The Crisis of Research Labor: Focusing on the humanities in South Korea

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Abstract

This article diagnoses the unsustainability of contemporary research labor, especially research labor in the humanities, as a 'crisis' and proposes the establishment of researcher safety nets and communities as an alternative. To do so, it first examines the factors that have led to the crisis in humanities research labor, and then explores what alternative communities and institutional changes are needed to resolve the crisis. In doing so, we explore the possibilities for rebuilding humanities academic communities, institutional change, and improved material foundations.

1. Introduction

This article diagnoses the current unsustainability of research labor in the humanities as a 'crisis' and proposes a knowledge commons network as an alternative. A research labor is unsustainable in Korean society. Looking at the current status of philosophy majors in the humanities as a representative example, as of 2024, there were about 900 philosophy majors in their 50s and 250 in their 30s registered in the Korea Research Information (KRI). The number of majors has dropped by one-third in 20 years. This indicates that philosophy as a discipline is in danger of disappearing, and the diversity of majors has been severely reduced. This trend is mirrored across the humanities and social sciences.

The humanities are often referred to as the totality of the human intellect, and their importance has always been emphasised. Contrary to the crisis in the humanities, public demand for the humanities is growing. Humanities books are always high on bookstore bestseller lists, and the demand for humanities public lectures is also high. In other words, the humanities are being discussed more than ever. So where is the 'crisis'?

This paper attributes the 'crisis in the humanities' to problems with institutions and academic structures. In particular, I will focus on the institutional level because I believe that public funding at the national level is the beginning of the solution. The 'crisis in the humanities' is not a new story, as mentioned earlier, so this paper aims to find out why this problem is recurring and to propose an alternative solution.

2. Is it a Crisis in the Humanities or a Crisis in Humanities Academia?

About twenty years ago, Jae Mock Choi (2000) spoke about the causes of the humanities crisis.

As has been well documented in the media, the introduction of the undergraduate system to be run on the basis of competition and pragmatic principles, the government's concentration of budgetary support on the

natural sciences at the expense of the humanities, the cuts in research funding for the humanities, the lack of humanities education in universities and elementary and secondary schools, and the neglect of the humanities in the general public and society have all contributed to the atrophy and crisis of the humanities.

Recently, the Ministry of Education has promoted a policy to increase the percentage of 'no-major admission' to 25%. In addition, research funding for the humanities and social sciences has continued to decline as the government's budgetary support for science and technology has been concentrated. In fact, the crisis situation has not changed much since the 2000 paper cited above. The status of new projects in the humanities and social sciences in the first half of 2024 is as follows.

<Table 1 New humanities and social sciences projects selected in the first half of 2024>[1]

Business division			Application and selection status for 2024		
			Apply	Selection	Selection rate(%)
Basic Research in Humanities and Social Sciences	Supporting the next academic generation	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Professor (Type A)	1,502	370	24.6
		Humanities and Social Sciences Research Professor (Type B)	4,387	1,273	29.0
	General Research Support	Junior Research Support	1,930	293	15.2
		Mid-Career Research Support	1,924	373	19.4

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[1] National Research Foundation of Korea

		Scholars Support	94	11	11.7
		Collaborative research Support	733	58	7.9
		Global Humanities and Social Convergence Research(Research Group)	142	29	20.4
Promotion of the Humanities		Publication support	808	47	5.8
		Translation Support	159	22	13.8
	Total		11,679	2,476	21.2

In 2024, the average selection rate for new projects in the humanities and social sciences is 21.2%, meaning that 8 out of 10 applicants will not receive any support for a year. The lowest selection rate is 5.8 per cent for the book publication support project. Recently, Ki Myung Kim (2024) has pointed out a number of systemic problems, including an evaluation system centred on journal articles and a systematic neglect of scholarly monographs, including doctoral dissertations. He states:

Basically, a theorist's 'monographs', in which he or she has pursued maximum depth through mid- to long-term research, are the only way for us to picture the totality of his or her ideas and theories. However, most universities in Korea only consider the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of publications from the last two years to the last four years in the appointment process.

