



## Online Series

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# North Korea's Education Policy and Its Prospects Based on Analysis of National Conference of Teachers

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The future direction and current tasks of North Korea's education policy were discussed at the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers held in Pyongyang on September 3, 2019. At the conference, Chairman Kim Jong Un emphasized the linkage between the importance of education and science technology stating that science technology is "a driving force of national economic development," and education is "the mother of science technology." His remarks illustrate that a focus of education policy has shifted from political ideology-oriented to science technology-centered education against the backdrop of changes to the informatization era, the importance of science technology in national economic development strategy, and the stability of the North Korean regime. The 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers in 2019 also discussed current issues in creating the foundations for educational development and proposed related tasks as follows: implementing follow-up tasks in line with the strengthening of institutional reform in the primary, secondary school and higher education; strengthening the capacity of teachers; establishing the long-term educational strategy; and expanding facilities and promoting investment in the educational budget.

While the institutional reform seems to have taken place ever since Kim Jong Un came into power up until now, a certain period after the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers will focus on stably operating and reinforcing a changed institution. The future direction of North Korea's education policy will reflect global educational trends and a periodical change of the informatization era.

At the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers held in Pyongyang on September 3, 2019, the future direction and tasks of North Korea's education policy were presented based on the evaluation of its educational achievements. This conference, designed for teachers selected nationwide, was held in five years after the 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers hosted on September 5, 2014. A statement from Chairman Kim Jong Un was delivered in this conference which described that, "Teachers should fulfill their duty as a revolutionary professional in carrying out the Party's guideline on educational revolution." This paper analyzes North Korea's educational policy agenda and discusses its future prospects based on what was announced at the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers, including Chairman Kim's statement.

### **Kim Jong Un's Education Policy in the Early Stages of His Rule: Implementing "Overall 12-Year-Compulsory Education System," Reforming Higher Education, and Carrying Out "North Korea's Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology"**

There was a distinct change of education policy in the early phase of Chairman Kim's rule to the point where it would be no exaggeration to say that the educational sector underwent the biggest change ever since he took power. Chairman Kim announced an "Overall 12-Year-Compulsory Education System" at the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in September 2012, held for the first time since he came into power, with a reform of system, the main focus of which was to add one more year to an elementary school period and to separate middle school from high school at the institutional level.

A series of institutional reforms were also implemented in the higher education sector, the direction of which was well reflected in the statement released at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers in 2014: "Let us revolutionize the education of the new century and make our country's education strong full of talented people." In the statement, Chairman Kim said that the goal of "educational revolution in the new century" is to "make our country a socialist educational powerhouse in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century by nurturing young students as reliable workers who will lead the construction of a powerful country and realizing ‘North Korea’s Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology,’ and to present detailed tasks for implementation.”

Various reforms on the institution of higher education were carried out based on the direction presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers. First, more universities were established and the process of reforming the department structure and educational curriculum followed depending on the type of the university. There were only three universities in North Korea prior to 2012, but the number increased to around 10 in 2016.<sup>1)</sup> This was due to an expansion of universities by integrating colleges of different majors, creating regional universities, and establishing universities with certain majors through an integration of similar colleges in the region.

In addition, the departments and curriculum were adjusted in line with the characteristics of universities by dividing the types into the “research-type educational institutions” and “specialized vocational college.” The existing 2 to 3 years of specialized school (*Jeonmun hakkyo*) was either integrated into universities or transformed into “specialized vocational college.”<sup>2)</sup>

Distance-learning and ICT-oriented education was also expanded. Starting with the establishment of Distance Learning Center at Kim Chaek University of Technology in 2007, computer network-based distance learning had increased under the Kim Jong Un era as it has been positioned as a major means of realizing “North Korea’s Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology.”<sup>3)</sup>

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- 1) Although North Korean authorities do not reveal detailed lists of universities, North Korea’s Chosunjoongang Yearbook (2016) specified that aside from existing universities, including Kim Il-sung University, Kim Chaek University of Technology, and Koryo Songgyungwan University, the following were transformed into universities: Pyongyang University of Architecture, Pyongyang College of Machine Engineering, Pyongyang College of Railways, Han Duk-su Pyongyang University of Light Industry, Jangcheolgu Pyongyang University of Commerce, Kim Won Gyun Pyongyang Music College, Pyeongbuk University, and Hwangbuk University.
  - 2) North Korea’s Chosunjoongang Yearbook (2018) described that “a project of establishing around 50 specialized vocational colleges was complete and roughly 60 specialized schools were transformed into factory college and farm college.” Whether a project of transforming specialized schools into vocational technical college or factory college is complete needs further confirmation.

Major universities' 'information-oriented' and 'distance learning-based' functions were strengthened by having established online colleges in major universities, such as Kim Il-sung University, Kim Chaek University of Technology, Kim Hyong Jik University of Education, and Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies, which allowed workers from main factories and enterprises to access distance higher education.

