Youth SDGs Action Plan

A Call For: Diversity in Education

2022
Team Korea

CITYNET
THE REGIONAL NETWORK OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

URBAN SDG KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM

ESCAP
This project aims to encourage students to approach the SDGs as part of their daily lives and challenge them to take the lead on sustainable action. Local university and elementary school students from both Yokohama and CityNet member cities will participate in the program.

The program’s objectives were to: identify priority issues that are directly of concern to the youths, document the issues through field research and group work, exchange the issues with youths overseas for comparative research, develop a short video showcasing the issues in its true form, and present the issues at the SDGs Seminar in Yokohama, held in January 2023.

**IMPORTANT TERMS IN THIS REPORT:**

**Absolute grading:**
Absolute grading refers to assigning a grade based on the student’s total score (i.e.: 90-100% is an A). Relative grading assigns a score based on the students’ ranking (i.e.: Top 4% of the school year get an A).

**Regular and rolling admissions:**
There are largely two university admission paths in South Korea: regular and rolling. Regular admissions weigh the students K-SAT score heavily, while the many different types of rolling admissions focus on other elements, including high school grades, extracurriculars, foreign language abilities, regional diversity quotas, and so on.
Young people have the right to diverse education and fair evaluation.

Young people have the right to develop their expertise in their major of choice by studying the subjects they want to study from high school. People in Korea should change their perception that students should only study subjects that are tested on the university entrance exams. Students should be allowed to take the test of other core subjects that would be related to their majors as their university entrance exams.

Unlike International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) curriculums, K-SAT focuses on math, English, science, Korean, etc., which is identical for all the students in Korea. However, once they graduate from high school, each student will begin to follow their individual major track. Business major is the most popular major among all universities. However, it is well known that basic level business classes are not offered for undergraduates. Furthermore, all the students who graduate from foreign high schools have deeper knowledge in Business than the rest of students, a distinct advantage. So most other students need to self-study to catch up. This case illustrates our thesis: High school students should have more freedom to choose the courses that they want to study. So schools should develop a better variety of courses.

TARGETED SDG: 4.4  
By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW

University students echoed the opinion that K-SAT preparation is only useful for the K-SAT itself, resulting in high school education lacking long-term value and meaning.
For justification, the university admissions process should be revised in favor of regular admission over rolling admission since regular admissions are more transparent and require less private education resources than rolling admission.

Many students believe that preparing for rolling admissions is much better than preparing for the university entrance exam since there are more than 50 application types for rolling admissions in South Korea. The biggest problem is that regular admissions have a cutoff score for the K-SAT, which is fair. However, there is no such criteria for rolling admissions.

A student that failed to enter a university through one rolling admission type can enter the exact same university, with the same grades, under a different rolling admission type. Due to the murkiness of these admissions criteria, it is even thought that some parents may even do a “disguised divorce” just for their child to have an advantage in admissions. In these cases, it is unfair to get accepted through rolling admissions. For full transparency, universities should expand regular admissions and essay-based admissions over rolling admissions.

In South Korea, prestigious companies like Naver and Samsung prefer to employ 80 percent of their workers as freshly graduated engineering majors. It was shown that they would rather choose engineering students from less prestigious universities rather than liberal arts students from the most prestigious SKY (SNU, KU, YU) universities. Even jobs in marketing departments require knowledge from the engineering field such as AI services.

Liberal arts students have lost their advantages in the Korean hiring market since engineering students also have good proficiency in language skills. For example, according to the newspaper Kyunghyang Shinmun, a language major student from Kyunghee University has sent resumes to 30 companies but only got accepted to 3 of those in the 1st round. Then, he even failed in the interview phase because of his undesirable major. So most of the students in the same major prefer to study and prepare for the government official exam.

A commonly seen celebratory banner stating how many students from a local high school were accepted into SNU, the top university.

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

The main stakeholders analyzed were high school and university students, top universities in the ROK, and the job market for fresh graduates.

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The difference between students in the engineering department and liberal arts department occurs starting from high school. In South Korea, we have esteemed high schools, such as science high schools, foreign-language high schools, international high schools etc. These high schools are special purpose high schools, considered to send many students to prestigious universities. However, based on the experiences of students graduating science high school in Daejeon (a city in Korea), students ranking 88th out of 100 in their year can go to SSH universities (slightly below “SKY”). On the other hand, in foreign-language high schools, in order to go to SSH, you need to be in the top 7 out of 100.

