

South Korea Powers Ahead With Globalization Plans

BY DAVID MCNEILL

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

FOR GOVERNMENT officials here, it's a vision worth savoring: Within the next decade, South Korea becomes Southeast Asia's top higher-education destination, poaching thousands of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese students from American universities and overtaking rivals Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

The higher-education system's historical insularity fades away. A handful of South Korean universities climb into the premier global academic league. Local students elect to stay at home to attend a branch campus of an American college.

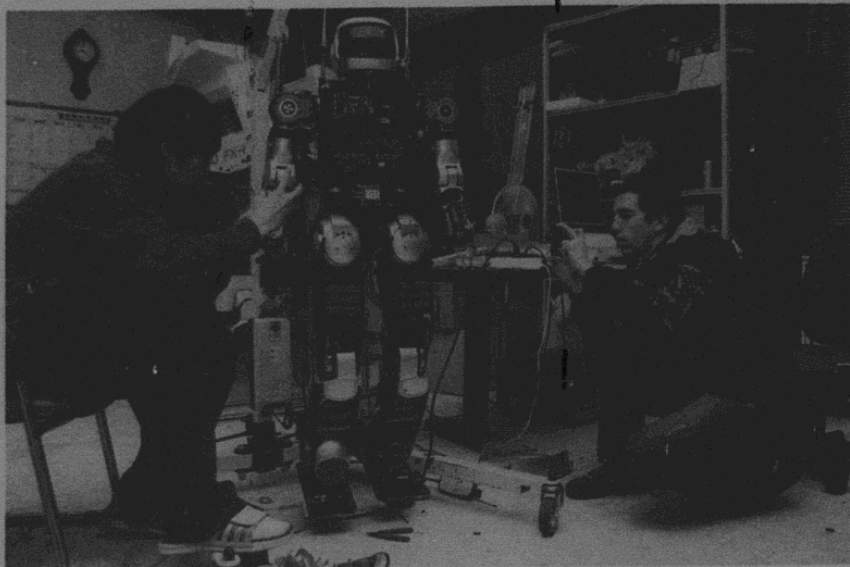
"We will bring foreign universities here," promises Hee Yhon Song, one of the key developers of the country's internationalization strategy.

Grandiose visions of the future often evaporate in the heat of an economic meltdown, and this one has its share of skeptics. Yet amid the wreckage of Asia's worst slump since World War II, the South Korean government is powering ahead with plans to transform the nation's higher-education system.

South Korea has signed pledges of cooperation with American colleges and lured hundreds of foreign professors to what was once consid-

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INTERNATIONAL

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Students at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology work on an international robot-development project sponsored by the U.S. National Science Foundation. Like other Korean universities, the institute is internationalizing its programs.

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Skeptics Question S. Korea's Internationalization Strategy

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ered an educational backwater. The government believes it can propel its best universities into the world's top 50 and stem the flow of students out of the country.

These plans, including a state-backed project to build a new "global" university from scratch in partnership with up to half a dozen American institutions, will not be affected by the recession, claim their architects.

"Economic cycles rise and fall," says Mr. Song, chairman of the Asia Development Institute, a nonprofit think tank in South Korea. "We are focused on the long term."

BRAIN GAIN OR 'BRAIN DEAD'?

That appears to be no idle boast. South Korea has pledged about \$600-million over the next five years to its World Class University project, a ministry-of-education-led bid

to raise the quality of research at 30 universities.

Nine Nobel Prize winners, including the 2006 chemistry laureate Roger D. Kornberg, are among the 81 foreign researchers set to take positions in the country.

BrainKorea21, a project aimed at creating "centers of excellence" in information technology, bioengineering, and other "knowledge-based" fields, has been promised \$2.3-billion before 2012, in addition to the \$1.4-billion invested from 1999-2005.

Slump or no, that support is ironclad, claims Young Soon Kang, who heads university policy at the education ministry.

Critics remain unconvinced, however, that these strategies will help South Korea overcome a crippling handicap in original research.

"I think they will fail," says Zang-Hee Cho, a top neuroscientist and professor

emeritus at the University of California at Irvine.

Mr. Cho, who has retired to South Korea, has been a tough critic of the state's higher-education strategies, dubbing BrainKorea21 "Brain Dead Korea21."

"The problem is that these projects are led by policy makers who don't know anything about universities," he says. The government must begin dismantling a hierarchical faculty system that many believe stifles creativity, he says, then focus on a handful of the country's best colleges and recruit "top-class professors" from around the world who will stay in the country.

"We need leaders in each field to lead each

faculty. They have to bring people together and create research facilities to match that goal. Those things are totally lacking," he says.

