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Education

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SOUTH KOREA'S EDUCATIONAL RENAISSANCE: A POLICY PROPOSAL

교육은 양동
이를 채우는
것이 아니라
불을 피우는
것이다

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Table of Contents

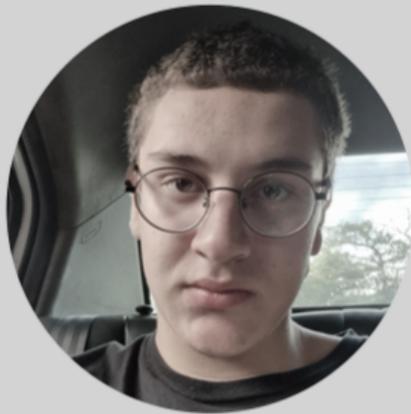
About the Authors	3
Introduction	4
Briefing Note	5
Assessment Methods in South Korea	6
The Neglect of Personal Development and Wellbeing	8
Gender and Sexual Education	10
Insight	12
The Rigidity of the Korean Education System	13
Harms to Personal Development	15
The Cultural Reproduction of Sexist Education Practices	18
Conclusion	21
Policy Recommendations	22
Action 1: Implementing more Coursework into the Curriculum	23
Action 2: A Revision of University Entrance Exams	25
Action 3: Introducing UNESCO Comprehensive Sexual Education	28
Conclusion	31

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Introduction

Education undeniably stands as a cornerstone in the edifice of personal and societal development. Its significance lies in its transformative capacity, capable of elevating individuals' lives by fostering intellectual enrichment and unlocking a plethora of unique opportunities. William Butler Yeats, recognizing the profound essence of education, aptly articulated, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." This illuminating analogy underscores the dynamic and inspirational nature of learning.

However, it's crucial to acknowledge that the process of kindling this metaphorical fire might inadvertently scorch the landscape in certain instances. A case in point is South Korea's education system, characterised by its issues surrounding exams, gender inequality, and a somewhat narrow scope of student opportunities and personal development, it raises questions about its efficacy in preparing students for the challenges of the future.

While South Korea boasts one of the highest literacy rates globally, there's a growing realisation that its educational paradigm might be ill-equipped to navigate the evolving demands of the contemporary world. This report sheds light on discernible issues within South Korea's education system, particularly the detrimental impact on mental health stemming from various facets such as assessment methods, gender disparities, and a lack of diversity in the curriculum. The ensuing exploration will dissect how South Korea's archaic educational framework inadvertently threatens the future of its students, and will provide solutions for the issue at hand, with the objective of formulating a curriculum prepared to take on the challenges of the coming century.

Education briefing note

Overview

This briefing note provides an outline of the core issues within the Korean Education system.

Assessment methods in South Korea place huge emphasis on the CSAT, creating inequality through private tutoring.

The Korean Education system, in emphasising academics, fails to support students' development in other areas of their lives.

Among these issues, Korean Education culture and lack of sexual education means girls suffer especially.

Assessments methods in South Korea:

The importance placed on one final examination has led to excessive private tutoring, increasing educational inequality.

- 2.9% of Korea's GDP is spent on private education related to the university entrance exam (Dawson, 2010).¹
- The annual figure of Korean students spending on private education is approximately 19 trillion won (\$19 billion), which is almost equivalent to the budget of a major city in Korea ²
- Free EBS Lectures and study materials intended to help students study for the CSAT has led to problems such as controlling test difficulties, depreciated value of textbooks in the classroom, and inappropriate test-preparation methods³

The college admissions system is an unstable and unpopular policy.

- The college admissions system has been changed 5 times over the past few decades (1954, 1962, 1964, 1969, 1982, 1993) leading some to argue that it is an unstable policy that is sensitive to public opinions ⁴
- There have been several recent scandals involving flawed items in elements of the CSAT. Since 2000, 5 flaws have been admitted in six different subjects⁵
- After growing criticism that Korean teenagers don't know enough about Korean history, the subject was made compulsory from 2017. This has led to accusations that the educational policy in South Korea is too strongly influenced by politics. ⁶

¹ Asia Pacific Education Review, Dawson, W, 2010, [Private tutoring and mass schooling in East Asia: reflections of inequality in Japan, South Korea, and Cambodia](#)

² Statistics Korea, 2013, [Private education in South Korea - statistics & facts](#)

³ Seoul: Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, Cho, J., Lee, M., Nam, J., Park, C., Park, J., & Shin, D, 2011, The analysis of the effects of the EBS education content use on school learners

⁴ Lee, C. S. , 2013, Reforming the college admission system of Korea: Asserting new solutions with 10 principles. http://21erick.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=11_5&wr_id=100002

Oh, S. H., Ahn, B. Y., Park, J. S., Kim, Y. P., Kim, A. J., Park, K. K., ... Nam, K. K. , 2008, Report on CSAT. Department of administrative reform. Seoul: Bobmunsa

Kim Y. C., Kim, M. S., Park, J. H., Sohn, J. S, 2007), The history of education policy in Korea (Report No. 2007-59). Seoul: Ministry of Education.

⁵ Suh Keong Kwon, Moonbok Lee & Dongkwang Shin, 2017, [Educational assessment in the Republic of Korea: lights and shadows of high-stake exam-based education system](#)

⁶ Ibid.

- Since college is seen as the only way for a successful career, and the CSAT is the only way to get into college, 73.3% of high school students are forced to go through the process.⁷

Students in South Korea lack motivation compared to other countries due to the nature of their exam system.

- Test scores, rather than interest, influence the subjects that students choose. 'Failure to obtain desired scores often means that the applicant has to wait another year and/or choose a different university or major that requires a lower cut score.' This has been given as the main explanation for why intrinsic motivation is lower compared to other countries.⁸
- Another explanation for lower motivation is the intense workload of Korean students. One study found that the average amount of free time students had was 2.5 hours a day.⁹
- Korean students' index level of intrinsic motivation was -2 in contrast to the OECD average, which was set as 0.¹⁰
- Further studies found that there was a continuous decrease in intrinsic motivation for maths throughout secondary school.¹¹

⁷ Statista, 2023, [Share of high school students enrolling in university in South Korea from 2013 to 2022](#)

⁸ Suh Keong Kwon, Moonbok Lee & Dongkwang Shin, 2017, [Educational assessment in the Republic of Korea: lights and shadows of high-stake exam-based education system](#)

⁹ J.M. Beach, 2011, [Children Dying Inside: A Critical Analysis of Education in South Korea](#)

¹⁰ OECD, 2013, Education at a glance, 2013, [Education at a Glance 2013](#)

¹¹ Hyunjoo Lee, Yongnam Kim, 2014, [Korean adolescents' longitudinal change of intrinsic motivation in learning English and mathematics during secondary school years: Focusing on gender difference and school characteristics](#)

The Neglect of Personal Development and Wellbeing:

The education system in South Korea has compromised the youth's ability to harness life skills.

