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**1st Korean Culture essay: What universities are in Korea**

One of the commonly known stereotypes of Korea is that students study very hard and have very high achievements in terms of learning. It is true that students in Korea spend a lot of time going to academies or studying late at school, and usually it is for one huge goal-to enroll into a good university. In fact, with a ratio of 69.8%, Korea has the highest rate of population with tertiary education among all the OECD countries in 2017[[1]](#footnote-1). Also, Korea has a total of 326 universities and junior colleges[[2]](#footnote-2), while the UK (just for comparison) has a total of 130 universities and university colleges[[3]](#footnote-3). Considering that Korea’s population is only about 13% larger than the UK, it is a notable difference in number. Not only that they go to universities a lot, universities hold a major space in the lives of Koreans-it partly determines what job they would get, who they would meet in their careers, and how people would evaluate them at first sight. As problems associated to universities become very important, many people are sensitive about the issues and problems the current education system occur, including intense academic cliquism, controversial admission systems and severe high school competitions.

As the history of the Korean Republic is very short, the recognition of universities has changed drastically throughout the past few decades. Back in the post war period, Korea was still a developing country. Education environments were poor, and most of the people were not wealthy enough for higher education than compulsory elementary schools. It took more than 30 years for the government to finally provide compulsory middle school education for everyone in 1985[[4]](#footnote-4). Still in the early 1980s, not many people were able to afford university educations and enrolment rates were under 30%. Tertiary education became a symbol of intelligence and university graduates were treated as elites of the society. Since graduating a university was almost equivalent as a social success, many families in rural areas who barely lived on by agriculture tried to send their siblings to a university with high expectations on them. Thus, the term ‘ox-bone tower’ was born, variated from ivory tower, implying the fact that poor agricultural families sold their precious ox to afford money for their children’s university enrolment fee[[5]](#footnote-5). Individual investments might have gone too far for educational purposes, but this tendency willing for higher education has been the motive power of the growth of the Korean society.

By the 90s, things began to slowly change. The society was overall stabled (before the 1997 IMF crisis) and a lot more people were able to afford the financial burden of tertiary education. But number of universities were limited, and it was difficult for everyone to find their way in. So, in 1990, the government decided to support more universities and by the year 1995, number of universities has increased from 107 to 131[[6]](#footnote-6). In 1996, the government has enforced a new policy about universities called 'Normative system for university establishments(대학설립준칙주의)'. It enabled establishments of new universities if they met specific conditions, such as minimum area per student, minimum number of students etc., which made establishing new universities much easier. As this policy took effect, the number of universities skyrocketed, and things began to be problematic. Although the economy of the country has changed during the past decades, the idea of sending their kids to a university was inherited from the 1980s. A lot of students(or their parents) still hoped for university enrollment, and people with great wealth started establishing their own private universities with the help of the new policy, some hoping to give more students the chance of education, but some looking forward for making a fortune with the tuition fees. In fact, there was another increase of 119 universities and colleges from 1990 to 2005, but 114 were private and only 5 were national[[7]](#footnote-7). Eventually, on 2005, Korea ended up having more than 5 times of universities than Korea did in the post war season[[8]](#footnote-8). As the number of universities increased rapidly, so did the population with tertiary education, which has increased from 27.2% in 1980 to 82.1% in 2005[[9]](#footnote-9).

As this happened, people’s recognition about universities began to change. As more than 4 out of 5 people started graduating universities and colleges, the graduation certificate of a university was no longer the symbol of intelligence, but just a proof that one has spent more years in learning stuff. Also, the government started to lose control of the numerous universities flooding the country, eventually making the quality of education hard to maintain. As a result, universities that shouldn’t be called one with extremely inferior conditions (e.g. a campus with only two small buildings that doesn’t even have tissues in the toilet booths[[10]](#footnote-10)) have been established and is standing to this very day. This is one of the reasons why academic cliquism is dominating the country. Academic cliquism about universities is very intense in Korea, making a whole list of universities[[11]](#footnote-11) sorted by their ranks. Although this list is unofficial, almost every highs school and university students know it, engraving the order into people’s minds.

