



Students work in the media center at Ewha Womans University.

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## In Cyberuniversities, a Place for S. Korea's Women

Long ignored by the country's educational system, they benefit as institutions move online

BY DAVID COHEN

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA  
THE CAMPUS at Ewha Womans University is eerily quiet and deserted. A snowstorm, the heaviest in 32 years here in South Korea's capital, has driven all but the hardiest wayfarers indoors. No sound escapes from within the institution's Gothic buildings where 17,000 women study.

Insung Jung, an associate professor of educational technology at the university, muses that today's weather is doing what South Korea's universities did to women for many decades: rendering them invisible.

Even as relatively recently as the early 1980's, says Ms. Jung, a director of the Ewha Multimedia Education Institute, "we weren't seen." There were very few female students at that time, she says, "and faculty members, almost all of whom were men, didn't really care about their female students."

Today, however, with the number of female students and instructors at South Korean universities at historically high levels, Ms. Jung's institution looks set to play a significant role in putting a greater distance between then and now: Beginning in September, the Ewha institute will administer the nation's first-ever "international cyberuniversity," offering online courses to 30 institutions around the world, including Rutgers University, in New Jersey.

### A GLOBAL MARKET

Working in collaboration with eight other local colleges, the international cyberuniversity plans to globally market five courses, mainly in women's studies and Korean studies, which will initially be taught via the Internet and later supplemented with videoconferencing and field trips to East Asia.

Ewha's plans are part of a surge of activity in a higher-education system that is pulling out all the stops to integrate new information technologies. Other South Korean colleges also are moving to embrace online instruction, both alone and through consortia, and nine cyberuniversities dedicated to vocational training and continuing education opened for business here just last month.

In this East Asian nation of 44.5 million, says Ho Nam Park, an education research-

er at the country's Education Ministry, the quality of information and communications technologies in colleges has come to be seen as "a barometer of national competitiveness."

At the same time, according to Mr. Park, new technologies also offer a cost-effective way for the government to achieve its plan of making postsecondary learning available to all South Koreans, especially women.

### CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Up until a half-century ago, the role of women here was culturally understood to

consist of little more than serving men. Degrees for women were often seen as unnecessary, even dangerous, to the feminine virtue of obedience to their sexual "betters."

Women were excluded from most courses at public and private schools, save for a handful in "womanly virtues"—such as embroidery, cooking, and the preparation of family ancestral rituals—aimed at creating dutiful mothers and cheerful wives. A general academic education, if it could be said to have existed at all, seldom went beyond learning Hangul, the national

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## Cyberuniversities in South Korea

Nine "cyberuniversities" approved by the South Korean government started operating last month. The institutions focus on lifelong learning and vocational education rather than replacing or competing with traditional colleges in the nation, such as Ewha Womans University.

Name & URL	Areas of Study	Projected enrollment
Korea Cyber University <a href="http://www.kcu.or.kr">http://www.kcu.or.kr</a>	digital-media design, venture management, law, languages, information communication	900
Korea Digital University <a href="http://www.koreadu.ac.kr">http://www.koreadu.ac.kr</a>	digital education, information, management, and media; culture and art, social welfare, languages	900
Kunghee Cyber University <a href="http://www.khou.ac.kr">http://www.khou.ac.kr</a>	media literature, e-business, digital multimedia	800
Open Cyber University <a href="http://www.ocu.ac.kr">http://www.ocu.ac.kr</a>	Internet management, computer design, Internet languages	800
Sejong Cyber University <a href="http://www.cybersejong.ac.kr">http://www.cybersejong.ac.kr</a>	hotel and tourism management, e-business, the Internet, cartoon animation	500
SeMin Digital College <a href="http://www.kcc.ac.kr">http://www.kcc.ac.kr</a>	English translation, digital media, hotel and tourism management	120
Seoul Cyber University <a href="http://www.iscu.ac.kr">http://www.iscu.ac.kr</a>	cultural policies, event management, technical writing, e-commerce	900
Seoul Digital University <a href="http://www.sdu.ac.kr">http://www.sdu.ac.kr</a>	law and police administration, e-business, animation and game design, China and Japan studies	800
World Cyber University <a href="http://www.world.ac.kr">http://www.world.ac.kr</a>	social welfare, hotel foods, health foods, e-business, music	500

SOURCE: INSUNG JUNG, EWHWA WOMANS UNIVERSITY

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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script, and the rudiments of learning Chinese ideograms.

### BREAKING BARRIERS

Established in 1886 by Methodist missionaries from the United States as an elementary school for girls, Ewha became a fully accredited university in 1946, after Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule. In the 1950's, the new university courted controversy by opening the nation's first medical and law schools for women, as well as departments of journalism and science—all areas that Korean society had traditionally reserved for men.

Emphasizing information technology is a key goal for Ewha, according to its president, Chang Sang. But before rattling off an impressive list of technological firsts at the university, she takes time to explain the neological use of the word "womans" in the institution's name. It underscores, she says, "the uniqueness of each individual female" who enters the university's doors, whether by way of the campus's rough-hewn stone arches or by using a palmtop computer.

Ewha already offers, at last count, 152 full-credit virtual courses to 8,799 female students dispersed within South Korea—some of them poor women from the hinterlands, others housewives and mothers here in Seoul.

