

Optimizing Talent:

Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN KOREA

"University-Based Meritocracy" and Duality of Higher Education Effect"

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Abstract

Rapid industrialization and democratization of Korea has become a center increasing interest of the world and it is told that ‘education’ or Koreans’ attitude toward education made “The miracle of the Han River. In the process of industrialization of Korea, it is generally admitted that higher education played a decisive role. The present paper tries to answer the question about the role of universities in the process of social mobility in Korea.

Traditionally (and even up to these days), Korean people has an absolute trust in ‘good’ education and are convinced that admission to a prestigious university would and should guarantee a bright future. That is to say, Koreans are still keeping their “faith” in universities for their function of an agency of meritocracy.

It was, basically, Confucianism that has been embedded as a foundation of those beliefs, values, and traditions in the educational system of Korea. Confucian philosophy highly esteemed value of pursuit of learning not only as an objective in itself, but also as a vehicle to self-betterment. Actually, in Korean society, education has been and IS the major means for young people to raise their social status, regardless of their own family background.

Nevertheless, in reality, higher education in Korea is two faced in its function. The one is to enable social mobility on the basis of traditional meritocracy and the other is to intensify educational inequality and consolidate social classes because of intense competition (which means, very often, very high cost of preparation) to get an admission from prestigious universities that only socio-economically well established class can afford.

And yet, “university” is at the center of social mobility based on each individual’s academic achievement. Precisely, with an indication of educational inequality, Koreans still acknowledge the higher education as an indispensable step for social mobility.

Given the circumstances, if we can control entry barrier of university caused by economic inequality, realization of educational equality then social justice would be at hand.

Korean government and universities started to make efforts with tailor-made policies and measures.

To designate the status quo, we would like to introduce the term of “University-based Meritocracy”.

The understanding by social function of education in Korea should be quite unique compared to that in other countries. Traditionally, Korean put almost religious trust in education. There is not much changes nowadays in this respect. Thus, the notion of **“University-based Meritocracy”** can be supported with Koreans’ perception of the role of higher education in social mobility.

I. Introduction

Rapid industrialization and democratization of Korea has become a center increasing interest of the world and it is told that ‘education’ or Koreans’ attitude toward education made “The miracle of the Han River” possible, which might be a reason of US President Obama’s comments about Korean education in his speeches. Even if this “development” can be taken for the light, there is the shade such as inequality and poverty. The problem of inequality in Korean society, along with those of injustice and poverty, brought disintegration and sufferings. According to OECD(2011), Gini index of income distribution of Korea is slightly more than 0.3 but poverty rate is 14.4%, the ninth highest among OECD countries.

In the process of industrialization of Korea, it is generally admitted that higher education played a decisive role. Above all, higher education provided skilled labor to the industry. On the strong initiative of the government, higher education had been expanded ever since and higher education completion rate of 25~30 years old attained over 60%, the highest among OECD countries (OECD, 2010). By consequence, educational Gini index, showing degree of inequality in education, was getting relatively lower. A research showed that educational Gini index of Korea decreased from 0.5 to 0.2 between 1970 and 2000 and average school-years of Koreans increased from 5 years to 11 years. This period corresponds with that of industrialization of Korea.

Besides, higher education of Korea used to be a ground of ‘education-based meritocracy’, while contribution of higher education to social mobility and equality of opportunity in Korea is still to be discussed. There are realistic evidence of positive

contribution of higher education to social mobility such as “*the dragon born in a small stream*” kind of anecdotes: a child of lower class could move to upper class with a decent job that he or she could get thanks to his or her education in one of universities with high reputation. Actually, each and every individual would do their best to upgrade his or her socio-economic status by and with his or her qualification approved by higher education. And yet, there exist counterargument, according to which no more dragon will be born in any stream with changes in Korean society.

Given the context, the present paper tries to answer the question about the role of universities in the process of social mobility in Korea. More precisely, this question deals with higher education to see if higher education can serve as a mediator variable that explain Korean’s social mobility (for example, by providing a better job opportunity). If the answer to the previous question is positive, another questions as follows shall be followed : What is the relation between one’s socio-economic background (very often socio-economic status of this one’s parents) and higher education? How higher education affects one’s acquisition of socio-economic status (for example, in the labor market or by getting a job). Hopefully, this research on the topic of ‘social mobility in Korean and role of higher education’ shall offer suggestions for educational policy - those of higher education in particular - to encourage social-mobility between generations. Discussing about relevant policy and policy making and offering suggestions are secondary purpose of the present paper.

