



## 7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)

Students' Forum: 11–14 May 2019 | Rectors' Conference: 12–14 May 2019  
Bucharest, Romania

Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:  
Perspectives from Asia and Europe



### Interview | Conducted by PARK, Jaekyung Focusing on How to Achieve Educational Fairness (SDG Goal 4)

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**HAN, Sangjin**

Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology,  
Seoul National University

#### **PARK JaeKyung**

Thank you, Professor Han for meeting me on such a short notice. On my way here, I read an interesting article. According to the news, the portion of freshmen into Seoul National University (SNU) from the so-called “Gangnam Districts,” the richest regions in the nation, has been steadily increasing, accounting for no less than 40.4% in 2016. This shows a vivid contrast against the past when SNU was filled with students from diverse backgrounds and regions. What do you think is the reason behind this social phenomenon?

#### **HAN Sangjin**

I think it is closely related with social change. As you have pointed out, in the past, most of the students were from rural regions. I myself was also born and raised in the countryside. Back then, campus society was very balanced. This was possible because university was far from the gale of professionalism; higher

education's ultimate goal was raising citizens with critical minds, who are necessary for public sector. But now, Korean society is more obsessed with industrialization, and campus is not an exception. University's goal now shifted to providing the most appropriate labour force for industries. Naturally, the admission tests also shifted; universities today no longer prefer students with profound insight of humanities. They just want controllable students which industrial sector likes. This trend is something that those from poor families or disadvantaged backgrounds cannot adapt to.

### **PARK JaeKyung**

Speaking of admission systems, SNU, as the top school in the nation, has tried many experiments on the admission process; such as special screening process for students from rural regions. But critics claim that this is leading to the overall downgrade of the quality of the school. Do you advocate this diversification of admission process? How should we balance the two most fundamental values; fairness and academic achievement?

### **HAN Sangjin**

Universities are only meaningful when they remain inside the society, and if society is undergoing serious inequality issues, I think it is natural for universities to take measures. This is universities' basic responsibility. But as you have pointed out, academic achievement is also a very important factor. My colleagues and friends who are, or had served as school presidents or deans, all first start their terms with huge ideals to address this issue, but as time goes on, they feel helpless faced with reality and give up. However, I still think it is a duty for school leaders to take measures against this trend.

### **PARK JaeKyung**

As you know, Korean universities are no more considered as "higher education," but de facto mandatory education. In 2005 for example, no less than 82.1% of high school entered university, which is much higher than the international average. What do you think is the reason behind? Do you think this is desirable, or should higher education remain as "higher education"?

### **HAN Sangjin**

I believe the number of those who go to the university will naturally go down. The main cause behind the high university enrolment rate is the wide-spread belief in Confucianism which values academics. However, this belief is diminishing fast. Before, when universities prioritized academic role, a high rate of university enrolment had some benefits. But now, as its focus has shifted to industrial fields, too high enrolment rate means a waste of human resources. Because of disparity between supplies (number of university students) and demands (number of jobs), this excess of supply will naturally be corrected. Personally, I feel that rather than being obsessed with the number of college students, what matters is the quality of education that universities provide. Anyone who wants higher education should have the opportunity, but it doesn't mean that everyone should go to college.

**PARK JaeKyung**

Could you please give suggestions as to how universities can fulfil its social duty?

**HAN Sangjin**

I think there is a wide-spread stereotype that university's role of providing appropriate labour force and the role as the bastion of truth and society are incompatible. In fact, these two roles are the two sides of universities' social responsibilities. Universities' biggest strong point is that only they can purely address fundamental problems that societies face. Other sectors such as politics or industries can never be objective because they have interests. So, I want to make two suggestions; firstly, universities must raise creative and critical citizens that can contribute to the society. As you and I have agreed, everything is competitive nowadays, but unlike the fields of politics or economics, universities are "pure." That is, universities are only institutions that can solve social problems without having to be conscious of others. So, I think that the leaders of each school should make various joint programs for their students, so that they can freely fulfil their responsibilities as young leaders without having to worry about lagging behind their competitors.

Secondly, universities should remain a social ladder for the poor and uneducated. This is not solely a problem with the admission system; the most fundamental reason behind this is the atmosphere in academics. Most professors these days have earned their doctorate degrees in the US, which is famous for emphasis on pragmatism and calculable factors. Some can say it is rational and reasonable, but in that course, academics tend to neglect social context. When even professors are pressured to focus on professionalization, how can we expect diversity in admission?