- While South Korea boasts one of the world's costliest educational systems, its corporate employees are ranked only 29th out of 33 OECD member countries in terms of their problem-solving capabilities, defined as their capacity to understand and address ambiguous issues.¹²
- There have been no serious or sustained efforts to spread Critical Thinking pedagogy across the curriculum or throughout the education system in Korea.¹³
- About 90% of Korean students do not take the opportunity to learn more about personal finance¹⁴
- According to data from the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, a small but concerning 3.1 percent of Koreans aged 19 to 39 are experiencing social isolation¹⁵
- South Korean teens had the lowest scores among 36 nations which participated in the survey with scores of zero in areas of relationship promotion and social cooperation that valued highly voluntary participation in local and school communities¹⁶

¹² HankYoreh, 2017, [Report: South Korean workers strong in reading and writing. Lack problem solving skills](#)

¹³ John Michael McGuire, 2007, [Why has the Critical Thinking Movement not come to Korea?](#)

¹⁴ Roland Happ, Jinsoo Hahn, Kyungho Jang, Ines Rüter, 2022, [Financial knowledge of university students in Korea and Germany](#)

¹⁵ Theara Coleman, 2023, [Why South Korea's people are so lonely](#)

¹⁶ YonHap News Agency, 2011, [S. Korean teens' social skills among worst in world: report](#)

The phenomenon of kyoyungnyol, or 'education fever,' has severely affected the health of South Korean Students.

- Only 17% of students with mental health issues reported seeking help, with 67% of students' reason for refusal of professional help being that they were not aware of their underlying problems¹⁷
- In 2021, South Korea recorded a suicide rate of 26 per 100,000 people, the highest among OECD countries, with 44% of teenage deaths due to suicidal reasons¹⁸
- Korean teenagers get less sleep than the people in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, who average 8 hours and 22 minutes of sleep while their counterparts such as the United States averaging 10 to 11 hours¹⁹

Despite progressive reforms being established, there is still intense pressure for South Korean students to pursue conventional career pathways.

- From the year 2020 to 2022, there was a decline in the number of humanities (the study of literature, philosophy, history and the arts) majors, with 17 disappearing, while 23 new engineering majors were introduced at four-year universities in Seoul²⁰
- Only 20.7% of the South Korean student population attended vocational high school, with a large sum of 66.8% of those vocational high school graduates ending up pursuing higher education²¹
- South Korea's millennial population boasts a 70% college degree attainment rate; however, the surplus of highly educated individuals has led to labor market oversaturation, contributing to elevated unemployment rates²²

¹⁷ Jaewook Choi, 2023, [Promoting Mental Health Literacy at Schools in South Korea](#)

¹⁸ Raphael Rashid, The Guardian, 2023, [South Korea may look perfect, but behind the facade lies a devastating suicide crisis](#)

¹⁹ Hwang Jang-Jin, 2020, [S. Korean teens suffer from lack of sleep, survey finds](#)

²⁰ Ji Min Nami, 2023, [South Korea still needs more humanities education: For a more empathetic society](#), p. 34

²¹ Seonkyung Choi, 2021, [The impact of education levels and paths on labor market outcomes in South Korea: Focusing on vocational high school graduates](#)

²² Matthew Low and Reena Koh, 2023 [Meet the typical South Korean millennial: educated, overqualified for the job market, and part of the 'kangaroo tribe' that can't afford to leave their parents' homes](#)

Gender and sexual education:

Regarding academic pressure, while South Korean girls are more likely to suffer from poor mental health, boys commonly engage in self-destructive habits.

- Regarding South Korea, while only 25.3% of boys affirm facing a depressive mood persistently, 36.5% of the girls affirm the same.²³
- The same pattern can also be seen in results regarding suicidal characteristics: In suicidal ideation, more girls (16.1%) affirmed to have already experienced it than boys (10.5%). Equally in suicidal planning where girls' sample of affirmative answers (4.3%) is higher than the male one (3.5%).²⁴
- Regarding academic stress consequences, 25.2% of the girls have a greater history of self-harm when compared to 3.7% of the boys.²⁵
- High school senior boys' mental health problems can be seen reflected in destructive habits such as drinking and smoking. While 65.2% of the boys already had their first experience drinking and 31.9% smoking, only half of the girls reported a first drinking experience and 10.5% regarding smoking.²⁶

Old-fashioned, Sexist or even the lack of sexual education impacts the lives of South Korean women by being considered the main cause of sex crimes.

- The “Sexual Education Guideline” which recommends schools provide 15 hours per week of sexual education was created in 2015.²⁷ However, the guideline is not respected, revealing relates of “not even remembering receiving sex education”.²⁸
- About three-quarters of Seoul's population affirmed that sexual education was poorly taught in schools.²⁹

²³ Kim, H., Park, K.-H. and Park, S., 2021 [Gender Differences in Lifestyle and Mental Health among Senior High School Students in South Korea](#), p.2

²⁴ Ibid., p.8

²⁵ Lee, M.-S., Jhone, J.H., Kim, J.B., Kweon, Y.-S. and Hong, H.J., 2022 [Characteristics of Korean Children and Adolescents Who Die by Suicide Based on Teachers' Reports](#), p.1

²⁶ Kim, H., Park, K.-H. and Park, S., 2021 [Gender Differences in Lifestyle and Mental Health among Senior High School Students in South Korea](#), p.7

²⁷ Goh, D., 2020 [Misogynistic sex education in South Korea is making students have distorted view on sex](#)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Seung-Duk, K., Eun-Joo, K., Hye-Kyung, S. and Aeree, S., 2001, [Viewpoints of Korean senior high school students on school-based sex education](#), p.1

- In Seoul, only 68.8% of boys affirmed receiving sexual education.³⁰
- Besides not being compulsory, sexual education quality is harmed by a lack of materials, interactivity and time.³¹
- Molka means the act of secretly filming people in the least expected situation by the victim, usually related to sexual harassment crimes.³² More than 15,000 people were arrested between 2012 and 2017 in South Korea because of molka and, among the criminals, 98% were men while 87% of the victims were women.³³
- The "Nth Room Case" reveals the shortcomings of sexual education, as men blackmailed young women on Telegram due to their distorted views on sex, underscoring the need for better sexual education.³⁴

