

# The Argus

No. 554 NOVEMBER 13, 2025  
Since 1954

***Institutional Measures Needed for the Increase in University Closures***



***Challenges in the Use of Land and Assets of Closed Universities for Local Development***

***Blind Spots in the Management and Transfer of Records from Closed Universities***

***Unresolved Responsibility for Unpaid Wages of Faculty and Staff***

***Issues in the Transfer Process for Students of Closed Universities***

**UNIVERSITY**

# The Argus

ESTABLISHED 1954

Published monthly except on school holidays by and for the students of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, The Argus, the campus English magazine, pursues the highest standard of campus journalism and academism.

- *President and Publisher* ..... Prof. Park Jeong-Woon
- *Executive Editor* ..... Prof. Lee Herim
- *Copy Readers* ..... Prof. Merrilee Brinegar  
Prof. Joseph R. Vincent  
Prof. Chris Kobylinski
- *Editor-in-Chief* ..... Kim Si-yon (EICC-2)
- *Editor* ..... Lee Seeun (M-3)
- *Staff Reporters* ..... Song Eun-seo (DCLLC-4)  
Jo Hae-deun (E-3)
- *Editorial Consultants* ..... Kim Yi-eun (E-4)  
Park Se-eun (R-3)
- *Illustrator* ..... Marian Chu

107, Imun-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, Korea  
(Postal Code 02450)

Tel: (02) 2173-2508 Fax: 2173-2509

81, Oedae-ro, Mohyeon-eup, Cheoin-gu, Yongin,  
Gyeonggi Province, Korea (Postal Code 17035)

Tel: (031) 330-4113

Printed by HONG DESIGN | Tel: 464-5167 Fax: 464-5168

## Editorial

# The Price of Looking Away: The Cost to Society

In today's hustle and bustle where everyone lives in a constant rush, people frequently turn away from societal problems, overwhelmed by the burdens of their own lives or convinced that certain issues do not affect them directly. However, neglect is not neutral; it transfers the cost of inaction onto someone else. What appears minor today often returns tomorrow in greater force, demanding a heavier price. To ignore a problem is not to erase it, but to burden others with its weight.

The damage caused by unresolved problems rarely disappears on its own. Instead, it grows until someone must bear it. This November issue highlights how neglected issues have quietly expanded into pressing crises within our society. As enrollment drops with the nation's declining birthrate, more universities face permanent closure. The aftermath has already been mishandled: displaced students bear transfer costs and hostility at new universities, while records go mismanaged and unsold assets have left faculty and staff unpaid. For years, the low number of closures—just 22—allowed society to dismiss the matter as marginal, but now the problem is worsening.

The plight of firefighters reflects a similar pattern of neglect. Though they risk their lives in flames to ensure public safety, their mental health has long been overlooked. A 2024 National Fire Agency survey revealed that 4,375 firefighters suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and 3,141 are at risk of suicide, revealing the unseen pain behind their image of unshakable duty and professionalism. The same disregard is evident in the values we claim to uphold. Words such as tolerance, respect, and inclusivity are widely celebrated, yet their meaning has become diluted by complacency. Because these ideals are treated as self-evident, their absence is often ignored. As a result, a troubling surge of exclusion now targets people with disabilities, migrants, minorities, and dissenters, eroding the very principles of coexistence.

The lesson, then, is clear: indifference is costly. To confront problems before they worsen requires a shift in attitude. It is not enough to think, "As long as I am not affected." We must instead embrace an attitude of conviction, "If no one else takes action, then I will do something." Such a posture may not resolve every challenge at once, but it sets the foundation for a society that is fairer, stronger, and more humane than the one we inherit.

By **Kim Si-yon**  
Editor-in-Chief

김시연



# CONTENTS



## Cover Story

>> Due to low birth rates and the resulting decline in school-age populations, regional universities are facing increasing difficulty in recruiting students, making university closures unsurprising. The real concern lies in the inadequate follow-up measures for previously closed institutions. Persistent issues have arisen in areas such as student transfers, the transfer and storage of records, and the payment of wages to faculty and staff. As more universities face closure, these problems are expected to intensify, highlighting the need for systematic solutions. Therefore, let's shed light on the challenges that arise after a university closes and explore strategies for managing closed campuses more effectively.

## 02 · News Desk

### Campus Section

#### 04 · Visiting

In Pursuit of a Career, in Search of Self

### Culture Section

#### 09 · Gemini

Beyond Prejudice: How Zootopia and Elemental Depict the Path to Diversity

### Social Section

#### 15 · Cover Story

Beyond University Closures: Unresolved Issues Demanding Attention

### Theory & Critique Section

#### 22 · Morpheus

The Long Echo of a Siren: Firefighters' Hidden Wounds

#### 28 · Epilogue

A Word to My Younger Self

## HUFS to Hold 13th Presidential Election in November

HUFS will hold its 13th University Presidential Election this November. With the term of President Park Jeong-woon, who was elected as the 12th President, coming to an end, the election officially began with the start of campaigning on Oct. 16 and will proceed with up to three rounds of voting in the last week of November.

Presidential candidates must be either full-time HUFS faculty members or external figures who receive recommendations from at least 10 electors, including five professors. Voting will be conducted electronically, and through a maximum of three rounds, one final candidate will be recommended to the Board of Directors (hereafter the Board). If a candidate secures a majority in any round, he or she will automatically become the final nominee to the Board. Once the Board approves the recommendation, the nominee will be formally appointed as the President.

The right to vote is granted to tenure-track faculty members, tenured staff, and all students registered for the 2025 fall semester, including international students. Associate members such as students on leave of absence or those delaying graduation may also gain voting rights if they register as full members according to the HUFS Full Membership Registration Program. Nine presidential candidates were confirmed on Oct. 17, and campaigning will continue until Nov. 23. The first round of voting will take place on Nov. 24, and if no candidate secures a majority, a runoff and final rounds will be held on Nov. 27 and 28.

This election differs in several ways from the previous one. In the 12th election, the top two vote-getters were recommended to the Board, but beginning with the 13th election, only the top vote-getter will be recommended. Moreover, the voting weight ratio was revised from 90:5:5, professors: students: staff, to 76:12:12, thereby amplifying the voices of students and staff. The election will be conducted through and all votes will take place online. All matters related to the process are overseen by the HUFS Presidential Candidate Recommendation Committee, the highest body managing the election. The committee comprises professors, students, and staff, ensuring balanced participation across all groups.

Regarding the election, Na Min-seok, the president of the 59th General Student Council BAKDONG, stated, “It is important to show high student interest through turnout,” adding, “Since the proportion of student votes has increased in this election, it will be an opportunity for students to voice their opinions.” The president is the university’s top executive who oversees its vision and operations, and this election marks a crucial turning point that will determine HUFS’s direction for the next four years. 

**By Song Eun-seo**  
*ftues0315@hufs.ac.kr*



▲ The increased voting weight of students and staff is expected to give their voices greater influence.

## The “2025 Relay Global Career & Entrepreneurship Talk” to Continue in November

The Ajou University Regional Innovation System and Education (RISE) Foundation, in collaboration with the World Federation of Overseas Korean Economic and Trade Association (World-OKTA), is offering the “2025 Relay Global Career & Entrepreneurship Talk” program. Hosted by World-OKTA and Ajou University RISE Foundation, the lecture includes HUFs as a participating university. The program consists of six sessions held every Tuesday and Thursday from Nov. 4 to Nov. 20 via Zoom, each lasting 90 minutes.

Any HUFs student can apply via the registration form or QR code on the HUFs website, providing their name, student ID, and other required information. Registration is first-come, first-served, with a maximum of 300 students per session, and applications must be submitted at least one day in advance. In each lecture session, global Korean mentors will share career and entrepreneurship experiences in cities like Melbourne, Toronto, Manila, Vienna, Christchurch, and Tokyo, with Q&A sessions offering direct insights.

Shin Ji-woo, a sophomore studying in the Department of Spanish, said, “The online format is less burdensome and I expect to gain valuable knowledge from mentors who have pursued similar paths abroad.” The lecture is expected to provide HUFs students with practical guidance and inspiration for global career and entrepreneurial opportunities. 



©AJOU UNIV. Regional Innovation System & Education Foundation

▲ RISE Foundation, offers a “Relay Global Career & Entrepreneurship Talk” program for HUFs students in November.

By Jo Hae-deun  
johiden@hufs.ac.kr

## HUFs Semiconductor Boot-Camp to Conclude in November

The Center for Semiconductor Boot-Camp is holding six HUFs System Semiconductor Boot-Camp Seminars from Sept. 17 to Nov. 26, 2025, in Room 206 of the Engineering Building on HUFs Global Campus. The seminars offer students a chance to learn the latest system semiconductor industry trends and gain insights from professionals. Three sessions have been completed, with three remaining on Nov. 12, 19, and 26 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m.