The term of ‘social mobility’ presents changes or movements of individuals or groups in social status or position. Such mobility occurs either horizontal or vertical. Horizontal mobility refers changes or movements in positions accepted as of the same level while

vertical mobility refers changes or movements in positions of different levels. Mobility between social classes represents the latter and it has two directions: ascending (moving toward upper class) and descending (moving toward lower class). If a worker becomes a CEO, it is an example of ascending mobility and in case of the other way round, that of descending mobility. Besides such an individual-base vertical mobility, vertical mobility comprises ascending and descending mobility of a group, appearance of a new group and disappearance of a group. This type of mobility is observed more frequently in modern society than in pre-modern society and in the cities than in the villages. It is also possible that an individual of a certain social class perform an intra-generational mobility or inter-generational mobility, vertically and/or horizontally, as an individual or as a group. If the son's social position is different from his fathers, there should have been a vertical inter-generational mobility.

It is the inter-generational and vertical mobility on which this paper is focused because we are convinced that inter-generational and vertical mobility would enable Korean society move toward being more democratic and equal. On the other hand, inter-generational and vertical mobility contributes positively to the social integration. Thinking with the concept of 'social integration as positive goal,' we'd have to admit that reinforcement of equality in a society through social mobility would intensify interaction and solidarity among constituents of the society in question.¹ If higher education provides a student, regardless of his or her parents' socio-economic status, an opportunity to fully develop and display one's talent to produce a result, it would be a meaningful

¹ UNRISD (1994). Social Integration: Approaches and Issues, UNRISD Briefing Paper No. 1, World Summit for Social Development, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, UN

contribution of higher education to the society for its efficiency and integration.

To achieve the purpose of this paper by answering the previous questions, we will proceed as follows: (1) To see how higher education in Korea is related to social mobility, we will make a brief literature review of the field, which includes examination of theories and appreciation of references presented up to now. (2) Then, references, materials and data about Korea will be investigated. Not only a survey of researches done in and about higher education and social mobility but current and significant tendency observed recently will also be pointed out to be clarified. (3) Based on findings and discussions in (1) and (2), we will draw a conclusion about social mobility and higher education in Korea. (4) It follows, as a logical conclusion, suggestions for educational policies to promote social mobility.

II. Social mobility and higher education: theories and researches

Harvigurst(1961) and Blau & Duncan(1967) presented quite plausible theory about contribution of higher education to the social equality. As industrialization progressed, the government takes measures to lead a substantial expansion of the opportunity of higher education. Those who have this opportunity of participating in higher education are eligible for social mobility. In other words, expanded higher education enable more individuals to make an attempt for social mobility with success on the basis of his or her ability fostered by higher education, which contribute to advance social equality. For those were born in lower class, higher education is one of the most important and

effective means to upgrade their social status: they go on to the college based on their personal ability, improve in their professional competence in the college to acquire higher position in job market and it makes a vertical social mobility. In such cases of college admission, higher education can be introduced as a dependant variable to socio-economic status of a student but it might be an independent variable to his or her social mobility. In the society where cost of higher education is low or social welfare system is solid enough so that students participate in higher education regardless of their parents' socio-economic background, higher education influences more to the individual's social mobility as an independent variable. This is what so called functionalistic perspective on the relation between higher education and social mobility.

It is well known that this phenomena is observed more frequently when the movement of population is increased in the process of industrialization or the mobility in labor market is increased with economic growth and in the society with open social system in which each individual's ability and achievement are seriously taken into account and properly rewarded. In the industrialized society always seeking after efficiency, skills and techniques are required to increase productivity. If one can be trained and practiced those skills and techniques by higher education, it is clear that higher education plays a decisive role for an individual to obtain a vantage ground in a labor market and to accomplish his or her self-fulfillment. In this regard, we can find actual proofs in Blau & Duncan(1967). Through an empirical analysis, they concluded that an individual's acquisition of social position or social mobility had not been affected greatly by his or her parents' socio-economic status but, to some degree, his or her education has been. Then, it was

education which played a decisive role to the child's acquisition of social position.²

However, Althusser(1971), Bourdieu et Passeron(1977), and Bowles & Gintis(1976) claimed that we could hardly expect an 'open' society where educational equality would be fully guaranteed based on each individual's ability, and even in a society where educational equality and education-based meritocracy are stressed, opportunity of education can not be equal, nor that of social mobility. Those who sympathized with this opinion accused higher education as a main cause of reproduction or expansion of socio-economic inequality. This is the theory of conflict which states: higher education offers contested terrain to different social classes for opportunity and achievement, nevertheless, socio-economic inequality persist throughout the higher education with diverse strategies of differentiation from admission to entire school life. Thus, expansive reproduction of original inequality would not be avoidable.

