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Title	Recent Trends and Policy Directions in Korean Higher Education
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Citation	高等教育ジャーナル : 高等教育と生涯学習, 33, 15-22
Issue Date	2026-04
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.14943/J.HighEdu.33.15">https://doi.org/10.14943/J.HighEdu.33.15</a>
Doc URL	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/2115/99282">https://hdl.handle.net/2115/99282</a>
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	HighEdu_33_p15-22.pdf



## Recent Trends and Policy Directions in Korean Higher Education

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*Abstract* — This report examines recent trends in Korean higher education policy under the Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung administrations. Korean higher education faces a demographic crisis as the college-age population shrinks, while institutional hierarchies have intensified despite achieving a 76.2 per cent enrollment rate in 2023. The concentration of prestigious institutions in Seoul has created a vicious cycle of regional university decline. University admissions reforms, including holistic evaluation systems, the High School Credit System, and absolute grading, have generated challenges regarding fairness, transparency, and evaluation reliability. The Yoon administration launched the Regional Innovation System & Education (RISE) and Glocal University 30 initiatives for decentralization and regional-industry collaboration. The Lee administration’s flagship “Creating 10 Seoul National Universities” project aims to develop nine regional flagship universities to Seoul National University standards through intensive investment. Additional reforms include the National Chair Professor system and enhanced lifelong education. The analysis reveals policy patterns resembling Tyack and Cuban’s “grammar of schooling” with pendulum swings between centralization and decentralization, while Clark’s coordination triangle highlights the need to balance state authority, market mechanisms, and academic autonomy. Korea’s experience offers lessons for nations addressing demographic decline and regional inequality in higher education.

(Accepted on 22 January 2026)

### 1. Introduction

Korean higher education is undergoing a profound transformation under the pressures of demographic decline, social inequality, and rapid technological change. These shifts are not unique to Korea but take on distinct characteristics due to the country’s compressed modernization, strong state role in education, and the unique social meaning attached to higher education credentials.

The meaning of higher education and university graduation has evolved dramatically in Korean society over time. What once represented elite access to

advanced learning has transformed into a mass phenomenon that fundamentally shapes social stratification and life opportunities. According to Martin Trow’s (1973) influential framework, higher education systems transition from “elite” (enrolling less than 15 per cent of students within an age cohort) to “mass” (ranging between 15 and 50 per cent) to “universal” (when enrollment exceeds 50 per cent). Korea achieved universal access to higher education in the early 2000s when enrollment rates surpassed 50 per cent. According to Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) (2024) statistics, in 2023, the enrollment rate of eligible students at Korean universities reached around 76.2 per

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cent, marking a historic high and representing one of the highest rates globally. This represents a society where three out of four individuals aged 18 to 21 are enrolled in universities. While there is a saying that “academic credentials are not everything,” educational background continues to function as a key criterion that determines success and failure in Korean society.

The concentration of economic growth and population in the Seoul Metropolitan Region has exacerbated university stratification. As prestigious institutions became increasingly concentrated in the capital area, regional universities faced mounting challenges in attracting students, faculty, and resources. This geographic imbalance has created a vicious cycle in which regional economic decline reinforces university decline, which, in turn, weakens regional development prospects.

Despite extensive government intervention, including the enactment of the “Regional University Development Act” and substantial policy initiatives, such as the Glocal University 30 project, regional universities continue to face existential challenges. Korea, which has experienced one of the most dynamic evolutions in higher education, was recently reported to have the lowest birth rate among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and its drastic demographic change poses unprecedented challenges to the sustainability of the current higher education system.

This report examines recent policy trends by drawing on government planning documents, academic research, and institutional analyses. It situates the reforms of two administrations—the previous Yoon Suk-yeol government and the current Lee Jae-myung government—within a broader policy trajectory. The analysis is grounded in a review of policy documents, official statistical sources, and relevant academic literature and adopts a synthetic approach to tracing recent developments in Korean higher education policy.

## **2. Brief historical context of higher education policy in Korea**

Korea’s higher education system expanded dramatically in the post-war period as part of a state-led modernization strategy. In the 1960s and 1970s, universities were viewed primarily as instruments for economic development, producing the skilled workforce needed for industrialization. Korean higher education has a legal basis in the “Higher Education Act” and other related laws with centralized control over admissions, funding, and institutional structures, ensuring alignment with national priorities. Article 5 of the “Higher Education Act” of Korea stipulates that universities are subject to the guidance and supervision of the Minister of Education.

The foundations of modern Korean higher education policy evolved in several key phases. The post-Korean War reconstruction period saw the establishment of a basic educational infrastructure, followed by the industrialization-focused policies of the 1960s and 1970s that prioritized technical and vocational education. During this period, the government maintained strict control over university establishment and the curriculum to serve national economic development goals.

