

Education system

South Korea

described and compared with
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of South Korea. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from South Korea for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

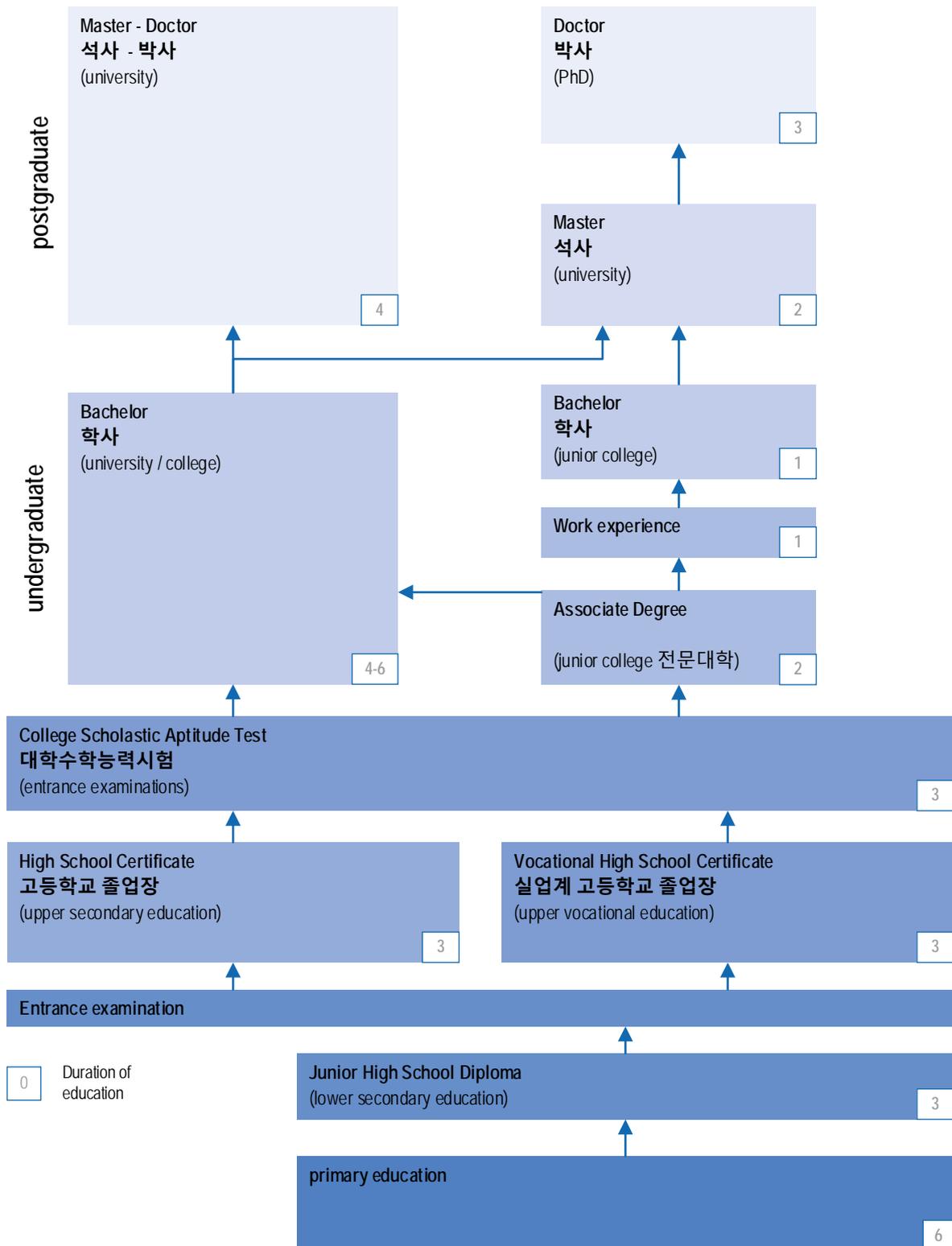
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We assemble the information for these descriptions of education systems with the greatest care. However, we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of errors or incomplete information in this document.



