

Science & Technology News from the Republic of Korea, June 2004

MOCIE establishes plan to attract foreign R&D centers

(Press release by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy MOCIE)

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy (MOCIE) has set up plans to actively draw in high-tech research and development (R&D) centers of multinational companies to Korea. This plan is aimed at cultivating advanced technologies at an early stage and producing a workforce of highly trained engineers and researchers.

Once a multinational company or research institute establishes an R&D center in Korea, the center will be eligible for government funds to pay up to 100 of its workers, provided that the center employs local science majors. In addition, the government will provide monetary support for up to 10 foreigners who work at the center training local researchers. The government has allocated three billion won to support this proposal.

In a bid to boost high-tech projects, multinational R&D centers are encouraged to join hands with Korean companies and universities in applying for government grants of up to 10 billion won per project.

Currently there are 134 R&D centers of foreign invested companies in Korea.

Human Cloning Scientifically Impossible: Prof. Hwang

(The Chosun Ilbo, June, 2, 2004)

NEW YORK -- In the New York United Nations Headquarters, Seoul National University Professor Hwang Woo-suk said that attempts to clone humans must stop because many alarming side effects were evidenced through animal cloning tests. He added that human cloning is scientifically impossible.

During a meeting with the UN press club, Hwang said that ... they will also present several pieces of evidence regarding the alarming side effects proven through animal testing that could also result from human cloning if scientists were to succeed.

Hwang is currently visiting New York ... to attend the "Human Cloning Issues in All Its Aspects for the United Nations" seminar hosted by the Genetic Policy Institute, held at the UN headquarters on June 2. Hwang and his research team has been the forerunners in this field, succeeding in animal cloning many times.

Hwang said that although cloning skills have been accumulated through animal testing that go on for quite some time, the chance of success is slim. He also said that animal clones showed abnormalities. Hwang said that human cloning could succeed after thousands of tries; however, there is no possible way to acquire that many human's ova. At the UN conference, Hwang said that he would explain why human cloning is impossible in real life, but he would continue to emphasize the need for cloning in stem cell therapy.

Information Ministry Plans 'Ubiquitous Korea' by 2007

(The Korea Times, June 9, 2004)

The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) on Wednesday said it will transform Korea into a ubiquitous society by 2007, within the tenure of President Roh Moo-hyun.

The code name, u-Korea, is short for ubiquitous Korea, referring to a futuristic environment that will offer uninterrupted access to the Internet, fixed-line and mobile networks any time, in any location. Earlier in March, the MIC disclosed the 8-3-9 tactics, which stands for eight new services, three infrastructures and nine new growth engines, as an action plan to attain the u-Korea vision. Eight services include offerings like portable Internet or telematics and three infrastructures are next-generation systems while nine growth engines are composed of digital TV, sophisticated robots and imbedded software and so on.

Chin said if the strategy is completed as planned, information technology (IT) sectors will create 290,000 new jobs by 2007 and IT exports will reach \$110 billion by the same period from \$57.6 in 2003.

S Korean Team Discovers Weight-Loss Effect of Diabetes Treatment

(Yonhap News, June 14, 2004)

A local medical research team claimed on Monday it has discovered a weight-shedding effect of Alpha-lipoic acid, which is normally used to treat diabetes.

The team led by Lee Ki-eob, a professor at University of Ulsan College of Medicine has made the discovery. Injections of the anti-oxidant supplement caused loss of weight and heightened energy use among mice in a controlled experiment, the team said.

Siemens to Invest 100 Million Euros on R&D in Korea

(The Korea Times, June 16, 2004)

Siemens will invest up to 100 million euros in South Korea through Dasan Network, in which the German-based juggernaut already holds a stake of about 40 percent. Through the large-scale investment, ... Siemens will focus on the development of communication networks like Ethernet.

Siemens spent 54 billion won last March to purchase 38.7 percent of Dasan shares, becoming the single-largest shareholder of the Korean maker of network equipment.

Information-Communication Minister Chin Dae-je, who also attended the gathering, said Siemens' investment will open the door to a new way of attracting offshore money. The Ministry of Information and Communication has gone all-out to attract foreign R&D centers to Korea, earmarking around 30 billion won for this year alone as funds directly geared toward that end. These efforts bore fruit when several research centers like Intel and Fraunhofer opened R&D centers earlier this year. But Siemens' case is first of its kind here.

Fate of SNU at center of debate

(The Korea Herald, June 18, 2004)

Which university produces the most elite groups in Korean society? The big three are generally acknowledged to be Seoul National University, Yonsei University and Korea University. But there is a big gap between them, with **30 percent of the elite coming from the government-supported SNU**, compared to 8.3 percent from the private Korea University and 6.8 from Yonsei.

... Some critics argue the university enjoys too many privileges, such as more job opportunities for its graduates, and want it abolished. The idea of doing away with the nation's top university appears ludicrous to many but the left-wing Democratic Labor Party has pledged to seek integration of national universities.

Many feel there is a need to revamp SNU but are split on how to accomplish such a task. One group wants to scrap SNU altogether and cites the European university system to bolster its view; the other opts for privatization to reorganize the university system along the lines of the United States and Japan.

The progressives say that if SNU disappears, a new system of integrated universities will come into being.

... A national system will remove the rigid ranking of universities in Korea. Proponents say that while ranking is natural in a competitive society, the problem in the current system is that many people evaluate a person according to the university from which he or she graduated. ... "If you meet a stranger, French people would like to know whether he is humorous, British see whether he is nice, Germans see whether he is polite, Americans see whether he is rich, and Koreans see which university he graduated from," former labor party Chairman Kwon Young-ghil said in a speech.

There is another reason for abolishing SNU, critics say. It will make the entrance to all universities wide open and enhance public education. In Korea, expenditure on private tutoring fees is far beyond the cost of public education, amounting to 9.4 trillion won last year alone, according to a report by the Bank of Korea.

Many people, however, feel that while the problem of social prejudice and education in Korea is serious, it is not enough to do away with SNU. Some worry a national university system can cause a general lowering of standards and that any remaining private universities will lure more students than the public schools. In Germany, where there is university integration, the state-controlled system is losing its competitiveness. In France, institutions other than top universities like the Sorbonne or INSEAD are struggling.

Shin Hyun-suk, a professor at Korea University said, "It is welcome that the government is seeking ways to put together some non-competitive and sporadic national universities. But the government should also make SNU more competitive." Education reformist Kim Dong-hoon criticized what he called a false sense of egalitarianism, saying in a radio discussion, "SNU's unfair privilege should be removed, but it does not mean SNU should be dismantled. That is a socialistic and utopian approach."

The opposition Grand National Party is preparing a bill for privatization of national universities. But a free market of universities is risky. Disciplines like philosophy that cannot meet market needs might suffer.

Instead of disbanding elite groups, SNU authorities say the government should develop another five or six elite universities that can rival SNU and prestigious universities worldwide. In the scientific field, universities such as the Korea Advanced Institute for Science and Technology and Pohang University of Science and Technology have been catching up with SNU.

The arguments about SNU's future reflect a feeling the country's top university is not performing its role effectively. Extreme and unrealistic as they may sound, the progressives appear to be acting as a catalyst for revamping SNU.

"SNU is an object of hatred and love at the same time in Korean society. SNU should consider why it is being criticized, and take a social responsibility for it," SNU professor Cho-kuk said in his column, saying "noblesse oblige" was the proper course for the university.