Now it is clearer why people are so obsessed with highly ranked university. The quality of experience that was shortly mentioned earlier is one reason. Renown universities provide better human relationships (not always, but the odds of meeting nice people are generally proportionate to the grades that are required for enrolment), better education, better learning conditions than universities that are relatively less valued. But the biggest reason comes from the list of universities itself. When the graduates get in the society, they are initially evaluated by the name value of their graduate universities which is stuck in nearly everyone’s mind. Despite of being illegal, cases of companies giving additional points to people by their graduate universities during job interviews do exist[[12]](#footnote-12). Even if people that graduated from low-ranked universities somehow get a job in big companies, promotion is implicitly limited and might experience isolation. Of course, this does not happen in the whole country, but it is enough to feel the impact of the cliquism in the country and could explain why a graduation certificate itself is no longer worthy: what matters is *where* one has graduated. Considering the fact that the purpose of an ideal university is education, it is sad that the main reason for graduation for many people is the name of their universities, and to get a job.

As the rank of universities is so important in current Korean society, university admissions are a very big deal for all students that are looking forward to getting in one. As a matter of fact, it is not too much to say that the ranking of universities was established because of the past and present admission system. Just as the history of universities in Korea, the admission system has also changed during time. In the post war season, the admission was totally on each university. They had their own exams, tests and interviews to sort out who would get admitted. But as corruption and illegal admission became an issue, the government came up with a national exam that would be the standard of grading, leaving less autonomy of each universities. The two systems, individual university dependent admissions and national admissions, alternated for some time with some changes until 1993. During each period, there was not much of a variety in admission systems and most of the exams were based on excessively difficult flat facts of subjects, resulting into a mere memorizing competition and student’s lack of actual understanding of the subjects. Also, the exam-first application-later system has caused severe polarization between the level of universities and departments.

In 1994, copying the SAT system of the US, the College Scholastic Ability Test(CSAT, 수능, suneung) was introduced for the first time. Unlike the previous admission exams that required only memorizing, the purpose of this exam was to test the actual ability of students to learn in further studying, in hopes of relieving the problems of the previous system. The grades are evaluated relatively, making it easier to sort out the student’s abilities[[13]](#footnote-13). For a short period of time, there was only regular admissions based entirely on the CSAT grades. In 1996, as the government judged that the 100% CSAT based regular admission system lacks variety, early admission based on essay exams, interviews and high school grades has started. This is how the base of today’s admission system was built.

Thus, regular and early admissions are the two mainstreams of admission systems that are still in place. The initial purpose of giving the students a second choice of admission was good. But starting in 2002, early admissions started to spread and diversify, which ended up occupying 76.2% of the upcoming university admission in 2019[[14]](#footnote-14). According to the universities’ opinion, they keep raising the early admission rates because the CSAT exams are becoming to easy to discriminate the students that are appropriate to enroll in the universities. It is true that the CSAT exams were easy for a few years (around 2012 to 2016), but its difficulty is getting back high; this is proven by the overall decrease in the grade cuts of the CSAT for the past years[[15]](#footnote-15). Yet despite the increasing difficulty of the CSAT and the rising public opinion demanding a decrease of it, the early admission rate increased every year since 2002, except for 2015[[16]](#footnote-16).

Unlike regular admissions, early admissions have very many routes of getting in university and has no distinct standard in early admissions, so universities ended up having each of their own diverse admission systems. For an example, Seoul National University has 4 types of admissions, which is general (early) admissions, regional equality admissions, low-incomer admissions and rural region admissions. Each admission has different fees and different requirements, which is where the controversy comes from. The public opinion of why the early admission rate is really rising is because early admissions make universities a fortune every year, and it could be a handy method for some politically, financially powerful people or people who have authorities in schools to illegally enroll their children into high-ranked universities.

