

# The Reform Process of English Medium Instruction in Korean Higher Education

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**Abstract:** In the context of the internationalization of higher education, many non-English speaking countries, from Europe to Asia, are promoting English as a medium of instruction (EMI). The EMI in South Korea started earlier and developed rapidly under the promotion. From the initial “Study Abroad in Korea Plan” to the World Class University (WCU) and Brain Korea 21st century (BK21) PLUS programs, with the support and guidance of the government, South Korea’s higher education has made significant progress, with the global top 100 universities in QS increasing from 1 to 6 in South Korea.

**Keywords:** English medium instruction; EMI; Internationalization of education; Korean higher education

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## 1. Introduction

The development of economic globalization has promoted the internationalization of higher education and induced fierce competition among global universities. At the same time, English has become the international lingua franca. Striving for international student, English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada have substantial advantages, whereas many non-English-speaking countries in Europe and Asia had to apply English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education. In Europe, Holland and Sweden had already started promoting EMI in the 1950s, and by the 1990s, EMI had virtually spread out through the entire European continent. In 2001, South Korea also began EMI teaching, contrary to Europe, EMI in South Korea had a strong “government-driven” feature from the beginning.

EMI refers to teaching professional courses in English in countries (or regions) where the first language is not English<sup>[1]</sup>, or teaching professional courses in English where the first language for most students is not English. The main features of EMI include: using English teaching for professional courses; acquiring the content as the teaching objective; English learning is not the main purpose of teaching; English as the second language for most students<sup>[2]</sup>.

In 2011, Byun conducted an in-depth analysis of EMI policy in South Korea, which is currently the most cit-

ed literature. The research found that although the Korean government's EMI policy from 2008 to 2011 improved the internationalization level of Korean universities, this "one size fits all" mandatory policy, which did not consider the English proficiency of teachers and students, the nature of the curriculum, and the lack of corresponding support tools, caused serious difficulties for both teachers and students <sup>[3]</sup>. Kim believed that the further development of EMI in South Korea requires the development of probationary courses, language centers, comprehensive training for teachers in both English and teaching skills, and the establishment of a long-term cooperation mechanism between English teachers and EMI teachers <sup>[4]</sup>. Lee and Lee extended EMI research to graduate level, pointing out that graduate students require higher English proficiency and benefit more from EMI courses because they will pursue further study abroad or engage in academic research work after graduation <sup>[5]</sup>.

## **2. Korean government policy in the reform process of EMI**

EMI policy in Korea was first introduced in 2001, when the Korean government launched a plan to attract more international students. However, due to the small number of international students in Korea at that time, the impact of the plan was insignificant. In 2007, the South Korean government summarized the reasons for promoting EMI in its "Strategic Plan for Internationalization of Higher Education" as follows:

- (1) Helping students to prepare for the future business careers or academic research, and supply graduates with a global perspective for domestic labor market.
- (2) Attracting international students to fill in the gap due to the declining of eligible students in Korea.
- (3) Enhancing the language proficiency and self-confidence of Korean professors, and promoting academic exchange of ideas within the worldwide academic circle.

### **2.1. Study Korea Project**

#### **2.1.1. The first stage: 2004–2007**

In 2004, the South Korean government launched "Study Korea Project," with the goal of recruiting 50,000 international students by 2010. The program finances 200 million Korean won (approximately \$200,000) to universities offering EMI courses. In 2005, 5 universities benefited from this program, 4 in 2006, and 2 in 2007. EMI has become one of the prerequisites for Korean universities to receive financial support from the government. More and more Korean universities started to offer EMI courses.

In 2006, Korean universities offered over 9000 EMI courses, accounting for 2.2% of the total 40,000 courses. According to a survey conducted by the South Korean government on 190 four-year universities, 94 universities offer EMI courses on undergraduate level, 78.7% of them have an EMI course ratio less than 5%, the highest EMI ratio is 61.6%; 58 universities offer EMI courses on graduate level, 5 of them have an EMI course ratio exceeding 50%, 34.5% of them offering EMI courses exceeding 10%, and 50% of them offering EMI courses exceeding 5%. During the same period, the number of international students admitted by Korean universities increased from 4682 in 2001 to 16,832 in 2004, to 22,526 in 2005, and reached 49,270 in 2007, which means the goal of admitting 50,000 international students had been basically achieved <sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **2.1.2. The second stage: 2008–2012**

