

# Re-thinking Democracy of Higher Education in South Korea: Challenges and Prospects

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## **Abstract**

*This study critically examines the current state of democracy in higher education in Korea, which is being threatened by neoliberalism, and suggests new tasks to make progress in the democratization of higher education. The prevalence of authoritarian culture in universities makes it difficult to form a democratic structure of reflection and discussion. In addition, the hierarchical system of educational capital derived from neoliberalism has led to exclusion and discrimination in university society. In particular, the employment insecurity system of professors further encourages discrimination among faculty members within the university community. Finally, the competitive financial support system among universities threatens the democratic and autonomous ecosystem of universities by forcing them to obey government policies rather than critique them. Historically, the universities in Korea have been able to expand rapidly, receiving full support from the nation and citizens. During this process, a special position has been guaranteed to the universities. This study argues that the social responsibility of higher education in Korea should be strengthened to advance toward a new democracy. Challenging institutional tasks to be carried out by Korean universities are also suggested.*

**Keywords:** *democracy, higher education, South Korea, neoliberalism, authoritarian culture, educational capital*

## **Introduction**

Higher education in Korea has achieved considerable growth despite its short history. Immediately after the independence from Japanese imperialism, there were only 19 higher education institutions in Korea, and the number of students was only 7,819 (Korean Ministry of Education, 2015). However, as the public's demand for higher education has exploded over the past 60 years, as of 2021, there exist 336 universities and more than 3 million students enrolled in higher education institutions. 72.5% of high school graduates enter the higher education stage (Korean Ministry of Education, 2020). Recently, due to the internationalization policy of higher education, the proportion of foreign students has also become significant. In 2021, it is estimated that more than 150,000 foreign students are enrolled in Korean universities.

The rapid growth of higher education in Korea is thanks to the full support from the government and citizens. The government of Korea was able to lead the quantitative expansion of higher education institutions without increasing the national financial burden through policies such as University Establishment Regulations initiated in 1997. Most of the financial support for higher education in Korea comes from student tuition fees. It would have been difficult for Korea's higher education to expand like this without the financial support of parents. Since Korea's higher education has grown rapidly with the full support of citizens, Korean universities must take on more responsibility as one of the agents in Korean society. Historically, higher education has had a special status and treatment in Korean society, as it produces an elite that will enter the dominant class (Kim, Basile, Jaime-Miaz & Black, 2018). Sometimes, the special position given to higher education served as a privilege.

Korean universities sometimes occupied an advantageous position in terms of employment and social status acquisition. However, although Korea's higher education has received many benefits and expanded quantitatively, the progress of democracy in Korea's higher education is very slow. In 1987, there was a large-scale democratization struggle against the long-standing military government in Korea. At that time, higher education in Korea, like other fields of society, was able to achieve democratization, albeit formally. For example, the police that monitored the university disappeared, and students and professors were able to participate in school management, such as the election of the president.

However, the neoliberal trend in education introduced in the mid-1990s has been distorting the democracy of Korean universities. Neoliberalism, which emerged in the 1970s as a trend of economic liberalism aiming for a small but strong government and strengthening the order of market competition, became the operating principle of politics, economy, and education in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s. As the *New Public Management*, a way that neoliberalism is introduced in the public section, has dominated higher education, it became the prevailing perception that democracy is just about creating an environment where individual interests and competition can be actively conducted rather than building a cooperative society or pursuing the public good. Korean universities, which had been dominated by the brutal governmental forces under military dictatorships and U.S. imperialism, are now beginning to see 'competition' and 'performance', the main ideologies of neoliberalism, took the place of 'freedom' and 'democracy' (Kim, 2010). Under the influence of neoliberalism, vocational training became the sole purpose of university education in Korea. Moreover, universities are actively applying the practices and values of the corporate world as their operating principles to student management. The universities solely dependent on

government funding to expand universities became subordinated to the state and corporations, and the market principle has become the main operating principle of universities. For example, various government-led projects provide financial support to the universities at the cost of leading universities in a specific direction. In particular, globalization under the influence of neoliberalism has had a significant impact on the curricula of Korean universities. Since the 21st century, Korean universities have made significant efforts to enhance their curricula to strengthen international perspectives and enhance their ability to compete in the global marketplace(Kim, H-J., 2020).

Members of a university learn and internalize intrinsically the values and norms of democracy through the systems, visions, operating procedures, and educational activities that a university offers. Due to its significance, discussions about democracy in higher education are being actively conducted in many countries including the United States. Research papers on democracy in higher education(e.g., Barrow, 1990; Donahue, 2008; Readings, 1997) discuss how higher education contributes to the realization of democracy, and what the role of higher education is as ‘public good’. In particular, Juergensmeyer, Nocella II & Seis (2019) warn that under neoliberalism, the education system commoditizes the educational experience and forces students to conform to capitalism by standardizing learning and testing, which is a threat to democracy in all other educational fields, a university is a socialization space where its members can embody a democratic lifestyle. Previous research on democracy in higher education criticized the situation in which, under neoliberalism, the purpose of higher education is increasingly seen as primarily a private or market-based purpose rather than a public one. In the same vein, it was pointed out that criticize how the strengthening of competitiveness and practicality and the pursuit of excellence under neoliberalism are in fact hindering the democracy of higher education. In short, the previous research on democracy in

higher education illustrates very well papers on democracy in higher education demonstrate how neoliberal management of universities is breaking down the democratic climate of universities, a long tradition of higher education. For example, Barrow (1990) pointed out in 'Universities and the Capitalist State' that today's university system is becoming a 'Corporate University' amid the ideological apparatus of corporate power and the capitalist state, and such a change threatens the democracy of higher education. In the same vein, Donahue (2008) emphasized in 'The Last Professors' how the democracy of higher education is being violated, noting that today's university is a for-profit university characterized by brand and mass supply. Readings (1997), in 'The University in Ruins', also paid attention to the situation where today's universities ceased to play a role in producing the national cultural ideology of the community along with the decline of the nation-state.