After being selected in 2024 for a Ministry of Education-supported project that provides government funding through 2028 to train specialized system semiconductor designers, HUFs launched the Semiconductor Bootcamp sessions organized by the Center for Semiconductor Boot-Camp. This year’s program features three industry experts. Cho Hak-joo, former Vice President at Samsung Electronics and now a professor at Yonsei University, will lecture on Nov. 12. Jeong Eun-seung, former President of Samsung Electronics, will lecture on Nov. 19. Shin Woo-cheol, Director at Synopsys, will lecture on Nov. 26. Students interested in attending can apply by submitting their name, student ID, and other required information through the QR code or application link provided on the HUFs website announcement.

Kim Jin-ah, Administrative Staff at the Center for Semiconductor Boot-Camp, said, “The seminar helps students gain firsthand industry experience from professionals, deepen understanding of their major, and clarify their career paths.” The seminar is expected to help HUFs students grow into future semiconductor professionals. 



© Center for Semiconductor Boot-Camp

▲ The Center for Semiconductor Boot-Camp organizes seminars to share expertise in the system semiconductor field with HUFs students.

By Jo Hae-deun  
johiden@hufs.ac.kr

# In Pursuit of a Career, in Search of Self

By Jo Hae-deun

Staff Reporter of Social Section

A JobKorea survey found that 87 percent of job seekers and 69 percent of workers in their 20s to 40s in South Korea (hereafter Korea) have experienced burnout, a state of extreme fatigue and helplessness from intense work. Many young people feel powerless amid the pressures of job preparation or demanding careers. HUFS alumna Seo Eun-jin, a 2006 graduate from the Department of English Literature and Culture and author of *Don't Worry, It's Okay to Start Small* (2016), views a career as a process of self-discovery. She has built her path by considering who she wants to become and choosing environments where she can best realize that vision. Using her English skills, she began work at Goldman Sachs, then moved to Bloomberg L.P. in Hong Kong, and now pursues new challenges in Germany. November is National Career Development Month and it aims to highlight personal goals, professional growth, skill building, and seeking opportunities. The Argus, through this interview with HUFS alumna Seo Eun-jin, shares insights on navigating career development without losing oneself.



@Seo Eun-jin

▲ Seo Eun-jin, then Bloomberg Sales and Relationship Manager, gives a lecture to corporate employees, sharing her global expertise.



## At HUFS, Dreaming on the Global Stage

**Q1** *The Argus: Please introduce yourself to The Argus readers.*

**Seo Eun-jin (Seo):** Hello, I am Seo Eun-jin. I enrolled at HUFS in 2002, majoring in Department of English Literature and Culture. After graduating in 2006, I began my career at the global financial firm The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc., working six months as a temporary assistant before transitioning to a

stock trader\*. I then worked as a business manager on the bond sales team at KB Investment & Securities Co., Ltd, before moving to Hong Kong to join Bloomberg L.P., a digital-based global financial firm. There, I analyzed the global bond market and provided financial information to investors across Asia. This allowed me to build over 10 years of broad experience in the Korean and Hong Kong financial sectors. Currently, I live in Berlin, Germany, where I work as an immigration consultant, assisting clients relocating to Germany with visas, housing, schools, and overall relocation needs.

\*Stock trader: A stock trader predicts market trends when buying and selling stocks and either executes trades directly or brokers transactions between clients.

**Q2** *The Argus: If you could describe your university life in one word, what would it be and why?*

**Seo:** “Challenge.” My university life was a series of challenges. Moving to Seoul and adapting to a new environment gave me immense opportunities for growth. I am originally from Yeosu, a city just over 350 kilometers south of Seoul and Seoul was the first city I lived in to attend Hufs. Living alone in a new city was not easy, but it taught me to be more independent and fearless in trying new things.

During university, I wanted to do everything I could on my own, so I focused more on various extracurricular activities than on my courses alone. As part of this, I took on overseas pursuits, learning directly from seniors’ experiences and cementing my aspirations for a global career. One of the most memorable experiences came toward the end of my term as editor-in-chief of *The Argus*, when we prepared a 50th-anniversary special issue. I traveled overseas with then-*The Argus* journalists to interview Hufs alumni around the world. In New York and Washington, D.C. I met several alumni: a lawyer who works in the iconic Empire State Building, an alumnus who runs a large wholesale sportswear business in New York, and another alumnus leading a major electricity company in Washington. Staying at their homes and seeing their lives abroad up close strengthened my own desire to build a career internationally.

**Q3** *The Argus: Through which experiences during your university years did you discover the life you truly wanted?*

**Seo:** Since high school, I had longed to study abroad. I wanted to learn on a more global scale, interacting with students of



▲ Seo Eun-jin goes on a business trip to Japan, building her international career.

diverse backgrounds while pursuing ambitious goals. My desire was so strong that I, usually a model student, even defied my parents and briefly left home. However, going abroad as a minor without guardians was difficult for my conservative parents, who came from a provincial background. When my high school dream of studying overseas was blocked, I set a goal to fully pursue life abroad once I entered university.

After starting university, I challenged myself with a variety of overseas experiences: reporting for *The Argus*, volunteering at a work camp in Singapore, participating in a youth exchange program in China, working as an au pair\* for a five-year-old boy in the United States, and traveling to the Philippines and Japan. Meeting people from diverse backgrounds, immersing myself in daily life and culture, and engaging with languages abroad were all deeply meaningful experiences.

Through these activities, I got to know myself better. I realized that a life interacting with people of various races, backgrounds, and values felt much more natural to me, and I recognized that building a career and living abroad was truly what I wanted.

\*Au pair: An au pair is a cultural exchange program in which a person lives with a host family and provides care for children in exchange for room, board, and a stipend, while immersing themselves in the local culture and improving language skills.

**Q4** *The Argus: Did you face any difficulties in identifying the career path you wanted?*

**Seo:** I did not always have a clear sense of my career direction. During such times, asking yourself questions is important,

## Visiting

©Seo Eun-jin



▲ Seo Eun-jin actively participates in a professional financial solutions exhibition.

but sitting still to reflect is not easy, so I read a lot of books including self-help books, biographies, and novels. Through these books, I lived vicariously, broadened my perspective, and was able to ask myself meaningful questions that helped me clearly envision the life I truly wanted.

### Q5 *The Argus: After discovering the career direction you wanted, what choices and actions did you take to achieve it?*

**Seo:** By asking myself questions and seeking answers through books, I realized that where I could shine the most was in a global environment that allowed me to use language to communicate with people and produce results. I recognized that my strength in English and my ability to work with people from diverse cultures were clear advantages. Based on this, I decided to gain experience in a foreign financial firm rather than the more typical path of large domestic or small-to-medium companies. Looking for opportunities to use English and perform in a global environment, I took my first career step through a six-month temporary assistant position in the securities team at global financial firm The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc.



▲ Seo Eun-jin represents her financial firm at a global solutions exhibition.

©Seo Eun-jin

### Q6 *How was your first experience in the workplace after leaving the university environment? What challenges did you have to overcome during that process?*

I started working at The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc., a global financial firm, but my primary role was literally that of an assistant. I mainly supported about fifteen stock traders. My tasks ranged from making copies, processing receipts, doing simple accounting, answering team calls, and even ordering lunch. At that time, I used to arrive at the office by 7 a.m. Some people would have breakfast orders that needed to be handled. One day, someone ordered breakfast from Burger King. I went out to pick it up, and of course it happened to rain that day. The paper bag tore, the food spilled, and I had to gather the fallen food from the ground. In that moment, I thought, “Did I go to university to do this?” I was frustrated and miserable, and I also felt a sense of inadequacy.

But then another thought came to me. There is no small or insignificant work in a company. My role was crucial in helping the people in the office perform their jobs smoothly. I thought to myself, “If I could not do this, what guarantee was there that I could do anything else well?”. I truly tried to maximize my efficiency. I walked around the neighborhood finding new delivery options, learned how to use the copier to make the work more automated, and redesigned the receipt process to make it easier. I was coming in at 7 a.m. to learn more, even though no one asked me to.

Seeing this, a managing director suggested I join the morning meeting, so I attended a morning meeting with the research and sales teams. I did not understand much, but I just sat and listened. I studied English on weekends, learned about stocks, and earned stock-related certifications. In my year-end review, one managing director wrote about me: “First one in, last one out.” Recognized internally, my contract was extended, and one year later, I was promoted to a full-time stock trader.



### In Hong Kong, Living the Dream on the Global Stage

### Q7 *The Argus: After working in Korea, you moved to Hong Kong. Why did you choose that city?*

**Seo:** At The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc., new hires received training at the Asia headquarters in Hong Kong. That was my first time visiting the city, and I felt something stir inside me: While Korea’s financial sector mainly covers the domestic

©Seo Eun-jin



▲ Seo Eun-jin stands in Central, Hong Kong, a center of global finance.

market, Hong Kong oversees all of Asia—and beyond, to the global market. For three days, I commuted to Cheung Kong Center, the building in the heart of Hong Kong where Goldman Sachs Group, Inc. was located, and my heart kept racing. I could not help but think, ‘I have to work in a place this amazing. One day, I have to work here.’

That dream came true in less than two years. I left Goldman Sachs during the financial crisis and, through an internal referral, joined KB Investment & securities co., Ltd. It was a great company with, wonderful colleagues, a good salary, and excellent benefits, there was nothing to complain about, but strangely, I could not shake the thought that if I did not leave then, I would never go at all. I felt it was a now or never situation. So, almost recklessly, I handed in my resignation, packed my bags, and went straight to Hong Kong to try my luck. Thankfully, within just three months, I landed a position at Bloomberg L. P. Hong Kong.