Among others, there was Thurow(1972) who adopted the notion of 'defensive expenditure' to explain this persistence of educational inequality despite of expansion of higher education and meritocracy. Precisely, the more educational opportunity is expanded and educational standard is upgraded, the more investment is made for education by the upper class to keep their status in competition through the strategy of differentiation. In case that higher education participation or completion rate is too high to be effective in struggle for social position, more investment will be made in selection of more privileged specialty or college/university which would offer better chance for

² It is a matter of course, in the points that even in the societies having 6-70% of entrance rate of higher education, previous social class continues but also there is little change in level of individual social status, we can doubt the role of higher education in social mobility.

acquisition of better socio-economic status or more favorable ground in labor market.

While Hirsch’s notion of positional goods (1976)³ is not exactly based on the theory of conflict, it is still useful to explain the reasons why so called upper class invest more and more in education. Hirsch defined ‘positional goods’ as goods and services which distinguished one from another by consumption. Its value is represented mostly with desirability by others. The notion of positional goods applies not only to public goods but to every kind of goods and services. For example, people spend much money on clothes with renowned brand not for the essential function of clothes but for their value of positional goods by demonstrating one’s economic status. According to Hirsch, one’s expenditure for positional goods is in general increasing as his or her household economy is on the rise.

What drew our attention was the fact that education shared characteristics of positional goods. When household income increases, investment in education tends to be increased. But then the benefit from education is not only depends on the size of “my” investment but also on the size of “the other’s” investment. As far as the benefit from education is relative like this, those who have better economic status would make more investment in higher education than those who have lower economic status.

III. Higher education and social mobility in Korea

³ Hirsch, Fred. (1976). *Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

1. Researches on higher education and social mobility

Among researchers of education in Korea, impact of higher education to social mobility in the process of industrialization has been one of the most attractive topics. Researches in this area differ with periods; between 1980-1990 and around 2000. During 1980-1990 years, most of the researches were carried in respect of functionalism. But, researches after this period came to the conclusion somewhat different from that of previous researches.

Several researches of mid-80's (B. Kim, 1985; C. Ahn 1988) reflected functionalistic perspective. According to the path analysis done by B. Kim (1985)⁴, influence of fathers' socio-economic status (profession and education) to children's economic status building was not greatly significant (0.058 and 0.037 each). On the other hand, influence of fathers' socio-economic status (profession and education) to children's education was a little significant (0.069 and 0.149 each). However, the level of his/her own education was found very significant (0.275) to his/her economic status compared to the other factors. With these findings, we can assume that, until 90's, higher education were playing an important part in social mobility as it was justified in the Blau & Duncan's model(1967). So to speak, in Korea, individual ability and efforts through higher education used to enable vertical mobility of one's social status to a high degree.

As compared with previous researches, recent studies (K. Kim, 2005; W. Cho, 2004; Y. Yeo, 2008; H. Bang et al, 2004; H. Lee, 2006; G. Kim et al, 2004; H. Park, 2011) around

⁴ B. Kim (1985). Educational Opportunity and Possibility of Social Mobility, KEDI, Seoul, Korea

2000 year were concluded with a relatively skeptical viewpoint on the role of higher education for an individual's social mobility. With minute differences, those researches substantially agreed that parents' socio-economic status had strongly influenced on the children's education (ex. higher education participation and/or completion) and then, education in turn had an effect in labor market. Thus, higher education was the origin of inequality in distribution of wealth and formation of social status (W. Cho, 2004; H. Lee, 2006). In a way, higher education was proved to be a decisive factor of intergenerational inequality. Moreover, the researches showed that intervention by parents in proceeding to 4 year institution was found to be highly significant. So then, it seems that social capital, which is consisted of cultural goods, cultural capital, social networking, and educational commitment, might have a great effect. Such being the case, recent researches about higher education and social mobility in Korea are likely to be on the same track as researches conducted in occident based on the conflict theory or the notion of social capital.