As discussed above, while foreign countries have been discussing the crisis of universities caused by the introduction of neoliberalism into higher education, hardly any discussion can be found about how the democracy of Korean universities has changed since the introduction of neoliberalism. Recently, the literature has begun to emerge, including a study by Kester, Zembylas, Sweeney, Lee, Kwon & Kwon (2021), which emphasized the importance of peace education for decolonization in Korea, integrating various theoretical perspectives such as decolonialism and multiculturalism.

This study analyzes how neoliberalism has been introduced into higher education policy in Korea and what its characteristics are. In particular, it critically analyzes the actual situation of Korean university society after the introduction of neoliberalism from the perspective of Bourdieu's (2001) 'reproduction of educational capital'. It then suggests tasks for advancing democracy in the Korean university system. The following research questions

are presented below. First, what are the characteristics of Korean universities that have internalized neoliberalism? Second, what are the state of democracy in Korean Universities? Lastly, what are the characteristics of democracy in Korean Universities from the perspectives of academic capital reproduction?

### **Adoption of Neoliberal Higher Education Policies in Korea**

Neoliberalism is an economic theory that extends market fundamentalism, stating that markets are self-regulated and work best when they are free from external influences (Jones, 2012). ‘Public Choice Theory’, a representative theory of neoliberalism, emphasizes that public sectors such as education can be reformed through marketization. These neoliberal tendencies reject the view of education as a common good. Any attempt by the government to maintain social justice is simply bureaucratic and inefficient, and market reform is assumed to be necessary (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005). Globally, neoliberal thinking is affecting all levels of education (Giroux, 2014; Brown, 2015; Robertson, 2008). Griffiths (2022), in his article ‘World-Systems Critical Education’, argues that in a globalized capitalist system, education is deeply intertwined with the world-system and serves to reproduce and legitimize its inequalities. The prevailing education systems tend to promote values, knowledge, and skills that align with the interests of the dominant capitalist class. This perpetuates social hierarchies and hinders social transformation. The same is true of Korea, and neoliberalism has begun to operate in the field of higher education. Under the assumption that the privatization of higher education will work as an important means of increasing efficiency and alleviating the financial crisis, the marketization of higher education is being promoted under the leadership of the government.

First, neoliberalism in Korea introduces market competition to universities. In the past, market principles were assumed not to apply to the areas of education.

However, under neoliberalism, the same market competition that applies to goods is also exercised in education. (Talyor, 2001). That is, competition in higher education is supposed to increase productivity and efficiency, and evaluation standards prepared based on market logic are received as golden rules making university students and faculty highly competitive human capital. Competitiveness here does not mean creative and innovative competitiveness. Rather, it refers to the competitiveness that brings about a high employment rate and that follows the neoliberal manual well. According to Giroux(1989), in the neoliberal system, education is a process of transmitting certain values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior to students in a social and political context. Education is not just a tool for the transmission of knowledge, but a means of social power and domination. Through education, certain cultures and ideologies are maintained. These cultures and ideologies can serve the interests of certain social groups and exclude others. Griffiths (2022), in his article ‘World-Systems Critical Education’, argues that in a globalized capitalist system, education is deeply intertwined with the world-system and serves to reproduce and legitimize its inequalities. The prevailing education systems tend to promote values, knowledge, and skills that align with the interests of the dominant capitalist class. This perpetuates social hierarchies and hinders social transformation.

Second, neoliberal higher education in Korea promotes the corporatization of universities. Under neoliberal logic, knowledge is a new form of asset (Tilak, 2004). According to a report by the OECD, the shift to a knowledge economy is focused on the new linkages between education and industry. Knowledge is rapidly becoming an important form of global capital, so-called ‘knowledge capital’ (Burton-Jones, 1999). Education as a form of intellectual capital began to be emphasized. From a neoliberal perspective, higher education in Korea becomes the core of a knowledge-based economy as a means of creating human

capital and new knowledge (Song, K-O., 2019; Hur, 2020). Accordingly, universities are also companies that create wealth from public property and are subordinated to companies conforming to the profit-oriented needs of capital. Neoliberalism applies corporate management techniques to university management (Ginsberg, 2013; Giroux, 2004; Mills, 2012; Ross, 2010). Just like in a company, the top-down management method as a management style is applied. Organizational management is established in a hierarchical order, and authoritarian practices, in which decisions made by higher-level managers are directed to lower-level members of the organization, take place (van Vugt et al, 2002; Flynn, 2015). Since the command-and-control structure of corporate business management uses a top-down management structure, business decisions can be quickly implemented without deliberation or resistance. Since the 1990s, some Korean universities have adopted the operating logic and systems of these companies.

Third, higher education in Korea under neoliberalism concedes job insecurity. In the past, university professors were divided into full-time professors and part-time lecturers. As the neoliberal university system became full-scale, the teaching status of university professors was differentiated in various ways. It is a representative faculty employment policy of neoliberal universities to reduce labor costs and flexibly control the status of faculty members in charge of education and research within universities (Talyor, 2001). The instability of the status of faculty members eventually blocks democratic communication at universities and encourages discrimination among professors. The unstable employment system draws the line among professors with arbitrary status divisions and internalizes splits and hostility among university members.

Fourth, democratic communication becomes difficult in neoliberal higher education in Korea. The application of neoliberal policies changes the meaning



and form of higher education since the market principle is in opposition to academic freedom and university autonomy, important values of conventional universities. A new kind of leadership has emerged in universities according to market principles, outsiders unrelated to the university participate in university executives, and consensus-based decision-making practices disappear (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Communication channels for regular discussions and suggestions are absorbed into general administrative management such as academic affairs. Several recent studies on Korean higher education (Kim, M-H., 2018; Chung, B., 2018; Song, K.O., 2018) have shown that communication between members of Korean universities has become quite authoritarian, and horizontal communication flows between members are rare.