### **Function of Education as National Development Strategy: “Education is the Mother of Science Technology”**

What stands out most in Chairman Kim's statement released in the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers is that the importance of education is related to science technology. In particular, the statement finds the need for strengthening education in the development of science technology, stipulating that “While science technology is a driving force of national economic development and an important symbol of national prowess, the mother of science technology is education.” Science technology is recognized both as the driving force for economic development and the standard of national power. It is a North Korean version of ‘Educational Development Theory’ that links the function of education to national economic development and the promotion of national power. It should be noted that ‘science technology’ is the mechanism connecting education and national development.

In fact, the patterns of linkage of the function and tasks of education with science technology have consistently been found under the Kim Jong Un era. Chairman Kim's statement released on August 25, 2013 reads as follows, “Let us continue to hold in high regard comrade Kim Jong Il's great *Songun* revolutionary ethos and achievements,” announcing the task of realizing ‘North Korea's Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology’ based on the perception

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3) North Korean authorities do not reveal accurate statistics on the number of online colleges and the number of students. One material confirmed that as of July 2018, there were about 100,000 students studying in more than 200 distance learning departments in around 50 colleges nationwide (North Korea Today, July 2, 2018), recitation from “North Korea's Vision of ‘Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology’ and the Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation of Science and Technology,” Byun Hak-Moon(2018), *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies*, vol.10, no.2.

of the era of ‘knowledge economy.’ In the 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers in 2014, ‘North Korea’s Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology’ was presented with the aim of ‘educational revolution in the new century.’ In 2015, Article 8 of North Korea’s Education Act was amended from “the principle of making all members of society intellectuals” to “the principle of realizing the Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and Technology,” which articulates that “realizing such a vision is a future remaining task of the socialist education.” Such an amendment was reflected in reforming the ‘Socialist Constitution’ in April 2019. It is in the same context that the slogan of the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) in 2018 was established as “Let us make a leap forward with science and guarantee the future with education.” Since the mid-2010, ‘science technology’ and ‘education’ always surface in tandem whenever North Korea discusses national development strategy.

The balance between ‘red or expert’ has always been a focal point of debates in terms of nurturing talents in a socialist society and the same holds true for North Korea’s education. Rodong Sinmun’s report on the National Conference of Teachers described those two aspects as follows: “someone who will commit themselves to the socialist construction based on the knowledge of fatherland and its people,” and “a creative person with expertise and knowledge in various areas, who is equipped with comprehensive ability of application and exploration.” While North Korea’s education has mostly focused on the former, the relations between political ideology education and science technology education have slightly changed, reflecting the social priorities of the time.

A recent shift of focus from political ideology-oriented education to education as a driving force in science technology and economic development is related to macroscopic changes in the informatization era, the importance of science technology in national economic development strategy, and the stability of the North Korean regime. Immediately after Kim Jong Un seized power, the focus of education had inevitably been on promoting political ideology for the purpose of securing the legitimacy of power succession and solidifying the ruling ideology. As the regime internally has gained sounder footing, however, the focus of education policy has

shifted to nurturing creative talents equipped with expertise based on the strengthening of science technology education.

### **Current Issues: Establishing the Foundation for Educational Development such as Implementation of Follow-up Tasks of Institutional Reform and Strengthening of Teachers**

The 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers in 2014 mostly presented tasks related to the re-organization of the elementary and middle school system and institutional reform of higher education. The 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers in 2019 discussed current issues in creating the foundations for educational development and proposed related tasks as follows: implementing follow-up tasks in line with the strengthening of institutional reform in the primary, secondary school and higher education; strengthening the capacity of teachers; establishing the long-term educational strategy; and expanding facilities and promoting investment in the educational budget.

Tasks on institutional reform in elementary, middle, and high schools were suggested to supplement and further develop the achievements of the past 5-years of institutional reform. Attention needs to be given to the point that students' talents and unique characters should be identified and that customized education based on that assessment should be provided in primary and secondary schools. North Korea's primary and secondary education system does not have an autonomous curriculum where either a school or student is given a choice. That leaves little room for customized education tailored to the talents and characters of students in general schools. The only choice that students can have is to select specialized schools as follows: institutions for talented youth that provide education in science technology, computer science, language, and arts and sports; and technical high school (*kisul kogup chunghakkyo*).<sup>4)</sup> The statement repeatedly emphasized that students should

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4) North Korea's high school had been operated without the division of liberal arts and natural science. In 2017, around 100 technical high schools were created. North Korean media reported that in 2018,

be given multiple chances to go to higher levels of education according to their talents and capability. Given this emphasis, it is highly likely that the student selection process and timing will go through institutional changes in institutes for talented youth, such as first middle school, rather than giving a choice to students in selecting courses within the curriculum of general schools. In addition, the following tasks were also suggested: strengthening of continuity of the education system for talented youth in phases of the general secondary education and the higher education; boosting the education of foreign language; and improving the methods of evaluation centered on measuring intellectual ability and creative application ability.

