

## Chapter 5

# Towards a Sustainable and Balanced Development of Higher Education in South Korea

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### Abstract

Higher education institutions must keep up to date with the changing needs and situations of students, addressing societal issues affecting young people's lives and learning. Among the crises that higher education institutions in South Korea are facing, population decline and a lack of sustainable development present a significant threat to these institutions' existence as well as student satisfaction and learning experience. By relying on a review of relevant literature, this chapter will discuss each of these challenges and potential solutions. We hope that our discussion of the challenges in South Korea will also highlight that many of the 'crises' for higher education and ways to tackle them can be both localised and globally applicable. What is significant here is that higher education has a key role to play in preparing the young generation of Koreans to embrace sustainability and to foster resilience in them – for preparedness for future crises. We propose that a focus on community identity strength and education for sustainable development (ESD) can work as a solution for improving students' learning and global citizenship in these areas. Furthermore, we argue that this is especially important for preserving local and regional strengths and, ultimately, mutual development between the region and universities.

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Sustainable development depends on building a stronger and positive personal and collective identity, and students' active participation in sustainable development transcends the localised challenges. Such outcomes are also important for the sustainable future of higher education in South Korea and continuous development in the higher education scholarship.

*Keywords:* Higher education; South Korea; sustainable development goals (SDGs); environment, society, and governance (ESG); education for sustainable development (ESD)

## 5.1 Introduction

A 'crisis', both in the real-world scenario and in a higher education context, can take on various meanings and definitions. Whichever changes or circumstances that threaten the sustainability of any known ways of a higher education institution's existence or modus operandi can be considered a crisis. If one goes with this notion, a crisis is highly contextually dependent/variant, and the broader geopolitical context needs to be taken into account if one is to take on a global view of where higher education is located in the current times.

In South Korea, higher education institutions, particularly universities, are feeling the crisis at multiple levels ([Ministry of Education \(MoE\), 2022](#)). The decline in the school-age population is the first of them, which changes the demographics significantly and threatens the survival of some higher education institutions, especially outside of the capital and in the more rural regions. Since the 1980s, South Korea's fertility rate has steadily declined. In the process of industrialisation, the country has seen the previously large families turn into more nuclear families, and also with this trend, couples having less children overall. The birth rate, which was 4.74 in 1970, was 0.78 in 2022. This decline in the birth rate is also driven by the rising costs of raising children and of those in the middle and lower socioeconomic classes opting out of marriage and child rearing in turn ([Ha, 2012](#); [Kim et al., 2011, 2019](#)).

On the contrary, the number of higher education institutions in South Korea has increased constantly, reaching 336 in 2021 nationally. There are currently 190 general universities, 134 junior colleges, 10 colleges of education, and 2 industrial colleges, despite the school-age population (6–21 years old) peaking at 14.4 million in 1980 and declining since ([Kim, 2023](#)). In 2023, this number is only 7.26 million, a decrease of 50.4% compared to 1980. By 2025, the situation will likely be even more severe, with the population expected to fall below 7 million and by 2030 only 5 million ([Presidential Committee on Ageing Society and Population Policy \(PCASPP\), 2022](#)). The other issue is that students tend to prefer attending universities in Seoul, the capital city, where there is a concentration of resources and jobs. As such, universities in other cities and towns struggle to deal with this double impact for their own survival as well as for ensuring relative value of education for their present and future students which, in turn, will sustain

regional growth (Kim, 2023). Efforts to bridge this gap between Seoul/the capital city region and the rest of the country and to improve educational development opportunities in the smaller cities are much needed. Our chapter presents some suggestions which may help shape the future of higher education in the smaller cities in the country.

The decline in the school-age population is recognised as a national problem, not only specific to certain regions. Such a demographic change can easily be seen as a crisis that threatens the sustainable development of higher education institutions and not unlikely, their survival in the long run (Gangwon Regional Innovation Platform, 2023; MoE, 2023). Accordingly, the central government of South Korea has created a system to prepare universities for such challenges that are rising rapidly and promote sustainable development and environment, society, and governance (ESG) education that fits with the local characteristics. This means that universities, and especially universities outside of the capital city where sustainable development is even more key to regional growth and educational objectives, will need to act quickly to embrace such initiatives and re-think the value of education for their students (Mun & Yang, 2022).

