



► Policy Brief

June 2022

Skills development and lifelong learning in the Republic of Korea

Challenges for trade unions¹

Key points

- The Korean experience in skills development and lifelong learning involved multiple stakeholders and a coherent policy vision that has lasted more than half a century. In the early years of industrialization, the country had abundant labour in agriculture but a short supply of skilled labour. Its early technical and vocational education and training policies therefore focused on increasing this supply.
- The second Korean Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1967–1971) had an accommodative policy regime that enabled the expansions of hiring capacity, learning capacity and training capacity to be synchronized.
- The policies of that time had been adopted despite the low demand for skilled workers, in anticipation of future needs.
- This approach took advantage of the young population at the time and enabled the Republic of Korea to enjoy the full benefit of its demographic dividend.
- While the largest skill segment of the workforce is the medium-skilled, the employment of highly skilled workers has grown rapidly in the past two decades, at more than twice the speed of total employment and several times the population growth rate.
- The number of mismatched workers has climbed, pushing the proportion of the workforce that is overeducated above 40 per cent.
- The National Training Card and the Lifelong Education Vouchers are important initiatives to expand lifelong learning and provide a foundation upon which to achieve a comprehensive system of personalized individual learning accounts.
- While trade unions have made their voice heard on several of these initiatives, they can and should take on a larger and more active role in skills development, including initiating programmes if necessary.

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► Introduction

This brief examines skills development and lifelong learning in the Republic of Korea. The approach takes a macroeconomic perspective of the main challenges and examines selected outcomes in terms of labour market performance.

The economy is the fourth largest in Asia and the tenth largest globally in nominal US dollar terms. If differences in costs of living are considered, the country is the sixth largest in Asia and 14th in the world in purchasing power parity-adjusted terms. From the mid-1960s until the mid-1990s, the Republic of Korea enjoyed economic growth that averaged more than 9 per cent a year. In 2020, the Korean economy narrowly avoided a technical recession despite experiencing a full year of decline in growth, which amounted to 1 per cent. It was its first drop in annual economic output since the Asian financial crisis that began in 1997.

In 1960, the country's agriculture, forestry and fishing sector accounted for 36.6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). In 2020, the sector's contribution had shrunk to just 1.8 per cent. In its place, manufacturing had more than doubled, from 11.4 per cent to 24.9 per cent of GDP over the same period. By 2019, the Republic of Korea had become a leading exporter of high-technology products, ranking only behind China, the United States and Germany.

The Republic of Korea leads the world in having the highest density of industrial robots. It is one of the most technologically advanced societies in the world, with high levels of digital technology use in both the economy as well as everyday life.

Since 2011, average labour productivity growth has been visibly slower than that of the preceding decade. This raises concerns about whether there are structural causes that may have an impact on longer-term economic performance.

Throughout the early years of growth, more than three quarters of the population was younger than 40. The proportion in their prime working age had just began expanding in the mid-1960s. It was the mid-1990s before the expansion ended.

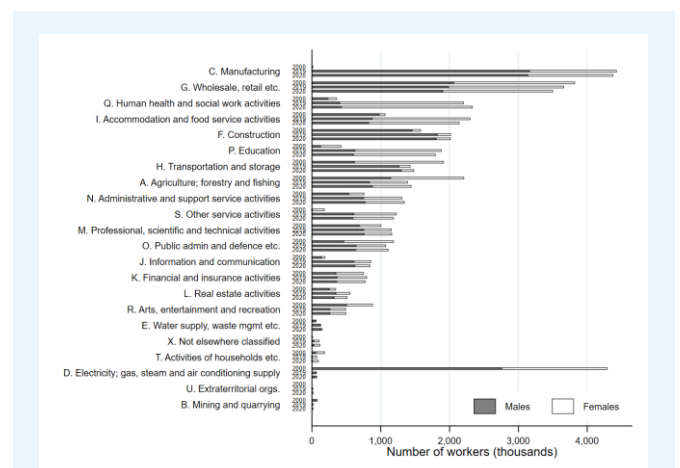
From 1960 to 2010, the proportion of the urban population saw uninterrupted year-on-year growth, with the sharpest increases occurring from 1968 to 1970. In 1960, 72 per cent of the population was rural. By 1970, the proportion of the rural population had fallen to 60 per cent. Then in 2004, the rural population fell below 19 per cent for the first time and has stabilized at that level since.