Girls are more affected by stress when it comes to Chaebols, top universities and academic performance

- The pressure during secondary education to join the large influential family monopoly, the Chaebols, who only accept students from the Top 3 Korean or Ivy League Universities is high and deeply affects student mental health.³⁵
- Regarding South Korea, more current studies see the impacts of pressures on mental health being greater for girls.³⁶
- Considering that girls tend to experience greater levels of stress than boys in all stress domains, the same is true for education³⁷. Within the range of 12-18 years old, girls (60.7%) indicated higher stress levels related to academic performance than boys (57.5%).³⁸
- Most pressure to succeed is related to academic performance, including joining top universities, girls tend to suffer more from stress than boys.³⁹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p.1

³² SOAS, n.d. [Digital sex crimes: Three lessons from South Korea](#)

³³ McCurry, J., 2018 ['A part of daily life': South Korea confronts its voyeurism epidemic](#)

³⁴ Hwang, L., 2022 [Sex Education in South Korea: What Can Be Done Better?](#)

³⁵ Jarvis, J.A., Corbett, A.W., Thorpe, J.D. and Dufur, M.J., 2020 [Too Much of a Good Thing: Social Capital and Academic Stress in South Korea](#), p.10

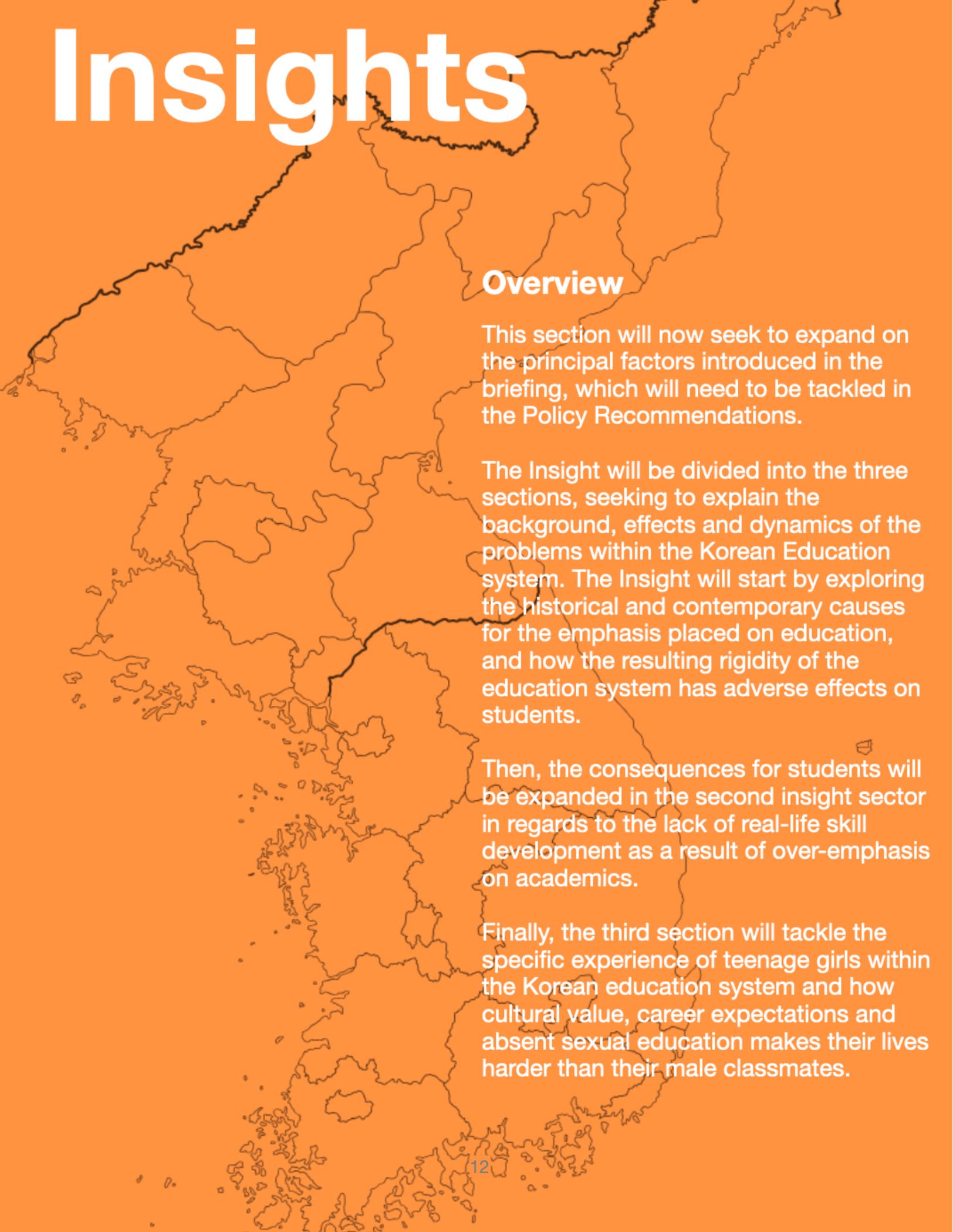
³⁶ Park, S., Jang, H. and Lee, E.-S., 2018 [Major Stressors among Korean Adolescents According to Gender, Educational Level, Residential Area, and Socioeconomic Status](#), p.2

³⁷ Ibid., p.2

³⁸ Ibid., p.5

³⁹ Ibid., p.5

Insights



Overview

This section will now seek to expand on the principal factors introduced in the briefing, which will need to be tackled in the Policy Recommendations.

The Insight will be divided into the three sections, seeking to explain the background, effects and dynamics of the problems within the Korean Education system. The Insight will start by exploring the historical and contemporary causes for the emphasis placed on education, and how the resulting rigidity of the education system has adverse effects on students.

Then, the consequences for students will be expanded in the second insight sector in regards to the lack of real-life skill development as a result of over-emphasis on academics.

Finally, the third section will tackle the specific experience of teenage girls within the Korean education system and how cultural value, career expectations and absent sexual education makes their lives harder than their male classmates.

The Rigidity of the Korean Education System, its Background, and its Consequences.