### **Perspectives of Reproduction of Academic Capital under Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism in Korea is operating in close connection with the logic of social reproduction of academic capital, which is unique in Korean society. In Korean society, the recognition struggle (Bourdieu, 194) to increase the value of academic capital is very important. The recognition struggle, in this case, takes the form of a class struggle mediated by academic capital<sup>[1]</sup>. Academic capital and its reproduction produce very specific discrimination and exclusion in the real world. According to Bourdieu (1984), academic and intellectual capital is a component of cultural capital and is a product of cultural effects guaranteed by the family and the school. Academic and intellectual capital is actually the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural transmission through family means that the academic capital of family members is passed on to their children in the acquisition of academic capital, and cultural transmission by school means that the level of academic background and the name of the school contribute to the reproduction of academic capital. In this sense, it can be said that the benefits obtained by acquiring cultural capital come

from the conditions of reproduction of academic capital rather than from the academic capital itself.

Bourdieu (1984) pays attention to cultural succession according to the origin, that is, succession by a specific class of origin for the reproduction conditions of academic capital. The cultural transmission of academic capital is, after all, “inscribed in membership of the bourgeoisie and in the qualifications giving access to its rights and duties (p. 23)”, which is called “the entitlement effect (p.22)” by Bourdieu. The entitlement effect is the best-hidden effect of the educational system and one of the special ways of classifying status. Through the entitlement effect, individuals of all groups are designated a hierarchically specific class, and this becomes a major principle of social inequality.

The distinction by academic capital is justified by the school education system in Korea. Degrees and various certificates produced through the school system are given customarily fixed values like money in the economic market. Degrees and certificates guarantee economic profits and serve as a momentum to secure power. The hierarchical order of majors and degrees in each school becomes a starting point that causes inequality in pursuing degrees in higher schools and entering society. That the class of origin determines the academic capital is the reality of neoliberal education. In the neoliberal education system, the inheritance of wealth determines the inheritance of academic capital. This is because the entrance to a prestigious university is already decided by which elementary schools and middle schools one enters. What should be noted here is that the children of wealthy families who have entered prestigious universities in this way take up a position in the established elites (legal, political, business areas, etc.) in Korean society.

Under the neoliberal ideology, academic capital in higher education is based on the argument that universities should be actively utilized commercially in order

to secure an advantageous global market under the social demand of enhancing national competitiveness (Mendoza & Berger, 2008; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In the same vein, Korean higher education has been increasingly focused on funding a few top universities in the name of cultivating high-quality human capital that can improve national competitiveness (Oh, S.-H., 2009).

According to Son (2014), three major universities, namely Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea University, have formed a triangular alliance with political power and corporate capital to produce instrumental knowledge required by corporations and to train human resources suitable for corporations. This is where the distinction of academic capital in Korean higher education is made. Major universities that are supported by power and capital are distinguished from those that are not, and graduates are also distinguished by their educational capital and gain differential status in society. Academic capital is differentiated between Seoul National University and the rest of the universities, the top-ranking universities and the rest of the universities, and in-Seoul universities and the rest of the local universities (Park, C.-G., 2018; Lee, D.-Y., 2015). The differentiation phenomenon of distinction results from the strong cultural and social stigma effect. It means the fixation and internalization of distinction in the sense that it is a differentiation of the recognition struggle of social existence which goes beyond the class struggle for the advancement of status. In this respect, academic capital, in the neoliberal education system, acts as an indicator of social inequality and social polarization. The current situation can be seen as a return to the medieval class society in that academic capital is imprinted as a symbolic and cultural indicator that confirms the identity of an individual. It is not much different from the class society of the Middle Age, where actual discrimination and symbolic violence were strong, in that the class of origin determines the academic capital, and academic capital, in turn, is reproduced as social capital only to fixate economic, political, and regional

inequality.

### **Self-portrait of Democracy in Higher Education in Korea**

By analyzing the current state of democracy in Korean universities from the perspective of ‘introduction of higher education policies under neoliberalism’ and ‘reproduction of academic capital’, several characteristics of Korean universities are derived.

#### Authoritarian culture of Korean universities

Since the top-down management method, as in companies, is applied as the management style within the organization under neoliberalism (Ginsberg, 2013; Giroux, 2004; Mills, 2012; Ross, 2010), authoritarian practices are taken for granted throughout the university in Korea. Such authoritarian practices are found everywhere in Korean universities. Strong authoritarian and even patriarchal elements exist in the structure, culture, and values of Korean universities. The patriarchal and authoritarian culture of the Korean university community is likely influenced by the patriarchal traditions of Confucianism. In addition, South Korea's 30-year military dictatorship required universities to be subservient to the military regime, and this authoritarian culture may have influenced the formation and maintenance of the university community (Koh, 2015). Democracy is taught on campus and is routinely talked about, but it is not fully internalized by the professors themselves. Seo, Y-P. (2016) criticized that while professors self-declare themselves as democrats, they, in reality, present authoritarianism and elitism deeply and unconsciously engraved in them for a long time and reign over students as a ruler. The authoritarian culture of a university stems from the authoritarianism prevailing in our society, which is learned individually through the socialization process. As a result, the authoritarian culture of a university is unwittingly taken as a given. In such an authoritarian culture, professors and administration offices form a vertical

relationship with students and they become an object of fear. Even the students' legitimate questions and criticisms are often dismissed as a challenge to professors and administration offices with strong authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism is operated within the society of professors as well. An authoritative relationship exists between tenure-track professors and non-tenure-track professors, and between senior professors and junior professors. In the authoritative climate of the society of professors, one should unilaterally follow the directions of the senior professor rather than expressing one's opinion.

Song, K-O. (2019) analyzed the behavior of professors in Korean university society. The result shows that the professor group wants professors to be sincere and obedient rather than challenging or actively participating in change. Her research has insight into the fact that the Korean social culture, which is a relationship of power and wealth, appears in university society as it is.

Under the authoritarian climate, it is difficult to criticize others even if one's selfish behavior undermines public interests. As mentioned by Weber (1968), the awareness to check the abuse of authority is weakened in authoritarian organizations. No structure to reflect on the issues and discuss them is formed even when undemocratic behaviors of a university cause serious problems. In a society with such a culture, it is difficult for its members to internalize the value of democracy and to learn the value of a critical spirit.

