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U.S.-DPRK
EDUCATIONAL
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THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS

EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES WITH THE DPRK: THE BRITISH (AND OTHER) EXPERIENCES¹

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The UK has for a decade run a project providing English language teacher trainers in Pyongyang, which has been a great success and has been expanded. The UK has also run some other exchanges, though not at the level of other European countries.

If it is decided to expand U.S.-DPRK academic exchanges, there may be an advantage in doing so in a more structured way than has hitherto been the case, to ensure that subjects of interest to the United States, and not just those of interest to the DPRK, are included.

What Has Been Done

Perhaps the most important educational exchange that the UK runs with the DPRK is the provision of English language teacher training (ELT). But the UK also occasionally arranges for small numbers of North Koreans to study in the UK and has from time to time attempted other exchanges.

English language teaching and training

Following a mission to Pyongyang in 1997 by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and subsequent ELT assessment visits, the UK decided to fund two ELT specialists in Pyongyang for an academic year. This arrangement was formalized during a visit to Pyongyang by the head of the FCO's Far East and Pacific Department in May 2000. The two teacher trainers arrived in September 2000 (so even before the UK and DPRK established diplomatic relations in December 2000) and were assigned to Kim Il-sung University and to Pyongyang University for Foreign Studies (PUFS). The project was funded by the FCO and administered by the British Council from Beijing.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations and the establishment of the British embassy in Pyongyang (May 2001), further funding became available and the program was expanded to three teacher trainers from September 2001, with the third teacher trainer assigned to Kim Hyong Jik University. Although it might have been possible to shift the administration

of this program from the British Council in Beijing to the British embassy in Pyongyang once this latter was established in 2002, it was decided not to change the existing arrangements. This was both because the British Council was able to bring to bear expertise in teacher training techniques and professional support for the trainers that would have been beyond the embassy's reach and because the existing arrangement took an administrative burden off a busy embassy. But the embassy provided moral and other support on the ground, and the teacher trainers continued to meet the ambassador once a month.

The DPRK response to the trainers was enthusiastic. They were warmly welcomed, and DPRK officials tried hard to make their lives comfortable. But there were considerable practical problems. Their accommodations were poor, and the embassy had to fight to prevent the DPRK from housing one of them in an isolated guesthouse. The teachers suffered the same problems over travel within the DPRK as other foreigners. Classroom conditions were often challenging. There was rarely (if ever) heating in winter or electricity, so that trainers taught classes in outdoor clothes and wrote on blackboards with numb fingers (whenever chalk was available). Their ability to interact socially with the teachers and pupils of the institutions where they worked was circumscribed.

Over time other problems emerged. Once the DPRK officials discovered that the British trainers had access to a materials budget (intended to ensure that they were able to provide basic educational materials for their classes) the latter came under pressure to help the institutions with their own chronic equipment failures. There were, for example, repeated requests for a new photocopier for one of the institutions.

At first the security agencies watched the program closely but to some extent this has now been relaxed. In the early years of the project unexplained officials would often (but not always) sit in the back of classes taking notes on what was being taught. This, however, happens much less frequently now. Observers are invited into ELT classes—but these are teachers from the university. Although trainers are aware that observers are listening to what is being said, any follow-up is now a point of positive and formative discussion. Teaching materials too were closely vetted, but this too has been relaxed to some extent. During the 2008–2009 academic year, the PUFs trainer was presented with a text taken from an encyclopedia on international law. After the teacher had written supplementary activities this was piloted in a class that included three hours of discussion on human rights. In Kim Hyong Jik University a pilot project using internationally published materials is now underway, and although there has been some censorship, most of it has been of a “cultural” rather than political nature.

There was, and still is, constant rivalry between the three institutions; when a trainer had to leave early or the British Council was unable to recruit

a full complement of trainers in time (another recurrent problem), discussions on which institution should do without a prized and prestige-bringing foreign expert were often delicate. Within faculties it was often unclear who had the final decision, which meant that the trainers were sometimes unsure what they were or were not allowed to do.

In late 2008 it was decided to expand the program further, to restructure it so as to reinforce its focus on teacher training, and to broaden it to include curriculum development. At the same time, in order to tackle the problems of rivalries within faculties, the British Council insisted on the appointment of a formal liaison official within each of the three institutions for the trainers. There are now four ELT teacher training experts in Pyongyang—one coordinator/in-country project manager/senior teacher trainer and three trainers—and the project runs as a partnership between the FCO and the British Council with shared funding, while working to ensure that it is recognized as separate from any other activity that the embassy undertakes. Also, in recent years the amount of direct control by participating universities over the trainers has been much reduced. This has had the effect of reducing the amount of direct teaching asked of the trainers, and so of bringing the main project objective of teacher training back to the forefront. Day-to-day management is now being moved from the British Council in Beijing to Pyongyang to give more local autonomy to the new in-country project manager. This has led to a more efficient system of budgeting and offers far greater pastoral support to the other trainers in country.

