

Demographic dive leaves South Korea struggling to fill campuses

Most universities yet to meet enrolment quotas for new academic year, raising concerns about institutional viability

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Concerns have been raised about the viability of some South Korean universities after institutions in the country – home to a rapidly ageing population – reported a record-high number of vacancies.

The Korea Council for University Education reported that 162 universities – or the grand majority of institutions – failed to meet enrolment quotas for the 2021-22 academic year, which begins in March.

Provinces in the east and south saw the greatest drops. Institutions there have resorted to offering perks such as scholarships, free accommodation and even iPhones to attract more students in the next few weeks, according to [local media](#).

The numbers revealed a widening urban-rural gap. In contrast to the provinces, enrolment numbers went up in Seoul, home to the three traditionally elite institutions of [Seoul National University](#), [Korea University](#) and [Yonsei University](#), plus [Sungkyunkwan University](#), which is known for its scientific prowess and close ties with Samsung.

The admissions system is centred around the *suneung*, a college entrance exam that has such high stakes that it [affects the whole nation](#) one day of the year.

Nearly all high-school seniors sat the exam when it was held in December, after Covid-related delays. However, the number of 18-year-olds in the country has declined from about 900,000 in the 1990s to about 500,000 today, according to [government data](#).

Stuart Gietel-Basten, an expert on Asian demographics and professor of social science and public policy at [The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology](#), told *Times Higher Education* that the situation was a “perfect storm”.

While he cautioned against making assumptions based on 2021-22, due to the pandemic, he felt the drop might have “exaggerated larger structural trends. The decline in birth rates has an impact about 20 years down the line, and we’re feeling that now.”

Professor Gietel-Basten said the usual methods for offsetting declining enrolments – for example, opening up to more young people or foreign students – might not work given South Korea’s particular situation.

Its higher education enrolment rate of 70 per cent, the highest in the world, meant that student recruitment was already at a “saturation point”, he said.

Then there is the problem of South Korea's glut of 203 universities and 127 community colleges, making a total of 330 tertiary education providers.

Professor Gietel-Basten recommended that South Korea "diversify intakes, moving beyond four-year bachelors for 18-year-olds into lifelong learning, plus online or hybrid courses".

Still, he said that, long-term, "some universities may just not be commercially viable, just like any industry".

The country's rigid system may not benefit its young people.

"South Korean families spend an enormous amount of money and effort to get into the 'right' universities, which are a path to what are narrowly defined as the 'right' jobs," which are traditionally in the government or *chaebol*, the family-run conglomerates that dominate the economy, Professor Gietel-Basten said.

"There will always be kids who can work at Hyundai or Samsung, or who want to go into the civil service," he continued. However, there were not enough of those high-end jobs for the 70 per cent of students who attend university.

Professor Gietel-Basten worried that graduates who feel they cannot use their university education will join what is called the *sampo* generation, a term for those who do not follow the traditional path of secure employment, home ownership, marriage and children. "And this will push the fertility rate even lower," he said.