South Korea's education success

Young people in South Korea's workforce are more likely to have achieved an upper secondary education than anywhere else in the developed world.

They are also among the most likely to have university degrees, shows an annual education report from the OECD.

The Asian country has invested heavily in education as a central part of its economic future.

In the 1960s, South Korea had a national wealth on a level with Afghanistan, says the OECD.

But the country's emphasis on education has seen its young people leapfrogging the academic achievement of other industrialised countries, including the United Kingdom.

Top ranking

The annual publication of comparisons in education systems produced by the OECD - the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - reveals the extent of South Korea's progress.

It is now in first place in terms of the proportion of younger people who have completed an upper-secondary education - leading a small group of countries, including Norway and Japan, where more than 90% of pupils reach this level.

These figures compare two generations - those now in the 25 to 34 age group and those aged 45 to 54.

In the older group, South Korea was well below western European countries such as the UK.

But in the younger group, it now has the highest achievement in the world, with 97% reaching this level.

For this younger group, who left school in the early 1990s, the UK has nudged up from 64% to 71% reaching the level, but has been overtaken to be placed in the lower half of the table of OECD members.

In terms of the proportion of population entering higher education, there has been a similar upwards leap by South Koreans.

Among the older group, Korea had one of the lowest levels of university participation - but in the younger group it is now third, behind Canada and Japan.

More recent figures in the report show that since the 1990s, there has been an upward drive in these staying-on figures among industrialised countries - with Germany, Ireland, Greece and Switzerland joining this group where at least 90% of pupils complete upper secondary education.

Spending levels

The South Korean success is also reflected in test results. International comparisons of maths skills among teenagers placed South Korea in second place behind Finland.

A spokesman at the South Korean embassy in London said that there was a great value attached to education in the country - and that it was seen as the way of achieving individual and national success.

From being a country that had experienced much hardship, he said that South Koreans had invested in education as a means towards economic progress - and that the country had recognised the importance of developing skills in new technology.

In terms of the share of national wealth invested in education, from primary through to higher education, the biggest spenders were Switzerland, the United States and Norway.

In higher education, including research funding, the biggest budgets were in the United States, Switzerland and Denmark. And a separate measure of "cumulative spending", reflecting longer degree courses in some countries, showed high levels of funding in Sweden and Austria.
At school level, for both primary and secondary, the OECD report shows that Luxembourg had the highest level of spending per pupil, followed in both cases by the United States and Switzerland.

For pre-school pupils, aged three and four, the United Kingdom had the highest level of funding.

The OECD report also details that higher spending does not necessarily convert to higher results - and that some education systems are more efficient.

South Korea spends about half the amount on school pupils as the United States, but its performance at maths is much higher.

Finland, the top-performing country at maths in 2003, spends much less than Italy, which was almost the worst-performing.

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