From time to time it has been possible to expand the program to take in one-off “road show” events in universities outside Pyongyang, although fewer of these have taken place recently. But these call for considerable preparation—although the provincial universities are almost always keen on them the central authorities in Pyongyang allow them only grudgingly. Even brief visits to provincial educational institutions have a great impact. When the UK ambassador visited a school in Sinuiju in 2008, he found the staff were still talking about a visit by his predecessor in 2004.

Study by North Koreans in the UK

From the outset the UK attempted to bring North Koreans to study in Britain. But these efforts were complicated not only by DPRK political conservatism but also by the shortage of North Koreans whose knowledge of English was strong enough to allow them to follow courses. In autumn 2001 the UK offered to take six to nine agricultural students but none passed the English language tests. The following year the DPRK was offered two scholarships but only one of the two MFA candidates passed the English language exam, and the North Koreans would not let the other one go alone. However, two DPRK officials (one of whom now works in the European Department of the DPRK MFA) attended a human rights course at the University of Essex, and

three people spent a month at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI); one wrote a paper that appeared in the *RUSI Journal*—Ri Tong Il, “Reunification of Korea and Security in Northeast Asia,” *RUSI Journal* 147, no 1 (2002).

At present, the ELT project provides funds and the opportunity for English language study in the UK by a small number of North Korean teachers and faculty or Ministry of Education (MoE) officials. Within the project this offer has been taken up to varying degrees with only one group visiting the UK during the last three years; however, the project continues to discuss the opportunity with the MoE. The DPRK universities have in the past asked for this provision to be increased but this has not been possible for financial reasons.

Separately from the project, the British embassy in Pyongyang also offers the chance for a small number of officials to study English in the UK. This is organized by the embassy (rather than the ELT project) usually with the MFA.

Other programs

Some two hundred books on international law were given to the MFA after the two people had been to Essex. Some of these were certainly used since MFA officials have mentioned them to UK officials—they were particularly interested in those materials that related to the United States. The British embassy has also supplied a variety of newspapers and magazines to the MFA, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Friendship Association, the Grand People’s Study House, and the Ministry of Health. At the beginning there was very positive feedback about some of the material, including the newspapers, *The Economist*, and *The British Medical Journal*. But this feedback tailed off over time, and it seemed that access to this material was being limited as international tensions increased.

From time to time the UK attempts other forms of engagement in the field of education. When the British embassy was first set up it donated a range of books to the Great People’s Study House on Kim Il-sung Square in Pyongyang, but found during subsequent visits that these were untouched. Perhaps they were only put on display during embassy visits and not made accessible to ordinary Koreans.

Non-UK programs

Other European countries run more extensive exchange programs with the DPRK than does the UK. There are a small number of DPRK students in France, while Poland has hosted North Korean students since 1954. Every year the Czech Republic offers the DPRK two to five long-term scholarships (four to six years) and four short-term scholarships (five weeks), and periodically invites seven to ten North Korean experts to seminars on economic issues. This means that at any one time there are usually about 25 North Korean students in the Czech Republic, and around 2,000 North Koreans have studied there

or in the old Czechoslovakia since 1948. Many North Koreans studied in the German Democratic Republic before 1990, and there are still Koreans who speak good German in middling and senior positions of the administration (e.g., Choe Thae Bok, Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly). From time to time the German Embassy in Pyongyang is able to arrange reunions of some of these people. In recent years, several dozen North Korean graduates have visited Germany for study and research, some on a long-term basis. The 12 scholarship positions offered each year have not always been filled by North Koreans. But since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and North Korea in 2001 some 50 medical doctors have been to Germany for postdoctoral training. The Swedes too pay for varying numbers of DPRK students to study in Sweden.

There are programs in the other direction, too. There are upwards of a dozen foreign students at Kim Il-sung University (mostly Chinese, with a leavening of Vietnamese, Kazakhs and sometimes Russians) all learning Korean over the course of four years. They have said that their classes are strict, with an emphasis on rote learning, but that within its own tradition the quality of teaching was good. They are, however, kept away from Korean students, with whom they have almost no interaction. The possibility of sending UK students to Kim Il-sung University was not explored (the problems of morale in such an environment for such a period would have been difficult to deal with), but it might well be possible for students from Western countries with relations with the DPRK to attend Kim Il-sung University (for an appropriate fee). Although there do not now seem to be any foreign students at other DPRK educational institutions, before 1991 there were foreign students who studied subjects other than Korean (including medicine and agriculture) and who studied outside Pyongyang. There were, for example, foreign students in Hamhung; they said that they did not enjoy the experience.