In addition, Ewha's Virtual Reality Research Center, which is financed jointly by the country's Information and Communication Ministry and Germany's Fraunhofer Institute for Computer Graphics, uses new technology to create computer models and image segmentation of human organs.

But the university's development as a center for international cyberlearning is particularly significant, she says, because it represents the first global fruits of the virtual-university trial project, which was established two-and-a-half years ago by the South Korean government to encourage the nation's 156 universities to form high-tech partnerships with the flourishing



PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE CHRONICLE BY SPOKYONG LEE, BLACK STAR

Until relatively recently, says Insung Jung of Ewha Womans U., women "weren't seen" at South Korean universities.

Chang Sang, president of Ewha: Information technology is a "God-given opportunity for women."



try's most prestigious institution of higher learning, for example, now offers courses in Internet instruction to some of its students, as do Chungnam National University, Gyungang National University, and others. At Sookmyung Women's University, pharmacists and other professionals have the opportunity to completely retrain in their jobs by using the Internet.

### LITTLE PUBLIC DEBATE

At the newly created Seoul Cyber Design University, a project involving two universities that specialize in art and design, member students work on all of their design projects in cyberspace. Another consortium is Bool Virtual University, which comprises the technology and communications programs at four conventional universities in the nation's southern region and provides graduate programs for member students, teachers, and officials in the public service.

There has been little public debate over the proliferation of online instruction. At the country's Education Ministry, a more pressing issue appears to be keeping any prospective interlopers at bay, says Mr. Park, the education researcher at the ministry.

Last month, the Education Ministry began to move against what it called "pseudo-cyberuniversities," which have shown signs of expanding to capitalize on rising public interest. (Under South Korean law, using the word "university" without government accreditation can result in fines or even imprisonment.)

One such institution, which called itself the Cyber International University, was recently forced to change its name to International Cyber Campus.

A new "lifelong-education" law, which



Wan-Young Ryoo of Hanyang U.: "Today in our country, we have 11 million people who are basically ignorant."

came into effect this year, has inspired another wave of South Korean cyberuniversities, nine of which opened for online business last month. These institutions focus on continuing education, including worker training.

A South Korean nonprofit organization also hopes to join the high-tech fray next year. It plans to open an information-technology college in P'yongyang, the capital of reclusive North Korea, in cooperation with that country's Education Ministry. The International Foundation for Northeast Asia Education and Culture, headed by the Rev. Kwak Sun Hee, says that it has

tentatively reached an agreement with the ministry to open such an institution, although other details of how it will operate remain sketchy.

### EDUCATING THE IGNORANT

"Today in our country," says Wan-Young Ryoo, a professor of educational technology at Hanyang University, in Seoul, "we have 11 million people who are basically ignorant." Wiring higher education, he says, "is principally for them." Mr. Ryoo, whose institution has played a key role in another consortium, the Korea Virtual University, predicts that the need

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private sector, as well as with universities abroad.

A total of 65 universities and five companies in South Korea participated in the trial, resulting in the creation of 15 virtual institutions, each operating within an existing university's system.

These institutions have developed new programs using various information and communication technologies, such as satellite broadcasting, videoconferencing, video on demand, and the Internet.

### A PLETHORA OF PROGRAMS

The new consortia have made available to the nation's students everything from the odd course by way of the Internet to elaborate programs that make novel use of new technologies.

Seoul National University, the coun-

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for technology-based learning "can only grow and grow in the years ahead."

Nobody will benefit more from South Korea's push to move higher education online than women, say Ms. Jung and Ms. Chang of Ewha. Ms. Chang hails information technology as "a God-given opportunity for women" in the country.

In recent years, the numbers of women working in, for example, academe, has slowly inched up, with official figures from last year now showing that 8,902, or 16 percent, of all teaching posts at South Korean universities are currently held by women. By contrast, women made up 36 percent of full-time faculty members at colleges in the United States in 1997, according to the U.S. Education Department.

Among the 3,363,549 students currently enrolled at four-year institutions, 38 percent, or 1,286,762, are female.

Right now, says Ms. Chang, technology-savvy women are "exerting a profound impact on Korean society, in terms of the knowledge they are acquiring and the opportunities they are enjoying as never before."

#### 'A NEW BREED OF HUMAN POWER'

Since South Korea officially became a member of the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 1996, the same year that the nation's government's began aggressively pursuing strategies to broaden information-technology education, "our society has realized that it needs a new breed of human power," she says.

In corporate South Korea, she adds, more than 35 percent of high-level information-technology positions are now held by women. By the university's estimates, more than 100 of its graduates currently hold chief-executive positions at companies specializing in new technologies.

"The Internet tends to emphasize qualities that women already have," explains Ms. Jung, such as the ability to focus on

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clients and "emotionally satisfying" their needs—areas in which women "tend to be strong."

An information-based society, she concludes, "needs an emotional face to go along with the reason-based elements in the new technologies. Here, again, women seem to be increasingly well placed to achieve this."

For all the good cheer about new technology's role in academically advancing South Korean women, though, Ms. Jung still has the odd doubt about the trend—at least when she looks beyond the snow-carpeted campus to the nightly domestic scene at her family home here in Seoul.

"My own daughter is too much," she says, with a smile. "She's always using the computer at home to chat online with friends—I can't seem to ever get her away from it." ■