The democratization period of the 1980s and 1990s put pressure on greater institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Educational reforms during this era introduced the concepts of diversification and institutional autonomy, although the state remained the dominant coordinating mechanism. In the mid-1990s, Korea’s higher education reform shifted from state-led, centralized control to the active incorporation of market logic and competitive mechanisms. This transition represented a gradual adoption of a policy paradigm, often summarized as neoliberalism or New Public Management (NPM), characterized by deregulation, autonomization, introduction of competition, and performance- and accountability-based management. The reform design moved away from a “supplier-centered regulation” toward a “rule-based regulation” that lowered entry barriers, promoted inter-university competition, and

linked national financial support to performance evaluation. This transformation was institutionalized through the core measures of higher education reform proposed in the May 31, 1995, Education Reform: the rule-based principle for university establishment, deregulation of student quotas, and linkage between evaluation and financial support. However, as a result of this market-oriented university establishment policy, 83 universities were established nationwide in rapid succession. In the face of demographic changes, such as the decline in the school-age population, local universities in Korea were driven to the brink of survival. Thus, a single policy choice returned as a tremendous boomerang.

Another major turning point was the Brain Korea 21 (BK21) project, which was initiated in 1999 to support Korean higher education and research institutions in fostering future generations in academia. The BK21 project, which seeks to make Korean research universities globally competitive and produce higher-quality researchers in Korea, provides funding to graduate students and professors belonging to research groups at top universities. This program represented Korea's ambition to cultivate "world-class universities" but also reinforced hierarchies by concentrating resources in a small number of institutions.

The project's impact was significant, with BK21 being a plan launched by the Korean Ministry of Education to strengthen the competitiveness of research and the educational quality of universities. Research evaluations of the program have examined its effectiveness in achieving these objectives (Popper et al., 2008).

The final key development was the continuous evolution of the university admissions system. The College Scholastic Ability Test (大學修學能力試験) system has undergone multiple reforms since its introduction, with ongoing debates about the balance between standardized testing and holistic evaluation methods. These changes reflect broader tensions between meritocracy and equity in Korean education.

These episodes illustrate the dual character of Korean higher education policy: ambitious state-led reforms that expanded opportunities and enhanced

competitiveness alongside unintended consequences that deepened inequality and reinforced systemic hierarchies. This historical legacy frames contemporary debates in which the state continues to play a pivotal role in guiding and constraining institutional change.

### 3. Current policy trends

#### 3.1 Demographic and social challenges

Korea was recently reported to have the lowest birth rate among OECD countries, and its drastic demographic change poses unprecedented challenges for higher education. The latest figures predict an almost 40 per cent decline in student numbers by 2040, indicating an increased urgency to restructure Korea's universities.

The demographic crisis extends beyond enrollment numbers to fundamental questions about institutional sustainability. Many regional universities face existential threats because student populations are concentrated in metropolitan areas. The geographic distribution of demographic decline is uneven, with rural areas experiencing more severe population losses than urban centers.

Thousands of elementary schools in Korea are threatened by closures or mergers. This is one of the side effects of the country's continuously declining birth rate. While this reference specifically addresses elementary education, it illustrates the broader system-wide impact of demographic changes that will eventually affect higher education as smaller cohorts progress through the educational pipeline.

The implications extend beyond mere numbers to include questions about educational quality, regional development, and social cohesion. Universities have traditionally served as anchors for regional economies and cultural activity. Their potential closure or consolidation raises concerns regarding regional vitality and balanced national development. These demographic pressures have not only intensified concerns about institutional sustainability but also prompted the govern-

ment to pursue new policy innovations aimed at restructuring governance and strengthening regional capacity.

### **3.2 Policy innovations and reforms**

In response to these challenges, recent administrations have advanced ambitious policy initiatives. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration introduced two major policy frameworks: the Regional Innovation System & Education (RISE) and the Glocal University 30 initiative. RISE represents a significant shift toward decentralized governance by transferring administrative and financial authority from the central government to local governments. This approach aims to align higher education closely with regional development and industrial requirements.

The Glocal University 30 initiative identifies 30 institutions for intensive support to enhance their global competitiveness. This selective approach continues the Korean tradition of concentrating resources while attempting to extend excellence beyond traditional elite institutions. However, as this initiative has become entangled with the new government's "Creating 10 Seoul National Universities" project following the change in administration, questions have been raised as to whether it will ultimately deliver the outcomes originally intended.

These policies represent a paradigm shift from uniform, centrally-designed programs to regional autonomy, local accountability, and strategic differentiation. However, questions remain about local capacity, coordination mechanisms, and the potential for increased inequality between regions with different resources and capabilities (Ha, 2025).

### **3.3 Current government's vision and strategies**

The current Lee Jae-myung administration has articulated an ambitious vision of higher education centered on addressing regional imbalances and enhancing the public nature of education. The administration's

flagship initiative, the "Creating 10 Seoul National Universities" project, represents a fundamental reimagining of Korea's higher education landscape (National Planning Commission, 2025).