The labour force participation rate stood at 62.6 per cent in 2020 and is just slightly above the average for high-income economies, having risen by 2.1 percentage points in the preceding two decades. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Republic of Korea saw its labour force participation rate fall by 0.7 percentage point between 2019 and 2020, which was much less severe than in most other economies.

The unemployment rate has been increasing since 2013 but remains below 5 per cent. Unemployment among youth (aged 15–29) also has worsened, from a low of less than 7 per cent in 2012 to 10 per cent in 2016. It has since stabilized at about 9 per cent.

There has been a strong increase in employment across almost all sectors of economic activity, driven by increases in female employees (figure 1).

► **Figure 1. Employment, by sector, 2000, 2019 and 2020**



Note: (1) The figure shows the number of workers in each sector of economic activity in 2007, 2019 and 2020. The sectors of economic activity shown are based on Statistics Division, UNDESA, *International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities: Revision 4*, 2008 and compare the major non-services sectors with the services subsectors. (2) The stacked bars for each year show total employment distinguished by sex (with the lighter-shade bars for female workers appearing to the right of the darker-shade bars for male workers). The values are sorted according to the value of total employment in 2020. (3) The change between 2007 and 2019 can be interpreted as longer-term development that had occurred before the impact of COVID-19.

Source: ILOSTAT, indicator: EMP_TEMP_SEX_ECO_NB. Indicator label: Employment by sex and economic activity (thousands).

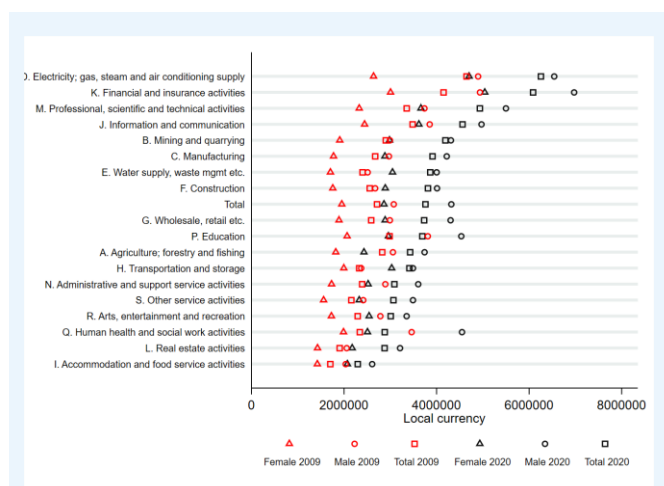
The services sector has the largest workforce among the broad sectors. In 2020, services employed more than 70 per cent of all workers. The manufacturing, construction and agriculture (agriculture, forestry and fishing) sectors each accounted for 16.2 per cent, 7.5 per cent and 5.3 per cent, respectively.

In a comparison of the services subsectors with the non-services sectors, manufacturing has the largest number of workers, followed by wholesale and retail.

In 2019, 43 per cent of the workforce was female. The human health and social activities services subsector was the largest employer of women workers in 2020. This sector has seen the largest increase in employment since 2000, with much of the increase due to female employees. Some other sectors, such as education, also saw increases in their numbers of female employees between 2000 and 2020, outpacing the increase in male employees. Others, such as transportation and storage, experienced the opposite.

Similar to the situation in India, the Philippines, Singapore and Viet Nam, the financial and insurance subsector is among the top-earning economic activity in the Republic of Korea (figure 2).

► **Figure 2. Earnings, by sector and sex, 2009 and 2020**



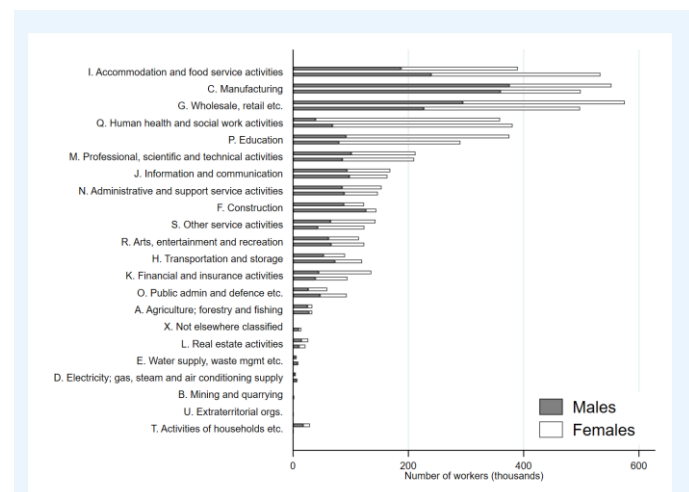
Note: (1) See note 1 to figure 1. Local currency refers to Korean won. (2) The comparisons show male (circle), female (triangle) and all workers (square) for 2007 (red marker) and 2020 (black marker). The ordering of the economic sectors is in descending order by value of mean earnings of all workers in 2020 (black square marker).

