

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS: REFLECTIONS OF AN ASSISTANT MINISTER OF EDUCATION

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For just *six* months, during the period from July 1 to December 31, 1993, I served as assistant minister of education in charge of higher education policy in the Government of the Republic of Korea. In this short article, I want to recount some of my experiences and observations, which I think will illustrate the higher education policymaking process in government and the relationship between government and universities. It is not my intention to indulge in autobiographical detail about the experiences of these *six* months. Moreover, I do not wish to suggest that these experiences and observations were necessarily representative of those that other predecessors and successors would recount.

I think it may be useful in this context, however, for me to sketch briefly something about how I stepped into and out of senior ministerial office in the government. It was in February 1993, when Kim Young Sam took office as president of the Republic of Korea, breaking a 30-year tradition of military rule and making a successful transition to democracy. The new president found one of his major and persistent challenges in the field of education, particularly higher education, which had for *so* long been plagued by charges of unfair practices, public mistrust, and deteriorating quality—all its contribution to national development in the past four decades notwithstanding. The then minister of education placed top priority on higher education reform, but he found this impossible to achieve with the existing bureaucratic administrators. An innovative idea, in keeping with the new democratic government, was accepted by the president: the most senior ministerial position in charge of higher education policy in the government was to be held by a respected university professor, one who was not only a professional in the higher education field but also experienced enough in administration to handle the complex organization. But, needless to say, most professors, who do not seek bureaucratic status in the government, would not accept such an assistant ministerial position, and quit their tenured professorship. Thus, the Civil Service Appointment Ordinance was revised to allow a professor to hold the assistant minister position concur-

rently with a professorship. In this way I was able to join the government and return to my professorship without any constraints.

I should add here another important observation regarding my appointment. For a long time there has been a widely held myth among government officials that the five assistant ministerial-level positions in government confer great power, even greater than the office of minister, in a sense. Accordingly, many officials seek such appointments; this is also true among professors interested in administrative or political status. To get these positions, they customarily make use of any connections in government circles, particularly private contacts with powerful high-level politicians. As can be imagined, having spent my life in a university, I was without political influence of any kind. But, the then minister of education implored me, solely on the basis of my expertise, to work together with him and strongly recommended me to the president, who has the power to make appointments. Such a clean and impartial personnel management by the new government, particularly the new president, was the prime reason for my eventually agreeing to the government's request.

The assistant minister of education in charge of higher education has both an internal and external role to fulfill. Internally, he is concerned with overseeing national policymaking in higher education and the unique organizational structure of the fragmented constituencies in the Ministry of Education. Externally, he is concerned with the relationships of the government to higher education. **Four** goals were set: first, maximum extension of the autonomy of higher education institutions; second, authentic democratization of university governance; third, increasing social trust toward higher education institutions through fair and honest practices; and fourth, development of various access channels to higher education.

A variety of policies were formulated and carried out to achieve these four goals. With the intention of revising and/or repealing them, I began with a critical examination of all **sorts** of laws, regulations, and ordinances seemingly designed to work against the autonomy of higher educational institutions. For example, I abrogated the government regulation on "Evaluation Criteria on Professor's Research Activity" and handed over the power for evaluating a professor's achievement to each institution. I also changed the bureaucratic procedures between the assistant minister of education and the universities and colleges. In the past, institution presidents and deans were always summoned to the office of the assistant minister, but now I visited the institutions to meet with them instead. All documents from my office to the presidents and deans were changed in their basic character from arrogant orders to polite requests for cooperation.

In particular, I recall one policy of great significance—the "differential support and control" policy. In the past,

the government's support and control mechanisms for higher educational institutions were exhaustively uniform, not allowing for the idiosyncrasies of each institution. When the government wanted to inflict punishment upon one institution, all institutions were put under the same sanction. When the government wanted to distribute funds to institutions, then every institution received exactly the same appropriation per student enrolled. This equal, uniform support and control policy has forced upon institutions of higher education a pattern of common endeavor, a uniformity of effort, and a dull mediocrity. During my tenure, a differential support and control policy was adopted. For instance, I made a thorough survey of those institutions that had been unfair or unjust in their admissions practices, faculty recruitment, and financial accounts. I then excluded those institutions from the list of institutions that were to receive government funding. To distribute government financial support, every institution was evaluated on the basis of the developed criteria, and provided with quite different amounts of funding. To increase the autonomy of higher education institutions from government involvement, a total evaluation system, similar to that of accreditation in the United States was adopted. That is, when an institution passes the minimum standard in evaluation, the government will allow that institution maximum autonomy for setting its enrollment quota, establishing new departments, organizing curriculum, and so on.

As I look back upon my experience, I am disposed to say that the effort of the new government to invite a professor to become the assistant minister of education was a success at least in some respects. However, there was never any doubt in my mind that the really significant innovations were hindered by the distorted politics that existed. The first trial I faced after taking office came from the outside. A number of powerful politicians came out against my policy on differential support and control. I was surprised to learn that some university presidents have had close political ties with certain powerful politicians, and rely on their political intervention. Some of these politicians told me without hesitation that, were I to reject their requests, I would be dismissed. On the other hand, in order to maintain support for our policies, I had to persuade top-level officials, who often pay attention only to trends in public opinion—which sometimes run counter to fundamental principles of education and are sometimes only concerned with private interests. The most difficult experience—a battle, in a sense—was when I submitted the budget to the Economic Planning Board and later to the National Assembly. To develop a policy requires a long process of deliberate study and discussion. However, the policy can all too easily be cut off disappointingly with one stroke of a pen by a low-ranking economic official or by a member of congress who does not understand higher education, and who presents absurd alternative policies.

