

Korea: The Free Learning Semester Programme

Supporting the flexible delivery of career education, and ensuring that employers, employees, and workplace experiences are systematically involved in provision.

The '[Free Learning Semester Programme](#)' in Korea was first piloted in 2013, and consists of one or two semesters at lower secondary level serving children aged 12 to 14. The purpose of the programme, as defined by the Korean Ministry of Education, is to help children better understand their capabilities and explore their aspirations through experimental and participatory learning while enforcing career education.

During these 'free learning semesters', there are no national standardised tests at schools, and teachers only evaluate students' performance based on their progress and participation. Evaluations undertaken during the free semesters do not count towards the formal grading of students. Unlike a normal semester, where students are required to spend 33 hours/week in the classroom; during a 'exam-free semester', students only spend 21 hours learning basic curriculum without the pressure of exams. During the remaining 12 hours/week, students can flexibly participate in whatever they want to as long as their schools allow it. Acting autonomously, schools typically offer many types of non-cognitive or work-based learning opportunities, including local community engagement, sports & arts programmes, and work experience placements.

To help schools develop relationships with their communities, from 2014 the Ministry of Education arranged partnerships with eight national bodies including the Cultural Heritage Administration, the Small and Medium-Sized Business Administration, and the Korea Forest Service. Such organisations support local branches to work easily with schools, and provide students with learning opportunities. In addition, to encourage the involvement of the private and civil sector with schools, in 2016 the Ministry launched a certification system. On a voluntary and pro bono basis, certified organisations called Educational Partners for Career Exploration offer a range of learning opportunities that are often community-based. One example of a certified partner is the Korea Housing & Urban Guarantee Corporation – which provides work experience placements and arranges for onsite specialists to visit classrooms to give career talks. Students learn about specific work areas to which they have not been exposed at school, and get first-hand experience in actual jobs, such as architects, city planning specialists, and architecture cultural commentators.

The Free Semester programme is regarded as a success in Korea with high levels of student satisfaction. After three years of piloting, in 2016, the programme was extended nationally to all Middle Schools in the country. In 2018, a study by the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation argued that the principles behind the programme should be extended and integrated into all school years.