Source: ILOSTAT, indicator: EAR_4MTH_SEX_ECO_CUR_NB. Indicator label: Mean nominal monthly earnings of employees by sex and economic activity.

The average earnings in the manufacturing sector is above that of the average for the total economy. On the other hand, in the services subsector, which employs the largest number of workers (wholesale and retail), the average earnings of employees are below the average earnings for the total economy. Accommodation and food service activities in the services subsector, which employ the fourth-largest number of workers, sits at the bottom of the earnings range.

There have been major changes in the sector profile of youth employment since 2012 (figure 3). The sector with the largest number of youth workers is accommodation and food service activities. Between 2012 and 2020, this sector experienced a significant jump in youth employment, at more than 25 per cent. The sector with the largest number of youths in 2012 was wholesale and retail trade. Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles is now the third-largest sector for youth employment, just behind manufacturing.

► **Figure 3. Youth employment, by sector and sex, 2012 and 2020 (thousands)**



Note: (1) See note 1 to figure 1 for the classification scheme of sectors. (2) The figure shows the number of youths employed in each sector of economic activity in 2012 and 2020. The sectors of economic activity are based on ISIC Rev. 4 (2008). The stacked bars for 2012 and 2020, show total employment distinguished by sex (with the lighter-shade bars for female youths appearing to the right of the darker-shade bars for male youths). The values are sorted according to the value of total employment in 2020.

Source: ILOSTAT, indicator: EMP_3EMP_SEX_AGE_ECO_NB. Indicator label: Youth employment by sex, age and economic activity (thousands).

A comparison of figures 2 and 3 reveals that the proportion of youths employed tend to be higher when average earnings are below the overall economy average.

► TVET policy development

The Republic of Korea has a comprehensive policy framework for skills development and lifelong learning that has undergone enhancements over several decades that led to the sophisticated system it is today.

The first Five-Year Development Plan (1962–1966) was formulated and set the economy on a path of rapid industrialization to provide jobs for the mass of unemployed persons. The main resource for creating skilled workers was the vocational education institutes within the education system. In the early 1960s, however, Korean policymakers could see that this system was not capable of accommodating the increase in demand for skilled workers that industrialization would bring. They opted to make up the shortfall of skilled workers through two other approaches: public vocational institutes set up through international collaboration and a system of in-plant training.

These two approaches capitalized on the young population at the time and enabled the country to benefit from the so-called demographic dividend. The growth of the industry workforce was further enhanced by rural migration.

The Vocational Training Act of 1967 enabled enterprises to provide the in-plant training.

The second Five-Year Development Plan period (1967–1971) led to the establishment of the Vocational Training Promotion Fund and enactment of the National Technical Qualifications Act.

During the second Five-Year Development Plan, the expansions of hiring capacity, learning capacity and training capacity were implemented with a high degree of policy precision, resulting in a synchronizing with an accommodating policy regime. They marked the 1960s as a formative period in determining the direction of skills development for years to come. As events demonstrated, a strong foundation was established for the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system, which remained valid until the 1990s. That evolved into the skills

development and lifelong learning framework, which the Republic of Korea is widely admired for today.

By the 1970s, the share of persons aged 15–39 in the population had just begun to expand. That coincided with a shift in industrial focus, from light to heavy chemical industries, under the third Five-Year Development Plan (1972–76). But the shift exposed acute shortages of skilled workers, leading the Government to realize "that public vocational training centres alone were not enough to meet the rising demands and that the participation of private enterprises in vocational training was necessitated".²

To meet the labour demand of the heavy chemical industry, the Financial Grants for Local Education Act was enacted in 1971 to support engineering education. The Vocational Training Special Measures Act was adopted in 1974 and made in-plant vocational training mandatory. Then in 1976, the in-plant training system was further expanded under a new Basic Vocational Training Act, which combined the Vocational Training Act and the Vocational Training Special Measures Act. The Basic Law for Vocational Training stipulated requirements on training outlay for private enterprises of certain industries with 300 or more permanent workers. Up through the end of the fourth Five-Year Development Plan, in 1981, the in-plant training produced the majority of trained workers.³

The TVET system continued to undergo adjustments and enhancements throughout the 1980s. Yet, the guiding philosophy remained unchanged until implementation of the then-Unemployment Insurance framework in July 1995 (later renamed as Employment Insurance). The framework paved the way for the funding of training to be personalized to some extent, depending on individual circumstances.