On paper, at least, the World Class University project is supposed to help fix the sort of problems that Mr. Cho identifies.

The government has invited foreign scholars to help "transform Korean universities into world-class research" institutes.

But many of the scholars who have responded are already past their best work, say skeptics, and are required to stay in the country for just a semester, or at most two months a year in a three-year contract.

That's hardly conducive to creating a sustainable research base, argues Hyeonsik Cheong, director of international affairs at Seoul's Sogang University. "The worry is that when the program is over, these guys will just go back to where they came from."

Mr. Cheong says he would redesign the program and pump in more money to recruit the best researchers on the planet.

"I would make them full time and have them interact with students and staff members to create something really sustainable."

NOT MEASURING UP

South Korea's task is formidable. By most

measures, including the numbers of research publications and research citations, South Korean universities do not perform as well as many Western institutions.

A ranking produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University puts the nation's highest-ranked college, Seoul National University, at just 21st in Asia and 164th in the world.

The system measures publications in *Nature*, *Science*, and other journals and the number of times published articles are cited by others, among other things.

South Korean universities also have relatively few internationally known faculty members. And until the World Class University project began, most institutions were reluctant to hire foreign professors.

The first stage of BrainKorea21, which ran from 1999 to 2005, largely failed to achieve a promised great leap forward in research. A recent study by Jung Cheol Shin, an education specialist at Korea University, found that the project "did not lessen the gap between Korea universities and world-class research universities in the U.S. or Japan in number of publications."

South Korea's dearth of top universities is a major factor in its annual student diaspora.

A record 115,000 South Korean students at all levels, including 69,000 university students, went to the United States last year alone—one in seven of all international students in the United States, according to the Fulbright U.S. Education Center in South Korea. An additional 115,000 or so went to Europe and the rest of the world.

"We can't keep getting a free ride from abroad and depending on the U.S. and Germany for technology to support our industry," warns Mr. Cho. "The brain drain is terrible."

Government officials counter that South Korea is at last retooling its creaking and in-



KIM JAE-HWAN

Zang-Hee Cho, a neuroscientist and professor emeritus at the U. of California at Irvine, says South Korea's higher-education plan is "led by policy makers who don't know anything about universities."

sular education system for the 21st century. Many point to the enormous growth in foreign-language learning.

"The ability to give lectures in English is now one of the main criteria in recruiting new faculty members in many universities," points out Ms. Kang, of the education ministry.

In 2007 and 2008, the government relaxed regulations to make it easier for local universities to form partnerships with foreign colleges, a move likely to produce many more collaborative programs.

Since February of last year, for example, Korea University alone has signed agreements with 50 foreign partners, including the University of Navarra, in Spain; Confederation College, in Canada; and Italy's John Cabot University. Those agreements are largely focused on student-exchange and study-abroad programs.

MOVING FORWARD

The education ministry, meanwhile, is touting its success in hitting a target of 50,000 foreign students, three years earlier than planned.

In a bid to double that number by 2012, the government plans to recruit aggressively abroad, especially in China, the source of 70 percent of South Korea's foreign students.

Dozens of colleges are also hiring more foreigners as full-time teachers and researchers. The numbers are still very low by international standards, at around 3,000 in the whole country. (In 2006, however, the education ministry reported that only 22 full-time foreign professors worked in the public universities.)

Some universities are striving to turn themselves into more appealing places to work. Ewha Women's University, a private, Seoul-based institution, is building a new nine-million-square-foot education-and-research complex with ambitious plans for foreign faculty recruitment and links with universities abroad. Ewha's Paju Complex will include a research center for biotechnology, nanotechnology, and information technology to facilitate collaborative research with foreign business and academe.

Will these efforts help South Korea achieve its goals: creating a handful of global academic brands, winning a bigger slice of the international educational pie, and stemming the exodus of its young talent?

The debate is likely to intensify this year with news that the plunge in Korea's currency is finally helping to keep students at home.

Many colleges, including the new Songdo Global University Campus (*see article, this page*), will be hoping to grab more of those students.

But critics say permanently reversing the drain depends on a fundamental redesigning of South Korea's pyramid-shaped higher-education system: Just 10,000 of 550,000 high-school graduates win places in the country's top three universities each year.

"Most of the other universities are very mediocre," says Mr. Cho. Until that changes, ambitious youngsters will continue to head abroad, no matter what the cost.

Still, even skeptics are bullish about South Korea's prospects in the long term. "I think Asian and Korean universities will eventually catch up with the U.S. and Europe," says Jongryn Mo, dean of Underwood International College at Yonsei University. "Once we set our sights, we'll achieve that."