G. Kim et al (2004) revealed that strategy of differentiation was worked out by those who had the same level (or length) of education in order to be on vantage point, because simply upgrading one's level of education is not of great use in job market of Korea where higher education has been so much generalized⁵ and level of education has been so much upgraded⁶ in Korea. For example, in case of the Seoul National University, the most privileged university of Korea, number of students from the high-income bracket was 130% of that from the low-income bracket in 1985 but the ration changed to 1680%

⁵ It is quite plausible that government guideline for university establishment has been considerably influential. (H. Park, 2011).

⁶ University participation rate in Korea is reposted as over 80%.

in 2000. Another noteworthy phenomenon of the year 2000 was that 25 among 10,000 high school graduate from Gangnam area (wealthy area of Seoul) went to the Seoul National University while only 15 among 10,000 high school graduate from the rest of Seoul did. By these statistics, we can conclude that, in Korea, the upper classes are striving to sustain their socio-economic status by defensive investment or with strategy to effectively maintain inequality.

At the same time, different from the defensive investment, higher education participants (college students and etc.) are differentiated partly because of increasing college price due to economic crisis in Korea. More and more students became hard up for college expenses and increasing number of students working for pyramid selling or taking too much part-time job becomes public concern in Korean society⁷. These students began working to pay the tuition or to pay off student loan but end indebted. They get a serious social defect even before formally entering into the labor market and, very often, they can hardly manage to have opportunity to be properly trained by graduation. This is the case of the “automatic differentiation” in proportion to the economic capacity of the parents’ because of the high cost of higher education.

Researches on university graduates’ entering into the labor market (G. Kim, 2003; A. Kim, 2003; H. Kim & S. Lee, 2007; H. Park, 2011) are trying to provide the answer to the question: what’s the relation between higher education and acquisition of socio-economic status?⁸ Among them, H. Park (2011) made a thorough analysis of the relations

⁷ Asia Today (News paper), 2012.6.11.

⁸ These researches are based mainly on the human capital theory, signal theory and statistical difference theory.

between higher education and employment. He picked up student variable, college (or university) variable, social structure variable. According to him, significant student variables were gender, age, orientation for employment before graduation, income level of the family and secondary education (the high school he or she attended); significant college variables were ranking or name value and employment rate of the institution, academic performance of the students, opportunity of international experience, academic-industrial cooperation program. Specifically, academic-industrial cooperation and networking exerted very positive influence on the employment. Contribution of secondary education and income level of the family could not be determined because the results of analysis produced different outcomes by the model of analysis they followed.

The relations between higher education and employment, of course, should be reviewed in respect of segment of labor market (big companies, small companies...) or type of the institution (college/university, polytechnic, area of specialty) (C. Kim & H. Kim, 2006; B. Lee et al, 2005; Y. Jeong, 2002; Y. Hwang & B. Baik, 2008). Those researches, conducted in Korea, identified Korean labor market more like as a 'job competition market' in which competition was to secure the opportunity of employment rather than a 'wage competition market'. It is concluded that large scale companies actually keep a closed system and bigger reward than others. They also underlined that entering into the large scale companies was most competitive but the applicants for competition was very limited⁹. As for the college variable, ability in the field of specialty was insignificant for employment, compared with general-skill ability. It made the inference possible that educational system of Korea would be closer to 'organizational space' of UK or France

⁹ Graduates of so-called top universities are in favorable position.

rather than 'qualificational space' of Germany.

As long as Korean labor market is based on job competition and educational system of Korea is based on the notion of education as organizational space, it would be inevitable for job seekers in Korea to compete to jump the queue or to secure a short cut by means of more and better education. As a result, it would have Korean put excessive emphasis on education and eager to increase level and quality of education. (Thurow, 1972, 1975). 'Academic inflation' and 'education fever' are the terms that describe atmosphere of Korea in actuality. From the same context, we can guess the reason for over 60% of higher education participation rate of young generation in the USA and in Japan where education shares characteristics of 'organization space'.

