945 to 1954, in which the curriculum at each school was based on legally stipulated requirements. The ‘Chosun Educational Council’ advised in 1946 that colleges should provide mandatory courses in the Korean language, cultural history, introductory natural sciences, and physical education. While the distinction between major courses and liberal courses was not yet made, these provisions became a de facto basis for the mandatory liberal education courses in Korea’s institutions of higher learning [6].

According to the Education Act and its ordinances enacted at the end of 1949 (following the founding of an official government of the Republic of Korea), the objective of general liberal education courses was clearly specified by defining them as ‘the courses needed for instilling the character suited for general leadership’. An amendment to the Act’s ordinances

in 1953 designated six subjects—Korean language, foreign languages, introductory philosophy, cultural history, introductory natural sciences, and physical education—as constituting the general body of liberal education courses, along with the installation of core curriculum. In 1952, Article 125 of the Education Act stipulated the first official ‘general liberal education courses’ [7].

The goal of college liberal education at this time was to foster the qualities needed to be citizen who has received higher learning: a basic understanding of humanity, society, and nature; eloquent language skills; the capacity for rational and critical thought; creative problem solving abilities; wholesome values; self-identification as a Korean with a cosmopolitan worldview; sophisticated appreciation of aesthetics; tireless dedication to self-improvement; and democratic leadership [8]. However, stipulating liberal education curricula by legislation led to problems such as inflexibility and uniformity in the curricula, instrumental courses in the liberal curriculum led to the repeated treatment of learning skill courses within the college-level liberal education curriculum, leading to vagueness in the exact content of higher liberal education [9]. Furthermore, because schools based their liberal education courses on the legally stipulated subjects, they did not develop new interdisciplinary courses, limiting the scope for exploring a more diverse array of academic fields. The lack of interdisciplinary liberal courses has persisted to this day.

2.2. Growth in the number of colleges and changes in liberal education (1995~1999)

Amid the ubiquity of college education, the social demand for new talent called for graduates with substantial expertise in professional fields in addition to a solid background in liberal education and foundational studies; this background was far preferable to graduates proficient in a specific field of foundational studies, as in the case of elite-level education (Seo 2010) Therefore, concern grew that the then-prevalent system of department-based school structure would be unable to train both professionals and liberal generalists.

The 5.31 Reforms of 1995 dealt mainly with reforms aimed at overcoming the limitations of department-based systems through moving to a faculty system of schools. The faculty system model was initially suggested as a solution to the problem of department-based system, in which liberal courses would be often dropped and marginalized in favor of major courses, limiting the course choices of students due to stringent credit requirements. However, once the Lee Myung Bak administration came to power in 2008 and enacted liberalization policies for schools based on its neo-liberalist policy stance, amendments made to the enforcement decrees of the Higher Education Act and the resulting changes in the college enrollment system effectively nullified the original reforms’ objectives of establishing the faculty system and wide-unit enrollment; these amendments reestablished the department-based system of student enrollment.

2.3. The crisis of universities and colleges and emergence of liberal education policies in Korea (2000~2016)

Driven by Koreans’ high demand for higher education, Korea’s colleges and universities have grown to the point that enrollment rates now exceed 80%. However, following the 2000s, job scarcity and the shrinking school-age population have precipitated an existential crisis for schools, which are now faced with school closures and downsizing.

Since 2009, the government has made policy efforts involving various financial assistance programs to encourage restructuring and innovation in the operation of schools. The financial assistance budgets have increased over the years, while the assistance programs have become

more diversified. Because schools that do not take part in government assistance programs are invariably exposed to financial crises, schools have been keen to respond to government evaluations.

In addition to the assistance programs that are a part of the 5.31 Reforms, new financial assistance programs have been introduced since 2010 by the Presidential Advisory Council on Science and Technology (2010.4.6) for the purpose of “prioritizing the strengthening of foundational liberal education in order to ensure that higher education is capable of enhancing the core competences demanded by the world of the future”.