**Q8** *The Argus: How was working in Hong Kong different from your previous jobs, and how did those differences help you discover a new side of yourself?*

**Seo:** During a company meeting in Hong Kong, a manager once said to me: “Speak up”; “Rose, don’t you have an opinion?” In Korea, team leaders usually take the lead while employees mostly listen, but in Hong Kong, if you do not speak up, you are considered incompetent. Thus, I realized I needed to change. I started to become more proactive: expressing my opinions, presenting new ideas, and approaching clients directly with questions. Abroad, no one spoon-feeds you, and this attitude naturally developed into stronger communication

and leadership skills. Through this experience, I learned that doing well at work depends largely on the ability to exert influence and solve problems through communication and active participation.

Another thing I truly appreciated about working in Hong Kong was its ability-based culture. Regardless of school background, gender, or age, people were recognized solely for their performance.

I loved that environment. Surrounded by brilliant colleagues from all over the world and working with clients from across the globe, I felt I was growing every day. My clients included global banking bond teams, Information Technology, and operations, among many others. Working with such a diverse range of people greatly expanded my own capabilities.



©Seo Eun-jin

▲ Seo Eun-jin works at a global financial firm in an office in Hong Kong.



**In a New Territory, the Power of Knowing Yourself**

**Q9** *The Argus: What kind of life are you living now, and what are you learning from it?*

**Seo:** I currently live in Berlin, Germany. After spending my twenties in Seoul and my thirties in Hong Kong. I wanted to experience the rest of my life in yet another place. Before moving to Berlin, I prepared by teaching business English, editing resumes in English, and offering career mentoring. Now, I work as a Senior Consultant at ICB Relocation, a German immigration company. In this role, I support clients with visas, housing, schools, and all aspects of relocation to Germany.



©Seo Eun-jin

▲ Seo Eun-jin explores Hamburg, Germany, her current home and new professional territory.

Although this industry is different from my previous

## Visiting

work in Hong Kong's financial sector, the essence remains similar: consulting new clients, selling company solutions, managing communication and relationships, and working to ensure client satisfaction. The main difference is that my clients are now individuals and families, rather than financial institutions.

Even so, working in a new country and market has taught me a great deal. Every day I learn about German immigration law, market trends, and client needs while meeting new people. Seeing clients settle successfully in Germany with my support is both meaningful and rewarding.

**Q10** *The Argus: How were you able to continue turning your strengths into personal assets in new environments?*

**Seo:** Passion. When you have passion for your work, you naturally start to reflect on what you can do better than others in that environment. At The Goldman Sachs Group, Inc., I was the youngest and had little to showcase, but my passion for work, eagerness to learn, and proactive attitude became my strongest weapons as a newcomer.

In Hong Kong, my strength lay in client management. My outgoing personality was well suited for sales and account management, and I greatly improved my soft skills, such as communication and negotiation, through that experience. Now in Germany, my unique advantage is language. I work at an immigration company where business is conducted in English, and while many clients are Korean, few can speak both Korean

and English fluently. My bilingual ability has become a clear advantage, and I am also studying German diligently. I believe mastering the local language will open countless opportunities I would otherwise miss.

**Q11** *The Argus: Lastly, for those Argus readers who wish to build their own careers, could you share a word of encouragement?*

**Seo:** The best is to try many different things. By challenging yourself in various fields, you can gradually gravitate toward the areas you are good at and truly want to pursue.

Also, do not undermine yourself by comparing your path with others, but instead remind yourself that you are doing well and give yourself the credit you deserve.



▲ Seo Eun-jin shares her professional insights during a lecture on overseas employment.

Career development is fundamentally about self-discovery: finding work that suits one's abilities, recognizing individual strengths, and applying them in environments where they shine. Amid competition and external pressures, this truth is often overlooked, yet a career ultimately serves as a means to understand oneself. HUFS alumna Seo Eun-jin's journey illustrates this principle, showing that by exploring diverse opportunities and identifying what aligns with personal goals and what one can do well, a career transforms from a source of stress into a path that nurtures growth and strength. 📖

[johiden@hufs.ac.kr](mailto:johiden@hufs.ac.kr)

# Beyond Prejudice: How *Zootopia* and *Elemental* Depict the Path to Diversity

By Song Eun-seo

Staff Reporter of Culture Section

“Elements don’t mix.” “Dumb bunny and sly fox.” These lines from *Elemental* (2023) and *Zootopia* (2016) capture perceptions that divide groups. Today, the society of South Korea (hereafter Korea) faces conflicts over diversity, with multicultural families, immigrants, and sexual minorities experiencing normalized exclusion. According to the World Values Survey by the Korean National Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2017–2022), only 50.8 percent of Koreans selected “tolerance” and “respect for others” as values to teach children, 11.5 percent points lower than the 51 country average, reflecting a lack of mutual understanding. Thus, November 16, the International Day for Tolerance designated by the UNESCO reminds us of the need to respect and embrace diversity. *Elemental* and *Zootopia* depict worlds of coexistence and show that acknowledging differences leads to stronger communities. Ultimately, they suggest that tolerance is not just a virtue but a foundation for overcoming hatred and opening new possibilities. The Argus by comparing the two films, highlights the meaning of tolerance and exploring the direction society should take.

## [Before Reading] Tolerance

UNESCO designates November 16 as the International Day for Tolerance and defines tolerance as an attitude of respecting, accepting, and understanding the diversity of humans, cultures, and forms of expression. In other words, tolerance is not merely enduring differences or generously “putting up with” others, but an active effort to respect different beliefs and ways of life. In this article, tolerance is understood as a social value that recognizes “diversity as it is” and seeks “coexistence.” It serves as the starting point for moving beyond hatred and exclusion toward a society where diversity is truly respected.

## 1 Introduction to the Films

### 1) *Zootopia* (2016)

The animated film *Zootopia* presents a city combining “zoo” and “utopia,” promoting harmony under the motto “anyone can be anything.” At first glance, the city appears ideal, yet deep-rooted prejudices persist. Judy Hopps, a rabbit aspiring to be a police officer, is mocked for her species, while Nick Wilde, a fox, is confined to the stereotype of being sly. Even Mayor Lionheart is suspected of being behind the crimes occurring in the city simply because he is a lion. Though the city claims to embrace diversity, carnivores are still viewed as threats, and herbivores are considered inferior, leaving both sides wounded. These wounds and insecurities eventually destabilize the entire society, and Assistant Mayor Bellwether manipulates this climate to deepen divisions between groups.

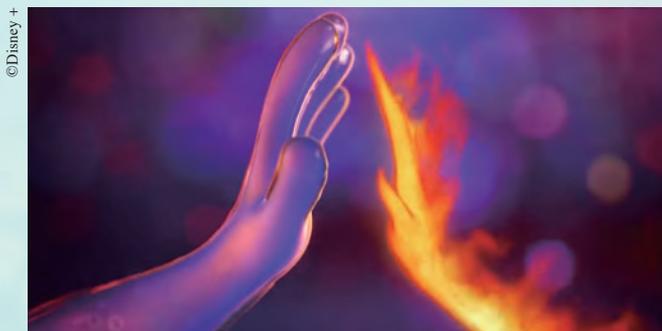


▲ Nick and Judy ride together in a police car on traffic patrol.

In this climate, Judy becomes the first rabbit officer through relentless effort, yet society continues to belittle her. Nick's entrance marks a turning point, as their uneasy partnership grows into trust while they confront prejudice and solve the mystery of carnivores turning savage. In turn, "Zootopia" itself speaks to the need for all animals to be respected not for their outward appearances but for their actual abilities, presenting an image of social integration. Ultimately, the film demonstrates that a society should not exclude individuals simply because they are different, but can achieve the true meaning of "Zootopia" only when diversity is respected and the strengths of each individual are acknowledged.

## 2) *Elemental* (2023)

*Elemental* takes viewers to Element City, a metropolis where fire, water, air, and earth are meant to exist together. The city projects an image of diversity, yet invisible barriers remain. Fire residents are seen as dangerous because their flames can ignite others, and urban design itself often neglects their needs. Water flows freely through the streets, but waterproof shops are scarce, leaving fire citizens to survive on the margins. Fire



▲ Wade and Ember place their hands together realizing that they can coexist.

is also considered dangerous because of its ability to ignite other elements, which leads to the prohibition of contact and exchange with others. Behind the image of coexistence lies a city built on exclusion.

Ember, a young fire element, grows up in this environment, where she struggles to fit in and lives apart from other groups. Her world shifts when she meets Wade, a water element who sees beyond the fear and discovers her warmth. Through their bond, Ember begins to recognize that her fiery nature is not simply a threat but a vital part of her identity. Wade, in turn, values her honesty and kindness, viewing fire not only as destructive but as a source of creativity and potential. By learning to view their differences as strengths rather than dangers, Ember and Wade are able to overcome prejudice and form a true relationship.