In 2008, the South Korean government launched the "Development Plan for Studying in Korea," with the goal of recruiting 100,000 international students by 2012. The South Korean government selects 13 universities annually and provides them with a funding of 400 million Korean won (400,000 US dollars). From 2008 to 2011, the number of international students increased from 63,592 to 89,537, whereas from 2011 to 2014, the number decreased by nearly 5,000 <sup>[6]</sup>. South Korea's excessive pursuit of quantitative increase of international

students was recognized by scholars, whereas extensive management have led to lower quality of education. South Korea's attractiveness to international students has been reduced sharply. In 2011, the South Korean Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology issued the "Quality Management Certification System for Foreign Students," evaluating the management of international students in 346 universities, and imposing restrictions on visa issuance and other penalties on poorly managed universities. It was not until 2015 that the number of international students in Korea resumed growth. During the same period, the proportion of EMI courses in Korean universities increased from 2.2% in 2006 to 3.1% in 2010, and to 25–30% in 2014<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **2.1.3. The third stage: 2012–2020**

In 2012, the South Korean government launched the "Study Abroad in Korea Plan 2020," with the goal of recruiting 200,000 international students by 2020 (extending this goal to 2023 by 2015). In 2022, there were 166,892 registered international students in Korea, accounting for 5.4%, of which 40.4% were from China.

## **2.2. Brain Korea 21st century project (BK21)**

In April 1999, in response to the low international status of Korean universities and researchers, the Korean government proposed the BK21 plan. This plan was focused on building research-oriented universities with international competitiveness and supplying high-quality innovative graduates. It was mainly divided into two stages.

In the first stage (1999–2005), an investment of 1.3 trillion Korean won (1.4 billion US dollars) was planned, 70% of which was used to support researchers qualified to international standards, including graduate students and new researchers. Moreover, it was used to build a world-class research-oriented university, and to emphasize indicators such as the number of SCI papers.

In the second phase (2006–2012), the Korean government planned to invest 1.8 trillion Korean won (2.1 billion US dollars)<sup>[7]</sup>. Every year, they supported more than 20,000 outstanding graduate students and built 10 world-class research-oriented universities, with SCI papers ranking among the top 10 in the world.

BK21 focused on internationalization strategy, but included the proportion of EMI courses in specific evaluation indicators. In the first stage of BK21, the weight of EMI course proportion was only 1%; in the second stage, the proportions of EMI, foreign teachers, and international students were included in the evaluation indicators, with a weight of 5% respectively. The South Korean government has also selected 10 "world-class research-oriented universities" to provide large-scale funding.

## **2.3. World Class University (WCU) and BK21 PLUS project**

Between 2008 and 2012, the Korean government proposed the WCU program. With funding from the South Korean government, a large number of high-level academic experts from overseas were hired by South Korean universities to teach in Korean university, which was supposed to enhance the research capabilities and international reputation of Korean university. During this period, WCU planned to invest 852 billion Korean won in total, with an annual average of 165 billion Korean won, to finance 75,000 outstanding graduate students and newly introduced experts<sup>[8]</sup>. The 2009 WCU evaluation report showed that among graduate courses selected by WCU project, EMI accounted for 80% (241/302), in which EMI courses offered by local teachers accounted for 58% (83/144)<sup>[9]</sup>.

In May 2013, the South Korean government continued to launch the BK21 PLUS program, which includes the following three aims:

- (1) To build a world-class research-oriented university, with 7 universities ranked in the world top 100 and 11 universities ranked in the world top 200.

- (2) To supply core and inter-disciplinary graduates in various fields, and support 15,000 outstanding graduate students and new researchers annually.
- (3) To improve the quality of university courses and research, with the citation volume of SCI papers in the world top 20.

### 3. Korean universities' policy toward EMI

Under the guidance and promotion of the government, Korean universities have also actively adopted a series of policies to promote EMI. For example, when recruiting new professors, their English proficiency and ability to offer EMI courses were emphasized. Students were also required to take a certain proportion of EMI courses to meet the graduation standards. Korea University was the most radical university among all universities implementing EMI policies. Starting from the second semester of 2009, all professors hired after 2003 must offer EMI courses, while professors hired before 2003 were encouraged to offer EMI through economic incentives.