The fee of early admissions is usually expensive, pricing from 50,000 won and up to more than 140,000 won (a dollar costs around 1100 won)[[17]](#footnote-17). Considering this with the fact that the competition rate of early admissions for Yonsei University was nearly 20:1 with 52,134 attenders[[18]](#footnote-18), the income the university gets from early admissions a year is at least more than 2.5 billion won. Many people are skeptical toward the overly priced admission fees, saying “Every year an admission season ends, a new building is built in the university”, which is a commonly known phrase between people. Also, the term “Stacking a brick on a new university building” is used when high school students pay their fee for university admissions (especially when they have low hopes of being admitted). Although these phrases are exaggerated, it explains the problem of the current admission system in a nutshell.

Issues about illegal or unfair admissions via early admissions are also common in articles or online communities. Since regular admissions are totally (or mostly) based on the grades of CSAT, a national exam which is a reliable index, early admissions are considered relatively unreliable as the same reason with the university exams before the CSAT. The CSAT grades are unbiased and objective, making regular admissions impartial and skill-based. On the other hand, the requirements and the procedure of each early admissions are vague, arbitrary and enclosed, so everyone in public has no clue of how the university sorts out the admitted.

The first point of controversy derived from the difference between admission systems is whether the early admission system is fair in terms of student’s abilities, compared to those who prepare for the regular admission. As mentioned previously, the requirements of early admissions are very different one another, which is also very different compared to the grades required for the regular admissions. For instance, students who enroll in Seoul National University by regular admission mostly have grades that go within 0.5% from the top since only slightly more than 400 among 580,000 people (The rough number of applicants of the CSAT each year) could get admitted. However, in early admissions, students only have to meet the least CSAT grades (grades higher than the least demanded are not evaluated) the university demands, which is approximately around 10% from the top[[19]](#footnote-19). It is undoubtfully lower than the CSAT grades the students that prepare for the regular admission must get. This is obviously because what the students focus on differ by what they must prepare for, or they get have some sort of talent that does not have much to do with the CSAT grades. Those who might have to get ready for interviews, contests or essay exams are likely to perform worse than those who prepare for the CSAT all year. Still some think it is unfair, requesting the increase of regular admissions for equality.

Although unfairness between different admissions might be personal, it becomes problematic when things start to go against the law. Since high school grades and competition awards are also important in many admissions, cheating and grade/career manipulation occur in some schools. The recent issue of Sook Myung women’s high school’s twin sister was also about high school exam cheating, having their father leaking upcoming exam questions and answers to get almost a perfect grade, buying many student’s suspicion because of the sudden leap in their grades[[20]](#footnote-20). Illegal admission of Yu Ra, Jung in Ehwa women’s university is an example of illegal university admission which was heavily criticized by the social media[[21]](#footnote-21).

As these are not the first time there was news about corruption in high schools and universities, the public opinion requiring the abolition of early admissions is growing bigger, pointing out the problems it is causing. As early admissions were brought in after regular admissions, early admissions do have their intentions and positive influences on the university admission system. They give students a different choice, or the university could find hidden talents of the students in a way that the CSAT grades couldn’t. It is why this system was introduced in the first place, but it could be said that it has gone too far than it was initially planned.

Although current’s system might not be perfect, there is hardly any choice for the students but to adapt to how things work. Since most of the people who prepare for their university admissions are high school students, the way students get ready for it mostly depends on what kind of high school they are attending to. There are a whole variety of high schools in Korea and each of them have their unique style, but they could be grouped in to four large groups: specialized high schools, ordinary high schools, autonomous private high schools and schools for special purposes.