According to the survey in Yonsei University engineering department, more than half of the students were from Gangnam, a neighborhood in Seoul famous for its private education industry. Also other majors consist of a lot of students who are from Seoul. It seems to be hard for students from other areas to enter prestigious universities, especially students from other cities in the same region as Seoul, as they are excluded from the few preferential “regional balance” acceptances.

In 2023, 19.4% of the first round of accepted students to Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University did not register to attend.

It is estimated that the examinees who cross-applied to the humanities department in the natural sciences gave up their registration and left as they passed the science and engineering department, medical and pharmaceutical departments at the same time.

The number of students who give up enrollment even after entering the top universities is increasing due to cross-subsidized liberal arts, science and engineering, medical, and pharmacology.

What this means is that more and more liberal arts students are deprived of opportunities, relatively compared to non-liberal arts students.
Many students who lack confidence in math wish to pursue liberal arts studies, but all parents push their children to become a doctor or go to engineering department. Admissions experts even say that of the two high school tracks available in public schools, the STEM-leaning track and the liberal arts leaning track, a STEM track is more advantageous for entering a prestigious university. This is why more and more parents prefer these courses, with this preference already being a heavily discussed topic in local education literature. It is also true that companies want these kind of students compared to liberal arts students.

Upon analysis of the stakeholders’ experiences, we identified common challenges and the issues laying behind them to overcome.

One key issue is the competition caused by relative evaluation used in high school education and the K-SAT. English is the sole main K-SAT subject graded on an absolute scale, but it is given little weight in admissions evaluations. SNU, for instance, gives only a 0.5 point difference between ‘1st rank’ (within the 96th national percentile) and ‘2nd rank’ (within the 89th) English scores. This shows how little absolute scores are allowed to influence.

Since students do not have the right to choose their own majors based on their interests, but rather what is achievable in terms of grades, they need to study the things they are not really good at, which might even change the course of their life since job opportunities strongly depend upon the major from which they graduate.

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As every test students go through in their school life is graded on a relative basis, students are caught up in unnecessary excessive competition.

This leads students to focus on comparing with others rather than focusing on themselves. Many students consider their colleagues as rivals instead of friends or collaborators. This phenomenon is definitely harmful for students’ emotional and intellectual growth.

Liberal art students are suffering from entering university and even after graduating university compared to non-liberal art students. Major reasons for this phenomenon are high preference for STEM students and standardized preference of job and designated view of education.

For example, Seoul National University’s minimum entrance score in regular admissions has fallen a lot, and for the first time, there has been a case in which a student who received a ‘3rd rank’ (within the 77th national percentile) in the KSAT entered SNU.

This is because students prefer medical school in very low-ranking universities rather than non-medical majors in Korea’s top universities.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Steps towards the change that we want to see:

1. **Diversify curriculums in middle and high school:**
   Provide major or trade-specific courses for students to take and be evaluated on, in order to raise their job competitiveness and allow students further freedom in choosing their future studies.

2. **Diversify the evaluation method, with a heavy preference for absolute evaluation:**
   Greatly lessen the stress students undergo at a formative age due to the relative ranking system and allow students from various backgrounds with various skills to be judged fairly in university admissions.

3. **Expand the KSAT to evaluate a diversity of subjects and greatly raise the proportion of KSAT score-based university admission procedures:**
   Raise transparency in the university admission process and reduce reliance on costly private education. In addition, reduce the overcompetition in the main exam subjects and allow more chances for students to enter popular majors.
To address the issues of student stress caused by Korean curriculums revolving around university entrance preparation, steps to take could be to diversify curriculums in middle or high school and diversify the evaluation method. **A general direction to take could be to steer away from one standardized path of study in order to lessen reliance on additional private education.**

Also as mentioned in the YSAP program, students are caught up in unnecessary excessive competition due to too much standardized and relative evaluation. **So there should be more diverse evaluation methods and absolute, non-relative evaluation as much as possible.**

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**ENSURE DIVERSITY OF EDUCATION!**

For further information and full interview clips, please visit the QR code above to access the 2022 YSAP Team Korea project video.
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