### A space of exclusion and discrimination

One of the unique characteristics created as neoliberal internalization progressed in Korean society is the close connection with the social reproduction logic of academic capital. In Korean society, the recognition struggle (Bourdieu, 1984) to increase the value of academic capital is important. Korean universities, which has internalized neoliberalism, involves the logic of

exclusion and discrimination caused by the hierarchy of educational capital(Hur, 2020; Sohn, 2014). The ranking of Korean universities, which has long been talked about among college students, has traditionally been specified by the distinction between the most prestigious universities and the top universities and between the upper-ranking universities and the upper-middle-ranking universities. Therefore, specific discrimination and exclusion based on the reproduction of academic capital are taken for granted. As capitalism in Korea deepens and individualism intensifies, selfish behaviors among the members of a university become prevalent. Professors, staff, and students overtly display behaviors that disregard public interests or the interests of others that conflict with their own in order to enhance the interests of themselves and the group to which they belong. In particular, the faculty group pursues private interests as they begin to prioritize their own interests rather than public interests. The behaviors of professors often lead to conflicts between individual professors and between the groups they are affiliated with. The selfish behaviors prevent them from resolving issues constructively and result in, ultimately, the loss of public trust in the society of professors.

The system of instability in faculty employment encourages discrimination among professors. The unstable employment system draws the line among professors with arbitrary status divisions and internalizes splits and hostility among university members(Koh, 2015; Song,2019; Shin & Jang, 2013). Shin and Jang (2013) shed light on the attitudes and behaviors of professors in South Korea, noting that they have a passive attitude toward change and a tendency to maintain conservative traditions. Factions are a representative example of exclusion and discrimination in the society of professors. Academic affiliation and regionalism create factions and their members share a sense of belonging. They show recognition and loyalty to the members of their factions, whether it is based on high school /college alumni or the relative degree of intimacy,

whereas they take an exclusive stance toward those outside the faction. The more homogenizing and uniting those within the same fence, the stronger the exclusion toward the group outside the fence. A more serious problem is that within the same faction, differences among members are not tolerated, forcing them to speak the same whether rational or not.

Exclusion and discrimination are also prevalent among students. To differentiate between universities in the Seoul metropolitan area and regional universities and to reveal their superiority, some degradingly call students from regional universities ‘Jijapdae Chulsin’ (meaning ‘the students are from low-level regional universities’). In particular, the distinction between ‘Seoul National University’ versus ‘Jijapdae’ is a unique feature of the hierarchical internal division of academic capital. It demonstrates the logic of extreme exclusion that all universities except Seoul National University are just like low-level local universities. Within the same university, a strange tension exists between students admitted to the university through rolling admission and those through regular admission. It is not uncommon to hear that at Seoul National University, students admitted through regular admission do not get along with students accepted through a special admission for residents of farming and fishing towns. Under the college entrance exam-centered and success-oriented higher education system, the pyramidal academic clique and the hierarchical ranking structure of a university and higher education monopolized rank and power in Korea, which created an extreme distinction between elites and non-elites. As such, the nets of exclusion and discrimination are densely and widely embedded in many parts of a university in Korea.

However, in a democratic society with diverse people, we all have our own opinions and make unpredictable decisions. In a democracy, tolerance is an important virtue, as it allows us to understand each other's differences and to

tolerate differences from ourselves. Especially in universities, where academic freedom is allowed, we have more opportunities to not only find our own identity, but also to expand our tolerance for others and learn to distinguish between self and other (Chae & Ariunbold, 2021; Jeffries, 2019). However, it is rare for any members of a university to practice or teach the spirit of tolerance.

It is difficult to even think of solidarity under the dog-eat-dog circumstances where all your energy should be put into entering the future labor market on better terms than others. With the expectation that as the ranking of the university improves, so will the level of the academic capital increase, university members remain silent on such unreasonable discrimination. The whole society is obsessed with the idea of going to a good university, getting a good job, and making good money. In this bitterly contested world of education and the dog-eat-dog labor market, the misguided notion of “Gakjadosang” (meaning each person finds their own way to live or no one backs you up.) is deeply internalized in the mindset of people. The cooperative and democratic university culture disappears, and only isolated individuals exist. Isolation at a university is not only a crisis in an individual’s existential sense but also makes it difficult to have certain types of learning that only occur through interaction with others. Even after becoming an adult, solidarity is formed with the people sharing academic ties, excluding people out of their league. In this climate, exclusion and discrimination are accepted without question among professors, staff, and students.

#### Loss of critique of universities due to bureaucratic rules based on neoliberalism

Korea’s neoliberalism is combined with bureaucracy rather than mere marketism. The top-down management method, just like in a company, is applied as the management style within the organization. Organizational management is established in a hierarchical order, and authoritarian practices, in



which decisions made by higher-level managers are directed to lower-level members of the organization, take place (van Vugt et al, 2002; Flynn, 2015). This bureaucratic control system has also been introduced into university management. On the one hand, the top-down management structure of the university headquarters allows for quick decision-making like in the corporate world, but on the other hand, Korean universities have lost the ability to be critical. Higher education in Korea has been promoted under a control policy that places importance on management at the national level since its establishment. In the 1960s, the Ministry of Education controlled higher education by strictly setting standards and guidelines for the establishment and accreditation of a university and university quota policy. Since the *5.31 Education Reform* in 1995, the government has led a university in the direction as it desired by using financial support as the main policy tool (Kim, Y., 2017). In the 2000s, controls on higher education seemed to be relaxed at least on the outside. In reality, however, universities were controlled by various evaluations and ensuing financial support. Externally, the government advocated the autonomy of a university, but internally, the government's policy direction was forced onto universities through indicators for evaluation and projects financially supported by the government. In other words, it artificially activated competition among universities through national-level university evaluation and used it as a means of quality control. This approach can be seen as the introduction of the neoliberal marketization policy model in higher education to Korea, which was already introduced by the British Thatcher government in the 1980s (Radice, 2013). A variety of government-led projects use financial support as bait to lead a university in a specific direction, resulting in a university's voluntary subordination to the government.