## 2 Commonalities

### 1) Superficial Coexistence and Underlying Prejudice

Both films, *Zootopia* and *Elemental*, depict cities that appear inclusive, yet beneath the surface lie deep prejudices and discrimination. In *Zootopia*, Judy is underestimated due to being a small rabbit, assigned trivial duties despite graduating at the top of her class, and struggles with systems designed for larger animals. Nick faces prejudice for being a fox, from being excluded from the Boy Scouts as a child to being refused service at an elephant ice cream shop as an adult. In *Elemental*, Ember's family is denied housing because they are fire elements and get pushed to the city's outskirts. These stories reveal how visions of inclusion are undermined by hidden systems of exclusion.

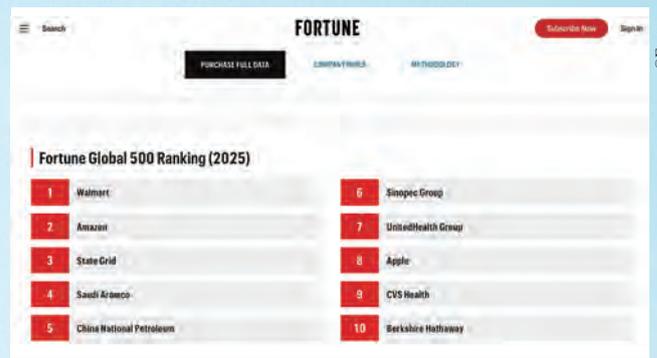
This cinematic theme resonates with reality. Societies often claim inclusivity, yet invisible barriers persist, especially for immigrants. While governments proclaim coexistence, institutions still demand conformity. The European Union has pledged non-discrimination under the Union of Equality, but a 2023 Eurobarometer survey found that 61 percent of respondents reported discrimination based on skin color and 60 percent based on ethnic origin. Half also cited appearance or expression, including markers such as the hijab, as a source of disadvantage, showing how societies push outsiders to assimilate rather than accept them.

Similar issues are visible in Korea. Since 2009, the country has run integration programs and joined global discussions, but discrimination remains. A press release, “Perceiving the Assignment of Unequal Status Between Koreans and Immigrants as Something Natural Constitutes Racial Discrimination” from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea reported that 68.4 percent of 338 immigrants surveyed believe racial discrimination exists. Respondents pointed to race, ethnicity, and skin color, noting that rights are not applied equally and that immigrants are rarely treated as full citizens. Lee Ji-yeon, a professor of Counseling Psychology at HUFS, explained, “People instinctively feel cautious toward those who are different.” She added, “Vague fears often lead to defensive attitudes, and when such fears are exaggerated, they become exclusionary and lead to inequality.” These findings show that even with integration policies, structural discrimination and unequal perceptions remain deeply rooted.

## 2) Synergy Between Different Beings

*Zootopia* and *Elemental* both demonstrate how entirely different beings can create greater possibilities when they work together. In *Zootopia*, Judy is often disregarded for being small and weak, yet her size enables her to enter the narrow alleys of Mouse Town to apprehend Duke Weaselton the weasel and her sharp observational skills allow her to track down the missing otter, Emmitt Otterton, uncovering crucial leads that larger animals could not. Nick long viewed as sly and untrustworthy, also reveals strengths. His quick thinking helps Judy avoid dismissal when he recalls a key detail, and later, his suggestion to review surveillance camera footage provides decisive evidence to solve the case. In *Elemental*, Ember, a fire element, and Wade, a water element, seem incompatible at first, but their contrasting qualities open new possibilities. Fire elements in Element City face prejudice and exclusion, yet Ember’s nature becomes a creative force in glassmaking. When a glass bottle breaks during a visit to Wade’s family, she melts the shards into a more beautiful object, prompting Wade’s mother to encourage her future as a glass artisan. The city’s glass architecture symbolically reflects how including fire elements can expand its potential. Ember’s discovery is not only a personal turning point but also shows how diversity, when embraced, can drive progress.

The lessons extend beyond fiction. Immigrants, often



▲ Companies founded by entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds are now listed in the Fortune 500, shaping the global economy.

marginalized or pressured to assimilate because of their differences, have repeatedly proven their ability to drive innovation and growth. A study published in April 2010 in *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* under the title, “How Much Does Immigration Boost Innovation?” found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of immigrant college graduates raises patents per capita by 9 to 18 percent. This demonstrates that immigrant knowledge and experience serve as critical drivers of innovation. Further confirmation comes from the American Immigration Council report *New American Fortune 500 in 2024*. The report shows that of the new companies included in the 2024 *Fortune 500*, 230 firms which account for 46 percent of the total were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants. These firms significantly shaped the U.S. and global economy, generating \$8.6 trillion in revenue in 2023 and employing over 15.5 million people worldwide as of 2024, with an average of 67,332 workers per company. This evidence makes clear that immigrant diversity not only benefits individuals but also strengthens economies and creates employment on a structural level.

## 3) Overcoming Prejudice and Advancing the Community

Both films demonstrate that prejudice is not merely an individual problem but a barrier to the progress of society as a whole, and they show how communities can change once prejudice is overcome. In *Zootopia*, solving the missing animals case removes the “savage” stigma placed on predators, and Nick, once limited by stereotypes, becomes a police officer. The police force shifts from relying on large, physically strong species to valuing diverse abilities, enabling more effective investigations. As mutual understanding grows,

citizens begin to see one another as equals, bringing the city closer to a true “Zootopia.”

In *Elemental*, Ember discovers her talent for glassmaking when visiting Wade’s family, using her flames to create works of art. The prevalence of glass architecture in Element City symbolically highlights how the contributions of fire elements, when not excluded, can advance the city itself. Thus, while set in different contexts, both films deliver the same message: societies that exclude diversity remain trapped in conflict and distrust, but those that acknowledge differences and foster cooperation enable the entire community to flourish.

This lesson also applies to reality. Scott E. Page, a University of Michigan professor studying complexity and social science, argues through the “Diversity Bonus Theory” that groups with diverse members outperform homogeneous ones because cognitive and experiential diversity enhances problem-solving and predictive accuracy, improving overall social efficiency. Similarly, 20th-century economist Joseph Schumpeter’s “Theory of Recombinant Innovation” suggests that innovation emerges from new combinations of existing elements, showing that integrating diverse backgrounds and experiences can drive transformative changes not only in technology but also in social and cultural development.

Real-world examples affirm this dynamic. Globally popular K-pop is not simply the export of Korean culture, but the result of recombining Korea’s precise choreography and fandom culture with production techniques and hip-hop and R&B influences from the United States and Europe. Producers,

songwriters, and choreographers from multiple countries have collectively shaped K-pop into a global music phenomenon. Likewise, the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025), directed by Korean American Maggie Kang, exemplifies cultural recombination by blending Korean folklore and K-pop idol culture with American-style action and animation. Its voice cast, including Korean American actors and others with cross-cultural understanding, reflects immigrant identities and multicultural elements throughout. The result is a new form of global content born from cultural recombination. These examples show that when immigrant and local traditions interact, the result goes beyond simple coexistence. Recombination produces richer cultural outcomes, highlighting the social value of diversity and the transformative power of overcoming prejudice.

### 3 Differences

#### 1) Patterns of Conflict Actors

Both *Zootopia* and *Elemental* reveal how differences can generate prejudice, but the manifestations of that prejudice differ significantly. *Zootopia* focuses on conflict between groups with different traits, while *Elemental* highlights the exclusion of a minority group by the majority.

In *Zootopia*, conflict emerges between herbivores and carnivores. Judy receives fox repellent Spray from her parents, who fear carnivores, and faces doubt from Chief Bogo despite graduating at the top of her class. Later, she echoes prejudice at a press conference by suggesting carnivores’ instincts are dangerous. These scenes show how stereotypes escalate into conflict. Reality mirrors this dynamic. Professor Lee explains, that “People categorize to simplify the world, but such stereotypes are hard to change and often lead to prejudice.” A report released in March 2024 titled “Women Paid Less Even When Doing the Same Work” from *Kyunghyang Shinmun* showed that 40.6 percent of female employees reported gender pay discrimination for work of equal value. Additionally 35.5 percent reported gender discrimination in promotion, exceeding the overall rate of 26.5 percent. Such cases reveal how stereotypes about women as caregivers produce workplace inequality. Men also face prejudice. In January 2023, the *Junbu Ilbo* article “Marginalized Single Fathers ... Even



▲ *K-pop Demon Hunters*, released on June 20, 2025, is now the most-watched title on Netflix and its soundtrack, including “Golden” reaches No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 for eight consecutive weeks, marking the longest time an animated-series OST stays at the top.

Single-Parent Facilities Only Support Single Moms” reported that welfare centers for single parents in Gyeonggi Province only accepted mothers, excluding fathers. In August 2025, *Gwangju MBC News* reported that a divorced father raising a child alone was denied entry to a facility because he was not a mother. These examples show how stereotypes that link caregiving solely to women disadvantage men as well.