The core of the current administration's higher education strategy focuses on developing nine regional flagship national universities to Seoul National University standards. While significant concerns have been raised, and various improvement measures are being proposed from different perspectives (Yoon, 2025), this initiative aims to mitigate the concentration of students in metropolitan universities and resolve regional educational imbalances. The government plans to provide intensive investments equivalent to Seoul National University's per-student education and research funding to these regional institutions. This approach seems to draw inspiration from the California university system's intensive development during the 1950s and 1960s (Yoon, 2025), which sought to enhance educational and research competitiveness while encouraging regional talent development by enabling students to pursue graduate and doctoral programs locally. This promotes regional settlement of human capital.

This strategy emphasizes strengthening connections between national universities and their regions and positioning them as centers of regional innovation and growth through collaborative frameworks with private universities, research facilities, and industries. This regional hub model represents a departure from traditional centralized approaches toward distributed excellence across the national territory.

The government's approach emphasizes balanced development through customized budget allocation to non-metropolitan regions rather than concentrating on higher education resources in the capital area. The administration seeks to restore the public nature of higher education and reform excessively competitive educational systems to reduce educational inequality.

Future-oriented talent development is another priority, with policies aimed at cultivating the human resources required for the digital age, particularly in artificial intelligence and related technologies. This

comprehensive vision attempts to address the challenges of regional imbalance, demographic decline, and technological transformation while maintaining Korea's competitive position in global higher education.

## 4. Critical policy issues

### 4.1 University admissions and evaluation system challenges

The Korean university admissions system faces mounting pressure for reform amid concerns regarding fairness, transparency, and effectiveness. The Comprehensive Student Record Evaluation (學生簿綜合銓衡) system, designed to move beyond standardized test scores, has generated debates about subjective evaluation methods and potential bias in the selection processes.

The introduction of the High School Credit System (高校學點制) has created additional complexity in the admissions landscape. Similar to university systems, this system allows students to select courses based on their interests and aptitudes. However, implementation has created challenges for high schools in terms of curriculum organization, teacher allocation, and evaluation standardization.

The shift toward absolute evaluation in high school internal assessments has increased universities' burden of ensuring transparent and reliable student evaluation. Grade inflation is a significant concern, making it difficult for universities to differentiate among applicants with similar high grades. This will lead to an increased reliance on additional evaluation methods, including interviews, portfolios, and extracurricular activities, raising questions about fairness and accessibility.

These changes reflect broader tensions in Korean education between standardized measurement and holistic evaluation, efficiency and equity, and tradition and innovation. Ongoing adjustments to admissions policies demonstrate the difficulty of achieving consensus on fundamental questions about merit, opportunity, and social mobility.

### 4.2 Regional disparities and institutional hierarchy

Despite various decentralization initiatives, the concentration of resources and prestige in Seoul-area universities continues to drain talent from regional areas. The concentration of academic prestige and resources in "SKY" universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University), together with other Seoul-based universities, in attracting top students and faculty perpetuates regional brain drain and undermines efforts toward balanced national development.

Regional universities, especially private universities, face multiple disadvantages, including limited research funding, difficulty in recruiting faculty, declining local job markets, and competition from metropolitan institutions. These factors create a self-reinforcing cycle of decline that policy interventions struggle to effectively address.

The persistence of hierarchical thinking in the Korean higher education policy reflects deeper cultural and structural factors. Educational credentials from prestigious universities continue to determine life opportunities in ways that make political and social reforms more challenging.

Under the "Act on the Promotion of Regional Universities," a policy that allocates 35 per cent of recruitment in regional public institutions to graduates of local universities has been implemented. In addition, under the Lee Jae-myung government's "Creating 10 Seoul National Universities" policy, the rise in the number of applicants at regional national universities for the 2026 academic year is an encouraging development.

### 4.3 Financial sustainability crisis

Korea's public expenditure per tertiary student is comparatively low at USD 6,617, which is less than half the OECD average (USD 15,102). Even after incorporating private and non-domestic funding, Korea's per-student spending at the tertiary level (USD 14,695) remains below the OECD average (USD 21,444) (OECD, 2025). Under these circumstances, the financial

foundations of Korean higher education have been severely eroded by prolonged tuition freezes and declining enrollment. Since 2011, tuition increases have been restricted while costs continue to rise, creating unsustainable financial pressure for many institutions.