In recent years, those universities desperately in the need of government funding have become even more subordinated to the government. They are

lining up in the direction the government induces to gain an advantage in university evaluation. Korean universities are generally struggling financially, so they have to rely on government funding. The government provides funding to universities based on the results of university evaluations that encourage competition among universities in order to control university quality. The Korean government's university assessment-based funding system eventually forces most Korean universities to submit to government policies, which makes it difficult for universities to be democratic and autonomous. Korean universities are accepting all evaluations and restructuring while giving up their autonomous functions. In the 'evaluative nation' (Seong, Y-G., 2008) or 'almighty evaluation era' (Kim, J-W., 2008), where state-led evaluation tends to be strengthened in all areas of society, evaluation for quality management of higher education institutions is accepted without question. Those who refuse to be evaluated would be branded as the disrupters of higher education quality control.

Under these circumstances, rather than running a university with its own unique identity stated in its founding philosophy, Korean universities demonstrate over-conformity to the uniform standards presented by the government (Song, K-O., 2016; Yoon, J-K., 2015). University evaluation has become a process of training in which professors and universities are subordinated to standardized evaluation standards while losing their critical ability. Instead of stressing the promotion of an innovative culture that the failures in new attempts or efforts are tolerated, strategies to improve short-term performance indicators, such as employment rates, are emphasized. The government's hegemonic authority is directly applied to the way universities are run (Lim, J-H., 2015; Yoon, J-K., 2015). The relationship between university administration and its members resembled the bureaucratic governance style. Administrative agencies at a university function as authoritarian bureaucracies rather than making decisions

on major issues by democratically collecting the opinions of its members(Song, K-O., 2016; Yoon, J-K., 2015). In recent years, the bureaucracy of Korean universities, in the competitive ecosystem of higher education, has been deepening under the pretext of survival and profit-seeking. The tendency of bureaucracy in higher education institutions is not unique to Korea. As the marketization of higher education has been accelerated since the 1980s, not only in the United States but also in European countries including Germany, the bureaucratization of university administration has become a discernible trend (Stromquist, 2007). In Korea, where the government has a stronger central power hegemony than those of the western countries, government-led university evaluation and restructuring were carried out by bringing financial support to the fore. Korean universities began to strengthen top-down governance to receive more government financial support. The deepening of university bureaucracy further strengthens the authoritarian culture of a university. It is a common view among public administration scholars that the authoritarianism of administrative organizations comes from bureaucracy (Lim, D-B., 2007). This authoritarian and bureaucratic university administration makes most decisions arbitrarily.

As the bureaucracy of administrative organizations of a university deepens, formal regulation and interference with professors and students become more severe, and the tendency to regulate behaviors through formal rules becomes stronger. For example, under the name of university evaluation, all lecture materials and syllabi of a university are standardized. Professors are required to assume a role as members of a bureaucracy controlled by the administration offices. Many problems arise when professors define their identities as bureaucratic professionals. For instance, egoistic and individualistic thought processes and behaviors are exhibited including ‘you only need to work as much as you get paid.’, ‘you only need to fulfill the minimum duty, whether in

education or research.’, ‘you don’t want to give a hand with administration work when you do not hold any positions.’ (Jeong, B., 2017). That is, when the status of professors is reduced to bureaucratic experts or businessmen selling knowledge, it is difficult for them to criticize the real world and become principal agents of knowledge and discourse production for the construction of a desirable future society. Professors are likely to become an individual seeking shelter in their own leisurely life after completing required assignments. It will be impossible to find an academic community that realizes democratic reciprocity or cooperativism against this backdrop. Under this climate of neoliberalism, university members lack a sense of solidarity. Indifference and structural silence naturally occur and the communication channels for regular discussions and suggestions are absorbed into general administrative management such as academic affairs. In a situation where competition between departments, divisions, and faculty members becomes commonplace, horizontal communication flows are cut off, and only vertical administrative decisions are made among a small number of members.

### **Challenges for the Development of Democracy in Korean Universities**

Democracy in Korean society has been being challenged tacitly. As a matter of fact, democracy has never proceeded without a hitch throughout history. Democracy inherently has limitations, and it has the full potential to regress. To realize democracy, therefore, reform is inevitable. This section suggests tasks that should be undertaken to develop substantive democracy in Korean universities.

#### Expanding the understanding of democracy

First of all, it is necessary to expand the understanding of democracy. Choi, J.(2019), in his book “Democracy after Democratization”, defines Korea's democracy as a conservative democratization. Under a strong anti-communist

ideology and an authoritarian-friendly social structure with a huge state bureaucracy, democracy seemed unlikely, but formal democracy was achieved in 1987. However, since then, democracy in Korea has not developed in terms of content or quality, and has become strongly conservative. In other words, there is a strong tendency to think of democracy as simply a political scene, emphasizing only the formal and procedural aspects of obtaining electoral rights.

This narrow understanding of democracy is also true in the university context. Korean universities often assume that they have implemented university democracy simply by following procedural norms, such as giving university members the right to elect the president and allowing student council to participate in university decision-making. Recent university evaluations in Korea have even utilized indicators to determine, whether its members are given the right to participate in a decision-making process or not is used as an evaluation indicator to judge the democratic operation of a university.

However, it is critical to view the democracy of a university not as a formal procedure, but as a state of life in which the problems arising in the real lives of members are resolved(Choi, J., 2019; Yoo, S.M., 2022). Peters, Alter, & Schwartzbach (2010) discussed the tradition of American universities and their contributions to the development of democracy. Among other things, American universities provided ample opportunities for students to learn how to fulfill their civic duties and responsibilities in order to foster interest and participation in social issues. These lessons should be applied to Korean universities. Democracy is the principle of life for community members to run a communal life in a free and equal relationship with each other. In other words, in the complex structure of modern society where various conflicts and problems must be managed, a new paradigm shift in democracy is requested. Democracy, in

the new paradigm, is utilized as technology or life principle of social operation that maintains and develops a society. Democracy is an autonomous principle for community members to run a communal life in a free and equal relationship with each other (Arendt, 1958).