In *Elemental*, prejudice against fire residents takes a different form. Unlike other elements who live in the city center, fire residents are pushed to the outskirts and denied access to public infrastructure. Ember herself is barred from a botanical garden as a child and later excluded from cultural life, fueling resentment among fire communities. This symbolizes real barriers faced by minorities such as people with disabilities. In May 2025, *KBS News* “Hiring Only ‘If you’re Not Disabled’ the Bare Face of Disability Employment Discrimination” reported that Daejeon limited disability hiring to those without daily needs, while Hanbat Arboretum excluded applicants with physical disabilities from jobs on site. In 2023, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education filled fewer than half of its reserved disability positions, prompting lawsuits. These cases show how discrimination lingers and how the burden of proof falls on victims. Baik Jong-wan, lecturer of Minerva College at HUFSS noted, “Insufficient social awareness is the main cause,” and emphasized that “responsibility must be shared collectively, not left to individuals.” Both the films and these real-life cases show that prejudice hinders genuine inclusion and exposes the limits of mainstream society’s understanding.

## 2) Backgrounds of Conflict

Both *Zootopia* and *Elemental* explore conflicts that arise within diverse societies, but the forms of conflict are clearly different. In *Zootopia*, the seeming coexistence among species conceals deep stereotypes. Deputy Mayor Bellwether fuels prejudice by claiming predators are dangerous and herbivores are victims. She uses the toxic plant, Night Howler to force predators into savage states and presents the incidents as natural attacks, heightening public fear. As a result, all predators lose social trust and status, while fear among herbivores grows.

This portrayal parallels reality, where stereotypes often lead to social conflict. The *Maeil Business Newspaper* article released on March 25, 2025, “Intensifying Gender and Generational Conflicts, Politicians Fuel Division,” argued that



▲ People watch the NYC Pride Parade celebrating the LGBTQ community.

political actors exacerbate divisions for electoral gain, invoking gender-related pledges during campaigns. These promises frequently spark disputes between men and women but are quietly abandoned after elections, leaving only heightened mistrust and ideological divides. Moreover, news outlets tend to simplify such disputes into binary conflicts, encouraging people to remain within their own “camp” and fueling antagonism rather than mutual understanding. This pattern is strikingly similar to Bellwether’s manipulation of fear in *Zootopia*, where prejudice against a few predators spreads to an entire group.

In *Elemental*, conflict stems from the systematic exclusion of fire residents. They are confined to segregated neighborhoods and have limited interaction with the city. Ember’s family serves only fire customers, and she is denied access to public spaces from childhood. Such daily discrimination restricts opportunities and leads fire communities to internalize hurt and mistrust across generations. The film illustrates how exclusion pushes minorities to the margins and accumulates lasting wounds.

This dynamic resembles the marginalization of minorities in real societies. A clear example is discrimination against sexual minorities. According to the *2021 Youth LGBTQ+ Social Needs and Realities Survey Report* published in May 2022, by *Daum*, a youth activist organization for the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights, 33.6 percent of 3,911 respondents reported experiencing discrimination in the past year due to their sexual orientation or identity. A 2020 survey on transgender discrimination by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea found that 65.3 percent of transgender respondents had experienced discrimination, most often in employment.

Additionally, 85.61 percent of those who faced discrimination did not report it, with 53 percent stating that they believed “nothing would change” even if they did. Moreover, 73.3 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents concealed their identities in the workplace out of fear of negative treatment or because they had already witnessed a hostile environment toward sexual minorities. Lecturer Baik explained, “These issues stem from a fundamental lack of spaces for dialogue in which people can confront existential concerns and engage with those they perceive as different.”

### 3) Strategies for Confronting Discrimination

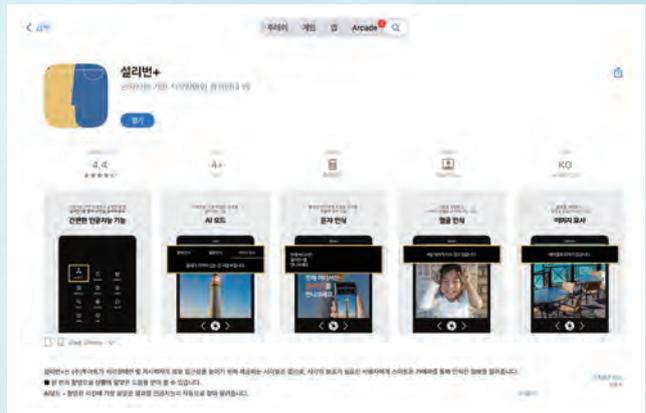
Both *Zootopia* and *Elemental* deal with conflicts rooted in prejudice, but they differ in how these conflicts are resolved. *Zootopia* depicts discrimination being confronted directly, leading to institutional change. Judy initially doubted because she is a small herbivore, proves her ability by solving the missing animal cases, and Nick joins the police, symbolizing increased diversity within the force. The film emphasizes social transformation through integration. This parallels the 1955 Montgomery incident. In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in defiance of segregation laws and was arrested. This event sparked a bus boycott that continued for more than 380 days. Ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled bus segregation unconstitutional, and by the 1970s legal segregation between Black and White citizens was completely abolished.

*Elemental*, however, highlights how a marginalized individual finds possibility through personal relationships. Through her bond with Wade, Ember’s abilities are recognized, and she begins to imagine living with other elements, even though the film does not show full societal change. It suggests that small

personal encounters can gradually lead to broader acceptance, much like the experiences of multicultural families and immigrants.

Lecturer Baik explains, “Social change begins when individuals repeatedly try to understand one another,” emphasizing that differences should be seen not as faults but as qualities that make coexistence necessary. Recent efforts to reduce digital exclusion reflect this approach. The application “Sullivan+” helps visually impaired users recognize text and images through artificial intelligence, and the Seoul Comprehensive Welfare Center for the Disabled has introduced a remote digital work model that supports independence and learning opportunities. These initiatives show how recognizing individual needs can benefit society as a whole.

Ultimately, both films portray the overcoming of prejudice. However, *Zootopia* highlights institutional reform and integration, while *Elemental* shows how empathy in personal relationships plants the seeds of change.

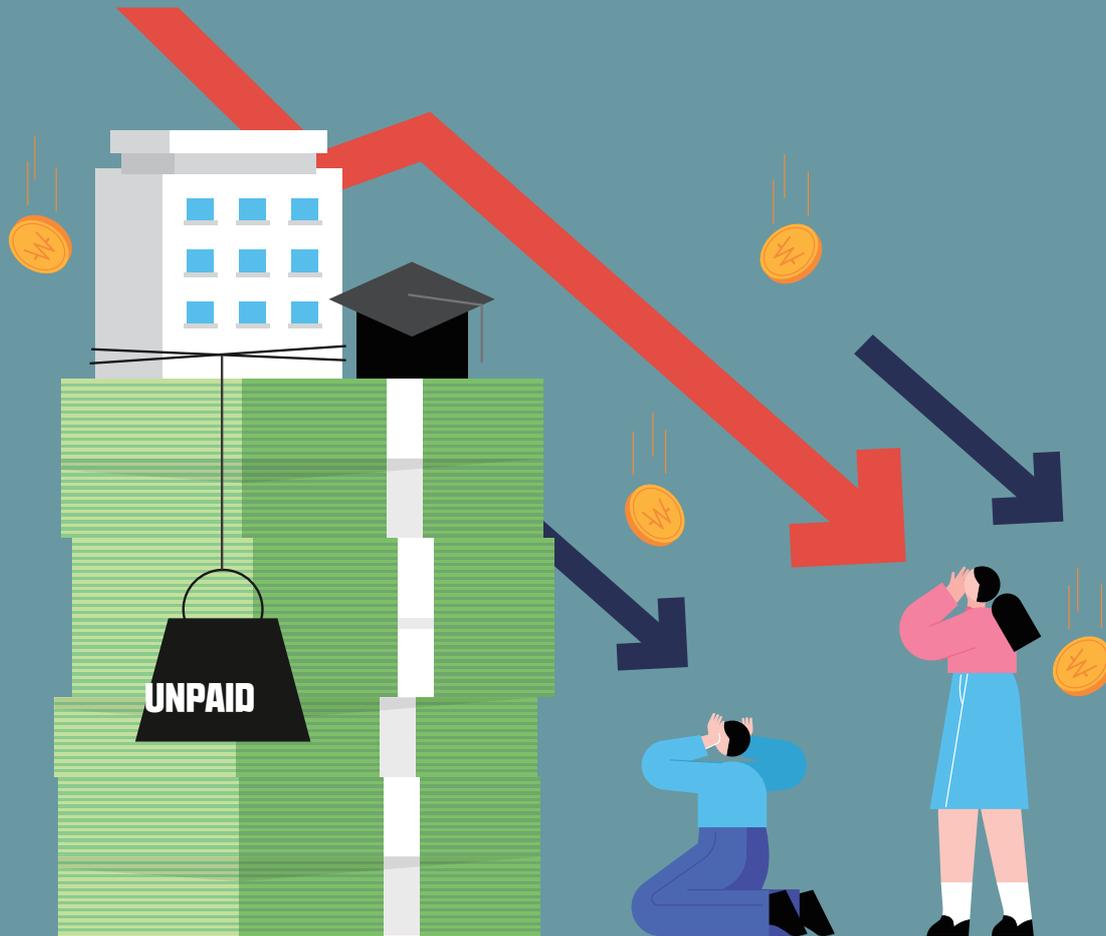


▲ The Sullivan+ application provides AI voice services for the visually impaired.