The colonial history of The Republic of Korea (ROK) provides one explanation for why the country has such a rigid educational system. Rigidity in this context refers to a set way of doing things in regards to the educational system in South Korea, which, reinforced by economic and cultural factors, is viewed as indispensable to society. Japan held control over Korea from 1910 until 1945. During these 35 years, many Koreans were deprived of educational opportunities. Only 14% of Koreans entered any kind of schooling and less than 1% of the entire Korean youth population ended up enrolling in secondary education and above.⁴⁰ This led the value of education to be heavily embedded in Korean culture coined 'education fever'. One of the early initiatives implemented in ROK's education was the 6-3-3-4 schooling system that is still in place. This marked the unification and standardisation of the education system and so paved the way for a more accessible, but flawed, system. The standardisation initiative, which was centred on a uniformed student selection system based solely on academic records, led to an overheating of academic competition and fuelled the growth of private tutoring. Hagwons (private education) became a tool for affluent families to enhance their children's test scores and secure early admissions to prestigious universities. There has been a 34-fold increase in the nation's spending on private tutoring compared to four decades ago.⁴¹ The annual figure of Korean students spending on private education is approximately 19 trillion won (\$19 billion), which is almost equivalent to the budget of a major city in Korea.⁴²

The structure of South Korea's labour market only adds to the importance of the education system in the country and the rigidity with which it is managed. The labour market is mostly service based which results in a high demand for very educated individuals. In 2021, 70.05% of employment was in services, 24.6% was in industry and 5.35% was in agriculture.⁴³ Between 2000 and 2019, primary education employment decreased whilst tertiary employment increased considerably.⁴⁴ This is the case even in low paid quintiles that do not require high skill levels, suggesting that over-education is an issue. This explains why there is not a significant amount of resistance against the

⁴⁰ Ki Seok Kim, 1998, [The Increase of Educational Opportunity in Korea under the Japanese Occupation: For Whom the Bell Told](#)

⁴¹ Kee Ho Choi, 2023, [The Cause of Institutionalized Private Tutoring in Korea: Defective Public Schooling or a Universal Desire for Family Reproduction?](#)

⁴² Statista, 2024, [Private education in South Korea - statistics & facts](#)

⁴³ World Bank, 2023, [South Korea: Distribution of employment by economic sector from 2011 to 2021](#)

⁴⁴ Korean Labour and Income Panel Study [Structural changes in South Korea employment \(2000-2021\)](#)

intensity of the current education system, as it is believed that the rigorous system is necessary for employment in the thriving sectors. The weight education holds in South Korean society justifies the rigidity of the educational system.

There have been some attempts to reduce excess private tutoring. The most significant of these are free EBS lectures and study materials intended to help students study for the CSAT. The Korean Government announced in 2010 that the linkage rate of the EBS materials and the CSAT would be expanded up to 70%. This way, students can prepare for the CSAT exams simply by relying on the EBS' CSAT study materials alone.⁴⁵ However, these efforts have led to problems such as controlling test difficulties, depreciated value of textbooks in the classroom, and inappropriate test-preparation methods.⁴⁶ A survey published in 2009 found that only 25% of respondents had reduced their private education expenses, and 65% of respondents answered that educational opportunities were provided uniformly by the EBS lectures.⁴⁷ This shows that there is still a long way to go until the system can be considered fair. The continued emphasis on private tutoring as a result of standardised academic examinations in South Korea only helps to exacerbate social inequality between those that can afford the tuition versus those who cannot.

In summary, there are two overlapping explanations as to why South Korea has such an intense, rigid education system. Firstly, the importance of education to South Korean culture has deep historical roots, as many South Koreans were historically deprived of education. Secondly, the South Korean labour market is mostly service-based and so it has come to be accepted that a stronger education system leads to better employment opportunities for South Koreans. It is important to note that the rigidity of ROK's education system is not without side effects. The intensity of the education system has been noted to have adverse effects on personal development and wellbeing, not only for the children but the community as a whole.

⁴⁵ Suh Keong Kwon, Moonbok Lee & Dongkwang Shin, 2017, [Educational assessment in the Republic of Korea: lights and shadows of high-stake exam-based education system](#)

⁴⁶ Seoul: Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, Cho, J., Lee, M., Nam, J., Park, C., Park, J., & Shin, D, 2011, The analysis of the effects of the EBS education content use on school learners

⁴⁷ Jeong, Young-Sik ;Kim, Young-Sik, 2009, [An Analysis of the Uses of EBS Lectures for the CSAT and the Reducing Effects of Private Educational Expenditures](#)

Harms to Personal Development.

This Insight section will aim to elucidate how the rigidity inherent in the South Korean education system, extensively discussed in the briefing and insight, adversely affects the personal development of South Korean students. It will commence by examining various facets of personal development, such as Health and Wellbeing and Life Skills. These dimensions of personal development have been compromised and undergone significant repercussions due to the longstanding establishment of the education system. Furthermore, this insight will delve into deciphering how the neglect of these crucial aspects of personal development can result in tangible harms. If left unaddressed, these consequences may lead to severe implications for the future.

As mentioned in the previous insight, the 6-3-3-4 schooling system has led to the persistent proliferation of hagwon centres, contributing to a 34-fold increase in the nation's spending on private tutoring compared to four decades ago.⁴⁸ Importantly, this system has played a subconscious yet significant role in exacerbating educational inequality and hindering social cohesion, perceiving education as a memorisation game rather than an avenue to cultivate rational thinking by placing importance on physical, artistic and civic education.⁴⁹

As the tacit social rule assumes the participation in these privatised educational activities as essential for academic competitiveness and a ticket to socioeconomic success, South Korean adolescents spend most of their time on academics. As a result, South Korean students get less sleep than their counterparts across the world, a proven cause of depressive symptoms.⁵⁰ Although study hours were generally considered to have a positive influence on adolescents' development, Korean adolescents experienced more negative emotions than American adolescents, displaying the effects of the education panic (i.e stress and anxiety about education excellence) has on the youth's psychological well-being.⁵¹

South Korea has cultivated a reputation for producing highly intellectual citizens, ranking 5th globally in their PISA performance, which assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science. However, Korean education

⁴⁸ DH Lee, 2022, [Education in South Korea](#)

⁴⁹ Kee Ho Choi, 2023, [The Cause of Institutionalized Private Tutoring in Korea: Defective Public Schooling or a Universal Desire for Family Reproduction?](#)

⁵⁰ DH Lee, 2022, [Education in South Korea](#)

⁵¹ Jiyeon Lee, Kyungsun Yang, Yuen Mi Cheon, 2018, [Daily Time-Use Patterns, Psychological Well-Being, and Family Socioeconomic Status of South Korean Adolescents: A Mixture Modeling](#)

fails to establish an education that fosters democratic citizens to participate in resolving real-life issues.⁵²