In theory, all institutions of higher education advocated the policy on autonomy, differential support and control, and democratization. In practice, however, some institutions have felt inconvenienced by the changes. Some presidents were fearful of falling behind in an environment of open competition, and tried to delay the policy implementation through their political connections. On the other hand, a few presidents of leading institutions tried to go their own way regardless of the government's plan. I also have to confess that some presidents opposed the autonomy policy simply in order to maintain their presidency, mainly in instances where their authority relied most heavily upon government bureaucratic control over the professors and students.

Only six months after I took the assistant ministerial position, a new minister of education was appointed as the result of a cabinet reshuffling. When I was appointed, a two-year term was guaranteed by an official document and I did not pay much attention to who would actually be the minister of education. Fortunately, the newly appointed minister of education, who had been a university professor of nutrition for about 30 years, is a person of very firm character and innovative personality. I met the new minister for the first time to report on my responsibilities and activities, only to find that we had quite different philosophies regarding higher education. The new minister simply wanted to show how many innovations could be implemented immediately after taking office. The new minister asked me to distribute government research funding equally among all professors, simply dividing the total amount into the total number of professors. As before, I had adopted a research funding policy of differential distribution, based on the strict examination of research project proposals, the competence of professors, and the importance of the research topic to national development, and to academic knowledge itself. Of course, I had to reject the new minister's policies, and thereafter various messages and signs were delivered to try to convince me to resign the position. Thus, exactly one week after greeting the new minister into the Ministry of Education, and six months after beginning my tenure in the Ministry of Education, I left office, partly by my own free will, but also in part by force.

It is almost a cliché to observe today that Korean higher education has made a significant contribution to economic, social, and cultural developments in Korea since its liberation from Japanese rule. However, it is also a cliché to observe that Korean higher education has lost much of its public appeal, that the colleges and universities have lost the confidence of our society, and that innovation in Korean higher education cannot be achieved without innovation in governmental bureaucratic administration. Korean higher education administration must have a political leader who understands the essence of higher education and can

talk the language of practical politics based on his or her expertise in higher education. There are exciting and challenging years **still** ahead for Korean higher education.

INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION: AMERICA ABDICATES LEADERSHIP

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Internationalism is a central focus of higher education policy worldwide. Nations recognize that they operate in a global economy, and that understanding other societies and cultures is both valuable in its own right and necessary to be competitive. Our argument here is that internationalism is mandatory for any higher education system in the 21st century. What is amazing to us is that while the rest of the world's universities are becoming more international, the United States shows signs of de-emphasizing internationalism in its higher education system. In the United States, international programs are under attack in Washington, while America's major competitors—the nations of Western Europe and Japan—are rapidly expanding their international efforts, devoting money and energy to a wide range of initiatives. The Fulbright program, America's flagship international education effort, faces severe budget cuts in Washington. The National Security Education Program, established in 1991 as the first major federal initiative in international education in several decades, is threatened with extinction even before it is fully underway. While many colleges and universities have included a greater emphasis on international studies in curricular reforms in recent years, fiscal problems have prevented full implementation.

The United States is a paradox. On the one hand, the U. S. academic system contains significant international elements. And it is arguably the center of research in most scientific fields worldwide, attracting international attention. English is the dominant language of world science—the Latin of the modern era—and most of the major scientific journals are edited in the United States. According to the Institute for International Education, the United States is host to 450,000 foreign students out of a worldwide total of approximately one million. The United States also takes in more than 60,000 visiting scholars annually. Many scientists and scholars from abroad hold professorships in American universities. This dominant international

presence in American education and research, contrary to general belief, is largely financed by external sources. International education and research are export commodities that make significant contributions to the national U.S. economy as well as that of many local communities. Higher education is a major “export industry”—one that deserves stimulation and not contraction. Current trends, in our view, will mean that the United States will lose its competitive edge in yet another area.

According to a recent Carnegie Foundation survey of faculty in 14 countries, American professors are the least internationally minded. U. S. faculty go abroad for research or sabbaticals less than do their peers in other major countries, and they seldom read journals or books published elsewhere. In general, American professors do not actively support international education, fearing enrollment losses in their majors or simply feeling that internationalism is not central to their subjects and disciplines.

Fiscal cutbacks have meant that international initiatives are suffering at the state and campus levels. Some state governments recognize the importance of competitiveness, and realize internationalism's role. But beyond trade missions overseas, there is usually little follow through where it counts—with the next generation of business and high-tech leaders now on the campuses. Allocations to higher education have commonly been cut, and international initiatives have not been supported in state budgetary allocations. Colleges and universities, faced with difficult budgetary decisions, seldom choose to expand foreign language offerings or support study abroad programs.

American universities are notoriously poor in teaching foreign languages, and few students have a working knowledge of a foreign language. Only an infinitesimal number take such important but “non-mainstream” languages as Japanese, Arabic, Chinese, or Hindi. Only 70,000 American students study abroad—about 1 percent of undergraduates at four-year colleges. And most of those go for a semester, take part predominantly in American packaged programs, and have England as the major destination. There is very little participation and even less diversity.

What are America's major competitors doing? They are investing heavily in international education. A decade ago, Japan declared the goal of hosting 100,000 foreign students by the year 2000, and this goal is likely to be achieved. Most of Japan's foreign students come from its major Asian trading partners. Japan is also building dormitories and other facilities for its foreign students and scholars, and is investing both in teaching Japanese to foreigners and in developing some courses of study in English. Currently, 43,000 Japanese study in the United States, while only 1,800 Americans study in Japan. Japanese universities are rapidly internationalizing their curricula, and every Japanese high school and university student studies English.

Western Europe has long recognized the need for in-