Another point of interest in researches is that, in 2000's, intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status by direct inheritance of ancestral legacy has decreased (H. Lee, 2006). On the other hand, the succession of the parents' socio-economic status through higher education has been on the much increase. As was discussed previously, such a change of trends could be interpreted as prevalence of education inequality through higher education. However, higher education would be a matter of debate from the point of view that considers higher education as a factor of building economic status in Korean society. This might advocate that higher education in Korea itself has been and still is playing a decisive part in formation of class and wealth. In real sense, what is the role of higher education in social mobility of Korea? We've got to pursue some more empirical studies and qualitative/ethnographic analysis to clarify this point.

2. Ethnographic description of higher education; confidence in rigorous meritocracy and the principle of systematic equality in policy

1) Education in Korean culture: education as entry behavior of an intellectual

Confucianism, for more than 600 years since Chosun dynasty (from AD 1392 to 1897), has been embedded as a foundation of beliefs, values, and traditions in the educational system of Korea. The Confucian ethic emphasizes 'seeking truth with righteous mind by himself/herself (格物致知 誠意正心),' and serving to others and society with those attitudes, teaching that only persistence and hard work for truth by him/herself yield results in school, as well as in life and in society(修身 齊家 治國 平天下)¹⁰. Also, in Confucianism, education was a starting point that a man/woman could reach to the truth of Heaven (天命; "God") through the human nature (性)¹¹. This kind of Confucian philosophy, which originate in China lly was developed in China, has influenced the whole region of East Asia to some extent. In countries such as Japan and Korea this influence was much stronger than in the other countries, for example, in Indonesia or in the Philippines, which have had strong influences of Islam and Christianity respectively¹².

Confucianism is characterized by a combination of strong emphasis on formal education as a path of social mobility¹³. Confucian philosophy stressed the importance of pursuit of

¹⁰ 格物致知 誠意正心, 修身, 齊家治國平天下 <大學>; Great Learning

¹¹ 天命之謂性 率性之謂道 修道之謂教 <中庸>; The Doctrine of the Mean

¹² Smits J. Park H. (2009). Five Decades of Educational Assortative Mating in 10 East Asian Societies, *Social Forces* 88(1). 227-256. The University of North Carolina Press.

¹³ Inglehart, Ronald (1990). *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University

learning not only as an objective in itself as mentioned above, but also as a vehicle to self-betterment¹⁴. Until recently, in Korean society, education had been the major means for young people to raise their social stature, regardless of their own family background.

In this context, Korea and Koreans have invested heavily in human capital, and have significantly increased their educational spending in the central government’s budget¹⁵. Recently, as a result, they experienced a greater expansion of enrollment in secondary schools and higher education than any other nationalities in the world, and have rapidly approached the highest level even among OECD countries.

Based on Koreans’ great esteem of value on the family¹⁶, Koreans used to demonstrate strong desire for children as the future of each family¹⁷. Traditionally, Korean families’ priority had been to bear sons, maintain inherited family and make them to contribute to the society(立身揚名). To fulfill these goals, cooperation of all family members to the head of a family (=father, in general) was required, and education was considered as the key factor for the success-story of the family. To give the education good enough to pass

Press; Tai, H.C. (edt) (1989). *Confucian and Economic Development :An Oriental Alternative?* Washington,D.C: The Washington Institute Press.

¹⁴ Martellaro, J. A., (1991). “Economic Growth in East Asia and the Confucian Ethic”, *Asian Profile*19(1): 81-89

¹⁵ Wang Jinguo, Russell Smyth, Tan Dai Hwee (2000). The Role of Confucian Values in East Asian Development: Before and After the Financial Crisis, *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Volume 7, Number 1, pp.115-135

¹⁶ Fujinaga, T., Rhee, C., Naito, T., & Akiyama, M. (1996). A cross-cultural study of mother–infant interaction between Japan and Korea: Cross-cultural comparisons of human attachment systems among five Asian and Western countries. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the international society for the study of behavioral development, Quebec City, Quebec, Canada, August 12–16.; Fukuyama, F. (1996). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks.

¹⁷ Sorenson, C. (1994). Success and Education in South Korea. *Comparative Education Review*, 38(1), 10–35.

the ‘*Kwako* (科舉, the national examination for higher civil service)’ was THE wish for all family. The designated head of the family had not only specific rights but also duties¹⁸.

Ogbu (1987a)¹⁹'s ‘cultural model of success’ describes impact of Asian Americans’ home culture to their performance at school. Korean students are having unique home environments, parental assistance, and social pressure. Traditional culture, along with its beliefs and values, eventually transfer to children (Ogbu, 1987b). Young Koreans are brought up to excel and to be resilient within typical home environment and tradition of education to empower children for climbing up the ladder by passing national examinations open to every citizen ever since.