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Education system South Korea



Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the most common foreign qualifications applicable to admission to higher education. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the comparable levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Degree or qualification	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level	EQF level
Vocational High School Certificate	MBO diploma (qualification level 2 or 3)	2/3
High School Certificate (general high school)	HAVO diploma	4
High School Certificate (science high school)	At least a HAVO diploma	4
Associate degree (2 years)	2 years of HBO	5
Bachelor (4 years)	HBO or WO bachelor's degree	6
Higher Diploma in Technical Education	HBO bachelor's degree	6
Master (2 years)	WO master's degree	7

NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework. EQF = European Qualifications Framework.
- The [EQF/NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [the Dutch education system](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market \(SBB\)](#), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

■ Introduction

The Republic of Korea (*Daehan Minguk*, ROK) has been in existence since 1948 and is subdivided into sixteen administrative divisions, i.e. nine provinces, six city-provinces and the capital city of Seoul. The head of state is the elected president.

Following Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the Japanese domination of Korea came to an end and the Korean peninsula was divided into a Northern state (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea), which received support from the Soviet Union, and a Southern democratic state that was renamed the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1948. This description concerns only the Republic of Korea, or South Korea.

The 1948 Education Act saw the establishment of an education system that strongly resembled the Chinese system. Financial assistance from countries such as the United States strongly boosted the industrialization of the Republic of Korea, which has had consequences for the structure of the national education system.

The Ministry of Education has been responsible for all types of education in South Korea since 1948. The ministry has undergone several change of name, but its current name is again, the Ministry of Education (MOE)(교육부).

Among other things, the MOE is charged with the formulation and implementation of policy in the field of academic activities, science and education. The ministry is responsible for policy for primary, secondary and higher education institutions, the creation and publication of new textbooks and curricula, provision of administrative and financial support to the entire school system, and supervision of teacher-training colleges and human resource policy. The education system is based on the traditional philosophy of *hongik ingan*, or the universal welfare of mankind.

In the 1950s, the focus was on rebuilding the education system with a huge emphasis on democratic education. National universities and teacher-training institutions were founded, and textbooks created for primary school. The 1960s and 1970s saw a focus on quantitative expansion of the student population, educational facilities and the number of teachers. Increasing student numbers resulted in heavy competition for admission to higher education. Various measures were then taken to regulate the system more effectively. The 1980s were characterized by qualitative changes, such as the introduction of a life-long-learning system, and renewal of educational facilities. In the 1990s, local autonomy became an important item on the educational policy agenda.

Approximately 80 percent of all higher education institutions are private, all of which fall under the responsibility of the MOE. Private institutions for secondary education also exist.

The official language of education is Hangeul. The Korean orthography is a phonetic system consisting of ten vowels and fourteen consonants combined to form syllables. Each square formed Korean character represents one syllable. Around the beginning of this century, changes were implemented in the transcription system, resulting in alterations to the spelling of various higher education institutions in English. These alterations mainly concern the initial consonants of names (e.g. 'Kimpo' became 'Gimpo', 'Pusan' became 'Busan', 'Chonju' became 'Jeonju').

Compulsory education lasts 9 years, and encompasses primary school and junior secondary school, for pupils aged 6 until 15.

The academic year runs from March until February.

■ Primary and secondary education

Primary education

Primary education or elementary education (초등학교, *Chodeung Hakgyo*) lasts 6 years (Grade 1-6), is free and intended for pupils aged 6-12. Pupils can enter a primary school (*kuckmin hakgyo*) between the ages of 5 and 7. The school year is 34 weeks long. Since 1997, English has been offered as a subject from Grade 3 onwards. The Seventh National Basic Curriculum was established by the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) and is currently being reviewed. From Grade 3 onwards the standard primary curriculum consists of the following subjects: Korean language arts, ethics, social studies, mathematics, science, practical course, physical education, music, art, foreign language (English), independent activity and special activity. More information can be found on the KICE and MOE websites. See under [Useful websites](#).

Secondary education

Lower secondary education (중학교, *Junghakgyo*) can be taken at a middle school (junior high school), and constitutes the initial years of secondary education. This stage in the educational system is included in compulsory education. It has a nominal duration of 3 years (Grades 7-9) and is intended for pupils aged 12/13 to 15/16. Admission is granted without entrance examination. The curriculum consists of the same subjects as in Grades 3-6, but with different subject matter for the practical course in Grades 8 and 9: technical education for boys, and home economics for girls. After completion of the programme, pupils are awarded the Junior High School Diploma (*Jung Hakgyo Chorupchung*).

Upper secondary education (고등학교, *Godeung Hakgyo*), sometimes also called high school education, covers the final years of secondary education and lasts for 3 years (Grades 10-12). The programme is intended for pupils aged 15-18. There are various types of high school: general high schools, vocational high schools, science high schools and special high schools, which include foreign language schools and art high schools. There are costs associated with attending high school education (school fees).