The vocational training system in the Republic of Korea is far from perfect and has encountered the same issues that beset vocational education worldwide, such as a low participation rate in apprenticeship schemes. Nonetheless, it differs substantially from those of other countries in terms of its outcomes for industry. The system has been able to make up some of the shortcomings and, more importantly, has remained receptive to continuing improvements.

² Young-Sun Ra, and Soon-Hee Kang, *Modularization of Korea's Development Experience: Vocational Training System for a Skilled Workforce* (Ministry of Strategy and Finance and KDI School of Public Policy and Management, 2012), 27.

³ Taeck-Duck Kim, *Case Studies on Technical and Vocational Education in Asia and the Pacific – Republic of Korea* (UNEVOC–ACEID, 1996), section 3.2.

Introduction of employment insurance

Under the employment insurance scheme launched in 1995, vocational skills development programmes are specified as an intervention approach “to prevent unemployment”.⁴ In the critical area of funding, in particular, the Employment Insurance Act states that the Minister of Employment and Labour “may provide funds to business owners who provide vocational skills development training prescribed by a Presidential Decree to cover expenses necessary for such training”.⁵

The Employment Insurance Fund goes beyond providing unemployment benefits and is regarded as a “social security insurance” scheme that covers employment stabilization payments as well as support for vocational skills development.⁶

At the same time that the employment insurance was introduced, the mandatory training requirement for enterprises was removed and a much more flexible approach was taken to support training initiated by employers as well as individuals.

The Asian financial crisis that began in 1997 triggered greater momentum to this shift in priorities. The crisis originated in Thailand with the sharp depreciation of the Thai baht but spread quickly to other Asian countries, with the Republic of Korea becoming one of the hardest hit. The economic downturn pushed the unemployment rate in the country up sharply, from 2.6 per cent in 1997 to 7 per cent in 1998.

In another significant shift under the employment insurance scheme, the unemployed were able to access vocational training through a framework that is no longer linked to their jobs and employers. This was made possible through the introduction of the Lifelong Education Voucher (explained further on) and the Tomorrow (Naeil) Learning Card system. The latter is an individual learning scheme administered by the Ministry of Employment and Labour that provides a personal training account with a stipulated level of funding to eligible applicants, regardless of employment status, who want to pursue training.

When first introduced, the Tomorrow Learning Card system had different entitlements for unemployed and

employed persons. Eligibility criteria had also included jobseeking status and level of monthly earnings. In 2020, the difference in entitlements based on employment was removed and the integrated version transformed into a National Training Card system. With the new system, the eligibility criteria were relaxed and the Card was extended to short-time workers, dependent self-employed persons and microbusiness owners.

The Ministry of Education administers a second individual learning scheme, called the Lifelong Education Voucher. It targets low-income adults, although the amount of funding is much less than what the Card system provides.

Participants in adult education and training can register for an account at two online portals, each provided by one of the two Ministries overseeing skills development and lifelong learning. These portals enable account holders to access information about courses as well as maintain records of their learning activities. The Education Ministry's portal is called Neulbaeum (Lifelong Learning) and the Employment and Labour Ministry's scheme is called HRD-net.

Quality control of training instruction was built into the system from the outset, as noted previously in relation to curriculum standards and instructor training.

The two Ministries spearheaded the drive for skills development and lifelong learning, and they were supported by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy in the task of establishing the type of skills in demand.

The Employment Insurance scheme also contributed to the development of digital learning as an important component of the overall education and training landscape in the Republic of Korea. In 1999, the Employment Insurance Fund began providing support for online training.⁷ Shortly before that, in 1995, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform had announced wide-ranging reforms to the educational system based on the goal of creating an “edutopia”, or an education welfare State, in the twenty-first century. Among the recommendations of the Commission was the establishment of a virtual university that would offer

⁴ Employment Insurance Act, Chapter III.

