

Chapter 11

South Korea—Commentary



Insung Jung

The three Korean scholars' overview of distance education (DE) in South Korea illustrates the extent to which the government and, in particular, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) has developed policies and procedures and initiated projects that have stimulated DE and promoted lifelong learning in collaboration with the higher education institutions.

Korea is a small country of one hundredth the size of Canada with a population of over 51 million. In the 1970s DE was first introduced by MEST in the form of the Korean National Open University (KNOU), conceived as a provider of lifelong education for the Korean people and an alternative route into higher education for those who had failed to gain entry through the highly competitive traditional system. In the 1980s, MEST not only continued to support KNOU financially but introduced the Social Education Law which allowed people to gain a Bachelor's degree through self-study without requirement for attendance at a formal institution and introduced a nation-wide educational TV channel (EBS) supplementing school education and promoting lifelong education for everyone in Korea. In the 1990s, the Ministry initiated an academic credit bank system (Usher, 2014) which allowed people to earn a Bachelor's degree by combining credits from different courses at the traditional universities, KNOU and other certified private institutions. It also authorized the establishment of wholly online 'cyber universities'. In the 2000s, the government's commitment to higher education reform, increasing access and the lifelong learning agenda led to the establishment of more cyber universities, grant funding of e-learning projects and the establishment of centers for teaching and learning development and improvement in the traditional universities. It also supported the Korea Education Research and Information Service (KERIS) in accumulating and distributing open education resources (OER) and open courseware (OCW) to the country's teachers and students, and strengthened the quality assurance system for both traditional and

I. Jung (✉)
International Christian University, Mitaka, Japan
e-mail: isjung@icu.ac.jp

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cyber universities. In 2015, the government seized on the opportunities presented by massive open online courses (MOOCs) to initiate the K-MOOC project which offered even more choices for lifelong learning.

In a country where around 80% of 4-year universities are private, operating with rigid admissions systems, these reforms and innovation in DE would not have been possible without the vision and funding provided by MEST. But the development of DE and proliferation of e-learning in higher education also owes much to the efforts of the universities and DE researchers and practitioners. For example, the Institute of Distance Education at KNOU which was founded in 1977 and the centers for teaching and learning that were established from 2003 onwards in all traditional and cyber universities as a consequence of these government interventions hired professionally trained instructional designers, e-facilitators and researchers to assist in developing, delivering and evaluating their DE courses and programs. Again as a consequence of government policy, Korea has many DE researchers and developers who have majored in instructional design and technology at both the undergraduate and graduate level, many doing so overseas. These professionals have contributed greatly to the rapid growth and quality improvement of DE and have also persuaded the government to include quality of 'instructional design effort' as an important criterion in the evaluation of all cyber and traditional universities and KNOU.

DE and the concept of lifelong learning are integral part of Korean higher education. 2016 saw the revised Lifelong Learning Act (first established in 1982) designed to remove some of the obstacles to lifelong education for workers (NILE, 2016). In that year, there were 408 higher education institutions in Korea. Of these, 189 were 4-year traditional universities with enrollment of 1,493,719, 17 were 4-year cyber universities with 97,497 students and KNOU had 123,197 students. Thus, around 14% of all 4-year university students were distance learners studying through KNOU or the cyber universities. And around 60% of the 4-year universities were offering online contents and courses for their students and exchanging their online courses with other collaborating universities (KERIS, 2016a). Again in 2016, within a year of its establishment, K-MOOC attracted and enrolled over 180,000 lifelong learners and since the introduction of OCW in 2007, over 350,000 courses had been shared and studied by adult learners following up on their personal interests and by university faculty as teaching and learning materials. These figures confirm the chapter authors' observation that DE is playing a key role in meeting the high and growing demand for higher education and lifelong learning in Korea, despite the declining population.

The chapter authors identify three challenges that DE in Korea has met: satisfying the ever-growing demand for higher levels of lifelong learning, creating a more open and flexible higher education system, and developing programs for a global audience. I would add a further serious challenge: providing such lifelong learning for the socially marginalized and less-developed parts of the country. In 2016, over 65% of KNOU students were in the capital Seoul and the larger metropolitan areas. Fewer than 1% were in the farming and fishing regions. And in the cyber universities, only 0.4% of the students were in farming and fishing communities and only 0.9% were unskilled laborers. And in the case of K-MOOC users, over 76% held a Bachelor's

degree or above, and over 65% were white-collar workers or post-graduate students (KERIS, 2016b). DE in Korea has achieved a great deal but is yet to fulfill its true potential in lessening the gap between access to higher education and lifelong learning for the advantaged and disadvantaged. The government recognizes the changes in the social and industrial environment that necessitate continuous learning beyond primary and secondary education. As it seeks out new sources of growth and vies to be a world leader in innovation, it needs to ensure equity and quality education for all.

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