For entrance to a high school, pupils must pass an entrance examination. Admission policy is very competitive. Students for vocational high schools may indicate their preferred school, whereas children who wish to attend a general high school are assigned a school in their area. Admission to a vocational high school may be granted by means of an entrance examination and/or the pupil's list of marks from middle school.

Although Grade 10 still consists of the subjects from the National Basic Curriculum, as of Grade 11 pupils can choose between three subject clusters: humanities, sciences or vocational training. At the end of the programme, the *Godeung Hakgyo Jolupjang* (High School Certificate) is awarded. More information on secondary education is available on the MOE [website](#).

In terms of level, a *High School Certificate*
(고등학교 졸업장, *Godeung Hakgyo Jolupjang*) obtained from
a general high school is comparable to a HAVO diploma.

Science high schools (과학고등학교, *Gwahak Godeung Hakgyo*) are primarily geared towards particularly talented pupils in the natural sciences. Pupils can complete a 3-year upper secondary education curriculum in 2 years, and then be admitted to a prestigious higher education institution without an entrance examination. Research is a focus in the programme, and exchange and collaboration activities take place with prestigious foreign secondary schools, research centres and universities. Science high school pupils are also successful in Olympiads for their subject areas.

In terms of level, a *High School Certificate*
(고등학교 졸업장, *Godeung Hakgyo Jolupjang*) obtained from a
science high school is comparable to at least a HAVO diploma.

The same principle applies to special high schools as to science high schools: only the most talented students in any particular field (music, art, sport, dance, foreign languages) are admitted, partly based on the recommendation of the middle school principal or teacher. These schools have existed since 2002.

Senior secondary vocational education

Vocational high schools (실업계 고등학교, *Silopgye Godeung Hakkyo*) offer a curriculum consisting of general subjects plus a vocational component. Students can choose from the following specializations: agriculture, technology, trade, fishery, industry and home economics. The entrance requirement is successful completion of the entrance examination (실업계 고등학교 선발 제도, *Silopgye Godeung Hakkyo Sunbal Chedo*). The nominal duration of the programme is 3 years, at the end of which the *Silop Godeung Hakgyo Jolupjang* (실업계 고등학교 졸업, or Vocational High School Certificate) is awarded. This certificate allows candidates to take the entrance examination for higher education, but only a small percentage of students wish to do so, and only a fraction of those succeed.

In terms of level, the *Vocational High School Certificate* (실업계 고등학교 졸업장, *Silop Godeung Hakgyo Jolupjang*) is comparable to an MBO diploma at qualification level 2 or 3, depending on the specialization.

■ Admission to higher education

Among other things, admission to higher education requires successful completion of the higher education entrance examination, known as the College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT)(대학수학능력시험, *Daehak Suhak Neungluk Siheom*). This test, introduced in 2004, falls under the responsibility of KICE and takes place every year in November. It is made up of five subjects: Korean language, mathematics, foreign language (English), social studies/science/vocational training (students choose one of these three subjects) and a second foreign language/Chinese characters and Classics.

Students are allowed to complete some or all tests within the relevant subject area of their choice. Scores for Korean language, mathematics and foreign language range from 0 to 200, with 100 as the minimum pass mark. For the individual tests within the remaining subjects, scores range from 0-100 with a pass mark of 50. The total number of possible credits for the entire test is 400. For admittance, a minimum score of 250 is required. For further details, see the [KICE website](#).

There is a considerable emphasis on working towards passing the higher education entrance examination.

Many pupils engage private tutors in order to prepare themselves for this exam, which means that pupils have little interest in extra-curricular activities at secondary school, and tend to ignore subjects that are not tested in the CSAT. Recently MOE decided to set up an admission officers system, with universities receiving funding for recruiting admission officers, who are trained to screen candidates without the use of CSAT.

In addition to the CSAT scores, higher education institutions can also take prep courses, portfolios, extra-curricular activities, letters of recommendation, etc. into consideration when determining admissions. At several universities the CSAT scores represents 50% of the total score, while the other 50% consists of high school results (40%) and extracurricular activities (10%). The student needs 122 credits in the high school curriculum for admission to university. Especially the technical universities do not use CSAT, but demand other evidence, like a recommendation letter and other document proving that the student has the required academic and intellectual skills in the field of technology and research. These institutions also organise their own entrance examinations.