ESD means that the central government educates the values, behaviours, and ways of life necessary for a sustainable development in a society at all levels of education in the midst of accelerated social changes following the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they are pushing to comply with the international norms of the organisation, ESG management being one of the key initiatives. Each education entity related to ESG and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) education in higher education is asked to demonstrate to what extent their projects have progressed against the tensions and challenges mentioned earlier.

Various policies have been proposed, such as the Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) project and the Place, Problem, and Project (P3L) method. The region has become an important topic for universities and the Korean society in crisis as aforementioned (Gangwon Regional Innovation Platform, 2023). South Korea achieved economic growth and democratisation centred on the metropolitan area around the capital city. Localities or regions outside of this area tended to be recognised as a colony supplying human and material resources to the metropolitan area. However, as the crisis deepened, growth centred on the metropolitan area stagnated, and dispersion instead of concentration and regions instead of the metropolitan area began to be recognised as an important growth model (Moon, 2023a). With such a change, the status and role of the national universities naturally increase, and there are new opportunities for higher education institutions to be working closely with the region in which they are located. In South Korea, there are 10 national universities in each administrative region. The MoE, which is the central ministry, has asked local universities to promote the RIS project. RIS based on local government–university cooperation is recognised as a way for the country to cooperate with the region in the field of education to save the region and the university from the crises they are each faced with. Problem-based learning (PBL) has also been recognised as an effective substitute for the one-sided, instruction model previously quite dominant in Korean education and is spreading widely. Importantly, PBL seeks to strengthen local innovation

capabilities by collaborating with the region in solving local problems with more practical solutions in mind.

In this chapter, the context of South Korea (which is sometimes also referred to as Korea) is in the spotlight. We will review relevant academic literature and policy documents to highlight the response of the Korean government and higher education institutions to two important recent crises (i.e., school-age population decline and the so-called regional decline more widely) and outline the process of recognising and coping with the challenges following and fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5.2 Higher Education in South Korea

### 5.2.1 Historical Background

In Korea, the central government or the state has traditionally had much power and influence on education. Through the Japanese Colonial Period and the Korean War, over-developed states were able to infiltrate civil society through centralised and efficient organisations and institutions, allowing the will of the state to penetrate civil society (Alavi, 1972). Education took root in this centralised system because citizens were educated in the way that aligned with the societal objectives to get through this challenging period and beyond (MoE, 1988). This strong state centrism is deeply entrenched in the society and education planning to this day (Moon, 2023a).

Therefore, one can expect that the definition of and proposed response to the crises as proposed by the government will have a huge impact on the higher education system's response and ensuing actions to cope with these crises in Korea. The government has strict guidelines and objectives for higher education that reflect on the societal goals. Curriculum review has led to the suggested inclusion of sustainable development and ESG-related content in 2015, and in 2022, glocalism featured as a hot topic and objective stressed by the government. Glocalism, a term that combines localisation and globalisation, has already been used as a political tool. Nevertheless, the newly found emphasis on this initiative rests heavily on the opportunity for the region to grow as an agent of globalisation rather than remaining on the periphery of the metropolitan area. In this sense, glocalism provides an important ideological direction for universities to permeate into the region (Moon, 2023a). Just as the American government tried to escape the threat of communism by developing the economies of Third World countries in the 1960s, the Korean government has the intention of reducing the burden on the central government by regional growths (Park, 2007).

The MoE in South Korea also periodically conducts university evaluations and provides government-funded projects. Under such guidelines and suggestions, national, public, and private universities are all required to follow the policies of the MoE carefully. MoE is always at the centre of the reform of the national system, deciding the direction of the development and changes in all higher education institutions. If any institution does not follow, it may face exclusion from future government support, and for this reason, it is sometimes criticised as a

reincarnated Leviathan for higher education institutions (Sakong, 2017). More in-depth analysis of how, under such a hierarchical structure, universities are responding to the regional needs and sustaining growth is much needed.