In this context of short-term performance evaluation by schools, researchers cannot find time to write a monograph. Monographs, which require several years of work, are very disadvantageous and difficult to build a track record compared to articles. In addition, monographs are not valued at the institutional level, as evidenced by the 5% selection rate of the Publication Support Project. It is impossible to have detailed discussions and academic debates through monographs.

As an alternative, Kim argues for a national doctorate system and our own academic politics and academic business. Specifically, the national doctorate system is a proposal by Chi Hyun Park (2022) that the state should operate a humanities and social researcher workforce of about 15,000 doctoral-level researchers, while supplying individual researchers and lecturers and researchers at all levels of universities. The budget to operate the system is currently 140 billion won per year, which is a little more than twice the budget for the humanities and social sciences academic research professor type A (60.3 billion won) in 2024. If the

lives of researchers can be stabilised in this way, more people will undertake long-term research projects, and the next generation of academics will be able to think positively about going to graduate school.

Academic politics is the idea that academia is a political arena with its own politics, and that in addition to writing good papers, scholars need to work on creating a good academic environment. It is not sustainable for researchers to continue to be fragmented and seek individual recognition by writing lots of good but unread papers. This is why we need to speak up for institutional change and funding.

I strongly agree with this opinion and argue that we need to increase our political power to create a political entity to change the system and secure funding. A good academic chair needs a material foundation. After all, everything is a matter of resources. For example, currently, there is a Korea Research Foundation project that graduate students can apply for called 'Humanities and Social Sciences Research Professor Type B'. In 2024, the selection rate was 29.0 per cent, compared to 60.5 per cent in 2021.

There is no guarantee that the selection rate will increase in the future due to cuts in R&D budgets. In fact, it is expected to worsen, and the barrier to entry for graduate students, who are less likely to have a research track record, will be even higher, with a requirement of three research publications in five years by 2025. The R&D budget is also expected to be restored to the original level in 2025, making it even more difficult to reproduce the next generation of academics.

In an empirical analysis of the crisis of philosophy, or the crisis of the humanities, Young Woo Kwon (2022) concludes, 'Philosophy is in crisis in Korean society in that philosophy departments are being merged and reduced in number in Korean universities. However, the survey showed that the majority of people agree with the importance of philosophy and philosophy education in universities. In conclusion, philosophy is not necessarily in crisis in Korean society, but rather the philosophical community needs to reflect on its own attitude towards philosophy.

This means that the crisis of the humanities is precisely a crisis of humanities academia, and that it is important to improve the awareness of humanities scholars at the same time as institutional change and improvement of material foundations. By raising awareness, I mean that we need to create our own political organizations and acquire a sense of empathy and solidarity that can lead to institutional change and the improvement of material conditions.

3. Some Possible Ways to Resolve the Crisis and the Academic Community

What kind of community is needed to address this crisis in humanities academia? First, we need a culture of community that views knowledge production as a communal creation, a public good, not just an individual achievement. The reason why knowledge production is often seen as an individual achievement is because it is seen as something that can be privately owned. Academic knowledge, however, is produced through social co-operation. Academic knowledge is the product of the direct or indirect collaboration of a

community of researchers, not a specific individual, and the value of this knowledge cannot be measured mechanically.(Park, S. H., 2020) The value of academic knowledge lies in growing the common wealth of existing knowledge and enabling new cycles of this common wealth.(Park, S. H., 2019) Therefore, the knowledge produced belongs to all, and it is necessary to share it freely.

It is also important that the knowledge product is produced by the autonomy of the individual. Currently, papers serve only as points for university appointments. Researchers need to publish more papers than other researchers to increase their chances of becoming professors, and universities need researchers who can produce more papers for university evaluation rankings.(Kwon, B. C., 2020) In this situation, the quantitative increase in papers is successful, but topics that can be written easily and quickly become important, even if they are not useful to academics. In addition, papers are produced according to the trends set by the government. In the early 2020s, the keyword "fourth industrial revolution" produced a large number of dissertations, but now few academics study the fourth industrial revolution. This means that they produce low-quality papers on topics that the state dictates, even if they are not in their field of interest.