For specialized high schools, one huge difference among the other high schools is that the main purpose of education is to get the students in actual working conditions by teaching practical technologies and knowledges, instead of preparing them to get in universities. But, because of the cultural atmosphere that values people’s universities so much, students willing to study usually decide to go to ordinary high schools or schools for special purposes, and the general recognition of these high schools is a school for inferiors or those who don’t want to study. There are some students who enroll in these high schools aiming for an easy high grade with the overall less-competitive competitors, and there also are special early admissions in some universities that give students from specialized high schools a better chance. This, one of the admission systems that is associated with unfairness, is sometimes called a ‘cheat key[[22]](#footnote-22)’ for admission, depending on how it is relatively easy to get in universities with this specific way. Still, because of several reasons (mostly the environment of education and high school life), students who aim for further studying in universities mostly avoid enrolling in specialized high schools.

Ordinary high school is the most common choice for students who graduates middle school in Korea. Statistically, 71.5% of high school students are attending in ordinary high schools, followed by specialized high schools, autonomous private high schools and schools for special purposes[[23]](#footnote-23). Ordinary high schools could either be national or private, but they are treated fair and unranked in most[[24]](#footnote-24) regions of Korea. Ordinary schools are literally, ordinary. They have standardized curriculums, and the ability of the students are well distributed. As many of the high school students are in ordinary high schools, the term ‘high school students’ in school life of Korea is usually limited to those attending in ordinary high schools. If one wants to talk about a particular type of high school, they usually mention what group of high schools they’re talking about.

There’re two major methods of being prepared for university admissions in ordinary high schools. One is to focus on the school’s midterm and final exams to make a good high school grade, participate a lot in competitions or school contests, and get ready for interviews and essays for early admissions. For these students, CSAT is not the main deal because it doesn’t have anything to do with the admission if they meet the least grades the universities require. On the other hand, the second main method of preparing for university admissions is to focus totally on the CSAT, aiming for regular admissions. Students who take this route are students who didn’t handle the previous school exams very well, students who failed in early admissions, or students who just prefer the CSAT over school exams or interviews, etc.

Autonomous private high schools are sort of an up-notch version of ordinary high schools. In 2010, there was a project by a government called ‘High School Diversify 300 Project’, which tried to make existing high schools into various types of high schools to give more liberty in high school educations and more choices for students[[25]](#footnote-25). Autonomous private high schools were one of them, and the schools to become one were picked among private ordinary schools. They could utilize half of the high school curriculum and could have their own admission systems. This resulted into making autonomous private high schools as elite schools, making the curriculum more appropriate for talented students. Although the way students get ready for university admissions are quite similar with ordinary high schools, universities tend to value autonomous schools over ordinary high schools since they know that autonomous school students are overall more skilled. They also get generally higher grades in the CSAT, compared to the students in ordinary high schools. In fact, even though just 8% of the high school students in Korea are attending in autonomous schools, 26.3% of the students admitted in Seoul National University in 2018 (which is considered as the best university in the country) among the top 100 high schools ranked by the number of students admitted were from autonomous private high schools[[26]](#footnote-26).

Just like autonomous private high schools, schools for special purposes are also considered elite. School for special purposes is a wide range of schools that were literally built for special purposes, but in this case, usually for advanced education for high school students. Meister high schools, Arts high schools, P.E. high schools, Foreign language high schools, International high schools, Schools for gifted students, Science high schools are all one sort of schools for special purposes. Meister high schools are a sort of an upper-class specialized school that focuses on fostering technicians for the industry, mainly to get a job after graduation. School for gifted students are technically science high schools that foster future scientists and engineers. It is not an actual high school but is only recognized as one, and students get university-level educations. Other schools for special purposes usually have specialties in their subjects (e.g. Foreign language high schools are specialized in foreign languages, obviously), but they all receive only highly competitive students with their own admission systems and curriculums.

Because these schools concentrate on their own school activities and universities value schools for special purposes quite much, almost every student in these schools do not attend the CSAT and prepares for the early admissions that does not require CSAT grades but only personal/high school activities. The level of education they received is unparalleled to those who study in ordinary high schools. Many students from schools for special purposes get used to writing reports or university-level subjects before they even enroll into a university, and the performance they show in universities are generally higher compared to those who came from other high schools. For instance, the average grade of the graduates in the college of natural science in Seoul National University in 2009-2011 showed that those who admitted through admissions for schools for special purposes had the highest average grade (3.53 out of 4.3) out of all admission types, while others recorded 3.17, 3.18, 2.94 each[[27]](#footnote-27).