Confucian tradition of high esteem for education produced undesirable side effects. The article of an incident published in a newspaper²⁰ illustrates the actual state of affairs in Korea. It was a story of a government employee: when she, the mother, couldn’t afford private tutoring of her child with her regular salary, she opted for a side job and worked as a barmaid at night against the Code issuing the ban for holding more than one office and prescribing the maintenance of dignity as a civil servant. There arose a huge controversy and the point of issue was the mother’s personal ethics, not her excessive attachment to the education of her child.

¹⁸ Sorenson, C. (1994). *ibid.*

¹⁹ Ogbu, J. (1987a). Cultural influences on plasticity in human development. In J. J. Gallagher, & C. T. Ramey (Eds.), *The malleability of children*. Baltimore: Brooks; Ogbu, J. (1987b). Variability in minority school performance: A problem in search of an explanation. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 312-334.

²⁰ Dokdo Center News, 2003.7.4.

2) University admission and equality

In Korea, the whole society is very rigorous with university entrance examination. Koreans are convinced that higher education would render him or her eligible for social mobility and the admission to the most prestigious universities, for example, the universities so-called SKY²¹ would and should guarantee a decent job. Koreans are still keeping their “faith” in universities for their function of an agency of meritocracy and claimed to the university admission process to be ‘absolutely’ fair and ‘perfectly’ reliable and ‘completely’ trustful. To live up this expectation, nation-wide examination for university entrance is prepared in absolute secrecy and administered like (or more seriously than) a military operation.

And no one can “buy” university admission whatever the applicant’s quality or level of contribution (i.e. amount of money) might be. In addition, number of students in each admission unit (major field, department, college and university) is strictly regulated by ministry of education.

The following article, editorial of a newspaper, about ‘admission by contribution’ displayed quite accurately Koreans’ conception of fairness in university admission and function of universities.

“... Above all, ‘admission by contribution’ is against the fundamental principle of our society, which is the equality of opportunity. Parents’ economic power is already too much influential in the course of preparation of university entrance by,

²¹ SKY stands for Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University.

for example, paying for private tuitions for their children. Given the circumstances, giving an admission to (re)compensate financial contribution, so to speak, taking the money for the key to the university entrance, would seriously intensify social conflicts and weakens the foundation of our community. The "contribution" would be concentrated in major private universities and should trigger the rich-get-richer and the poor-get-poorer among universities and university rankings would be fixed more and more solidly. Supporters for the idea of 'admission by contribution' often cite the case of USA. However, for fear of negative side effects, no other country other than the US adopted such a policy..... If we plan to reduce the tuition by half, increasing government budget and university reform will be the right path to take. The policy of admission by contribution will provoke nothing but confusion and conflict in our society²².

3) Severe politicization of higher education policy

As mentioned above, as 'education fever' of Korean society claims educational equality to upgrade their socio-economic status. But, in reality, educational equality is restricted to a high degree by economic inequality and there starts a vicious circle. Consequently, education has become one of the biggest issues in presidential elections. Candidates in the presidential election or in the legislative election or in the regional elections are supposed to present their idea and plans about education. In other words, the resolution of education inequality is recognized as an ideological issue in Korean politics. University

²² Hangearae News, 2011.06.09.

admission procedure is one of major issues of differentiation between progressive parties and conservative parties in recent legislative elections and it is more seriously treated in the upcoming presidential elections²³.

In addition to the political decision on politicized educational issues, public opinion, education-related NGOs’ and teachers’ positions are greatly valued. Even though an education policy is supported by evidence-based researches, it cannot be implemented if there’s an objection from any of these interested parties. One of the sore examples²⁴ is that a 6-year teacher’ college model, proposed after more than 10 years’ research failed to get approval of the National Assembly. Congressmen (and congresswomen!) were concerned about the aftermath of changes in teacher training program not for the sake of quality of teachers but for the sake of their votes. Each congressmen/women calculated gains and losses of votes from those who might be affected with the new model.²⁵.