In 2010, adoption of EMI courses achieved 15% at Seoul University, 40% at Korea University, 34% at Kyung Hee University, 29% at Yonsei University, 26% at Sogang University, and 20% at Central University. Since the establishment in 1992 and 2009, the Gwangju Institute of Science and Technology (GIST) and the Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology (UNIST) have been fully adopted EMI courses, and English was the official language throughout the university<sup>[4]</sup>. Several top universities, such as Korea University, Yonsei University, and Ewha Womans University, have also established special humanities colleges to fully adopt EMI in order to attract international students and domestic students who are proficient in English.

At the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), President Xu Nanpyo, who took office in 2006, mandate all courses (excluding Korean history and Korean language) to adopt EMI. However, in 2011, one professor and four students in KAIST committed suicide due to high pressure in the courses, which shocked the entire South Korea. Afterwards, KAIST's mandatory EMI policy was adjusted, and some courses were allowed to be taught in Korean. After 2011, the focus of South Korea's higher education policy shifted from recruiting international students and EMI to improving the research capabilities and international rankings of Korean universities. **Table 1** summarizes the achievements of the top 100 universities in South Korea's QS rankings in recruiting international students, hiring foreign teachers, and offering EMI courses.

**Table 1.** Internationalization of Korean universities in world top 100 (data from Top Universities and Korean Universities websites)

Universities	International students in 2022	Foreign professors in 2022	EMI courses
Seoul University (36)	2014 international students, account for 8.2%, including 70% undergraduate students, 30% graduate students; QS score is 10.3	307 foreign staffs, account for 8%, QS score is 12.2	4% in 2005 increased to 15% in 2010; plan to increase to 30% by 2015 and 50% by 2025; had only 9.68% EMI courses in 2014, ranking 35th among Korean universities
Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (42)	916 international students, account for 9.2%, including 43% undergraduate students, 57% graduate students; QS score is 12.3	155 foreign staffs, account for 12%, QS score is 23.1	In 2006, nearly all professional and liberal arts courses for undergraduate students were EMI. In 2014, KAIST adopted EMI for 80% of undergraduate courses and 62% of graduate courses
Pohang University of Science and Technology (71)	92 international students, account for 2.9%, all are graduate students; QS score is 2.9	122 foreign staffs, account for 16%, QS score is 34.7	In 2009, EMI was 25%; in 2010, 88% of undergraduate courses and 95% of graduate courses adopted EMI. In 2012, 81.5% of undergraduate courses and 92.2% of graduate courses adopted EMI
Yonsei University (73)	5046 international students, account for 20.6%, including 88% undergraduate students, 12% graduate students; QS score is 51.3	418 foreign staffs, account for 11%, QS score is 19.4	6% in 2005 increased to 29% in 2010; 1285 EMI courses in 2022, accounting for 19%

**table 1.** (Continued)

Universities	International students in 2022	Foreign professors in 2022	EMI courses
Korea University (74)	4052 international students, account for 16%, including 84% undergraduate students, 16% graduate students; QS score is 32.9	345 foreign staffs, account for 9%, QS score is 14.7	Undergraduate students must complete 5 EMI courses before graduation, while business school students must complete 10 EMI courses. EMI courses increased from 10.2% in 2002 to 38.1% in 2008, and 40% in 2010
Sungkyunkwan University (94)	3923 international students, account for 17.5%, including 76% undergraduate students, 24% graduate students; QS score is 38.7	364 foreign staffs, account for 11%, QS score is 18.9	In 2017, EMI was 42.3%; EMI for international economics and trade, international business management majors reached 100% <sup>[8]</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

In the process of internationalization of higher education and building top universities, the government has always played a significant role, although the efforts of Korean universities cannot be ignored. The initial “Study Abroad in Korea Plan” aimed to expand the enrollment of international students, directly providing financial support for EMI courses, with relatively single policy objectives and tools. Subsequently, the WCU and BK21 PLUS programs evolved their policy objectives to enhance the global competitiveness of higher education and support world-class universities. In addition to supporting EMI courses, it also includes employing international excellent teachers and research experts, and improving the teaching and research level of domestic universities. With the support and guidance of the government, South Korea’s higher education has made significant progress. For example, from 2005 to 2022, the global top 100 universities in QS increased from 1 to 6 in South Korea.

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## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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