⁵ Article 27 of the Act.

⁶ See www.ei.go.kr/ei/eh/eg/ei/eiEmins/r/retrieveEi0101Info.do.

⁷ Insung Jung, “Online Education for Adult Learners in South Korea”, *Educational Technology* 43, No. 3 (2003), 9–16.

online education programmes.⁸ Since then, several virtual universities have been set up, such as the Seoul Digital University,⁹ where degrees can be earned entirely through online lectures.

Qualifications and standards

An important development that has had long-term impact on training quality was the establishment of the Korea University of Technology and Education (KOREATECH) to provide four-year programmes for vocational training instructors. This occurred through a change of name of the Korea Polytechnic College to KOREATECH in March 1992.

In 2004, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy initiated sector-based human resource development councils to coordinate and implement human resource programmes in single industries.

In 2015, the Ministry of Employment and Labour established industrial skills councils to develop and improve the national competency standards, in conjunction with Human Resource Development Korea (HRD Korea). These standards detail the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform tasks effectively within each industry. The competency standards form the foundation of skills qualification, vocational education and training, and career management. Each competency standard consists of 8–12 units describing the necessary capacity in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude.

The initial national competency standards model launched in 2002 was benchmarked against Australian training standards and German skills qualifications. The first competency standards were developed in 2003 for five occupational areas, including welding, automobile maintenance and cosmetology.¹⁰

Since 2015, new competency standards have been developed each year for promising industries and new types of jobs to keep up with every paradigm shift in industries. A network of businesses, schools and experts participate in the review and the updating of the

competency standards on a regular basis. As of June 2020, 1,022 competency standards in 24 categories had been developed.¹¹

HRD Korea initiated the National Qualifications Framework based on the national competency standards.¹² The initial framework consisted of five levels: craftsman, industrial engineer, engineer, master craftsman and professional engineer. Since its introduction in June 2017, 23,500 private qualifications have been registered, with 99 private qualifications formally acknowledged and approved by ministries as nationally certified qualifications.

Women and youth

In terms of accessibility, there have been longstanding concerns about challenges that certain groups experience, especially women. In the 1990s, women had very low representation rates in vocational training centres.¹³ Many more resources have been devoted to assisting women to access training since then, leading to establishment of Woman Resources Development Centres and Women New Job Centres. One area of focus for these centres is to provide support and training to women whose careers have been interrupted by family caregiving roles and who face challenges re-entering the workforce because of skills obsolescence. A large proportion of this group has a level of educational attainment achieved in their youth, before their family role began.

In 2016, there were 56 Women's Human Resources Development Centers and 147 Women's New Job Centers. There was renewed emphasis by the then-President and his administration to tackle the shortfalls in women's employment, with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family reporting an increase in centres to 58 and 158, respectively.¹⁴

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family also operates the Saeil Center, which provides customized employment support services to women, including vocational education and training.¹⁵

⁸ Jung (2003), 11.

⁹ See <http://en.sdu.ac.kr/>.

¹⁰ Soo-Bong Uh, "Job Training in Korea", in *Republic of South Africa Systematic Country Diagnostic* (World Bank, undated).

¹¹ Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL), *Employment and Labour Policy in Korea* (2020).

¹² Human Resource Development Korea (HRD Korea), *35 Years of HRD Korea: Together with the Korean People toward the World* (2017), 47.

¹³ Taek-Duck Kim, *Case Studies on Technical and Vocational Education in Asia and the Pacific - Republic of Korea* (UNEVOC-ACEID, 1996), 17.

¹⁴ Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, *년도여성새로일하기센터 사업지침 (Business Guidelines for Women's New Employment Centre for 2021)* (2021).

¹⁵ See <https://saeil.mogef.go.kr/hom/info/info02.do>.

Attention also has been directed to the training needs of people living with a disability. The Ilsan Vocational Training Institute for the Disabled, the first of its kind, was set up in 1987. It was acquired in 1992 by the Korea Employment Promotion Agency for the Disabled, which had been established in 1990 following the Promulgation of the Act on the Promotion of Employment of Persons with Disabilities (No. 4219).¹⁶ Now, the Korea Employment Agency for the Disabled has established facilities in several regional locations.

The TVET system established in the 1960s also included a role for apprenticeships. In 1967, the Busan Vocational Training Institute was created and included the elevation of training standards for apprenticeships.