Despite initiatives implemented to bolster democratic citizens such as the 1997 Fourth Reform Plan which included upgrading the civic education system to foster experts on North Korea and reunification, they severely lack real life application. It has not been successful in developing a mature education for democracy with the destruction of law and order occasionally seen as a virtue, making it challenging to find civic-minded individuals when social conflict and disintegration affect people's daily lives. For example, teachers who are expected to exemplify democratic values end up prioritising their own self-interests. There is a noticeable decline in their enthusiasm and sense of duty as teachers, with a growing inclination to withdraw into their own personal spheres.⁵³

As a result, Korea is bearing the brunt of social conflicts stemming from a failure to embrace democratic values—an essential set of life skills that cannot be obtained through passing a written examination. Significantly, this has resulted in citizens who are less attuned to global issues and less prepared to participate in the international community, further substantiated by the fact that a high number of Koreans go abroad to receive good education, compared to foreign students seeking education in Korea.⁵⁴

While Korea's commitment to fostering a knowledge-based economy is evident in its remarkable success in industrialization and science technology, particularly reflected in its top-ranking education system with efficient internet distribution and utilisation, there is a growing concern. Despite achieving accolades in global assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and boasting one of the highest higher education completion rates worldwide, there is a fundamental disconnect.

The current trajectory reveals a paradox: an educational system that excels on paper but fails to translate that success into individual lives. Many individuals, despite their educational achievements, find themselves ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their social lives. It's as if the emphasis on academic prowess has come at the expense of personal development, resulting in a decline in both life satisfaction and overall quality of life.

⁵² Data Panadas, 2023, [Pisa Scores by Country 2023](#)

⁵³ DH Lee, 2022, [Education in South Korea](#)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

In essence, the Republic of Korea's education system, while successful in academic metrics, appears to have neglected the holistic development of its citizens. There is a pressing need for a paradigm shift in education ideology, one that not only prioritises academic excellence but also nurtures the essential skills and attitudes required for a fulfilling and successful life. The spirit of learning needs rekindling, and a comprehensive review of the education system is imperative to ensure that it not only prepares individuals for academic success but equips them for a future that extends beyond the classroom.

The Cultural Reproduction of Sexist Education Practices.

The pervasiveness of Chinese Confucian Philosophy, a principal tenet in contemporary South Korean culture, upholds male chauvinist views in the country's education system.⁵⁵ The pattern of South Korean girls suffering from poorer mental health is not random and its origins are a reflection of Confucianism in society. Confucianism's sexist roots can be seen, for instance in how they divide marriage hierarchically. The relationship between husband-wife, according to Confucian philosophy is hierarchical with men being more powerful⁵⁶ which can be seen through the housework division according to gender. South Korean women tend to quit their jobs to become housewives while men join the job market.⁵⁷ As a consequence, being a "trophy wife" is a reality for many women since having a career would not be ideal following South Korean cultural ideologies. In conclusion, male domination sets women far from employment and education⁵⁸ as an effect of Confucian hierarchic "rules" and, as an effect, the Korean education system is also not prepared to help women succeed to the same extent as their male counterparts.

In addition to the Confucian influence on structuring the educational system, South Korea suffers from the monopoly of Chaebols such as Samsung, SK, and Hyundai,⁵⁹ whose prestige in the job market creates pressures for students to land positions within these companies. Chaebols are "large, often family-run, conglomerates that dominate the South Korean economy"⁶⁰ and because of their power, they specifically choose students from the most competitive universities in the country.⁶¹ For instance, in 2015, 56% of South Korean GDP came from chaebols.⁶² This economic power leads many students to think that their careers amount to working at a chaebol or nothing.⁶³

This pressure deeply affects students' mental health,⁶⁴ with the consequences being more severe for South Korean girls.⁶⁵ The higher pressure to succeed educationally for

⁵⁵ Koh, E., 2008 [Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?](#)

⁵⁶ Meier, J., 2014 [Confucius's Glass Ceiling](#)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kuhn, A., 2021 [A woman takes a lead role in Confucian ceremonies, breaking a new path in South Korea.](#)

⁵⁹ Allison., 2023 [Korean Chaebols explained: the empires of South Korea](#)

⁶⁰ Time., 2023 [Why South Korea's Latest Cram School Crackdown Is Doomed to Fail | Time](#)

⁶¹ Frayer, L., 2017 [South Korean Youth Struggle To Find Jobs After Years Of Studying For Tests](#)

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Frayer, L., 2017 [South Korean Youth Struggle To Find Jobs After Years Of Studying For Tests](#)

⁶⁴ Jarvis, J.A., Corbett, A.W., Thorpe, J.D. and Dufur, M.J., 2020, [Too Much of a Good Thing: Social Capital and Academic Stress in South Korea](#), p.10

⁶⁵ Park, S., Jang, H. and Lee, E.-S., 2018, [Major Stressors among Korean Adolescents According to Gender, Educational Level, Residential Area, and Socioeconomic Status](#), p.2

girls is culturally preserved, having been happening since the beginning of chaebols' existence. This pressure only helps to worsen gender inequality between young boys and girls where when it comes to depressive moods, suicidal intentions and planning and self-harm episodes, South Korean girls experienced this more than boys.⁶⁶

Besides that, the academic pressure of studying for a job within a Chaebol company is one of the main reasons for high-stress rates and damage to students' mental health in South Korea.⁶⁷ The damages of male chauvinism on mental health caused and preserved by Confucian behavioural rules and Chaebols are clearly illustrated by the consequences quoted above and further when it comes to sex crimes against south Korean girls by their classmates

Chaebols, by creating this pressure on students to attend higher education guides the way secondary education is structured and, by doing it, deviates focus and money from other important educational roles such as sexual education. The archaic, sexist or even the lack of sexual education in schools is a consequence of Chaebols' influence on the Korean education system. Due to the pressure to achieve higher education created by Chaebols, entering a university is a dream for many South Korean students. In that way, the huge investments in university entrance education⁶⁸ and test scores being the focus of students⁶⁹ lead to an illusion that higher education is the only path to success.

Consequently, second-degree education is turned to the university joining process, ignoring equally essential things such as quality sexual education. Besides that, the male chauvinist culture created and preserved by Confucian strands on South Korean people's morality makes sexual education not a priority.