For a number of specializations (including art, languages and mathematics), students may be eligible for the special selection procedure which aims to identify especially talented students. Student representatives, students with an excellent student record, working professionals, adults and students from rural areas also fall under this category.

Graduates from science high schools choose to be admitted to prestigious technical universities, while many graduates from foreign language high schools want to go abroad for further study in higher education.

■ Higher education

Higher education is provided primarily by universities (industrial universities, teacher-training universities, broadcast and correspondence universities, cyber universities) and colleges (junior colleges, cyber colleges, technical colleges, colleges in company, graduate school colleges) as well as various other research and other institutions. A distinction is drawn between national institutions (funded and managed by the MOE), public institutions (funded and managed by local management boards) and private institutions (funded and managed by individuals or organizations). The three most prestigious universities are the Seoul National University (서울대학교, *Seoul Daehakgyo*), Korea University (고려대학교, *Korea Daehakgyo*) and Yonsei University (연세대학교, *Yonsei Daehakgyo*), jointly abbreviated to SKY. The national universities also have a good reputation.

The number of higher education institutions in Korea has increased considerably in recent decades.

In 2007 there were over 400 higher education institutions in the country, whereas currently the number is dropping again due to institutions closing as a result of financial difficulties or institutional mergers.

The government has set up various higher education projects to implement reforms in the higher education system.

The Brain Korea 21 Project (1999) is aimed at developing and encouraging excellent and creative researchers. The participating universities form research networks, each of which contains one prestigious university. Government funds go directly to the Master's and PhD students, and provide them with a stimulating working environment with opportunities to study abroad.

The New University for Regional Innovation (NURI) project aims to provide encouragement and support to institutions outside the capital city, to create a 'balanced development of the nation'. Regional education institutions are experiencing difficulty in recruiting students due to the dominance of institutions in the Seoul area, and graduates from regional education institutions have considerable trouble finding a job. It is for this reason that the NURI project aims to enhance the competitiveness of regional institutions.

Specializations are offered that match the demands of the regional economy, so that graduates can provide a boost to these economies. A partnership is also being set up, the Regional Innovation System (RIS), in which higher education institutions, local management and research institutes all collaborate. The BK21-NURI Committee (BNC) was founded in 2006 in order to steer both of these projects in the right direction.

In addition, the Study Korea Project (2004) has been established in order to attract international students by offering a more extensive scholarships programme, setting up and developing a number of Korean Education Centres abroad, offering more courses in English and better accommodation for students.

Lastly, in 2008 the *World Class Research-oriented University Project* was launched (*WCU Project*), in which top-notch researchers from abroad are recruited to collaborate with Korean scholars in carrying out research in technological innovations.

For the purpose of higher education internationalization, the National Assembly passed in 2007 the *Regulation on Joint Curricular Operation between Domestic and Foreign Universities*, enabling Korean universities for the first time to provide courses abroad and to confer a joint degree with a foreign university.

Adult and distance education

The sector for adult and distance education is very large, and is served by many different institutions and in a variety of ways, including secondary education.

The Korea National Open University (formerly called Korea Air & Correspondence University) provides distance education to adults via television, radio (Educational Broadcasting System), CD-ROMs, Internet and video/cassette tapes. In 1990 the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) was founded in order to expand opportunities for life-long learning. EBS broadcasts its cultural and social programmes daily via TV, radio and satellite.

Cyber universities and digital colleges provide distance education via the Internet. Since 2009 their number has increased and since then they no longer fall under the Lifelong Education Act as distance learning universities, but are now considered to be regular higher education institutions falling under the Higher Education Act. They offer 2- and 3-year junior college programmes (associate degree) and bachelor's programmes.

Self-study programmes are another option, introduced in 1990. Here, students must pass four exams that are set by the government. The examination consists of the following sections: general subjects (liberal arts), a basic major, an advanced major and a final exam covering all topics.

In the educational credit bank system (1998), students can collect credits that have been obtained through various means, e.g. through self-study programmes, individual certificates or part-time at a university. Based on the credits obtained, it is then possible to be admitted to a higher education institution with some exemptions, and eventually to obtain a degree. The system falls under the supervision of the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) (한국교육개발원, *Hanguk Gyoyuk Gaebalwon*), which is also the national centre for life-long education.