### ***5.2.2 COVID-19 and Its Impact on Higher Education Institutions in South Korea***

COVID-19 has also had a huge impact on higher education in Korea as would have been the case globally. There are, for instance, studies in areas where various crises caused by the transition to non-face-to-face teaching methods and digital transformation due to COVID-19 have been applied to education, threatening the sustainability of higher education (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022). The rapid transformation in the main delivery mode of teaching and student expectations will inevitably lead to further impact on education that will have to be looked at carefully.

Education institutions are also faced with a major change as the result of the increased focus on the region as the centre as a solution, namely, more region-focused developments, in order to cope with the challenges brought on or accelerated by the pandemic. In an environment where the topic of SDGs and ESG management is spreading around the world, Korea has begun to respond actively to these global trends. As institutions of higher education emerged as a solution to the crisis in the region, various programmes focusing on regional cooperation, regional education and governance within the region emerged. Since 2015, the government revamped the curriculum to encourage elementary, secondary and high school students to learn and experience contents relating to sustainable development while keeping up with the trend of globalisation. In particular, education on the environment and sustainable development was included in the revised curriculum, and the government under President Moon Jae-In set strengthening sustainable development as a national task in 2018. The government sought to establish and strongly promote the Korean sustainable development goals (K-SDGs) that complement the '3rd Basic Plan for Sustainable Development'. Accordingly, by 2023, all local governments and institutions of higher education are required to develop a master plan and action plan and report it to the prime minister's office every year (Lee, 2023).

### ***5.2.3 SDGs and ESG Management***

Currently, research on SDGs and ESG in South Korea generally focuses on two dimensions: whether the SDGs are included in the curriculum within universities and how they might be implemented and linked to the regional goals. Accordingly, each educational entity continues to develop programmes within the curriculum, within the school, between schools and in conjunction with schools and other civic and social and community organisations (Kim, 2023). Naturally, research related to ESD and ESG management generally places emphasis on structural reforms and related roles within universities. However, sustainability research at universities has not yet progressed beyond the level of

reporting on such data and we argue that more in-depth research and analysis is needed. First of all, it is important that we understand how the SDGs are being implemented within universities. Lee (2020) argues that universities should think about how to innovate and practice education and expand their role in the society. In other words, we need to learn how we can make students understand sustainable development and think about implementing them in their daily lives (Choi & Ji, 2023; Lee, 2023). There have been initiatives to engage with such goals, such as providing liberal arts education at universities as a way of educating students of their role in sustainable development. For instance, the Korean MoE's Glocal University 30 project encompassing the existing university education innovation project and regional linkage project is underway, although the success of this project has yet to be seen with little research tracing its impact so far. Unlike in Korea, sustainability and ESG concepts have been introduced in higher education for quite some time in Europe. Even in such countries, however, the majority of the research looks only at sustainability concepts and quality assurance in higher education (Manatos et al., 2017) and thus focusing on the delivery but not so much the impact and implications of such programmes on students or local contexts.

According to press releases, many universities in Korea have set up internal groups such as ESG committees, in order to facilitate ESG management. The establishment of ESG-related institutions is of great significance in that it serves as a practical starting point for ESG management. Konkuk University in Seoul led on such developments. In April 2021, they established the 'ESG Committee' under the direct supervision of the chairman of the board of directors of the school corporation and enhanced its expertise by establishing three divisions under the committee: environment, social responsibility and transparent management (Lee, 2023). Their ESG committee prepares practical strategies and measures for efforts to reduce carbon emissions, introduce eco-friendly energy and strengthen social responsibilities such as employment, safety, human rights and youth entrepreneurship for various stakeholders, ethical management and transparency (Cho, 2021). Korea University also established their ESG committee in April 2021 with the aim of making the SDGs a core value of the university management and actively fulfilling its social responsibility in applying ESG values to university education, research and administration (Song, 2022). Other universities including Seoul National University and Keonyang University followed suit in establishing ESG committees and research institutes in the following years to serve the purpose of strengthening environmental, climate and ethical education and operating comparative and course ESG programmes among others. Chung-Ang University launched the '2030 Carbon Neutral ESG Sharing Forum' with the participation of top experts in Korea with the goal of advancing carbon neutrality from 2050 to 2030 and leading ESG-related industries (Choi, 2021). The main aim of these establishments and new initiatives all link to establishing a strong ESG linkage system by bringing together industry, academia, and research networks and minimising the cost of building supply chain management (SCM) for each industry.