©App Store

Though different in setting and story, *Zootopia* and *Elemental* both underscore how prejudice and exclusion can undermine communities. *Zootopia* illustrates how stereotypes between herbivores and carnivores, when exploited by those in power, spread distrust and division, pointing to the need for institutional reform and social integration. *Elemental* emphasizes the isolation of fire residents, exemplifying the structural discrimination faced by minorities, yet it also shows that through personal encounters and mutual understanding, new possibilities for connection can emerge. Together, the two films suggest that differences do not justify exclusion but can instead become resources for cooperation and mutual enrichment. Respect for diversity is presented not only as a moral value but as a foundation for social growth and innovation. 🗣️

flues0315@hufs.ac.kr



# BEYOND UNIVERSITY CLOSURES: UNRESOLVED ISSUES DEMANDING ATTENTION

**By Jo Hae-deun**

*Staff Reporter of Social Section*

**W**hat happens after a university closes? Of 22 universities shut down in South Korea (hereafter Korea) since the 2000s, most remain neglected. Students may transfer to nearby universities but face higher costs and longer commutes. Records should be transferred to the Korea Advancing Schools Foundation (KASFO), yet mismanagement persists. Unpaid wages for faculty and staff also remain unresolved. To address this, the Structural Reform Bill of Private Universities was passed in July 2025, enabling the government to order closures of troubled schools or return part of their assets to founders to encourage voluntary shutdowns. Meanwhile, a 2021 study by Seoul National University and the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs projected that 195 of 385 present universities could close between 2042 and 2046. Despite the six-year anniversary of the Special Act on the Promotion of Utilization of Abolished School Property, enacted on November 26, 2019 to promote effective use of closed universities, closures continue to worsen issues of transfers, records, and unpaid wages. The Argus seeks to highlight these challenges and explore strategies for managing closed institutions.



## When Universities Close: The Burden Falls on Students

### Phenomenon 1 Students Affected by University Closures and the Resulting Disputes

To protect students' right to learn in university closures, a special transfer system has been implemented. This system, established under the Higher Education Act and its enforcement decree by the Ministry of Education (MOE), guarantees students from closed universities the opportunity to transfer to nearby institutions. The receiving universities are designated by the MOE, and students are supposed to be placed in programs similar to their original majors. However, despite the existence of this system, practical problems persist. The *Dong-A Ilbo* reported on April 29, 2018, that a Seonam University electrical engineering graduate student had to transfer over 100 kilometers away due to the lack of a nearby similar program. Another student learned only three days before the deadline, through an online article rather than an official notice, that he had to apply in person. According to the KASFO, among 11 closed universities, one in four students could not continue their studies. "Exploring Post-Closure Measures for University Shutdowns and Corporate Dissolutions: Focusing on Cases of Closed Private Universities and Dissolved Educational Corporations," a 2020 paper by Ryu Dong-hoon of Korea National University of Education cited lack of information, difficulty matching majors, and inconsistent credit recognition as causes of low transfer rates. Students transferring to universities in other regions also faced higher costs.

Moreover, special transfers often provoke disputes. When Seonam University medical students sought to transfer to Jeonbuk National University's medical school, 328 of 436 students voted against it, and protests followed. Nursing transfers from Seonam University to Wonkwang University's nursing program drew similar opposition, with about 1,400 signatures collected in five days. In summary, while special transfers exist to protect the academic rights of students from closed universities, institutional gaps remain, and disputes and controversies surrounding these transfers remain unresolved.

### Cause 1 Blind Point in the System for Guaranteeing Students' Right to Learn

Why are students of closed universities often unable to continue their studies? The Higher Education Act and its Enforcement Decree designate them as eligible for "special transfer admission" to similar departments at nearby universities beyond the regular quota. However, this system has no enforceability. Decisions on acceptance and credit recognition rest with each university, while the government can only request, not order them. As a result, some universities admit fewer students than eligible, and if the only nearby department refuses, students may have to transfer to distant universities, making commuting difficult. For instance, after Geondong University closed in 2012, some students had to commute to Pusan National University, a university just over 220 km south of Geondong University because the nearby Kaya University refused transfers.

Students at a university set to close must go through the special transfer admission process, but this often brings heavy financial burdens. The Higher Education Act guarantees transfer opportunities but offers no support for added tuition or living costs, leading some near graduation to give up continuing their studies. Moreover, university autonomy is broadly protected under the Constitution and the Higher Education Act, allowing each university to operate its own curriculum and credit recognition system. Even for the same department, differences in course composition and graduation requirements often mean that previously earned credits are not fully recognized. Since the government does not have legal authority to enforce credit recognition or curriculum adjustment,



▲ Students from Kyungpook Foreign Language University are holding a protest against the school's unilateral closure, demanding their right to continue their studies.

©U's line

structural instability affects students' academic continuity. In addition, universities in the final stages before closure often have administrative functions practically paralyzed, resulting in inadequate student record management. The MOE cannot track each student individually or transmit information to target universities efficiently, leading to frequent delays or omissions in announcements regarding transfer opportunities. Consequently, students are left in uncertain situations, unable to prepare properly.

Universities required to accept transfer students may also face resistance from their current students. In the Seonam University case, admitting students beyond the regular quota raised concerns about infringing on the rights and educational environment of existing students. Dormitories, classrooms, and laboratory facilities designed for the original enrollment may exceed capacity, creating resource allocation problems and feelings of unfairness. Such opposition cannot be dismissed as mere hostility; the University Education Research Institute emphasized that transfers beyond the quota inevitably weaken educational conditions and called for institutional improvements.

### **Prospect 1** Legal Reforms to Ensure Academic Rights for Students of Closed Universities

The existing special transfer system had a legal basis, but in practice depended upon negotiations between individual universities and the MOE or temporary measures. This was because the MOE lacked the legal authority to “directly” manage the academic records and transfers of students from closed universities. As a result, which universities would accept how many students and which credits would be recognized were entirely at the discretion of the receiving institutions, leaving students to cope with delays, denied credits, and other uncertainties.

To address these limitations, Article 21 of the 2025 Structural Reform Bill of Private Universities stipulates that the MOE must “directly support” transfers for students from closed universities. This allows the MOE to pre-match students with eligible universities, provide guidance on credit recognition, and offer unified procedures and information. Students can now continue their studies more securely through a standardized process instead of seeking information from individual universities. The same law also requires that students who forgo transfers receive tuition compensation for academic discontinuation.

This takes into account the fact that many students could not continue their studies due to financial burdens, such as differences in tuition or relocation costs. Previously, students who declined transfers had no support, leaving them vulnerable to dropping out. The new law provides at least minimal compensation to mitigate financial losses, even if students choose not to transfer. However, details regarding the amount and method of payment—whether a flat rate or income-based—have yet to be finalized, and the law's practical effect will depend on future enforcement regulations and budget allocation.



### Records of Closed Universities that Need to be Managed

#### **Phenomenon 2** Poor Management of Closure Records

When a university closes, records containing personal information and the activity history of its members remain. These closure records include a wide range of materials, from academic and administrative documents such as attendance logs, transcripts, course withdrawal forms, faculty evaluations, personnel records, and accounting documents to memorabilia like plaques, trophies, and graduation albums. Administrative documents, in particular, contain sensitive personal information, including names, resident registration numbers, and university ID photos, which are essential for employment, graduate school applications, and submission to public institutions. For example, when Asia University closed in 2008 due to the corruption of the school cooperation, the school deleted all academic records out of concern for prosecution, causing students major difficulties in transferring or seeking employment. Similarly, when Myungshin University closed in 2012, Suncheon National University, which accepted 15 students through special transfer, struggled with academic support due to missing student records. Currently, the KASFO manages closure records and provides certificate issuance services, with over 30,000 requests in 2024 alone, showing high demand. These records are crucial as they verify members' academic activities and are necessary for employment or further education.

However, many records remain poorly managed.



©Chosun Ilbo

▲ The KASFO transfers massive amounts of records from a closed university using a forklift.

Some are abandoned on campus, exposing personal information and academic evidence to risk, while others, even after transfer, are difficult to manage due to system limitations. In some closed university buildings, admission applications containing names, resident registration numbers, and ID photos are scattered on the floor. A video posted by YouTuber who documents experiences at closed universities in 2019 showed exposed admission forms from Kangwon Tourism College, which closed in 2012. This is not limited to Kangwon Tourism College. As of February 5, 2025, *KBS News* found that 14 out of 17 universities closed before 2020 had records that were not properly transferred due to unclear management responsibilities.

Poor document management has also led to the loss of administrative documents. For example, at Seonam University, the main building at the Namwon campus was flooded due to water pipe damage, and all submerged records were excluded from transfer. Similarly, Suncheon National University faced difficulties supporting academic work due to missing records from Myungshin University students accepted through special transfer in 2012.