In 2009, a system was set up in the field of lifelong learning, the so-called lifelong learning account system, recognising non-formal education from young and old, to make it possible to obtain a diploma in primary or secondary education. This is an addition to the credit banking system, which solely operates in higher education. Credits need to be part of a programme that has been evaluated and recognised by the National Institute for Lifelong Education, established in 2008, in order to be recognised. The NILE is a merger of the Lifelong Education Center and the Credit Bank Center that were previously part of KEDI (see above) and the Individual Bachelor's Degree Examination Department, that was previously part of Korea National Open University (see above). The lifelong learning account system is still in the pilot phase.

In 2007 there were fourteen industrial universities (called open universities until 1998, now also referred to as polytechnics) that offered technical education to people with a technical or industrial background, such as the Chinju National University of Technology, Chungwoon University, Korea Polytechnic University and the Seoul National University of Technology. Close collaboration with the industry is a priority. Industrial universities provide programmes with a practical focus, and the number of years within which a student must complete a programme is unlimited.

Many of these universities are also 'colleges in company', which means that the university works together with businesses in various fields including research. Students are given work placements at the company, and the employees of the company receive relevant training from the university. Examples are Seoul Digital University, which collaborates with fifteen different companies, and Korea Polytechnic University, which offers programmes for senior managers.

■ University education

Bachelor's degree (학사, *Haksa*)

The bachelor's programmes have a customary nominal duration of 4 years; programmes in medicine and dentistry normally take 6 years. Students need 140 credits to complete a 4-year bachelor's programme, where each credit represents 1 hour of lectures/tutorials or 2 hours of lab/practical work per week, over a 16-week semester. During the course, students take 42 credits' worth of general subjects. The 6-year programmes require 180 credits. Male students often take an additional 2 years to complete their studies due to compulsory military service.

In addition to their major, students may also choose a minor. In addition to the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science, degrees are also awarded that refer to the specialization concerned, such as Bachelor of Engineering and Bachelor of Social Work. The teacher-training universities (Universities of Education) provide programmes for primary teachers (elementary school teacher), whereas secondary school teachers are taught at the college of education of a general university, both in 4-year bachelor's programmes.

In terms of level, the *Bachelor* (학사, *Haksa*) following a nominal 4-year programme is comparable to a WO or HBO bachelor's degree, depending on the specialization.

Master's degree (석사, *Suksa*)

After completing a bachelor's programme, students can continue on to a master's programme (following an entrance examination) that takes at least 2 years. To do so, the bachelor's degree must have been completed with a GPA of at least 3.0, or an average of at least a B.

Twenty-four credits are required for the completion of a 2-year master's programme. The master's degree is awarded following completion of an examination and approval of the thesis.

In terms of level, the *Master* (석사, *Suksa*) following a nominal 2-year programme is comparable to a WO master's degree in a similar specialization.

Doctor (박사, *Paksa*)

Programmes for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) have a minimum duration of 3 years, and completion requires 36 credits plus the successful defence of a doctoral dissertation. Students need to pass an oral examination, be fluent in two foreign languages and write a dissertation worth 6 credits.

Combined Master's-PhD programmes are a recent development, with a nominal duration of 4 years and no entrance examination required for admission to the PhD component.

■ Higher professional education

Associate degree

Higher professional education can be taken at junior colleges (전문대학, *Jeonmun Daehak*). These colleges were created in 1979 and provide professional programmes with a theoretical and a practical component, initially primarily in technical specializations, but later they expanded to include a wider range of programmes. Most programmes take 2 years, however some last 3 years, including nursing, clinical pathology, radiation, fishing, navigation and engineering.

The entrance requirement is a high school certificate (or equivalent), as well as successful completion of the CSAT and an entrance examination for the college itself. The target group includes graduates from vocational high schools who have studied a relevant specialization, professionals from secondary vocational education and technical staff.

Eighty credits are required to complete the 2-year programmes and obtain the Associate Degree (called the Junior College Certificate/Diploma until 1997).

This diploma allows students to continue on to the third year of a related bachelor's programme, although most graduates decide to look for a job. There are currently around 150 junior colleges. Many of these institutions dropped the word 'junior' in 1998, or changed their name in some other way.

In terms of level, the *Associate Degree* is comparable to 2 years of higher professional education (HBO) in a similar specialization.

Since March 2008, junior colleges have offered a 1-year Advanced Course leading to a bachelor's degree. A total of 140 credits are required to obtain a bachelor's degree, to which credits earned previously at a junior college count. The admission requirements are 1 year of relevant work experience and graduation from a junior college.