4) University, social mobility and equality of opportunity

In Korea, graduates of universities with top ranking such as so-called SKY have incomparable privileges and priorities in labor market. They have easier access to exclusive labor market of large multinational companies and their wage level is much

²³ For example, free education and feeding in elementary school in Seoul was a big issue in major election. At the year of 2011, the former major, Oh Sehoon who was objective to free-feeding, resigned his job as a result of referendum which agreed with free-feeding in elementary school in Seoul.

²⁴ Cho Y. (2012). “Innovative Model for Teacher Education: Preparing Teachers for a Changing World with the Redefined Conception of Teacher”, in *Teacher Education Frontiers* (ed. By Oon-Seng Tan), Cengage Pub. Singapore.; Cho Y. (2010). *Cultural Selection of Research-based Policy in Policy Politics; A case of “A Suggestion of Teacher Education Reform”* in Korea, November 6th, 2010, Beijing Forum, Peking University, Beijing, China

²⁵ Cho Y. (2010). *ibid.*

higher than that of the graduates of any other universities from the beginning of their career.

Among freshmen of Seoul National University in the year of 2010, 35.9% are children of professionals or administrators; 28.9%, teachers or office-workers; 12.7%, sales people or workers in service industry; and 7.7%, low-class technicians, farmers and fishermen. As to the father’s education, 16.7% of fathers graduated high school or had less education; 53.0%, university/college; and 28.8%, graduate school. In short, 60% of SNU students came from middle and lower class for whom and, in particular, for the 17% whose father had education no more than high school level. This fact can be interpreted as a positive sign of the role of higher education. That is why SNU admission like SKY admission is the key to the vertical social mobility.²⁶

As graduates of the SKY still have much more chance to secure well paid job at the labor market and to rise to high ranks, there is very interesting (or even funny) practices in Korea. For example, there are professional matchmakers who are paid to find a young man from modest background but with good education for a daughter of wealthy family with not that good education.

Even though every Korean longs for good education in hope of vertical social mobility, there are policies and measures to decrease the inequality generated by education. For example, preferential treatment of graduates of local universities is formally required to the companies of certain scale and government supports pre-service training program of provincial universities and small colleges to enlarge their opportunity for employment.

²⁶ The proportion of this slot is decreasing year after year and arouse criticism. (2004-24.1%, 2005-22.5%, 2007-19.1%, 2009-16%)

Policies and measures to mitigate inequality of opportunity by reducing the impact of family background are enforced to the university admission procedure. The SKY universities, for example, allocate a portion of admission to the applicants from rural area or from lower class. This is to find baby dragons in small streams. Priority and quota for them in distribution of scholarships, international experience and student-loan are some of nurturing system. Those who support this idea of positive discrimination estimate these policies to be appropriate to render the Korean society more equal but critics argue that the SKY monopolize human resources and left no one with (even hidden) ability at home because once admitted in a SKY or similar university, chance of his or her return to hometown and dedicate to its development will be very slim and the gap between metropolitan area and rural area will be getting even more serious. The controversy here is about the level of effectiveness of these policies.

5) Stories of the dragons born in a stream – cases of vertical social mobility by education

In Korea, since more than 2 thousand years, many many success stories are known. Here are some of cases around us .

A. *. Ban (68)

He was born in a small village went to local schools. Parents’ education is unknown and didn’t seem wealthy nor highly educated. Always the top of his class, he was accepted in and graduated from Seoul National University then applied to the national

examination to become a diplomat. After serving as ambassador, minister of foreign affairs, he was appointed as the Secretary of United Nations

B. *. Kim (45)

She was born in a small village and went to a vocational school. Both parents were elementary school graduates and worked in agriculture. After graduation from Seoul National University with BA, MA and PhD, she joined one of the most privileged teacher’s college of Korea. She was married to a judge who was also from a very modest background, graduated SNU, passed the national examination.

C. * Jang (30)

She was born in a small village and went to local schools. Parents’ is education unknown but his father is working as a low rank administrator in local tax office. She was admitted in Seoul National University and awarded 1 year abroad scholarship. After spending one year at one of the most prestigious US university then decided to continue her study in the SNU Law School

D. *. Cho (52)

He was born in a small village and went to local schools. Both parents were high school graduates and ran a small independent business. After BA and MA in Seoul National University, he was awarded government scholarship for further study abroad. With a

Ph.D from one of the most prestigious US university, he joined Seoul National University as a professor. Being a professor of SNU, he also was appointed to Secretary of the president and elected to the dean of college, president research associations.