In 2013, a Work–Learning Dual Support System was introduced as an innovative form of apprenticeship. Beginning with 171 learning workers and 51 companies in 2013, it grew to 67,307 trainees and 12,493 companies as of May 2018. In this system, workers spend part of their work week in an academic institution learning subjects directly related to their job.¹⁷

Lead agencies

Under article 40 of the National Government Organization Act, responsibility for employment insurance as well as vocational competency development training belongs in the portfolio of the Ministry of Employment and Labour.¹⁸

HRD Korea, under the Ministry of Employment and Labour, is the primary agency in charge of vocational training. HRD Korea also oversees apprenticeships, lifelong learning for workers and the promotion of national qualification tests and expert skills. The agency was established in 1982 as the Korea Vocational Training and Management Agency by incorporating the Central Vocational Training Institute, 24 public vocational training centres, an industrial masters' college, a research institute and a technical qualification testing agency.¹⁹

In addition, HRD Korea engages in the development of overseas employment opportunities. To support this work, KOREATECH was designated to provide research on the characteristics of overseas employment in targeted countries. This is an unusual aspect of the work of these

two organizations, which may overlap with as well as provide significant depth to their roles in advancing vocational training.

The Jobs Council, which was set up under the Ministry of Employment and Labour and comprises nine ministries and various other stakeholders, was responsible for developing the Five-year Roadmap for Job Policy Plan (2017) and the Innovative Measures for Vocational Competency Development Plan (2019).

The Ministry of Employment and Labour and the Ministry of Education are in charge of financing for skills development and lifelong learning programmes. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family oversees or collaborates in the provision of resources, such as the job centres that offer training to women.

Role of trade unions

Trade unions have a large and active role in the Republic of Korea, providing substantial inputs on all aspects of labour market policies, including those related to training. There is a large body of documentation on the revival of union activism in the late 1980s and the increasing confrontation between unions and the Government in the 1990s. Many of the issues that arose in the push for worker empowerment related to the development of active labour market policies that focused on the needs of unemployed workers and preparing them for job opportunities through adequate access to training.

In 1999, the Government ratified the Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (No. 144). Only in 2021, however, did the Government ratify the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), together with Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29). A year earlier, the Trade Union and Labour Relations Adjustment Act (Act No. 17432, 9 June 2020) was enacted. Regardless of the ratification status of Conventions No. 87 and No. 98, trade unions have had a visible presence in the economy and society for several decades.

¹⁶ See www.kead.or.kr/view/agency/agency03_02_02.jsp.

¹⁷ ILO, Observation (CEACR) – adopted in 2019, published 109th International Labour Conference session (2021), Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142).

¹⁸ *Employment and Labour Policy in Korea*, 8.

¹⁹ The English name was later changed to the Korea Manpower Agency before taking on its current form in June 2001.

While the Trade Union and Labour Relations Adjustment Act of 2020 does not specify a role for trade unions in skills development and training, their influence over policymaking in these areas has been evident. Recent presidents of HRD Korea came from a trade union background. In April 1993, for instance, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the then-newly formed militant National Council of Trade Unions had included employment insurance among the proposals for the "central labour-management agreement". Among the items in negotiation for the Social Pact that followed were improvements to the employment insurance system and expansion of its coverage as well as "expansion of vocational training". Since then, trade unions have been instrumental in shaping the development of policies that impact training.

In 2018, two national union centres – the FKTU and the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions – presented separate observations about the functioning of the skills development and lifelong learning system, which had implications for the Korean Government's compliance with the ILO Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142).