The next important thing is for researchers to take direct action for institutional change. A typical example of this movement is the discussion on the Researcher Welfare Act led by the Knowledge Sharing Researchers' House. The Researcher Welfare Act promotes the institutionalisation of researchers' rights and welfare, including support for academic organisations outside universities and a research safety net for unstable researchers, so that education and research inside and outside universities can interact and develop through cooperation, competition, and sharing of members.(Kim, M. H., 2024)

In particular, the need for researcher welfare legislation is suggested here. 'Financial hardship is the most prominent characteristic of precarious researchers. The majority of precarious researchers reported that they are forced to take on unrelated jobs to make ends meet, and even when they are unable to do so and need to borrow money urgently, it is difficult to obtain loans from stable financial institutions such as banks." In other words, there is an urgent need to establish a safety net for researchers to address economic difficulties.

Here are the highlights of the specific legislation:

Article 1 (Purpose): The purpose of this Act is to establish and operate an efficient deduction system for unstable researchers who are or have been engaged in research and educational activities by establishing the Researchers' Deduction Association, and to promote the livelihood and welfare of unstable researchers and contribute to the development of higher education by conducting welfare projects such as paying retirement deductions.

The core of the legislation is the establishment of the Researchers' Deduction Association to provide retirement benefits to unstable researchers. This is important because precarious researchers, such as lecturers, are not enrolled in pensions and have no retirement benefits when they retire. Therefore, the legislation aims to promote the livelihood and welfare of precarious researchers by establishing the

Researchers' Deduction Association. Naturally, this requires a campaign to enact the legislation, and this is where the political power of researchers comes into action. Researchers should unite and unite to campaign for the enactment of the legislation.

It is also important to support academic organizations outside of universities. Many unstable researchers have been able to supplement their income by doing research-related work, such as teaching, in non-university organizations. In addition, in the absence of adequate research space, unstable researchers can use the space of academic organizations to interact with other researchers. In other words, non-university organizations take over and supplement the role of the university.(Kim, M. H., 2024)

Major studies (Park, C. H., 2022; Kim, K. M., 2024) advocate for the establishment of a national doctorate system. A national doctorate system would facilitate research and provide basic livelihood security for researchers at the same time. A 'national doctorate system' that guarantees at least five years of stable research for PhDs in basic sciences should be implemented, and the number should start at around 5,000 and gradually increase to 15,000, half of the current 30,000 lecturers in the humanities and social sciences. This would also normalise graduate schools in Korean universities, where students can return their national doctorates when they become professors.

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the national doctorate system, it is necessary to establish about five 'basic humanities and social sciences institutes' in non-metropolitan areas to provide research space for national doctors while systematically accumulating research results, taking into account regional balanced development. In this way, new PhDs will not need to apply for Non-tenured faculty, and existing Non-tenured faculty will move to the institutes, so universities will no longer be able to use Non-tenured faculty cheaply. Also, as many national PhDs move down to the regions, the next generation of PhDs and younger lecturers will be able to find teaching positions in the metropolitan areas.(Park, C. H., 2022)

Even if there is a national doctorate system and a basic humanities and social sciences institute system, those who value belonging to a university more will continue to pursue the path of tenured faculty, which guarantees a higher income and activity level, while those who are satisfied with the relatively low level of income and want to continue research will remain in the position of national doctorate. In the end, if researchers' lives are stabilised, more people will undertake long-term research projects, and the next generation of academics will be encouraged to pursue graduate studies. Most importantly, unnecessary competition will be reduced (Kim, K. M., 2024).

In order for such institutional change to be possible, researchers need to gather and build political power, as mentioned earlier. In the case of science and technology, there is the Presidential Advisory Council on Science & Technology directly under the president. The humanities and social sciences should also create a body directly under the president. The humanities and social sciences should also be close to politics. As in the case of science and technology, the establishment of an organization directly under the president should lead to institutional change and strengthening of our material foundation.

4. Conclusion

So far, we have looked at the crisis of research labor in the humanities and social sciences. What is important is that we ourselves have a sense of crisis that the academic community is no longer sustainable. Unlike the previous 'crisis of the humanities', we need to recognise a 'crisis of the humanities academic community'. In order to improve material foundations, we need to create a political community for institutional change. Institutions change only when we make demands on the state and struggle for our interests. It is no longer a myth that if you write a good paper, someone will read it, or that if you produce enough papers, you can become a full professor. Now we have to demand and fight for it ourselves.

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