### *5.2.3.1 ESG Management of Universities*

In South Korea, a university is an organisation consisting of hundreds of faculty members and thousands of students. As such, it has the character of a community-based enterprise in terms of economic activities such as job creation, service provision, and consumption. At the same time, it is also a public institution in that it provides educational services publicly and receives financial support from the state. Therefore, universities, like companies and public institutions, should conduct their own ESG management for sustainable development and should take the lead in spreading ESG culture to all parts of society. As we have seen, many universities in Korea have already established ESG committees, declared ESG visions, and set detailed implementation tasks. However, compared to major universities, companies, and public institutions overseas, there is still a lack of awareness and practice of ESG management across higher education institutions in Korea, and there is almost no disclosure of ESG-related information or socially responsible investing (SRI).

### *5.2.3.2 Operation of ESG Committee and Efforts to Spread ESG Culture*

Experts have noted that ESG management in Korean higher education institutions is still only at a beginning stage (Kim, 2022a). In order to have effective ESG management in universities, the ESG committee should have autonomous control over its ESG management. The ESG committee should establish governance in which various involved actors such as faculty, staff, students, and alumni associations participate to discuss agendas and share achievements from time to time, and the ESG committee should be able to coordinate activities and establish priorities by exerting leadership (Kim, 2022). As there can be a conflict of interest between various departments of the university or various stakeholders of the university, there must be an organisation that has the authority to coordinate and prioritise the direction of the university, its budgeting, and resource allocation.

In addition, ESG management must include considerations for all stakeholders involved, including the socially disadvantaged, awareness of the rights and safety of all members and suppliers, and democratic and fair management. Some ways to spread the ESG culture created at universities include education, service, and community engagement (Leem, 2022). In addition to education for university students and professionals, eco-friendly ecological education and green consumption education should also be conducted for community members. In addition, it is necessary to systematically carry out social service activities within the broad framework of ESG. For example, Korea University's Social Contribution Centre has an ESG committee within the institution, which conducts continuous and systematic volunteer activities for underprivileged areas, people with disabilities, multicultural/North Korean defectors, the elderly living alone, and children/adolescents (Korea University Social Service Organisation, 2022). In addition, it is necessary for universities to take the lead in consulting for ESG management by public institutions and companies in the local community and for university professors to actively participate as ESG committee members of public institutions or companies.

### 5.2.3.3 *Disclosure and Dissemination of ESG Information By Universities*

Dissemination of information by universities through the publication of sustainability reports is another way in which the sharing and transfer of knowledge can occur at the local and national levels. Since 2019, Seoul National University's sustainability institute has prepared a sustainability report in compliance with the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) for ESG and published it after being verified by an external party and has been publishing a green report every year since 2014 to share information related to the university's green campus activities and greenhouse gases related to each campus and major buildings ([Seoul National University Institute for Sustainable Development, 2021](#)). Yonsei University established the 'Global Social Contribution Institute' in 2017 to declare social participation as the central responsibility of the university. They are taking the lead in achieving the UN's SDGs through various activities and have prepared and published a sustainability report every year since 2020. In addition, Hanyang University, Aju University, and Wonkwang University are also publishing sustainability reports detailing their involvement and steps towards a sustainable future (Kim, 2022).