So, do high school students really work hard as much as their known for it? In ordinary high schools, class starts on 9 AM and ends on 5 PM, and time for self-studying is given until 9-10 PM. Since the law restrict the time of private education up to 10 PM nowadays, students staying late in academies till dawn are rarely seen, but schooltime itself is already over 12 hours a day. Even though the lengths of studying time have shortened than the past, it is still a very long time spent for studying. Things get more intense when it goes to the school for special purposes. Most of these high schools have their own dorms, and because of their deadly curriculum compared to the standard high school one, they are half-forced to stay late until night to catch up with their classes.

Since the Korean society values the name value of universities quite much, retrying for the next year’s admission is rather common in Korea. Systematically early admissions are difficult to retry, so most of those who look forward for another chance prepare for the CSAT. Retrying is a whole year of intense studying all over again (although the knowledge remains) without going to high school. The load of studying gets worse when people get in the academies specially made for those who retry. Class starts around 7 AM, studying ends in 10 PM, with very little amount of break time in between, and there is almost no weekends or holidays. It could easily drive people nuts and it is easy to give up. Still, being a very hard decision to make, many people make up their minds to give it another shot. In the CSAT on 2018 (the exam was on 2017), high school graduates occupied 22.3% of the whole CSAT attenders, and the percentage got slightly higher this year (2019 CSAT) to 23.2%[[28]](#footnote-28).

It is apparently true that Korean students go through a lot of studying. It might end up in a good achievement in the amount they learn, but the excessively long studying times are lowering students’ happiness (20th among 22 OECD member states[[29]](#footnote-29)), and according to a research, even the efficiency of studying[[30]](#footnote-30).

Peter Ferdinand Drucker, an Austrian-born American management consultant, educator, and author, once predicted that most university campuses would be gone by the year 2020. It points out that the essence of universities was education, but it loses its color gradually and deforms into a job factory, leaving no point of having a university. Is tertiary education on the right track? In Korea, universities somehow function as an identification card-it explains a huge part of an individual, and people or companies evaluate them with their 4-year length segment from the past. Eventually, most students are demanded to enroll in a university whatsoever, resulting from listing universities from top to bottom to establishing faulty universities that should not exist. As competition gets tense, people became skeptical about the admission system that started off well with good deeds, but is not working in ideal conditions due to universities’ income through admission fees, greed by those with power, etc. Yet students do their best to get the best they could from various high schools, trying to find the way going forwards to this very day. In the past decades, Korea had lots to develop and needed as many labor forces that could work for and lead the country as possible. Now, Korea is facing the next step. The economy has changed, the society has changed but education was yet to face the change. Education should evolve in a way that could properly find the talents among people and help them derive their full potential. The question everyone has is…*How*.

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5. Namu wiki, university, Korea (<https://namu.wiki/w/%EB%8C%80%ED%95%99#s-4.1>) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Number of universities, posted by 대학교육연구소(<http://khei-khei.tistory.com/579>) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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    ([https://namu.wiki/w/%EB%8C%80%ED%95%99%EC%88%98%ED%95%99%EB%8A%A5%EB%A0%A5%EC%8B%9C%ED%97%98/%EB%93%B1%EA%B8%89%EC%BB%B7](https://namu.wiki/w/percentEBpercent8Cpercent80percentEDpercent95percent99percentECpercent88percent98percentEDpercent95percent99percentEBpercent8ApercentA5percentEBpercentA0percentA5percentECpercent8Bpercent9CpercentEDpercent97percent98/percentEBpercent93percentB1percentEApercentB8percent89percentECpercentBBpercentB7)) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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23. National index of Korea(e-나라지표) (<http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1541>) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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