The situation seemed to improve after the 2020 amendment of the Private School Act. The amended Article 48, Paragraph 2 and Enforcement Decree of the Private School Act, Article 18 clearly defined the obligation to submit closure records, the managing authority, and the specified the scope of records. In 2022, the KASFO completed the construction of an offline archive, U-Archives, preserving records from closed universities, establishing a more systematic management system. However, even after records were transferred to the KASFO, management remains challenging. According to Article 18, the school corporation must submit academic and administrative records to the MOE within

three months of dissolution or closure order. Article 48, Paragraph 2 of the Private School Act allows the MOE to designate the KASFO as the dedicated managing institution, and Article 18 of the Enforcement Decree requires submitted records to be promptly transferred to the KASFO. Consequently, all closure records are managed at the KASFO's U-Archives built in 2022.

In practice, however, the facility filled quickly. Immediately after moving records from a temporary warehouse in Icheon, a city just over 70 km south of Seoul from the past 10 years, 82 percent of the space was full, and even after expansion in 2024, 98.6 percent was occupied. Some records are now stored in collection boxes in the third-floor corridor and will remain there until the government completes further expansion.

### Cause 2 Inadequate Management System for Records of Closed Universities

Poorly stored records due to full facilities highlight the vulnerability of record management after university closures. When a university closes, the school corporation must submit related documents to the local education office within three months. Under Article 6, Paragraph 1 of the KASFO Act, the education office manages these records through the KASFO, responsible for transferring and managing closed university records. Completing the transfer and reporting within three months is practically difficult. Jin Min-su's 2023 study, "Current Status and Improvement Plan for Managing Records of Closed Private Universities," notes that the required timeline often does not allow accurate reporting, causing discrepancies between reported and actual record lists and quantities.

The KASFO has managed records, including academic registers of closed universities, since 2013, but submission obligations, management authority, and scope were clearly defined only after the 2020 revision of Private School Act, Article 48, Paragraph 2, and its Enforcement Decree, Article 18. The KASFO U-archives opened its doors in 2023. For universities closed before the revision, enforcement and awareness were weak, and the non-retroactivity of law makes applying new regulations to past cases difficult. The KASFO preserves important records for over 30 years under Article 30, Paragraph 2 of the Enforcement Decree of the Public Records Management Act, but there are no rules on storage facilities, resulting in

inadequate management.

Some private universities also had poor internal record systems before closure, causing improper transfers. Universities producing over 1,000 records annually or holding more than 5,000 records must establish an archive and assign professional staff under the Public Records Management Act. In practice, few universities comply. According to data provided to Representative Go Min-jung by the National Archives on September 4, 2025, of 241 private universities required to assign professional staff, 157 had none and 23 did not disclose archive status. The KASFO managing records for 22 closed universities currently has only three professional staff, making systematic management very difficult.

### **Prospect 2** Record Management Through Digital Archives

A major challenge in managing records from closed universities is addressing gaps from before the 2020 amendment of the Private School Act, Article 48, Paragraph 2, and its Enforcement Decree, Article 18, which clarified submission obligations, management authority, and record scope. The KASFO has taken a proactive approach, collecting records not submitted at closure. Since 2023, the KASFO has requested donations from closed university operators and strengthened on-site monitoring. A KASFO on-site inspection in January 2024 found one university still holding original records, and by June, 15 additional academic and organizational records were secured with the university foundation's consent. As the dedicated agency for closed university records, the KASFO continues to collect valuable records, ensuring ongoing management improvements.

Universities hold extensive records reflecting long histories and member activities. As closures increase, physical storage limitations have become apparent, and digital archiving has emerged as a solution. Kim Song, Kim Nu-ri, and Yang Dong-min in "A Study on the Digitization Strategies for Records from Closed Universities" (2025) highlighted storage capacity issues and proposed digitization. Hong Min-jung in "A Study on Methods of Collecting Closed School Records and Improving Preservation Management Systems" (2024) emphasized that digital archives reduce management disparities, provide consistent procedures, save space

through authorized disposal of originals, and reduce transfer risks. Under Article 43, Paragraph 1 of the Enforcement Decree of the Public Records Management Act, originals can be destroyed after electronic copies are stored. Expanding digital archives is expected to reduce physical storage burdens, and the KASFO actively pursues digitization.

Independent online record systems at universities complicate digitization. The KASFO created U-ERP for private universities, its online repository, but utilization remains low. The U-ERP allows easier transfer of scattered records. During the closure of International University of Korea, 120,000 administrative records, including accounting and personnel data, were successfully transferred to the KASFO and standardized for public access, enabling graduates to retrieve certificates and records. Jin Min-su in "Closing Private University Records Management Status and Improvement Measures" (2023) noted that unifying all university systems into a single repository is impractical and recommended establishing at least guideline-level unified principles for digital record management.



### **Faculty and Staff Suffering from Unpaid Wages**

### **Phenomenon 3** Unsellable Universities and Unpaid Wages

The primary cause of bankruptcy or closure in private universities is financial distress. As Kim Yong Hyun, Managing Partner Attorney at Baruljung Law Firm, explains, "Bankruptcy or closure itself signifies financial collapse, so unpaid wages are an inevitable outcome." Once the MOE designates a university as being in financial crisis, the institution is required to submit a restructuring plan, which may include closure. With the approval of the board and authorization from the ministry, the closure is finalized, followed by liquidation procedures to settle overdue debts such as unpaid wages. Despite closures to resolve financial difficulties, unpaid wages often remain unresolved or worsen. Payment is nearly impossible if assets are unsold. The *Kukmin Daily* reported on September 15, 2020, that Sunghwa College tried to sell assets for 8.2 billion won (US\$ 59,566,774.38), half of



▲ Faculty and staff from a Gyeongju University protest against unresolved unpaid wages.

the appraised value, but staff could only be paid after the sale. Similarly, International University of Korea, closed in 2023, faced 10 failed public auctions in 2024 and three auctions in 2025 at nearly half of the 54 billion won (US\$ 37,842,421.37) appraised value, but no buyers appeared.

Delays in liquidation cause massive wage arrears. The 2020 Inspection of State Administration confirmed that Seonam University owed 36.6 billion won (US\$ 25,648,752.26), Sunghwa College 980 million won (US\$ 686,769.87), and Hanzhong University 44.8 billion won (US\$ 31,395,194.03), totaling 82.38 billion won (US\$ 57,730,716.16). Subsequent closures reported unpaid wages: Dong Pusan College 5.557 billion won (US\$ 3,903,375.69) in 2020, International University of Korea 22 billion won (US\$ 15,417,282.78) in 2023, and Jeju International University 30 billion won (US\$ 21,023,567.43) in 2025. A 2022 EBS survey of 78 professors from closed universities found 46.8 percent cited unpaid wages as the biggest problem, with some facing severe family issues including divorce.

Research by former Sunghwa College professor Kim Jeong-hee in 2017 found 64 percent of 44 faculty members from closed universities suffered mental health issues, including depression or suicidal thoughts. Seo Yun-ho's 2020 study, "The Status of Faculties and the Autonomy of University in Accordance with the Change of University," noted many faculty faced long-term wage arrears. As private university employees in the private school pension, they were ineligible for employment insurance and government unemployment benefits, leaving them unprotected against financial and psychological stress. Some faculty developed social withdrawal due to mental trauma. Unpaid wages continue to severely affect the lives and mental health of faculty and staff even after universities close to resolve financial difficulties.

### Cause 3 Delays in University Property Liquidation

Unpaid wages at closed universities persist mainly due to delays in liquidation caused by difficulties selling university property. Legally, when a university corporation can no longer fulfill its purpose, it must dissolve and sell assets, including land, converting them to cash to settle debts such as unpaid wages under the Private School Act, Article 42. Closed universities generally pay overdue wages from property liquidation proceeds.

For regular employees, unpaid wages are legally entitled to priority repayment of three months' wages and three years' retirement benefits under Labor Standards Act, Article 38, Paragraph 2, and the Act on the Guarantee of Employees' Retirement Benefits, Article 12, Paragraph 2. Similarly, closed university staff are entitled to the same priority, and the KASFO's liquidation guide specifies these amounts as first priority. However, actual payment requires selling basic assets such as real estate and reserves, so delays in liquidation make wage repayment practically impossible.

A key problem is low demand for closed university campuses, often located in small provincial cities with low land values and limited nearby amenities. Kim Han-soo, professor of Business Management at Kyonggi University, noted in his 2018 study, "The Plan for Effective Utilization of the Assets of a Closed University," that closed universities frequently cannot be sold even at half the appraised value due to limited accessibility and usable facilities. Attorney Kim said, "School facilities are designed for special purposes, making demolition and reconstruction necessary. However, due to the accompanying approval and licensing procedures, the buildings cannot be used immediately after purchase, which reduces their appeal. School sites are generally very large, making it difficult to acquire the entire property and launch new projects, thereby lowering demand." Furthermore, unpaid wages accrue late payment interest. Under the Labor Standards Act, interest starts 14 days after the unpaid wages become due and continues until payment. Unpaid wages and retirement benefits accrue interest at an annual rate of 20 percent. This interest increases the total debt over time, making it even harder for staff to receive the full amount they are owed.