There are two key government-led programs for strengthening liberal education: ‘Convergence 3.0’ and ‘Character education 3.0’. The former program is aimed at encouraging the development of diverse and creative liberal courses that fuse the rationality of the sciences, the imagination and insight of the humanities and the social sciences, and artistic creativity. This goal is to be accomplished by an overall enhancement in the quality of liberal courses, through the joint development and joint operation of convergence-related subjects offered in higher education. The latter program is aimed at supporting the development and operation of character-related courses and programs offered by schools, thereby expanding and enhancing character education, setting guidelines for character education as demanded by society and employers, and sharing the outcomes of the program with socially disadvantaged groups. These two financial assistance programs require schools to set up a steering committee for liberal education, hire personnel, and develop relevant programs. They also call for the introduction of new courses to provide the requisite ‘character education’ for graduates, as well as the creation of more liberal courses focusing on ‘character’.

3. The university’s choice in the conflict between two ways of liberal education reform and higher education reform in Korea

However, the 5.31 Reforms that formed the basis of higher education reform in Korea lack provisions for liberal education; government-led programs for strengthening liberal education were introduced only as late as 2010. Although these belated efforts to attain liberal education reform should have been consistent with the goals of the preexisting higher education reforms, problems soon surfaced because the values that informed the two lines of reform were incompatible with each other.

Table 1. Points of the conflict between higher education reforms and college liberal education reforms

5.31 Higher Education Reforms				Policies for Strengthening Liberal Education
Oriented toward the demands of education consumers	⇒	Enrollment system that meets the demands of the public	⇔	Joint inter-college development of convergence efforts
Focus on diversification & specialization	⇒	Inter-college competition through practical programs	⇔	Character education
Autonomy and accountability in school operation	⇒			
Higher-quality college education	⇒	Strengthening research	⇔	Emphasis on classical humanities

Higher education reforms in Korea were intended to alleviate the public’s psychological and financial burden, to encourage inter-college competition through government financial

assistance, and to foster talent that would be better suited to the industrial needs of employers. Faculty members were asked to focus on research rather than teaching.

During this process, changes occurred in the characteristics of higher education in Korea, and each school's 'founding ideologies' and 'unique traits', which had been present since the inception of Korean colleges and universities, came to be blurred. Furthermore, higher education reform's excessive emphasis on inter-college and inter-student competition gave rise to policy inconsistencies with respect to character education. Other ideological discrepancies are evident, such as requiring colleges to engage in joint development of convergence programs while at the same time emphasizing inter-college competition. In addition, the efforts of higher education reforms to create graduates suited to the industrial needs of employers sometimes precluded the pursuit of liberal education, such as the study of classics and the humanities. The graduate school-based research system is also at odds with undergraduate-based efforts to strengthen liberal education.

Amid the conflicts with higher education reforms, the main reason college-level liberal education reforms are given lower priority and ultimately fail to take root lies in the fact that, in the face of incompatibility between the goals of these reforms, schools tend to focus their resource investments on those fields that make them more eligible for larger financial assistance from the government.

[Table 2] summarizes the two largest government assistance programs (in terms of monetary sum) that emphasize liberal education. We use this to compare the content, scale of financial assistance, and evaluation criteria between the largest undergraduate support program, Advancement of College Education (ACE), and the more liberal education-focused 'Character Education 3.0' and 'Convergence 3.0'.

Table 2. Comparison between ACE and programs for strengthening liberal education

	ACE Program	Programs for Strengthening Liberal Education	
		Character 3.0	Convergence 3.0
Content	Enhancing core competence through strengthening foundational liberal studies Encouraging schools to organize and operate foundational liberal curricula in a systematic manner, focusing on the required core competences of higher education	Subjects for building character, coupled with hands-on education Non-academic programs relevant to character education	Development of multidisciplinary liberal education courses (humanities and science, science and literature, technology and art, etc.)
Scale of financial assistance	Total: 57.3 bil. KRW (27 schools) Per-school average: 2.3 bil. KRW	Total: 445 mil. KRW (selected participant group comprising 10 schools) Per-school average: 20-150 mil. KRW	Total: 114 mil. KRW (selected participant group comprising 6 schools) Per-school average: 19 mil. KRW at most per school
Evaluation Criteria	Graduates' employment rate Alumni enrollment rate Faculty placement rate Investment in student education Payout in scholarships Management of student affairs Ratio of undergraduates to total alumni Degree of internationalization	Operational goals and syllabus of character education subjects Student participation rate in character education subjects Methods and plans for gathering feedback from participant students Methods for evaluating participant students Gains from developing and	Goals of convergence-related courses Syllabus of convergence-related courses Teaching methods and tasks Teaching materials and reference texts