■ Assessment systems

The high schools use a five-level assessment system:

Numerical grade	Description
90-100	<i>Su</i>
80-89	<i>Wu</i>
70-79	<i>Mi</i>
60-69	<i>Yang</i>
< 59	<i>Ga</i>

There is no uniform system in use for higher education. The system used is usually clearly indicated on the Academic Transcript. Below are some examples of assessment systems used in higher education:

Numerical grade	Letter grade	Grade
99-100	A+	4.5
90-94	A	4.0
85-89	B+	3.5
80-84	B	3.0
75-79	C+	2.5
70-74	C	2.0
65-69	D+	1.5
60-64	D	1.0
<59	F	0

OR:

Letter grade	Grade
A	4.0
B	3.0
C	2.0
P	Pass
NP	Non-Pass

OR:

Letter grade	Grade
A+	4.3
A0	4.0
A-	3.7
B+	3.3
B0	3.0
B-	2.7
C+	2.3
C0	2.0
C-	1.7
D+	1.3
D0	1.0
D-	0.7
F	0

Quality assurance and accreditation

There is no single, central accreditation body that is responsible for accreditation of the entire higher education system in South Korea.

There are a number of accreditation bodies that focus exclusively on their own target groups. For example, the Korean Council for University Education (KCUE) (한국대학교육협의회, *Hanguk Daehak Gyoyuk Hyupyihoe*) is responsible for the evaluation and accreditation of all programmes in 4-year colleges and universities. The Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) is responsible for all non-formal programmes. The Korean Council for College Education (KCCE) (한국전문대학교육협의회, *Hanguk Jeonmun Daehak Gyoyuk Hyupyihoe*), established in 1997, is made up of the directors of all junior colleges in the country. Among other things, the KCCE focuses on improving the quality of education in junior colleges, on increasing their autonomy and promoting mutual collaboration among them. The English version of their website contains a list of junior colleges, see under [List of higher education institutions](#).

The Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET) (한국직업능력개발원, *Hanguk Jigeop Neungluk Gaebalwon*), also founded in 1997, conducts research in the field of technical and vocational education. The KRIVET

has worked on qualification systems and the evaluation of institutions that provide vocational education.

The Accreditation Board for Engineering Education of Korea (ABEEK) (한국공학교육인증원, *Hanguk Gonghak Gyoyuk Injeungwon*), the Korean Accreditation Board of Nursing (KABON) and the Korea Industrial Technology Foundation (KOTEF) each focus on their own occupational group.

■ International treaties

South Korea has concluded international collaboration agreements in the field of education with many countries including China, Mongolia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Russia, Hungary, Denmark, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Kazakhstan and the Netherlands.

■ Composition of file

For a complete file in secondary and higher education, the certificate and accompanying list of marks are required in English. Schools will often issue a certificate in English (the Certificate of Graduation), accompanied by a School Record or School Transcript. Higher education institutions usually issue a certificate in English, the Certificate of Graduation, accompanied by an Academic Transcript. The documents in Korean can also be requested.

Authenticity

There are no known problems with the authenticity of Korean certificates. It is sometimes possible to verify Korean certificates, such as transcripts, for a period of 90 days after the date of issue either online or after downloading a programme.

Some examples are:

- [Korea University](#)
- [Seoul Institute of the Arts](#)
- [CERTPIA](#), serving several Korean higher education institutions;
- KICE [verificatiewebsite](#) voor CSAT scores (College Scholastic Aptitude Test).

■ List of higher education institutions

- [Website](#) of the KCUE (Korean Council for University Education), with an overview of national, public, and private institutions.
- [Website](#) of the KCCE (Korean Council for College Education), with an overview of all colleges and their websites.
- [Website](#) of the MOE (Ministry of Education), with an overview of the institutions for distance education in higher education (cyber and digital universities).

■ Useful links

- [Website](#) of the MOE, the Ministry of Education (English version).
- [Website](#) of the KCUE (Korean Council for University Education), the interest group for the universities and 4-year colleges.
- [Website](#) of the KEDI, Korean Educational Development Institute.
- [Website](#) of the National Institute for Lifelong Learning, including information about the Academic Credit Bank System and the Lifelong Learning Account System.
- [Website](#) of the KRIVET (Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training), the research institute for technical and vocational education.
- [Website](#) of the KICE, including information on the admission requirements for higher education and on the curriculum of the secondary education.
- [Website](#) of the Educational Broadcasting System with information on distance education for adults.
- [Website](#) of Korea Net (Gateway to Korea), a general page for information on South Korea.
- [Website](#) of the Nuffic NESO office in South Korea.