Language teachers and trainers from countries other than the UK work in Pyongyang. The Italians maintain an Italian teacher at PUFSS, and the French a French teacher who works both in Kim Il-sung University and in PUFSS. Germany has since 2002 maintained an academic lecturer from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) working at Kim Il-sung University's department of German studies (approximately 15–20 students). German is also taught at PUFSS. Until 2006 the Mennonites maintained two Canadian English language teachers in the Great People's Study Hall, and at present Trinity Western University (TWU) of British Columbia, Canada, maintains half a dozen teachers in Pyongyang and sometimes hosts DPRK students in Canada. TWU is a faith-based institution with links to ELIC in the U.S.

Germany has also taken a high-profile role in the biannual Pyongyang Film Festival. In 2006 it showed *Downfall*, depicting the last days of Hitler. Koreans came in large numbers to watch this portrayal of a crazed dictator barking incomprehensible orders from his bunker as his country fell apart

around him. Another film about opposition against Nazism, *Napola*, won the Grand Prize; a third one about the student resistance organization “The White Rose” was equally praised by the jury.

What Worked and What Didn't

Educational exchanges are an effective means of breaking down the barriers by which the people of the DPRK are surrounded. Equipping Koreans with a knowledge of English, and so with a skill through which they can access different kinds of writing, is an effective way of getting new ideas into the DPRK.

In general, the ELT teacher training program has been a great success, and it is hoped to extend it to schools in Pyongyang and perhaps to institutions outside the capital. It has earned great goodwill among North Koreans and has contributed significantly to the DPRK's interaction with the outside world. In the closed world of the DPRK, simply having people listen to and look at a foreigner every day, and note that he or she is a human being like them, is an achievement. The expansion of the program into curriculum and materials development, language testing and assessment systems, British culture and English for Business, and more recently discussion of learner autonomy and self-access centers offers a chance to contribute to DPRK education in a more direct way. In its early stages the program also allowed some direct access to senior levels of DPRK universities—so to people with some access to senior levels of the national leadership. But it was rarely possible to conduct a conversation with such people that went beyond the practicalities of the program, and contacts at that level have become much more difficult in recent years.

The UK study program too works well. There is a group of alumni (to whom the embassy has reasonable but not automatic access) and the students seem to enjoy their experience of the UK. The DPRK students work hard and generally get good reports from their tutors. The only problem to arise was with one student who insisted on stuffing his homestay hosts' fridge with kimchi.

Although donations of books and other reading material achieved some initial success, it seems that the DPRK authorities now make sure that nobody reads them. The Germans appear to have had the same experience with their Goetheinstitut reading room, which they opened in June 2004 but closed in November 2009. A library of teaching resources was donated by the Canadians to PUFs and Kim Il-sung University. Although students probably do not have access to these materials, they are often used by teachers. Moreover, some of the materials have made their way into “locally” produced materials and so are at least being used in classes.

What Areas Should We Focus On?

It is important to work with the grain in North Korea. Trying to develop areas of exchange in which the North Koreans are not really interested or, worse, uncomfortable with, is highly resource intensive and unrewarding. The United States would be well placed to capitalize on the DPRK's hunger for English language teaching, and for technical education, if the political climate allows this. It might well be possible too to invite DPRK students to study at U.S. institutions. If this can be arranged, it is unlikely that they would be allowed by their authorities to study anything except English language and technical subjects, and the DPRK would insist that they study in groups and that DPRK officials have regular access to them.

What Strategies?

At present, U.S. academic exchanges with the DPRK are very modest compared to those of many other countries. It does not appear that this is the result of a conscious decision—more that this is just how things have turned out given the overall lack of contacts between the United States and the DPRK.

If the United States decides at some point on a large-scale expansion of academic exchanges with the DPRK (this would, of course, depend on political developments), it might be worth considering structuring this through a comprehensive agreement with the DPRK. Such an agreement might offer the advantage of ensuring that the exchanges take in not just areas of interest to the DPRK (usually technical subjects) but also areas in which the United States would like to see exchanges. At present it seems that almost all academic exchanges between the United States and the DPRK were initiated by the DPRK, which has therefore been able to pick the subjects covered. It is likely too that the process of administering such an agreement would generate comprehensive details of exchanges, providing an overview of what is happening. It seems that as things stand few U.S. academic institutions know what exchanges their sister institutions elsewhere in the United States are pursuing.

There is probably also scope for developing exchanges through non-governmental and faith-based bodies. Both James Kim's Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) and Pyongyang Business School (an initiative launched with Swiss backing by Felix Abt, a Swiss businessman who has now left Pyongyang but who ran a pharmaceutical company there until 2009) are examples of what can be done.

Notes

¹ Any views in this paper are purely those of the author and not necessarily those of the British government.