		operating character education subjects Expected effects (and secondary effects) of character education subjects Provision of facilities and equipment for program implementation Plans for spreading the gains from character education	Evaluation methods Gains from development and operation of joint courses Expected effects (and secondary effects)
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The notion of the importance of liberal education is included in all programs: the ACE program, ‘Character Education 3.0’, and ‘Convergence 3.0’. However, a closer look at the evaluation criteria reveals large inter-program differences. While the ACE program tends to emphasize the employment rates of graduates and the alumni enrollment rate, the two latter programs are mainly concerned with the implementation of character and convergence education courses, participation, teaching methods, and the provision of facilities and equipment. While the employment rate is the primary metric in the former program, the ‘character education’ aspect is the most important metric in the two latter programs.

While the ACE program covers both major and liberal courses, the actual financial assistance is awarded based on employment rates or enrollment rates, rather than the quality of the liberal education provided. Meanwhile, focusing efforts solely on the eligibility for assistance from the ACE program runs counter to the intended goals of policies for strengthening liberal education. This discrepancy is because high-quality liberal education is not sufficient for receiving adequate financial assistance from the government.

In particular, the ACE program provides 2.3 bil. KRW on average in financial assistance, while liberal education support programs only offer 150 mil. KRW on average. Furthermore, only those schools that do not participate in the ACE program are eligible for the liberal education support programs, meaning that schools have no option but to choose from either the ACE program or the liberal education support programs and concentrate their investment efforts accordingly. The paltry sums offered in assistance by ‘Character 3.0’ and ‘Convergence 3.0’ incentivizes schools to drop these programs and instead opt for the better-paying ACE program.

As a result, this system establishes an incentive structure in which schools with higher employment rates receive larger sums in financial assistance than those that provide better-quality liberal education, so the restructuring and operation of college-level liberal education naturally becomes more focused on meeting the requirements of better-paying financial assistance programs than on strengthening liberal education itself. Consequently, the liberal education curricula at schools are reorganized to be tailored to ‘employment’ rather than ‘character’. This focus has become the key reason that college-level liberal education policies have failed to take root in actual character-oriented liberal education courses, resulting in the offering of only minimal liberal education courses.

4. Discussion

A few central principles must be established in order to resolve the issues plaguing college-level liberal education reforms in Korea. First, financial crisis is a circumstance shared by schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other nations. Leading schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, among others, have braved the difficult circumstances and directed their efforts toward fostering liberally educated graduates through pursuing relevant reforms. This suggests that liberal education reforms

should be prioritized as a means of restoring the long-term and fundamental role of higher education in fostering liberally educated graduates. To succeed in this process, the budgets of programs for strengthening liberal education must be greatly expanded.

Second, college-level liberal education reforms in Korea must go beyond restoring the traditional values of character and convergence education, but should rather be provided to a degree sufficient to meet contemporary demands while also assisting the goals of higher education reforms to the extent possible. It is worth noting that liberal education reforms in the United States, arguably the most similarly oriented to the reforms in Korea, have maintained a balance between contemporary demands and traditional values. American undergraduate schools such as Carnegie Mellon University have maintained the professionalism and strict interdisciplinary nature of its liberal education curriculum while at the same time pursuing the popularization and democratization of liberal education.

Third, efforts for college liberal education reform in Korea must develop and implement differentiation strategies. Liberal education reforms in the United Kingdom have pursued flexible school systems and excellence in teaching/learning as their differentiation strategies, while Chinese schools have opted to develop cultural education programs, courses for the appreciation of classics and artistic masterpieces, and culture-friendly campuses, as well as efforts to strengthen the humanities through various practical social activities as part of their strategy.

Following a prolonged period of rapid growth, Korea's colleges and universities are currently faced with an existential threat, including turmoil in liberal education. Nevertheless, we hope Korea's institutions of higher learning will be able to transform this 'challenge into an opportunity' for growth through exerting their best efforts to develop a successful Korean-style model of liberal education.

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