However, ESG information disclosure at universities is not mandatory at present, and there are no disclosure standards. Therefore, most universities do not disclose ESG information, and even universities that disclose ESG-related information adhere only to various standards set by themselves. In addition, disclosure methods vary, and some sustainability reports are difficult to locate. Therefore, it is necessary to develop ESG guidelines and evaluation indicators to be applied across institutions. The Korean MoE could help create and provide ESG guidelines, but it would be preferable to make them university led ([Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy \(MTIE\), 2021](#); [Park & Jeong, 2021](#)). It is true that universities need ESG and have an obligation to practise it, but if the MoE provides ESG guidelines to be applied to universities and applies them uniformly, there is a risk that ESG will turn into another university evaluation standard. In addition, it would be better to make ESG-related disclosures through university alerts rather than disclosing them separately on the university website or the websites of related institutions within it ([Korea Foundation for the Advancement of History, 2022](#)).

### 5.2.3.4 *ESG University Cluster*

The 2023 ESG University Cluster Agreement Ceremony and Forum was held, attended by 32 universities nationwide under the theme of 'Drawing the Future of Growth, Sustainability, and Sustainability of Universities with ESG'. The ESG University Cluster has declared that it will set and implement five common goals based on the ideology of ESG, such as taking the lead in environmental protection by creating a eco-friendly campus for the sustainable development of universities, creating social values for the realisation of an inclusive and safe society, and establishing transparent and fair governance. Initiatives including an ESG club where students and faculty members at each university can work together to promote ESG while using the platform created by the 'Korea ESG Management Institute' are proposed.



#### **5.2.4 Regional Cooperations Between Universities and Local Government**

Universities, local governments, and companies are cooperating in ESG management for the common goal of revitalising the local economy and awareness of the crisis caused by the decline in the school-age population. ESG is not just a corporate issue but a social issue, and universities, which sit at the centre of research and education, can practise ESG management through cooperation with local communities (local governments, public institutions, industries, etc.). In November 2021, Chungnam National University launched the ESG Promotion Council with the participation of universities, local governments, public institutions, industries, and research institutes such as Chungcheongnam Province, Daejeon City, Sejong City, Startup Promotion Agency, and Hyundai Jeongju with the purpose of laying the foundation for a regional innovation system (Lee, 2023).

To this end, it has placed the emphasis on the role of education in building local value chains and plans to hold an ESG social value academy for professional development. Handong University, in cooperation with three organisations including Pohang City and the Korean Council of UNAI KOREA, has decided to implement Global Citizenship Education from March 2022 for sustainable development through financial support from Pohang City and the utilisation of Handong University's teaching resources. Likewise, six universities in the Jeonbuk region (Jeonbuk National University, Jeonju National University, Jeonju National University of Education, Jesus University, Jeonju Jeonju University, and Jeonju Vision University) signed the 'Jeonju-University ESG Agreement' with Jeonju City to realise ESG values (Lee, 2022). In 2021, Inha University collaborated with four public companies in the Incheon area (Metropolitan Landfill Management Corporation, Incheon International Airport Corporation, Korea Environment Corporation, and Incheon Transportation Corporation) to hold a student contest to propose ESG management innovation ideas to these public companies. In September 2022, the Incheon University LINC 3.0 Project Group was established by the Incheon Port Corporation, under a business agreement with the Metropolitan Landfill Management Corporation and the Incheon Transportation Corporation for cooperation in the ESG Management Innovation Idea Contest and plans to select and award excellent work through student competitions (Kim, 2022). In November 2022, 120 students from 12 universities, including Hanseo University, Chung-Ang University, and Chosun University, who are carrying out the LINC3.0 project, participated in a project to develop ESG ideas for companies in Taean, South Chungcheong Province (Song, 2022).