Transforming the paradigm of democracy into a life phenomenon means that democracy is established as an operating principle of a university and members of a university are emphasized as the main actors of communal life. If democracy is understood from this point of view, breaking away from the authoritarian and hierarchical culture of a university is one of the ways to realize substantive democracy in universities. We received socialization learning in a society where authoritarianism became already prevalent and as a result, we tend to take authoritarian culture in universities as a given, even oblivious of its existence. However, it should be noted that authoritarian culture is contrary to the interests of the majority, and it is an ideology serving the interests of the ruling group. It is then necessary to break away from the authoritarian and undemocratic culture in order to realize substantive democracy in Korean universities. In conclusion, realizing democracy in higher education in Korea should not be limited to simply improving procedural regulations. Rather, the members of a university should maintain a perspective on democracy in the process of resolving the problems that arise in human relationships in a university. We must ensure that all students in the classroom have equal knowledge and information on a given subject. That is, we must not rule over students or the underprivileged in a university by claiming baseless authority.

### Establishing an institutional framework for the advancement of democracy in universities

However, there is a limitation to establishing a culture of democracy in a

university solely with the individual efforts of professors and students. It is necessary to prepare an institutional device for the members of a university to internalize democratic behaviors. At the university level, a code of conduct and reward and punishment system should be established as an external tool for learning democratic behaviors. Without various institutional devices and supportive measures, democracy can regress. According to Quinlan & Akerlind (2000), organizational culture, support systems, and policies, in addition to individual motivation, can influence faculty collaboration, which is fundamental to a democratic university culture. For example, a university organizational culture that values and encourages faculty collaboration can facilitate faculty collaboration. Resources, programs, and teaming arrangements for faculty collaboration are also important.

Above all, we need a code of conduct that can strengthen the professional ethics of professors based on the principle of democracy (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Finkelstein & Altbach, 1997). In a democratic society, all occupational groups have their own ethics and morals. Just as doctors have ethics as doctors and teachers have ethics as teachers, professors have ethics as professors. In particular, the professions that have a greater impact on society are required to have a higher level of ethical awareness. Professors with academic capital must have a fundamental commitment to academic integrity and respect for learners. They are also expected to respect different views and adhere to research ethics based on academic freedom and diversity. At the same time, they should be able to provide equal opportunities for students from different cultures and backgrounds without prejudice and discrimination. Such behaviors of professors as pursuing only their interests without considering professional ethics and as trying to adhere to the vested rights based on the rules of the past roll back democracy in universities.

Some professors may argue that they are not responsible for the undemocratic behaviors that occur in academia because they are not the ones who did it.

However, responsibility is the act of acknowledging that I am the cause of all psychological and practical negative consequences causally caused by what I have done or not done and taking a compensatory attitude towards it. I can be held accountable for what I have not done, and I can be held responsible for the direct effects as well as the indirect ramifications of what I have done. Even if we are free from legal issues, we must view responsibilities from a moral level (Kim, S-W., 2017). Respect and authority for the faculty do not come naturally from one's position but become attainable when a mature professional ethic is put first. It is not enough to enact a code of conduct based on a professor's professional ethics. To overcome the behavior of power-trip that can only be passed in the authoritarian era, education on democracy is needed for professors and staff. Frankly speaking, professors in Korean universities have had few opportunities to learn the principles of democracy, such as how to trust people, how to form solidarity, and how to solve problems democratically. Professors and staff in universities may believe that they are fully acquainted with the democratic modes of life, which even elementary school students in Korea learn at school, but this may be a false consciousness. It is also necessary to educate students on ethics based on democratic principles. The current divisions between generations, males and females, and ideologies in Korea are even more intensified because we are mired in the dogma that only allows wading our way through it (Seo, Y-P., 2016; Song, K-O., 2019; Yoon, 2015). We are not born with the virtue of being a democratic citizen who excludes dogmatism and accepts tolerance. Tolerance education must begin with understanding the thoughts and opinions of yourself and others, while respecting individual liberty. Sometimes you have to learn to put the whole before your individual needs and desires and refrain from pursuing your own interests.



However, democratic virtues cannot be acquired just by running an educational program for a few hours at a university. The internalization of democracy is revealed through a rational attitude based on reflective thinking and moral self-consciousness. Reflective thinking is the ability to look back on what one has done and judge what is worthwhile and what is not, what should and should not be done. When we think reflectively, we have the power to resist erroneous authority or commands from the outside and have the power to oppose dogma. In a university where self-censorship is available through such reflexive thinking, one feels ashamed of putting the interests of oneself and one's own faction as one's top priority. To this end, it is necessary to raise academic capabilities through solidarity and cooperation rather than competition and to create a culture that values the merits of solidarity (CFAT, 2015; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). To do this, higher education systems must create an environment where diverse students can interact, learn, and grow. Universities should promote policies and programs that embrace and respect diverse cultures, races, genders, economic backgrounds, and more. Diversity and inclusion are important foundations for building solidarity among students and promoting a culture of collaboration. In addition, higher education systems should provide students with learning experiences that foster collaboration and teamwork. Through project-based learning, team projects, and problem-solving assignments, students can experience collaborating with each other and sharing their opinions to achieve a common goal. This goes a long way toward creating a culture of solidarity and collaboration. It's also important to provide opportunities for students to self-organize and get involved. Student councils or student-led projects allow students to express their voices and participate in decision-making. This helps foster a culture of solidarity and cooperation among students.