IV. "University-Based Meritocracy" in Social Mobility

1. Summary: Conceptualization of Korean Higher Education in Social Mobility

To sum up, higher education in Korea is two faced in its function. The one is to intensify educational inequality and consolidate social classes and the other is to enable social mobility on the basis of traditional meritocracy.

The former is a newer viewpoint adopted after 2000. In the 1980's, university used to be the gate way to success. However, Korea had started to be incorporated into the capitalistic system of the world and undergone continuous economic crisis²⁷. In this process, the gap among industries and social classes became wider. As was observed in previous chapters, conclusion of the researches after 2000 corresponded to some degree with conflict theory or defensive investment. This alteration of the viewpoint reflects changes of social trend in Korea.

The latter is the product of identification of social mobility in Korea as a result of competition for social position by means of higher education. University is at the center

²⁷ With economic crisis in Korea in 1997, that from USA at 2009, and then that in Europe, Korean economy is experiencing recession and problem of unemployment. Gini index of Korea has increased and absolute poverty rate came up to 14.6% (OECD, 2011)

of social mobility based on each individual’s academic achievement. We would like to introduce the term of “University-based Meritocracy” to designate the status quo. Precisely, with an indication of educational inequality, Koreans acknowledge the higher education as an indispensable step for social mobility.

The perception of higher education in Korea should be quite unique compared to that in other countries. It might be a combination of life stories we, Koreans, are living with from long long ago. If we quote A. Maclyntyre, we are pursuing his “Narrative Quest”²⁸ in the stories of our community to seek for our own. We firmly believe that higher education is a way of meritocracy-based social mobility because my life story cannot be detached from ancestral legacy (or tradition) of Korean society.

Traditionally, Korean put almost religious trust in education. There is not much changes nowadays in this respect. Thus, the notion of “**University-based Meritocracy**” can be supported with Koreans’ perception of the role of higher education in social mobility. But also it is still easy to find evidences related with the fact these days : Meritocracy-based university admission, persistent pursuit of equality of opportunity for higher education, 20% of freshmen’s fathers with less than high school education, and university programs to support vertical social mobility, among others. Besides, contribution of higher education in social mobility is also justified by statistics..

If university-based meritocracy is somewhat trustworthy and if it is a true story and actual event, it would be a good thing for ‘higher education for social mobility.’ If only we are able to control entry barriers of higher education to cope with justice and equality

²⁸ Maclyntyre A. (1981). *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, U.S.A.

in education, we shall be assured of contribution of universities to the realization of ideals of freedom and equality. Moreover, policy makers shall concentrate on the equality of access to higher education, which would facilitate the formulation and the enforcement of the policy.

2. Suggestions and recommendation

By introducing the concept of ‘**University-based Meritocracy**’ based on the tradition and history of Korea, we could describe the actual state of Korean society regarding higher education and social mobility. And yet, the role of higher education in Korean society started to be changed to consolidate educational inequality and social classes as was pointed out in recent researches.

Under the circumstances, the direction that social mobility policy in Korea should take is quite obvious: Reinforcement of equality at the entry level of higher education and intensification of student support programs to improve one’s performance. To achieve the goals, we would like to present suggestions and recommendations as follows.

To begin with, it would be recommendable to maintain the policy of general education and higher education to reduce ‘education inequality by private tutoring’ in the process of university admission. Priority and quota system for applicants from geographically and socio-economically disadvantageous environment is to be sustained. Institutionalization of such a positive discrimination should be appreciated.

To add to this, we are keen to the policy for student loan of tuition and fees. Economic crisis, poverty and unemployment are widely prevailed to every corner of the world and

push the students out of class. Those students cannot concentrate on their study and may not have enough qualification for a decent job. The students are not the only victim of the incident but it is a matter of whole society. This policy needs extra funding in addition to long-term management system. Therefore, with simple policy of education, answer to this problem cannot be found. Hopefully, this suggestion might be brought to an issue in Korean politics.

Subsequently, opportunity of international experience (student exchange, internship and etc.) or that of access of the industry-university network should be equally distributed to all students. If the policy takes students with less exposure to international context into consideration, it is even better.

Last but not least, entry barrier to the selective labor market should be lessened. And the impact of university ranking is also mitigated in entering into labor market. Characteristics of Korean labor market of being a 'job competition market' and 'organizational space' deserve special emphasis in reforming labor market for positive social mobility.

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