

## **Consumer Science in Korea: An Overview**

An overview of the development of consumer science in Korea is presented. The economic and social environment leading to consumer science is noted, as well as the academic environment from which consumer science emerged. The paper concludes with a discussion of the current situation with respect to consumer science and its future prospects.

**Myung-hee Park, Dongkuk University, Seoul, Korea<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

After the World War II and the Korean War, Koreans struggled for economic growth to pull themselves out of poverty and the debris of war. Over three decades Korea experienced an average 8.2% annual growth rate with annual income rising from \$79 in 1960 to over \$10,000 in 1997 (National Statistical Office, 1996). Family income and consumption, family living standards, and related issues were the primary topics of focus until late 1980s. At this time consumer issues became an important topic due to the dramatic growth in income and consumption (Korea Consumer Protection Board, 1997)

Since 1990 the study of consumer issues has increased dramatically in Korea. (Choi, et al., 1990). Consumer laws emerged in Korea beginning 1981, with the Board of Consumer Protection founded in 1987. Even though the consumer movement started in the 1960s, there were few scholars or researchers interested in consumer issues until the late 1980s. As interest in consumer issues increased, a need for consumer related professionals and research emerged.

### **Historical Development of Consumer Science in Korea**

Beginning in the late 1960s, many Korean universities founded colleges of home economics. Highly qualified female students applied to these colleges to enroll in programs focused on private family life. These students were not typically oriented toward careers outside of the home since such work was considered inappropriate for women.

In the early 1980s feminism, along with rapidly changing economic conditions and social values, affected the perspective of female college students. With improved economic wellbeing families needed more income to maintain their level of living, household tasks moved into the marketplace, and household products were increasingly produced outside of the home.

By the late 1980s many female high school graduates did not wish to apply to a college of home economics because they wanted to pursue a career outside of the home. To attract more students, home economics units began to change name and revise curricula. While there was controversy regarding name change, it brought the development of new programs and much needed professional training for students. Some universities have also changed home management programs to consumer science programs; however, this change is also controversial.

### **Current Condition of Consumer Science in Korea**

In Korea there are over 160 universities and 145 junior colleges. In 1995 over 18,000 students graduated from a college or university. This included more than 4,000 home economics graduates from universities and more than 3,600 home economics graduates from junior colleges. This represents over 10% of all female college and university graduates (Kim and Lee, 1996).

Twenty-nine universities have a home economics program. Seventeen of these changed the college name to College of Life Science or the College of Life and Culture. At the same 29 universities, eight colleges have changed the home management department into a consumer-related department, in conjunction with significant program changes.

Along with these changes in the traditional field of home economics, Korean consumer protection laws now require the establishment of customer service units in businesses. Even without this legal requirement, Korean

businesses are becoming more consumer-oriented. They realize the importance of customer service and the need for self-regulation. In addition to changes in the private sector, various levels of Korean government, after implementation of the local autonomy system in 1995, are seeking ways to better serve Korean consumers (Song and Lee, 1996). Although the demand for consumer professionals is increasing, there is currently no licensed consumer professional.

Financial planning for consumers is an emerging area in Korean financial institutions. In the past, financial advice and financial planning were not popular within the general public. With the rapid increase in household income, the increase in dual-income families, the increase of economic problems associated with age and the increase of the risk of job loss, many Korean consumers now find themselves in need of professional advice to realize economic security (Yoon, et al., 1997). Given these changes, Korean financial institutions need to provide increased comprehensive financial counseling services directed toward the prudent use of financial resources, rather than just sales. The Consumer Education Committee of the Korean Society of Consumer Studies developed the Consumer Adviser certification program in 1996. The Committee has also decided to develop a program to accredit financial planners.

### **Future Prospects**

After the name change from home economics, some universities have successfully adopted and settled into the new fields. While some home management departments have changed their name to Consumer Science and have developed programs oriented toward career preparation, students becoming a Certified Consumer Advisor find this certification is not yet highly valued in the labor market. However, as customer service becomes better established within business and government, the Consumer Science major, and related certifications, will be viewed more positively in the job market. Research in consumer related areas are becoming increasingly popular. This is in part the result of a rapidly developing economy and growing consumer base. However, the current economic difficulties in Korea and the economic policy guided by the IMF have greatly lowered consumer confidence due to the anticipation of slow, or even negative, economic growth. This will make it more difficult to establish consumer science as a new field to meet social needs. But the progressive scholars and professors in consumer science are starting to teach more job-related skills and to get more involved with student career development. This will likely lead to the maturation of consumer science as an academic discipline.

### **References**

- Choi, E., K. Rhee, M. Park, K. Kim and J. Yoon (1990). An Introduction to "Consumer Science" and its research area. Journal of Consumer Studies, 1(1).
- Kim, Y. and M. Lee (1996). A study on the renaming of the department of home management at a junior college and reform of the curriculum. Journal of Korean Home Economics Association, 34(6).
- Korean Consumer Protection Board (1997). Consumption Life Indicators in Korea. Seoul: Korean Consumer Protection Board.
- National Statistical Office (1996). Korean Statistical Handbook. Seoul: National Statistical Office.
- Song, I. and E. Lee (1996). Development of consumer adviser educational program. Journal of Korean Home Economics Association, 34(3).
- Yoon, J., S. Shon, K. Kim and Y. Sung (1997). A proposal for enforcing a financial planner certification system. Journal of Consumer Studies, 8(1).

### **Endnotes**

1. Professor, Department of Home Economics Education.