#### **5.2.5 Change in Participation and Perception**

As Bandura's (1982) concept of self-efficacy suggests, active participation and especially participating in activities that directly relate to one's goals has a profound impact on the individual(s) involved. When university students participate in programmes co-created by the state and universities in response to national policies for survival and growth, they are much more likely to see its direct

potential outcomes and find stronger motivation to take part and bring about the intended desired outcome. This could also lead to students getting a broader and better understanding of the local region and affect their sense of citizenship and belonging which in turn can transform them into participatory citizens. This can also take them out of their shell, worrying only of their personal achievements and anxiety to catch up with the developments within the capital city, and establish a more grounded identity as someone who belongs and works for the growth of the locality. A young businessman having set up a social enterprise together with his college mate in Chuncheon speaks of his experience which closely follows this, noting that he has managed to combine his vision with that of the city, Chuncheon, and that it has been a satisfactory journey (Moon, 2023b).

The emergence of the RIS project, mentioned earlier, which combines the visions of university innovation and regional innovation, has led many national universities in smaller cities to identify ways to utilise national resources optimally. As an example, universities in Gangwon province have implemented programmes to encourage local residents and youth to solve problems in their local region (Gangwon Regional Innovation Platform, 2023). The mission of many such universities outside of Seoul in the coming years is to carry out more of such projects, have a closer focus on the regional needs and engage students and staff to work on these needs and eventually, and contribute to regional growth by attracting and keeping talented young people who will stay and continue to work towards these goals locally. In this sense, university research and education for their students, who are local youth, can aim to improve their understanding of the region and become experts in the region. Making them region focused may be the best solution to balancing outgrowth across regions, and such a strategy fits the age of glocalisation well.

At Kangwon National University, there is a new project called ‘Students Club Research Projects’, a student community club which focuses on young people establishing themselves in Chuncheon, the city in which the university is located (Gangwon Regional Innovation Platform, 2023). Students who join this club try to engage with local issues and identify opportunities to find solutions to these issues while turning them into career opportunities for themselves. Students are invited to participate in competitions run by the Centre for Innovation in Higher Education with staff mentors, and the aim is to get students involved in these projects where they can form social capital with a wide range of people in the region, including fellow students with similar goals as well as public institutions and local residents. Also, through these projects, students learn to identify an issue and form and conduct autonomous research under the guidance of academic staff, and in this sense, it fulfils the educational purpose in training students to think independently and critically. The government has promised substantial funding to support these programmes for the coming years, and universities are keen to be selected to be funded for these programmes and also come up with ways to engage students effectively. Another added benefit to such programmes is that this provides the best opportunity to open up the campus for discussions across various stakeholders, inviting local residents and activists to have open and progressive conversations with the universities and their students to work on

local issues together. We hope that this will lead to more integrated local systems of communities and universities working together that serve as an open space for research and community work for all.

### **5.3 Discussion and Conclusion**

Population decline, along with centralisation of resources and opportunities in the capital city, has led to challenges for smaller cities and higher education institutions in the regions in attracting young people to study and stay in their cities. Also, the socioeconomic changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an alarming sense of crisis felt and experienced by higher education institutions in South Korea. The state-centred management of educational institutions and national agenda have traditionally impacted on the universities' ability and scope to make autonomous decisions and create policies and programmes that serve themselves and their students best. We propose that closer cooperation between higher education institutions, local governments, and stakeholders are needed, with the students playing the role of active agents serving as a linkage point between. Such an opportunity will also allow students to consider a wider range of options for their academic and career pathways as the result of their involvement in these projects, local knowledge, and social capital.

The current crises have also served as a wake-up call at the national level, leading to the realisation and consensus that more attention needs to be paid to the local needs and how universities in each region and city can better reflect these needs alongside their students' needs. A variety of new programmes and projects that closely align with regional issues has been introduced, which centre around higher education institutions acting as the regional hub. As outlined in our chapter, many of these programmes and projects focus on sustainable development at local and national levels and universities are keen to involve students in these, so that they can develop a better awareness and understanding of the local needs while gaining first-hand experience in PBL and research focused on generating practical and locally applicable solutions. We would like to argue that such endeavours will help higher education institutions to manage wisely with the present challenges and, furthermore, serve the students and communities more optimally in the coming years.

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