Private universities, which educate approximately 80 per cent of Korean students, face particular difficulties. Unlike public institutions, which receive government operational support, private universities depend heavily on tuition revenue and endowment returns. The combination of tuition control and demographic decline creates a perfect storm that threatens institutional viability. In particular, official Ministry of Education policy documents have reaffirmed the prolonged tuition freeze policy implemented since the early 2010s and the continued regulation of student quotas, reinforcing financial constraints on universities (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Government funding through competitive grant programs has partially offset revenue losses, but this creates dependency relationships and may distort institutional priorities toward grant acquisition rather than educational mission fulfillment. The concentration of funding in research-intensive activities may undermine the quality of undergraduate education and teaching.

#### **4.4 Internationalization and quality concerns**

Against this backdrop of financial strain and declining domestic enrollment, internationalization has increasingly been framed as both a demographic response and a revenue-related strategy for Korean universities. Internationalization has been pursued as both a demographic response and a competitive strategy. The Study Korea 300K Project aims to attract 300,000 international students. However, current patterns raise sustainability concerns regarding geographic concentration, educational quality, and integration outcomes. This policy has some inherent limitations. Primarily, despite its intention to attract international students and facilitate immigrant integration, it inadequately addresses international students' academic aspirations and career objectives, prioritizing short-term economic gains and industrial

labor recruitment (Han & Choi, 2024).

The heavy dependence on students from China and Vietnam creates vulnerability to geopolitical tensions and economic changes in these countries. Moreover, the focus on enrollment numbers rather than educational outcomes risks commodifying international education and undermining Korea's reputation as a quality destination for higher studies.

Many international students face significant language barriers, difficulties in cultural integration, and limited postgraduate employment opportunities. The lack of comprehensive support systems and career pathways suggests that current internationalization approaches may be unsustainable in the long run.

#### **4.5 Research and innovation ecosystem challenges**

Simultaneously, questions surrounding internationalization intersect with broader concerns about universities' roles in research and innovation, particularly regarding how global engagement is linked to knowledge production and societal impact. Despite substantial investments in research infrastructure and human resources, Korean universities struggle to translate research output into innovation and economic value. Concentration of research funding in elite institutions limits the development of diverse and resilient research ecosystems.

University-industry collaboration remains relatively weak compared to other developed countries, partly due to regulatory constraints, cultural factors, and institutional incentives that prioritize academic publication over practical applications. An emphasis on bibliometric measures may discourage risk-taking and interdisciplinary research, which can generate greater social and economic impact.

The research evaluation system's focus on quantity over quality and impact may create perverse incentives that undermine a sustainable research culture. Reforming these systems requires balancing accountability, creativity, and long-term thinking.

## 5. Future prospects

The Korean university admission policy exhibits characteristics similar to those described by Tyack and Cuban (1995) as the “grammar of schooling”—persistent structural and cultural patterns that resist fundamental change despite continuous reform efforts. The pendulum-like swings between centralization and decentralization, standardized testing and holistic evaluation, and excellence and equity initiatives demonstrate recurring cycles of reform without fundamental transformation.

The historical trajectory reveals repeated oscillations from centralized control in the 1960s and 1970s to liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, back to intensive state intervention through programs such as BK21, and now toward decentralization through RISE and regional initiatives. Each swing promises to address the shortcomings of previous reforms but often recreates similar problems in different forms.

Clark’s (1983) triangle of coordination model, which analyzes higher education systems based on the balance between state authority, market mechanisms, and academic oligarchy, provides insight into Korea’s policy challenges. Historically, Korean higher education has been dominated by state authorities with limited market mechanisms and constrained academic self-governance.

Current reforms attempt to introduce more market elements through competition and performance-based funding while simultaneously strengthening regional governance capacity. However, achieving an optimal balance between state planning, market efficiency, and academic autonomy remains elusive and requires moving beyond the binary thinking that has characterized previous reforms.

Several critical factors determine future outcomes: successful demographic adaptation while maintaining quality and diversity, innovative governance models that balance coordination mechanisms, sustainable and diversified funding systems, robust quality assurance that promotes excellence and innovation, and qualitative improvements in international cooperation and integration.

Korea’s experience offers important lessons for other nations facing similar challenges such as demographic decline, regional inequality, and global competition. Ongoing policy experiments provide valuable insights into the possibilities and limitations of reforming centralized higher education systems. Success depends on learning from both domestic experiences and international best practices while adapting solutions to the Korean context and needs.

RISE and Glocal University 30 have been introduced as policy instruments to ease regional disparities by strengthening local governance and fostering closer links between universities and regional industries. Similarly, the “Creating 10 Seoul National Universities” initiative seeks to curb metropolitan concentration through targeted investment in selected regional flagship institutions. Nevertheless, whether these initiatives can substantially alter the trajectory of demographic decline or loosen long-standing institutional hierarchies remains an open question. Addressing the structural constraints embedded in these large-scale national projects will depend not only on policy design but also on sustained coordination between central and local governments; the gradual development of collaborative governance within universities; the accumulation of institutional capacity for reform; and, above all, the willingness of faculty members and administrative staff to engage actively in the reform process.

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