On the other hand, a new communication method such as information

technology can induce direct participation of university students. Those in their twenties belong to the digital native generation who use digital devices with full command. They cross space and time, carry out cultural exchanges, and share information with people all over the world using digital devices. The increase in online expression of a student council's position on specific political issues, especially in the era of COVID-19, and the recent tendency of Korean university students to become more politicized seem to be related to the development of information technology. Unlike the existing media, the Internet is interactive and quick. So, the Internet can activate the direct political participation and deliberation of university students by reducing the cost of students' political participation such as expressing their thoughts and opinions about the school. The use of information technology in the decision-making process of university administration brings checks on administration and strengthens the power of its members, thereby increasing information disclosure, information sharing, and communication using cyberspace.

Of course, the development of new information and communication technologies can lead to negative phenomena such as algorithmic bias bias (Eubanks, 2018; O'Neil, 2016) rather than contribute to the democratization of higher education. Algorithmic bias reflects the biases of developers and can undermine diversity and equality, for example, by reflecting racial and gender bias in university admissions processes. Furthermore, while anonymity allows for freedom of opinion and personal safety, it can also be used to increase negative behaviors such as hate speech, disruptive communication, and intimidation on a digital scale (Schneier, 2015).

This can lead to issues of bias and legitimacy in discussions and decisions within the university. In addition, advances in technology have made large amounts of information available online, which can be difficult to trust and

verify (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Students may be exposed to inappropriate sources or false information, which can negatively impact academic and democratic decision-making. Thus, while the development of information technology can bring both light and shadows to democracy in higher education, it should be guided by the effective use of information technology to contribute to democracy in higher education.

### Building new governance between government and universities

To realize the democratization of higher education, it is urgent to establish new governance between the government and universities. In the history of higher education, Korean universities have never been recognized for their autonomous ability by the government. From the initial stage of their establishment, Korean universities have been organized in accordance with the government-led evaluation system. Moreover, since the regime of the president, Kim Young-Sam, Korean universities have fallen into a swamp of regulation due to the government re-regulation and are unaware that they give complete obedience to the government (Kim, Y., 2017). Established according to the national plan from the early stages of higher education, Korean universities were not given an opportunity to manage themselves. Accordingly, the influence of the Ministry of Education expanded across the universities, and Korean universities operated with a high degree of dependence on bureaucracies. Currently, Korea's higher education has reached a level that makes it difficult for the universities to reform independently as the Ministry of Education exercises all its powers on policymaking, university evaluation, and financial support for higher education.

Some argue that Korean universities should be run by the bureaucratic decisions of the Ministry of Education because they still do not have the capacity to manage higher education on their own and lack professional accountability. The way to increase the capacity of universities is not to increase the technocratic

managerialism of higher education by the Ministry of Education, but to increase the public autonomy of universities, i.e., as agents of change, universities should have the greatest responsibility for education and be able to control themselves according to their autonomous professionalism, so that they have the ability to exert primary pressure within the professional community of the faculty association against universities and professors who shirk their social responsibility. Non-democratic societies, such as authoritarianism and totalitarianism, are also characterized by the concentration of power and influence in a single center. Democracy is a pluralistic force at the center of a society(Choi, J., 2019). Therefore, the democratization of higher education in Korea requires a governance shift that dismantles the power over higher education that is overly concentrated in Korea's Ministry of Education and partners with universities(Kim, B-C., 2015; Byun, K-Y., 2017; Goodman, Kariya, & Taylor, 2013). Kim, B-C. (2015) argues that the Korean government is strictly submissive to universities based on university evaluations, and that governance between the government and universities needs to be centered on productive tensions. In other words, the government should play a role in supporting universities and acting as a check on abuses of autonomy, and universities should establish a governance arrangement where there is a productive tension between government and universities that can be stimulated to bring out the proper role of government. Byun, G-Y.(2017) also emphasized that governance in which mutual checks become possible through the active participation of various stakeholders in higher education should be formed. For example, since the needs and demands for higher education are different depending on the viewpoints of various stakeholders (government, market, university experts, etc.), it is necessary for the representatives of each stakeholder group to participate in the discussion process. Through the social consensus of each stakeholder group, the purposes, directions, and priorities of higher education need to be derived and a mid-to-long-term plan for higher

education can be prepared.

This change in government-university governance needs to happen in at least three ways. First, there is a need for collaborative governance between government and universities in the formulation of government support policies. Governments should formulate policies that support fair university governance while respecting university democratization and autonomy (Watson, Hollister, Stroud, & Babcock, 2011). They should ensure university autonomy and provide support to promote both academic excellence and social responsibility through fair funding, infrastructure development, research support, and international exchange. Second, governments and universities need to jointly develop governance guidelines. Based on these governance guidelines, the government can provide recommendations on university operations and decision-making. This will promote cooperation and mutual understanding between universities and governments, and build democratic and transparent university governance. Third, communication between universities and the government should be strengthened. The government should open a steady communication channel with universities, collect their opinions and needs, and set up a structure to understand their achievements and difficulties. Universities should also actively communicate with the government to participate in policy formulation and implementation and provide input (Goodman, Kariya, & Taylor, 2013; Watson, Hollister, Stroud, & Babcock, 2011).

#### Reinforcement of social responsibility of Korean universities

Finally, Korean universities need to strengthen their social responsibility for the advancement of democracy in society. Korean universities are often criticized for lacking a sense of political, social, and cultural responsibility despite their quantitative expansion. Korean universities operate solely for the benefit of individual universities and do not attempt to form any political position even

when the higher education ecosystem is collapsing. It should be acknowledged that as Korean universities, unlike Western universities, grew rapidly from the need to nurture talents in higher education under the national goal of prioritizing development, it was difficult for many researchers and professors to internalize their identities as intellectuals with a spirit of the times or a critical mind (Song, K-O., 2019). Given that Korean universities grew rapidly with the full support of the nation and citizens, it is expected that they bear more responsibilities as a member of society. However, Korean universities are insensitive to social suffering and their special position guaranteed by society was deformed into privilege.

Etymologically, the word ‘professor’ is the combination of *pro-* ‘in front of’ and *-fess* ‘one who speaks’. That is, a professor is the one who criticizes with dignity even in the face of power. The ontological essence of professors lies in the ‘criticism of power’ because the professors searching for universal truth inevitably conflict with the power pursuing special interests. In this sense, the indispensable role of universities and professors is to be aware of the changing times and to respond to the demands of the times with an open mind.