As an result, sexual education is poorly taught⁷⁰ and the newest educational guidelines on the topic are useless. On the other hand, sexual harassment, violence and sexual related crimes became common. As a consequence of the old-fashioned, bad quality

⁶⁶ Kim, H., Park, K.-H. and Park, S., 2021 [Gender Differences in Lifestyle and Mental Health among Senior High School Students in South Korea](#), p.2

⁶⁷ Lee, M.-S., Jhone, J.H., Kim, J.B., Kweon, Y.-S. and Hong, H.J., 2022, [Characteristics of Korean Children and Adolescents Who Die by Suicide Based on Teachers' Reports](#)

⁶⁸ Asia Pacific Education Review, Dawson, W, 2010, [Private tutoring and mass schooling in East Asia: reflections of inequality in Japan, South Korea, and Cambodia](#)

⁶⁹ Suh Keong Kwon, Moonbok Lee & Dongkwang Shin, 2017, [Educational assessment in the Republic of Korea: lights and shadows of high-stake exam-based education system](#)

⁷⁰ Seung-Duk, K., Eun-Joo, K., Hye-Kyung, S. and Aeree, S., 2001, [Viewpoints of Korean senior high school students on school-based sex education](#), p.1

and sexist⁷¹ sexual education in schools, molka, the act of secretly filming a person in an intimate situation is common. With men being usually the aggressors and women the victims,⁷² molka illustrates the lack of sexual education in the South Korean situation. Cases of sexual abuse on the internet such as the Nth Room Case⁷³ also happen and reveal this lack of good quality sexual education in South Korea, which would act as a method of protection for women and review a historical problem that continues due to the influence of Confucian culture and institutions such as Chaebols. The impacts of chaebol and Confucianism male chauvinist ideologies are drastic to, mostly girls, mental health and make it clear that South Korean education requires reforms.

⁷¹ Hwang, L., 2022, [Sex Education in South Korea: What Can Be Done Better? | by Leo Hwang | The Ends of Globalization](#)

⁷² McCurry, J., 2018 [A part of daily life: south korea confronts its voyeurism epidemic sexual harassment](#)

⁷³ Hwang, L., 2022 [Sex Education in South Korea: What Can Be Done Better? | by Leo Hwang | The Ends of Globalization](#)

Conclusion:

- The Korean Labour market is a big explanatory factor for the rigidity of the Korean education system, with many Koreans believing it is the reason for the country's economic success.
- The emphasis placed on the CSAT and academic performance in general causes South Korean students to have some of the worst mental health in the world.
- The importance good grades hold for South Koreans, and the rigidity of the education system means many students spend more time studying, and less time socialising or building up their life skills.
- The prevalence of Confucian philosophy in Korean culture also bleeds over to the Korean Education system, with very little emphasis on girls' needs in school as many are expected to stay home and help their husbands when they get older anyway.
- The dominance of Chaebols in the South Korean Economy means academic education holds greater importance than sexual education, a large reason for the culture of sexual harassment of young Korean girls.

Policy Recommendations

Overview

Now having looked at the primary issues that plague the Korean education system, our goal is to start a discourse and posit ways to solve these problems. The policy recommendations we have chosen have been selected for their feasibility and proven results within other education systems, with the right caveats introduced to make them right for the Korean education system in particular.

Given the cultural significance of education in South Korea, we have also been careful not to suggest too much change, but merely presenting a shift in the overton window in areas that we feel are more open to being altered. It is of the utmost importance to always frame these policy decisions within the Pre-established framework of the ROK.

Action 1: Increasing the prominence of coursework within the curriculum.

Action 2: Revising the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT).

Action 3: Implementing the UNESCO Comprehensive Sexual Education Curriculum in Korean Public Schools.

Action 1: Increasing the prominence of coursework and teacher assessment in the Korean education system.

This policy will recommend moving away from admitting students to university in South Korea solely based on CSAT scores. Instead, it proposes a system like the US where a combination of in-class performance, coursework and examinations is used. For example, students in the US apply for colleges with an average of all their grades in the 4 years of high school, teacher's opinions, and the results of various examinations such as SATs in English and Maths and AP results in specific chosen subjects.⁷⁴ An increase in in-class assessment as opposed to exams would help to alleviate the excessive use of private tutoring in Korea, which is being driven by the intensity of the examination system. Because less emphasis would be on final examinations and more on consistent performance, there would be less opportunity to benefit from the additional content that is only accessible to the children from higher socio-economic backgrounds. It would also stop the intense public backlash that the CSAT question papers have received in recent decades, as individual questions on exams would be a very insignificant portion of a student's results. Finally, it would encourage students to choose subjects based on interest and not purely exam results, which would improve motivation.

The main advantage of this policy is that it reduces some of the pressures on Korean students whilst the retention of some formal examinations means that it would likely be accepted by the Korean public, for whom high standards of education is important. Furthermore, it is not a very difficult or costly policy to implement as it simply involves counting the work that students are already doing in their final high school grades. This will need very limited additional training for teachers. There would need to be some minor changes to CSAT subjects to involve an element of coursework, but this is not overly difficult to carry out.

One criticism of the US education system is that it does not teach students higher-order skills. NAEP results show that there are significant weaknesses in problem solving, analysis, statistical inference, and comprehension of complex passages of prose.⁷⁵ However, this policy is not proposing that South Korea copies the US education system. It simply needs to take inspiration from their system of less emphasis on exams. Teacher-based assessment systems are often criticised for increasing teacher workload because it requires teachers to gather evidence on student's abilities which could be seen as a source of stress. One report on this subject identifies three ways in which the roles of teachers have been expanded – they have become the primary assessor; they

⁷⁴ Kings Education, 2023, [Education in the UK vs US: Full Comparison \(2023\)](#)

⁷⁵ Phi Delta Kappan, 1993, [Strengths and weaknesses of American education](#)

are responsible for setting the standards and for the moderation of assessments.⁷⁶ On the other hand, a teacher-based assessment system may reduce some of the stress associated with having your test scores judged and compared with others. Another commonly cited issue with teacher-based assessment is reliability. Nevertheless, there are several studies to suggest that teacher-based assessment can be very reliable. When assessing the reliability of work samples or portfolios, Masters and McBryde found that the Pearson product-moment reliability index was 0.94.⁷⁷ Similar results have been found by McCurry and MacKenzie (2006),⁷⁸ Falk et.al (2007)⁷⁹ and Lindstrom (2007).⁸⁰ In all these studies, the systems being studied had implemented strong teacher training in assessment.⁸¹ This means that an important part of implementing this policy in Korea would be to provide additional teacher training in how to carry out assessments. When it comes to coursework and portfolios, there are also concerns surrounding plagiarism and intervention in student's work from parents or teachers. This criticism can be counterbalanced by the benefits associated with students working with teachers to witness how their work can be improved.