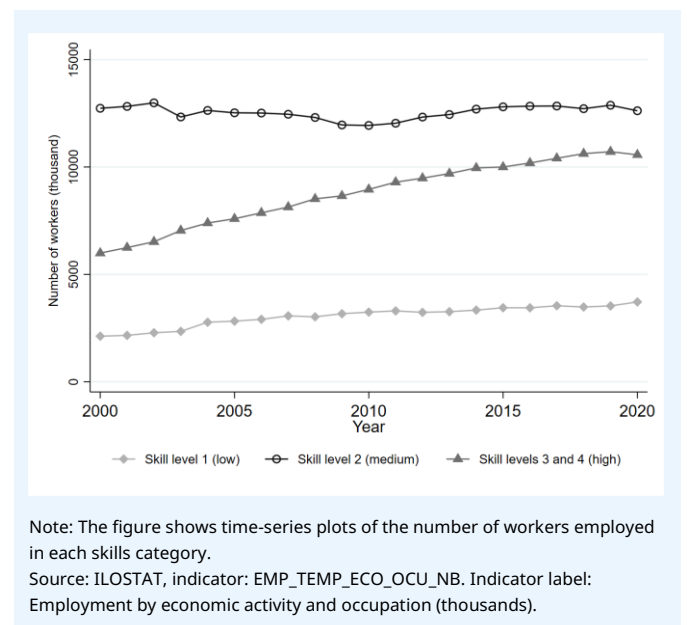
Among the areas covered by the FKTU observations were the Work–Learning Dual programme, industry-specific Special Apprenticeship Zones and the Tomorrow Learning Card System. One concern raised in the FKTU observations was that "the status of a learning worker is more vulnerable than that of an ordinary worker". On that basis, the FKTU argued that the Government's introduction of a "learning employment contract" could potentially lead to abuses.²⁰

Since 2019, the need for workers to be involved in discussions on matters that affect their employment conditions, including those related to training, has been mandated through the creation of labour management councils at the enterprise level.

0.5 per cent population growth of that period. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of highly skilled workers increased year-to-year until just before the end of that period. The number of low-skilled workers also rose but at a slower pace and with slight interruptions (figure 4).

The overall trend for low-skilled workers has been a light decline, while the employment of highly skilled workers has grown at an average annual rate of 2.9 per cent, more than twice the speed of total employment and several times the population growth rate.

► **Figure 4. Employment, by skill level, 2000–20**



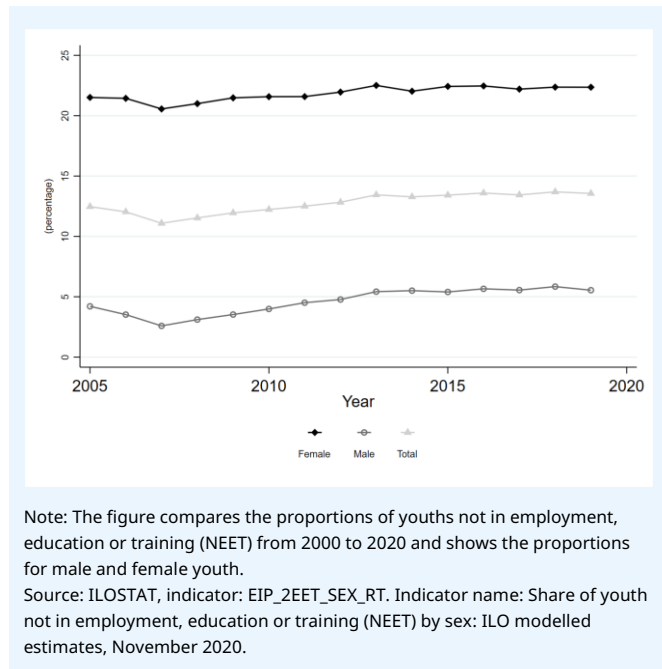
The proportion of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) has risen slightly since 2007 (figure 5). For female youth NEET, the proportion is almost as high as that of the Philippines¹, with more than one in five in that category.

► Labour market developments

The average growth rate of total employment from 2000 to 2020 was 1.2 per cent per year, much faster than the

²⁰ ILO, Observation (CEACR).

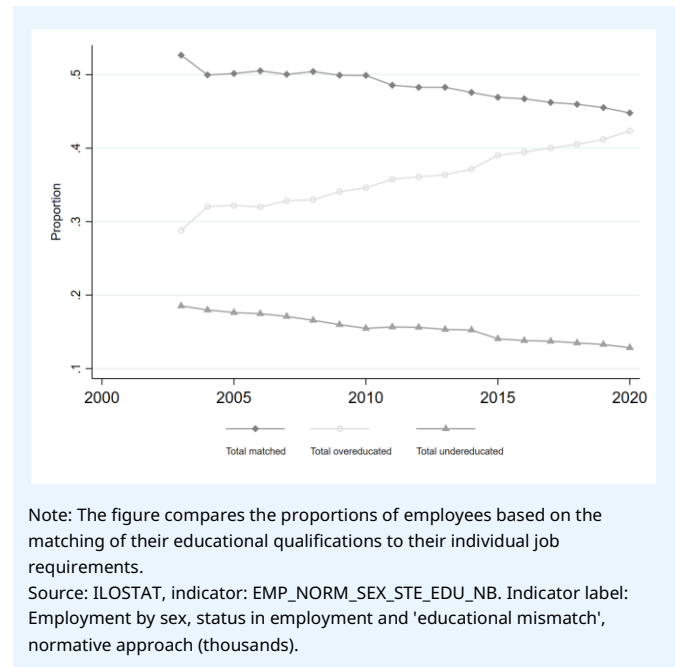
► **Figure 5. Youth not in education, employment or training, by sex, 2005–20**