Accommodating the needs of the times in education does not only mean immediately responding to the needs of the industry. Admitting that the history of Korean universities is short and the identity of the professor society has never been properly established, now it is time that the Korean professor society must strengthen its social accountability. Equipped with the function of fulfilling social accountability, Korean universities should carry out the public responsibility of critiquing social reality for the realization of democracy. What kind of social accountability should be fulfilled? Above all, we need to expand the field of study dealing with the current issues of democracy in Korea. In particular, compared to other countries, there is very little discussion about how higher education can contribute to social democratization in Korea. For the

advancement of democracy in Korean society, it is essential to discuss the function and role of higher education academically. Horkheimer (1978) states that “all science is inseparable from the social process, and the work of scholars is also a product of the process of social reproduction.” Adorno (1977) also mentioned in a similar vein that a society in which science cannot engage in “radical thinking” for a new community cannot dream of a just future. In this context, Habermas (1987) says that “the core of university reform is academic critique”, and academic critique is a prerequisite for social critique.

In addition, academic communities serving the role of making discourse on democratic issues and producing knowledge on the given issues should be strengthened especially because the social accountability of universities cannot be accomplished on an individual level. We must ask ourselves whether Korean academia provides an atmosphere in which scholars, with a sense of responsibility, carry out research that contributes to the progress of democracy in society. Unfortunately, there has been no such structure of discussion in our academic circles. Truth be told, there are even few opportunities for opinion gathering and reflection within academia. Have we ever had a meaningful intellectual debate to suggest practical alternatives based on radical criticism when exclusions and discrimination threaten the value of democracy in Korean universities? Have we ever properly introspected the authoritarian culture of a university and examined the validity and feasibility of various alternatives to get out of it? Discourse on democracy should be continually produced through good discussion and debate in academic conferences or forums, where the answers to the questions raised above can be answered regularly. A good discussion and debate are the locomotive of democracy that clarifies the situation and highlights the problem, thereby enabling a broader and deeper understanding of democracy and stimulating participation and practice. This is also the role that society expects of intellectuals.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, universities in Korea have been able to grow rapidly with full support from the nation and citizens. During this process, a fairly special position has been guaranteed to the universities. Given this, Korean universities are expected to bear more responsibilities as social agents, but this is far from how the current Korean universities present themselves to society. In the absence of self-innovation efforts of the universities for the development of democracy in Korea, the concept of neoliberal democracy has swept over higher education in its place. Beginning with the globalization of universities, Korean universities went through a wave of university restructuring carried out in the name of economic efficiency, and excellence has become a university's goal in recent years. Under such circumstances, Korean universities have been controlled and managed by the nation and are becoming a simple administrative institution that supplies commodified human beings and knowledge that can compete in the global market.

Consequently, universities in Korea do not function as a critical space for raising questions about the spirit of the times and creating new ideologies for democracy. The goal of the scholarly work does not lie in exploring the value of democracy and the meaning of the times, but in conducting research to produce knowledge products for businesses. Discourse in a university stays at a low level, mainly on finances and student recruitment, and the identity of a university is increasingly damaged. Now, democracy in Korean universities is at a crossroads: Will we be stuck in a rut where authoritarianism and discrimination are internalized, or will we move beyond formal democracy to realizing substantive democracy in a university?

It is not an easy task to upgrade democracy in a university to the next level. Professors, who have already established vested rights in Korean society, have been taught socialization from the prevailing authoritarianism in society, and as



a result, they unknowingly take the authoritarian culture of a university for granted. Students and parents tend to believe that a collective opinion supported by many people is absolutely right. This is because it is more convenient to live with unconditional trust in collective authority rather than thinking and judging for yourself. The nation also exercises power on the basis of the opinion of the majority. Accordingly, the opinions of the majority become public opinion, and authority is formed.

When a university only functions as a training center to prepare for employment and to transfer knowledge, not as a higher education institution freely criticizing and making discourse on democracy in the present age, is there any reason to call it a ‘university’? As Shils (1992) put it, the well-being of universities depends on the reflective and rational attitudes and moral self-consciousness of professors. Without these moral virtues of professors, a university’s status will inevitably collapse despite its financial resources and administrative authority. Who will be able to address the issues of democracy in society unless professors challenge collective authority and point out problems? Universities aim to help professors pursue academic truths based on democratic values and to communicate those truths, in various forms, to students and citizens. When a society of university plays its part, civil society will form deep trust in it. Furthermore, when there exists a strong bond between civil society and a university, the democracy of society can be sustained.

In the end, strong solidarity among the university members should be built to confront neoliberalism in a university, which forces a university to internalize corporate competitiveness and makes the disappearance of critical knowledge in a university self-evident. Even if the number of participants is small in the beginning, only the ceaseless efforts can make changes. Organizational solidarity that resists the dominant trend of neoliberal universities can discover the possibility of greater solidarity through the practice of breaking small

cracks. The neoliberal domination of universities shifts the crisis of universities to the university members and threatens university members so that the crisis is eventually advantageous to the market, capital, and vested interests. The neoliberal universities' pressure of restructuring is an expression of an obsession with self-crisis. In this situation, small resistance and a small voice can be a starting point to expose the reality of the self-crisis of the neoliberal universities. The joint solidarity to find the right to regain a university's identity, the reason for its very existence, and the production of critical knowledge and equal education have become unprecedentedly important. Democracy will eventually have no choice but to retreat unless efforts are made to protect it, nurture its values, and continuously have discussions and develop institutional devices for its improvement.

[1] The study only covers neoliberalism in South Korea universities(the Republic of Korea). However, according to a study by Reed (1997), globalization under neoliberalism has also had a significant impact on the closed and tightly controlled society of North Korea. The study argues that North Korea has been forced to respond to the challenges of globalization while preserving its socialist ideology and national identity.

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