Tasks in higher education are presented as follows: planning the personnel demands with a consideration of the types of university and the goal in human resources; re-organizing the curriculum and departments based on such demands; and setting the size for undergraduates. In particular, it was emphasized that cutting-edge science-related departments should be actively established reflecting the change of the informatization era. Majors and departments specializing in cutting-edge science and technology are increasingly popping up in North Korea's universities. Rodong Sinmun reported that 85 departments were newly established in 37 universities, including Information and Security Department, Nano-Material Science and Engineering Department, and Robotics Department. The special emphasis on the establishment of cutting-edge science technology-related departments revealed at the National Conference of Teachers indicates that such trends will continue for the time being.

The biggest focus of the statement in the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers is to strengthen the capacity of teachers. While the statement of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers suggested the direction of 'educational revolution' by realizing the "Vision of Making All People Well-versed in Science and

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additional technical high schools in nine specialized areas were established and that in 2019, technical high schools in six specialized areas are expected to be founded, including for the mining industry. In addition, preparations are underway to establish 11 technical high schools with specialty in information in each province and to select and operate one technical high school in every city and country. ("Meari," September 5, 2019)

Technology,” the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers emphasized the importance of teachers to achieve the ‘educational revolution’ tasks and presented further tasks needed to improve their roles. The task of strengthening the capacity of teachers in multiple ways is laid out in a statement, such as teacher-training, their placement, and retraining of the teachers. On one hand, such moves were made in preparation for the informatization era and on the other hand, the lack of teachers that North Korea’s educational community faces was reflected in that trends. The statement also emphasizes the importance of nurturing the informatization-related capability among other qualifications of teachers, such as the usage of science theory and information technology devices. It could be assumed that even with the widespread use of ICT devices, including computer and cell phones in North Korean society and the class environment created for ICT-based classes thanks to the initiatives of informatization-oriented education, the teachers’ level of usage of ICT remains low, which becomes a problem on the ground. Furthermore, the statement requires that teachers be capable of providing lectures in one or two major-related classes, aside from their major. This hints that a lack of teachers is worsening due to the establishment of new types of school, technical high school, and the full-implementation of 12-year-compulsory education system in 2017, which was applied in phases since a school system reform. The statement laid out the following tasks for the strengthening of teachers in primary and secondary schools: reforming teacher-training colleges and universities; and enhancing the retraining projects for current teachers. Meanwhile, it was stressed that excellent students, including those with a Ph.D. and students studying overseas should be placed as university professors to improve the quality of teachers.

The statement also presented other supporting tasks: expanding the state investment in education; stimulating grants and support for school; and boosting the educational infrastructure, including expansion and improvement of educational facilities. In particular, the educational response was underscored during a transition to an informatization society, including transforming every classroom to a multi-functional one that can utilize ICT. It also was directed in the statement that a long-term strategy should be crafted and that there should be an enhanced role

for the Science and Education Department under the Central Committee of the WPK and the Ministry of Education of the Provincial, City, and County Party Committee.

### **Prospects for Education Policy: Settling the Institutional Reform and Promoting Global Education**

While the institutional reform seems to have taken place ever since Kim Jong Un came into power up until now, a certain period after the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers will focus on stably operating and reinforcing a changed institution. As stated above, the detailed tasks of reinforcement would be: developing a major and curriculum for a technical high school; expanding universities through integration; re-organizing a department and curriculum of specialized vocational colleges; supplementing teaching and evaluation methods and entrance examination system; informatizing education; continuously expanding distance learning; and enhancing the qualities of teachers.

The future direction of North Korea's education policy will reflect global educational trends and a periodical change of the informatization era and fourth industrial revolution. Educational institution reform in the early days of Kim Jong Un's ruling is divided into two phases: changing primary and secondary school system; and implementing the higher education structural reform. Those two were carried out in a direction that conforms to global trends, global standards, and a change in the informatization era. Such a direction of change will continue to be in place for a significant amount of time. The 13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers discussed how to embrace international experiences of educational development and to 'follow' global development trends in a way that "stands firmly on our own feet while looking out onto the world." The press release and Chairman Kim's statement of the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Teachers described further steps that the North should "go over" the education level of educational powerhouse in a way that "challenges, competes, and goes above the world." An important factor that impacts how close North Korea could come toward this goal would be a possibility of exchange and cooperation with the international community and an openness of the



North Korean regime. After all, what could take the burden of stringently controlled, excessive political ideology education, a fundamental problem in North Korea's education, off of its shoulder will eventually be the confidence in regime stability.

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