Republic of Korea: Country Profile

The Republic of Korea has one of the highest rates of progression from secondary school to tertiary and higher education. It also has a high ranking of student performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. Nevertheless, despite such a highly educated young population, the country is facing several challenges: (1) it has one of the highest youth unemployment rates among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states (Park, 2011); (2) the schism between the labour market and higher education creates societal instability; (3) the link between industry and the higher education sector is weak in terms of the level of workforce training (Woo, 2010); (4) the skills-mismatch forces young people to seek more education, while employers have to invest in more on-the-job training for new recruits; (5) academic degrees are currently not linked to the national qualifications standards; and (6) the academic learning culture of higher education does not promote the full appreciation and value of recognising non-formal and informal outcomes through the assessment of prior learning.

The Republic of Korea’s demand for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) through its Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) and Lifelong Learning Account System (LLAS) derives from socio-economic developments such as demographic changes and the emerging knowledge-based economy (Lee et al., 2010). In this respect, the Republic of Korea is attempting to move away from an examination- and instructor-based pedagogy to one which takes into account experiential learning.

The Lifelong Education Act (LEA) provides the legal framework for lifelong learning. The Act required the Republic of Korea to establish a National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE), which operates the ACBS and manages and supports the LLAS. The aim of the ACBS is to promote an open learning system that provides higher education opportunities and raises the academic level of the entire society by providing opportunities for neglected groups to participate in higher education. The LLAS enables learners to plan their learning process systematically and accumulate learning outcomes in non-formal and informal settings. It also ensures that every learner has the right to choose from a variety of learning options and promotes self-directed learning. Finally, it helps to link learning achievements to general and vocational certification.

The benefits of the ACBS are associated with the involvement and interests of various stakeholders (NILE, 2013). First, traditional higher education institutions have established on- and off-campus and online lifelong education centres for non-traditional students that are accredited by NILE to be part of the ACBS. Second, the Republic of Korea government departments, including the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Employment and Labour (MoEL), have recently pressured traditional higher education institutions to change their structure and policies and orient more towards the National Competency Standards (NCS) including RPL. Third, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers offer programmes that are usually relevant to the labour market and are expected to adopt the NCS on their curricula. Fourth, an employer or a firm may be a key stakeholder in the ACBS system. A firm may want its training programmes to be accredited by the ACBS. By having its firm-specific training programmes accredited, a firm can help its employees in obtaining higher education degrees alongside vocational qualifications. Last but not the least, the ACBS is attractive to adult learners given that it provides them with a second chance to study at a higher education level, acquire vocational qualifications, and change their speciality or major. The latter would be difficult in a traditional higher education system.
Efforts are being made to link various TVET systems and vocational qualifications, and to enhance the development of a competence-based education and training system. Since 2010, the MoEL and its affiliates have therefore taken charge of developing and operating NCS (KRIVET, 2009). The country considers the alignment of the ACBS and the LLAS to the NCS an important way forward in the future.

Resources and references


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1 Previously, the development of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) was the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOEL), whereas the Korean Skills Standards (KSS) was under the Ministry of Education (MoE). Recently, however, in 2010, NOS and KSS have been merged together to form the National Competency Standards (NCS). Additionally, the MOEL now operates the NCS in collaboration with its affiliates. This change is expected to enhance the overall coordination function of the NCS.