Overall, this policy aims at shifting the focus and end goal of the Korean education system to something more holistic and ultimately more representative of students' abilities. A more coursework-oriented examination system would greatly reduce the emphasis on the final university examinations, and allow students to base their time in schools not only around this exam but also around other productive facets of their life not related to education. Arguably, this form of assessment might be considered more effective for university admission, as the continued performance of students at high levels would be more telling of their abilities than one exam they may do badly on due to stress.

⁷⁶ Stanley et al, 2009, [Review of Teacher Assessment: Evidence of What Works Best and Issues for Development](#)

⁷⁷ Masters, G. N. and McBryde, B, 1994, [An investigation of the comparability of teachers' assessments of student folios / Geofferey N. Masters , Bruce McBryde](#)

⁷⁸ McCurry, D, and MacKenzie, M, 2006. [Teachers Making Contextualised, Group Judgements of Generic Skills and Dispositions](#)

⁷⁹ Falk, B., Ort, S. W., & Moirs, K, 2007. [Keeping the Focus on the Child: Supporting and Reporting on Teaching and Learning With a Classroom-Based Performance Assessment System](#)

⁸⁰ Lindström, L, 2007. [Assessing craft and design](#)

⁸¹ Stanley et al, 2009, [Review of Teacher Assessment: Evidence of What Works Best and Issues for Development](#)

Action 2: A Revision of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) - University Entrance Exam.

Middle and high school students in Korea find themselves dedicating the majority of their days and nights to school, influenced by their own and their families' deep-seated belief in education as a powerful tool for elevating socioeconomic status and fostering social mobility. This conviction has led virtually all students, including high achievers, to engage in private tutoring, commonly referred to as hagwons, with the goal of excelling in the college entrance exam and securing admission to prestigious universities, often associated with higher earning potential. Consequently, these students have limited time for social interactions and practical application of their acquired knowledge as extensively explained in the insight. This entrenched lifestyle has also precipitated a surge in mental health issues among Korean students, manifesting in severe instances of school violence, bullying, and tragically, suicide.⁸²

As a result, it becomes evident that the root cause of the stunted personal development of Korean teenagers lies in the intense focus on the college entrance exam. Addressing this critical issue calls for a policy that reevaluates the methods used to assess Korean teenagers applying for universities.

CSAT, or better known as College Scholastic Ability Test is South Korea's university entrance exam that has been long known as one of the most stressful exams in the world. The CSAT is a grueling eight hour examination, a day in which brings the entire nation to a halt. Work starts an hour later, enabling students to get to their testing centers on time; planes are grounded during the listening portion so as not to create any extra noise. Younger classmates flood the streets to support upperclassmen. Parents pray together that the many hours of study their children have put in will pay off. Significantly, these actions showcase the importance of this is in providing the trajectory of a South Korea's students future with the test being facing long term controversy due to the nature of test overemphasize rote learning.⁸³

Nevertheless, despite South Korea's weight on CSAT, it can be contended that this exam will be difficult to sustain in years to come. This is due to the fact that traditional academic skills such as solving equations or learning computer code which are key elements focused in the CSAT will soon become obsolete in a world in which computers can perform such techniques more quickly and accurately than humans. All information-

⁸² HJ Choi, 2013, [Historical Analysis of the Policy on the College Entrance System in South Korea](#)

⁸³ Kwon Moon, 2018, [The Korean CSAT is the exam that stops a nation](#)

based jobs, in fields as diverse as journalism and medicine, will be under threat by 2050.⁸⁴

Surviving and thriving in the 21st century will demand key skills, namely emotional intelligence (imagining a computer caring for a sick person or a child remains a challenge) and the capacity to navigate change. Foreseeing the future reveals an inevitable surge in the pace of change, encompassing the rise of AI and a changing climate. Successfully managing such uncertainty necessitates adaptability and psychological resilience, qualities best nurtured by an education system that prioritizes the "four Cs": critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Hence, unless prompt measures are taken by the Korean Education System, South Korea is at risk of lagging behind due to its lack of holistic education.

Therefore, my policy recommendation would be for Universities to dedicate a section in which students are required to write an essay detailing the trials and tribulations they have gone through in the past. This can strengthen South Korean students' personal development as they would become incentivised to engage themselves in community building and extracurricular activities. By immersing themselves in experiences beyond the four walls of their classroom, they can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and also their motivations, alluding them to use the knowledge they gain in real life and strengthen their emotional intelligence. It can be proven that students possessing elevated emotional intelligence excel in: 1) managing emotions such as test anxiety and school-related frustration; 2) establishing meaningful connections with both teachers and peers; and 3) comprehending human motivations, interactions, and social relationships. In the U.S, many colleges and universities require applicants to submit personal statements or essays, which provide an opportunity for applicants to showcase their writing skills, express their personal experiences, and articulate their goals.⁸⁵

However, one must also take into account the feasibility of assessing the qualitative essays of these South Korean students. This argument can be substantiated by the dean of admissions from a major university in Seoul who argued that if student qualitative records are reflected in regular admissions it could add to the burden of university preparation rather than reducing it'. "Designing admissions based only on this reform proposal is daunting," he said, noting highly limited data on qualitative evaluation'.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ The Guardian, 2020, [Instead of rote learning useless facts, children should be taught wellbeing](#)

⁸⁵ MacCann, C., Jiang, Y., Brown, L. E. R., Double, K. S., Bucich, M., & Minbashian, A. (2020), [Emotional intelligence predicts academic performance: A meta-analysis.](#)

⁸⁶ Yumi Jeong, 2020, [Lukewarm reaction to university admissions exam changes](#)

Furthermore, one can argue that while this initiative enhances personal development, it may inadvertently exacerbate inequality. Students from higher-income families often have access to more resources, enabling them to produce well-researched essays. The ability to hire a paid professional third party or receive assistance from an upper-middle-class parent can easily polish these essays. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain extracurricular activities may be accessible only to the affluent, and in some cases, they might even be entirely fabricated, as demonstrated by the infamous Operation Varsity Blue scandal. A recent working paper, authored by individuals affiliated with the Student Narrative Lab at Stanford, reveals that, quantified through a computer program, essay content exhibits a higher correlation with household income than SAT scores do.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, the incorporation of qualitative assessments should not be overlooked. A 2019 survey of admission professionals highlighted essays as the foremost "soft factor" and the fourth-most crucial overall factor, trailing only grades, curriculum strength, and standardised test scores. To address this, universities could establish clear and dependable essay prompts and scoring rubrics. Such measures would enable all high school teachers, regardless of geographical location or income background, to guide students in essay preparation, thereby enhancing overall effectiveness.