This is also high in comparison with other high-income economies and indicates that while improvements in training provision and access are undoubtedly necessary, they may not by themselves be sufficient for addressing the needs of youths.

One problem that the Republic of Korea has is with mismatched workers – persons who are overeducated compared to the requirements of their jobs. The number of such workers has been climbing for more than 15 years, pushing the proportion of the workforce that is overeducated above 40 per cent since 2018 (figure 6).

► **Figure 6. Education mismatch, 2000–20**



Less than half of all employees are properly matched to their job in terms of educational qualifications, giving the Republic of Korea one of the highest rates of educational mismatch in the world. The consequences of this for skills development and lifelong learning may not be fully evident for some time.

► Conclusion

In the formative years of the 1960s, the country had abundant human resources but a short supply of skills. Its early TVET policies therefore focused on increasing this supply. Once the supply of skills had become responsive to TVET policies, the focus moved to ensuring that the skills being produced by the TVET system met the demands of industries.

The establishment of human resource development councils and industrial skills councils in the early 2000s can be compared to the much later development of industry transformation maps in Singapore in 2015. Without information on industry skills demands, the direction of skills development and lifelong learning as a national undertaking would have been hampered by a lack of direction and clarity.

The TVET system's continual transformation included the inculcation of progressive learning values in the population. Such systemic and societal values are the most likely building blocks of the coherent and effective system of lifelong learning seen in the Republic of Korea today.

Although the formal designation of lifelong learning came much later, the anticipatory enactment of TVET policies in the early 1960s proved critical in establishing the foundation for lifelong learning. In that sense, the initiation of forward-looking skills development policies early in the development cycle was a matter of good timing and key to the ultimate policy success.

The Korean experience in skills development and lifelong learning is characterized by the commitments of multiple stakeholders to a coherent policy vision that spans more than half a century. In the process, these commitments have had to endure the vicissitudes of politics and the temperaments of each new generation.

Although trade unions have focused on skills development efforts only relatively recently, their contributions to the public debate have been visible. As the skills development and lifelong learning needs of the country evolve, trade unions should be prepared to take on a greater role. This could include being more involved in developing tripartite initiatives to address the concerns of individuals in terms of their access to skills development opportunities at various stages of their working lives.

As policies continue to evolve, there will be areas in which a review could yield further improvement. An obvious starting point would be to expand coverage for the National Learning Card system to more of the population. Given the inevitability of resource constraints, this would only be viable if there is a way of prioritizing segments of the population that are most in need of support for skills development. As the FKTU's work shows, trade unions have an important role in ensuring that policies remain relevant to the needs of individuals they were designed to serve.

There are several other areas of policy interest that involve complex issues in which trade unions should represent the voices of workers. One important area is to examine the wider ramifications of labour market mismatches, when workers are overeducated. Such a policy examination could also examine if efforts should be made to encourage individuals to spread the accumulation of qualifications over a longer period rather than concentrate it in their younger years.

With policies on skills training that have been coherent, far-sighted and adaptable, the Republic of Korea has enjoyed the benefits of its demographic dividend to an extent few countries have been able to do. Compensating for the political upheaval since the 1960s and evolving through the tumultuous period of the Asian financial crisis, this policy framework has made the Republic of Korea a model for countries aiming at an effective and sustainable approach to skills development and lifelong learning.

The new challenge is for the skills approach to fit in with new societal realities, including a rapidly ageing population, an extremely low birth rate and the growing skills mismatch due to overeducation. Trade unions have a unique role in supporting workers as they confront this and other challenges that have an impact on skills development. Given their intimate understanding of the needs and concerns of workers, trade unions can take up a larger and more active role in skills development, including initiating programmes that are designed to respond to the specific training needs of workers.

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