

Abstract

South Korea has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities and policy makers have a choice on how to view this outbreak: solely as a threat, or as an opportunity to take in longer-term lessons in managing internationalization and student mobility and utilizing online technologies.

COVID-19 Pandemic and South Korean Higher Education: A Threat with a Silver Lining?

Bawool Hong

The current COVID-19 pandemic is posing several challenges to international higher education. In an age of rapid internationalization, universities strive for global institutional cooperation, actively promote overseas student mobility, and form international academic communities. This togetherness, in return, has made them more vulnerable to external threats than ever before.

The South Korean Outbreak

Such is the case in South Korea, where the coronavirus outbreak has brought about unprecedented challenges to the higher education system, not even experienced during the 2002 SARS and 2015 MERS outbreaks. After the first case of coronavirus emerged on January 20th, the epidemic spread at a rapid rate nearly leveling that of China, where the virus first originated. With over 160,000 international students studying in Korea, and thousands of foreign exchange students coming in on an annual basis, the ministry of education was quick to act by issuing a strict two-week quarantine policy on all incoming international students. This policy restricts the students to their dormitories and outlines firm measures to prevent the spread among local students. Universities quickly followed suit by canceling all large gatherings such as graduation and enrollment ceremonies, and postponing the start of semester by two weeks. In addition, most universities made it mandatory for all classes to be taught online for the first two weeks, and have now continued online classes indefinitely due to the ongoing coronavirus situation.

Thus, the college scene has changed drastically. Whereas normally, at this time of the year, newly admitted freshmen roam college campuses and faculty and staff prepare for the new semester, university campuses have in a sense come to a halt. Overnight, college towns have become ghost towns, most university facilities have been shut down, and foreign exchange students are canceling commitments and registrations left and right in

order to leave the country. International students, once seen in a positive light as new sources of enrollment (due to Korea's declining student population) and as a way to diversify student bodies, are now being seen as possible threats to campus safety, especially those returning from their winter break from heavily affected regions such as China.

Unprecedented Challenges, Unprecedented Changes

Nevertheless, amid these unprecedented challenges, several unexpected silver linings have emerged in the South Korean higher education system. In a short period of time, an educational revolution has erupted in terms of teaching and learning, as faculty members across the country are experimenting with new ways to interact with and teach students, as they simply cannot physically meet with students. From part-time adjunct instructors to senior professors nearing retirement, they have all been "forced" to try out new educational technologies and innovative methods of teaching. Even traditional faculty members who long believed in the superiority of brick-and-mortar institutions and face-to-face teaching are now "forced" to adapt to the changing times. Therefore, to make things easier, universities such as Korea University in Seoul have provided week-long seminars for all faculty members on how to successfully live-stream classes, pre-record lectures, and teach students through online platforms.

Staff members have also been "forced" to come up with innovative ways to carry out administrative tasks in response to the changing tides. Ewha Women's University, the first women's university in Korea, recently made national headlines when, for the first time in its long history, it conducted its graduation and enrollment ceremonies fully online via YouTube live streaming for all graduates and incoming freshmen. It was a huge success with over 2,000 parents and students in attendance and a program that included a university presidential message, a live talk show, and a welcoming performance from alumni and faculty members. These "forced" changes have also been felt at the government level. Since the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution, scholars and higher education practitioners have demanded that government officials change obsolete regulations and restrictions on higher education institutions so that they may compete in a rapidly changing world, with little to no effect. However, due to the coronavirus outbreak, policy makers at the ministry of education have been "forced" to modify a policy that previously prevented all universities from providing more than 20 percent of classes online.

Moreover, the threat posed by COVID-19 has unexpectedly created a new sense of solidarity between domestic and international students, university administration, and local businesses and communities. Chinese students, researchers, and professors at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) in Daejeon recently garnered regional and national praise for their contributions to coronavirus prevention. After initially mobilizing funds to donate to China's coronavirus prevention, as the situation in Korea rapidly worsened, the group decided instead to send the donations and medical supplies to the city of Daegu, the most heavily affected region in Korea, where the majority of coronavirus cases have been reported. Furthermore, universities such as Kyungpook University in Busan have lent a helping hand not only to patients, but also to many local businesses and communities affected economically by the coronavirus outbreak, by drastically lowering rent on university facilities.

Lessons for South Korean Higher Education

At the end of the day, Korean universities and policy makers must ask themselves how they will view this inescapable global pandemic: solely as a threat, or also a stimulus for positive change in higher education? As mentioned in Altbach and de Wit's article in *University World News*, March 14, 2020, "The coronavirus crisis is a serious problem for societies, individuals, and for higher education. But the crisis will eventually pass." And I also agree with the authors that "universities worldwide are doing an impressive job of crisis management in difficult circumstances, but learning longer-term lessons and effective strategic planning have not been a strength of the academic community." Therefore, Korean universities and policy makers should be commended for the work done so far and continue to act with caution against the threat; but at the same time, they should use it as an opportunity to learn longer-term lessons in managing internationalization and student mobility and adequately utilizing online delivery and educational technologies.

Amid these unprecedented challenges, several unexpected silver linings have emerged in the South Korean higher education system.

Bawool Hong is research assistant at the Higher Education Policy Research Institute, Korea University, Republic of Korea. E-mail: bawoolhong@korea.ac.kr.

Final Remarks

This being said, even as I write this article, I sincerely hope for the world's quick recovery from the coronavirus outbreak, and my deepest condolences go out to all countries, institutions, and people devastated by this pandemic. Furthermore, I hope that, all in all, the international higher education community will come out on top of this setback more innovative and forward looking, and stronger than ever before. ▲