Abolishing the CSAT isn't advisable given its enduring significance, especially within the South Korean community. However, imperative enhancements are needed. For instance, the college-administered test should strategically assess applicants' higher-order thinking skills in alignment with the high school curriculum, offering a paradoxical solution to the issue of private tutoring. To achieve this ambitious objective, the test must feature authentic problem-solving questions demanding a profound understanding of the subject, thereby reducing the necessity for private tutoring. In contrast, the prevalent practice of using test material unrelated to high school subjects may exacerbate the demand for costly tutoring services, given the limitations on high school teachers' time and resources to cover extensive topics. Further, the test questions should be set from information available within the high school curriculum so that high school teachers can focus on providing instruction on root principles rather than the superficial knowledge of subjects.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Arvind Ashok, 2021, [The persistent Grip of social class on college admissions](#)

⁸⁸ Hee Jun Choi, Ji Hye Park, 2013, [Historical Analysis of the Policy on the College Entrance System in South Korea](#)

Action 3: UNESCO Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) Implementation in Korean Public Schools.

Chaebols and Confucianism effects are deeply immersed in South Korean culture and will be hard to change their historical effects on South Korean education and how it affects women's mental health. However, by observing what nowadays education neglects, acting against it could be a great first step and maybe work as an eye-opener to the next generations. In that way, implementing useful, functional and dynamic sexual education as a mandatory subject in South Korean public schools could be a policy that would start the process of broader change.

UNESCO Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) would be a great addition to public education. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a UNESCO-created curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about sexuality. It equips young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to care about their health and develop respectful social and sexual relationships.⁸⁹ The addition of this curriculum to secondary schools would open students' eyes to the gender inequalities that pervade Korean culture. CSE has Gender Equality as one of its key values and, besides raising awareness and teaching young students the many important contents of sexual education, in South Korea, Gender Equality must also be a primary focus of the education system. The cultural damage of imposed male chauvinism and its effects on education and girls' mental health is a huge problem which requires proper education to combat on the ground.

Exposing students to gender egalitarian education from a young age would mitigate the reproduced culture of male chauvinism and over time the impact on mental health suffered by women. Solving a culturally imposed problem is not done quickly, the CSE project would need to be imposed on education as soon as possible and the effect would only be seen as generations pass. Despite the urgency, adopting this route to solve the mental health effects created by gender inequality in education is a safe route since it would have more longevity than other strategies. The imposition of sexual education in a functional way would insert gender equality into South Korean culture and make it part of younger people's daily lives.

Adopting new methods of a sexual education subject is important since the subject was already created but it does not work for students. The difference between CSE would be its implementation process which contains many important factors that the South

⁸⁹ UNESCO, 2017 [What is comprehensive sexuality education?](#)

Korean “Sexual Education Guideline” from 2015 lacks.⁹⁰ An example is teacher-appropriate training. Besides teachers’ training process being patterned, their proficiency is guaranteed by a Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education (PLSSE) assessment, which is given by schools.⁹¹ In addition, the whole process and the achievement of project goals are monitored by UNESCO itself, which creates pressure on governments and schools to make it work.⁹²

As happened in El Salvador, CSE implementation⁹³ would be made through a partnership between the South Korean Government and UNESCO, more specifically, the South Korean Ministry of Education (MOE). The CSE implementation in schools would be publicly financed and would align with Lee Ju-ho’s, the South Korean Minister of Education, goals since he is well-known for his innovative education policies.⁹⁴ His new policy to curb private education spending⁹⁵ could work as an indicator of where to redirect money to sexual education projects in public schools.

Of course, there are potential problems with this policy. The CSE project may be not culturally accepted by the South Korean population since their culture is staunchly based on Confucianism and Chaebols. However, CSE gives a lot of importance to community engagement since they believe sexual education results depend on community support, a facet of Korean culture that is also very well established. Focusing on young people, researching to deeply know the target community, and engaging with the media are strategies suggested by UNESCO when implementing the CSE and better solutions to the cultural problem could be discussed with members of the MOE.

The CSE implementation in schools presented success in countries such as Sweden, Norway and Zimbabwe which despite focusing on STI awareness, the project was also publicly financed, with community engagement taking a hugely important role in its implementation. By changing the focus in the South Korean case study to gender equality awareness with a focus on girls' mental health, success could also be achieved.

By adopting the CSE methodology to reform sexual education subjects and making it mandatory in public schools, public awareness of the next generation will be greater in

⁹⁰ Goh, D., 2020, [Misogynistic sex education in South Korea is making students have distorted view on sex](#)

⁹¹ UNESCO, n.d., [Comprehensive Sexuality Education Implementation Toolkit](#)

⁹² UNESCO, n.d., [Monitoring and evaluation of CSE programmes](#)

⁹³ UNESCO, n.d. [Learnings from CSE practitioners in El Salvador, Laos and Zimbabwe: operational research report](#)

⁹⁴ Dong-hwan, K., 2022 [Education minister candidate returns after 10 years to reshape schools](#)

⁹⁵ Yim, H., 2023, [South Korea aims to curb private education spending, axe 'killer questions'](#)

sexual equality issues in South Korea. In that way, public pressure, policies by political leaders and media pressure on the government would urge for changes in sexual inequality, improving equality in education. Besides that, by being educationally imposed, gender equality would become part of South Korean next-generation culture. As an effect of greater awareness of the gender inequality situation and the further changes this policy would create, not only the pressure caused above girls on education would improve but their access to better options of higher education and employability would also be higher.

Conclusion

Despite the intricate challenges embedded in the current South Korean education system, initiating transformative change becomes attainable through the implementation of succinct and targeted solutions. By diversifying methods for evaluating students in university admissions, reassessing antiquated approaches, and introducing comprehensive sexual education in public schools, a systematic shift is conceivable.

Undoubtedly, education stands as a cornerstone in any society, shaping the professionals who will propel the nation's economy into the future. Yet, solely adopting an economic perspective focused on financial outcomes with an emphasis on quantitative and objective curriculum overlooks the human aspect. A more humane approach to education, prioritizing the mental health and well-being of students, not only aligns with our shared values but also yields positive financial results as the next generation enters the labour market.

These proposed improvements envision a brighter future, aiming to reshape education into a catalyst for positive societal transformation. By fostering a healthier, more inclusive, and equitable environment for South Korean students as well as a more rounded holistic education we aspire to pave the way for a more promising tomorrow.