### Prospect 3 Local Governments' Purchase and Utilization of Closed Universities

Closed university campuses often have low accessibility and utilization potential, making them difficult for private buyers to acquire. As a result, liquidation procedures are frequently delayed. To address this, local government acquisition and use based on public interest have been proposed. The 2022 KASFO report, *Current Status and Challenges of Policies on Closed Universities*, recommended that local governments seek early approval to repurpose campuses as community resources, including senior care facilities, research parks, renewable energy sites, and corporate or public training centers. This could reduce regional economic decline and create opportunities for local revitalization. Kim Han-soo, a professor at Kyonggi University, also noted in his 2018 study, “Measures for the Efficient Utilization of University Closure Assets,” that considering regional characteristics and local support, campuses could be converted into senior care centers, resorts, research parks, lifelong learning centers, or public training facilities.

The Structural Reform Bill of Private Universities, effective August 2026, institutionalizes such initiatives by allowing national and local governments to support closures, dissolutions, and liquidations. Under Article 23, Paragraph 1, the government or local authorities may acquire assets used for education to facilitate smooth closures or dissolutions. Previously, restricted asset sales hindered liquidation, but local government purchases now enable faster closure completion. Under Article 24, Paragraph 2, when acquiring or leasing land for public projects, authorities must prioritize assets of closing private universities or dissolving school corporations, based on the Act on Acquisition of and Compensation for Land for Public Works Projects and structural reform plans. This

framework allows local governments to actively acquire and utilize closed campuses, enabling smoother liquidation.

Several local governments are already implementing plans. In 2024, Gangjin, a county just over 380 km south of Seoul, announced a project to transform the 2012-closed Sunghwa College campus into a youth entrepreneurship hub. The county acquired the site and plans to invest 33 billion won (US\$ 23,125,924.17) to establish a startup community, including incubator support, startup attraction, and a drone zone. The focus is on attracting Fourth Industrial Revolution companies using internet and wireless technologies. Similarly, the former Tamra University campus in Jeju, a city just over 500 km south of Seoul will be developed as the Jeju Space Industry Cluster, led by Jeju from October 2025. The project will invest approximately 113.3 billion won (US\$ 79,399,006.33), including acquisition costs, to create a 300,000-square-meter industrial complex for space, Research and Development, knowledge, Information Technology, and high-tech industries. Although still in planning or experimental stages, expanding local government roles in utilizing closed campuses could provide an alternative to traditional private-dependent liquidation.



▲ The main gate of the now closed Hanmin Academy restricts entry, symbolizing the end of the institution.

Even after a university closes, students, alumni, and faculty continue to suffer. While past closures often stemmed from corruption and financial mismanagement, future ones will be driven mainly by declining enrollment due to low birth rates. The number of college-age students is projected to fall from 820,000 in 2000 to 260,000 in 2040, leaving over 200,000 seats unfilled. University closures will thus shift from isolated private cases to a structural challenge for Korean higher education. To minimize harm and social disruption, institutional safeguards for students' learning rights, proper record management, and compensation for unpaid wages must be firmly established. 

johiden@hufs.ac.kr



# The Long Echo of a Siren: Firefighters' Hidden Wounds

By Lee Seeun

Editor of Theory & Critique Section

On August 10, 2025, firefighter Park, in his 30s, who had been suffering from depression after being dispatched to the 10.29 Tragedy\* site, disappeared after leaving a note apologizing to his friends and family. His family reported him missing to the police, hoping for his return, but he was found dead 10 days later, on August 20. The next day, on August 21, it was confirmed that another firefighter, firefighter Nam, had also died after responding to the 10.29 Tragedy. Firefighter Nam, in his 40s, from the Goseong Fire Station in South Gyeongsang Province, was found dead at his home on July 29 while on medical leave. With the successive deaths of firefighters who had been dispatched to the disaster, national attention turned toward the need for psychological support for firefighters.

According to the National Fire Agency (NFA), as of 2023, more than four out of ten firefighters experienced mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or sleep disorders. Yet in 2024, only 102 counseling personnel were assigned to serve 66,048 firefighters nationwide, handling 79,453 counseling sessions in total, an average of 779 cases per counselor. The film *The Firefighters*, released in December 2024, vividly illustrates the psychological challenges firefighters face and the lack of sufficient support systems. The Argus, marking Firefighters' Day on November 9, focuses on their psychological struggles, using the film as a lens to examine how future policy and public attitudes should evolve to better understand and address the mental health burdens carried by firefighters.

\*10.29 Tragedy: It is a deadly crowd crush that occurred on October 29, 2022, when a large crowd celebrating Halloween in Itaewon, Seoul, surged into a narrow alley, killing 159 people and injuring 195.

## [Before Reading] *The Firefighters* (2024)

*The Firefighters* is based on the 2001 Hongje-dong arson incident in Seodaemun District, Seoul, where six firefighters lost their lives and three were injured after the landlord's son set fire to a multi-family home. The tragedy heightened national attention on the poor working conditions of firefighters and became a turning point for improving firefighting equipment and command systems. At the time, firefighters were wearing water-resistant suits instead of fire-protective gear, and government funding was insufficient. In 2020, 19 years after the incident, all firefighters in South Korea were finally granted the status of national civil servants. The film depicts the sacrifice and dedication of firefighters through this real event. Rookie rescuer Choi Cheol-woong of the Seoul West Fire Station joins veterans, Jung Jin-seop and Kang In-gi, to respond to various fire scenes. With the goal of saving everyone, the team battles through repeated emergencies, but when a massive fire breaks out, the situation spirals into an uncontrollable crisis.





## Firefighters' Sense of Duty

In the film, firefighters from the Seoul West Fire Station rush into the restroom immediately after returning from a call, only to hear another alarm before they arrive. Without hesitation, they run back out and climb onto the fire truck. In another scene, firefighters respond to a call only to find the road to the burning building blocked by illegally parked cars. Unable to drive in, they shoulder heavy equipment and sprint toward the building. The same is true when they enter the flames. They charge inside with a single thought in mind: to save lives. What drives them to rush into such danger is not the absence of fear but a profound sense of mission and responsibility in their work.

This sense of duty is not confined to the film. It was also evident in the 2001 Hongje-dong arson incident, on which the film is based. After the first fire report was received, more than 20 fire trucks and 46 firefighters from the nearby Seoul West Fire Station and others were dispatched. However, illegally parked cars blocked the narrow alley, preventing the trucks from entering. Firefighters began firefighting operations by dragging hoses 150 meters from the scene. Rescue teams, carrying equipment weighing over 25 kilograms, ran nearly 200 meters to reach the site. Within about five minutes of starting the operation, they successfully evacuated seven people, including the homeowner and tenants. But when the homeowner, surnamed Sun, insisted that his son was still inside, three firefighters entered the building, which was already engulfed in flames, though no one was found and the initial search ended. Sun then protested, demanding to know

why they would not save a person still inside. On that single word that there was someone to be rescued, 10 firefighters rushed back into the house, even though they were wearing water-resistant gear instead of fire-protective suits. The aging structure could not withstand the heat and eventually collapsed, burying all 10 firefighters. Rescue efforts continued after the collapse, but six of the trapped firefighters were later pulled out unconscious and pronounced dead after being transported to the hospital. One of the survivors, firefighter Kwon Young-cheol, recalled in the SBS program, *The Story of the Day When the Tail was Bitten*, aired on November 10, 2022, that although operating in extreme heat was nearly impossible, information that a family member was trapped inside was something they trusted completely. He said that when they hear that, firefighters go in two, three, even four times, until they are absolutely sure.

How do firefighters maintain their sense of duty and overcome fear in the line of duty? According to “Moderating Effect of Vocational Calling on Firefighters’ Stress and Burnout” (2020) by Choi Hae-youn, professor of the Department of Counseling at the Korea Counseling Graduate University, those in the public sector, such as firefighters and police officers, show a distinct tendency to prioritize internal rewards such as altruism, public service motivation, and a sense of achievement, over external rewards such as financial compensation. These psychological resources can strongly contribute to organizational performance. Among them, firefighting has the distinctive nature of assuming risks and even accepting the possibility of sacrifice in order to protect the safety and property of citizens. The ethos of the fire service is built on duty: dedication and sacrifice toward the nation and the people, cooperation and trust within the organization, and a personal sense of mission and pride. This spirit is expressed in Article 2 of the 119 Firefighters’ Code, also known as the Firefighting Spirit, which reflects the organization’s emphasis on a sense of calling.

Calling refers to a purpose-driven attitude toward one’s work, recognized as a source of meaning in life and a sense of contributing to society. It provides a feeling of personal fulfillment and motivates individuals to devote themselves to socially meaningful tasks. Those with a strong sense of calling find accomplishment in their work itself, regardless of whether it brings substantial financial benefits or external recognition, and they demonstrate passion and initiative. Calling enhances self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, increases job satisfaction



▲ Firefighters search through the collapsed structure during the 2001 Hongje-dong arson incident in Seoul.

## Morpheus

and organizational commitment, and fosters attachment and dedication to the organization.

Why, then, do firefighters tend to have such a strong sense of calling? In “The Antecedents of Sense of Calling” (2016), Kim Yu-ri, associate professor of Business Administration of Sejong University, surveyed 328 employees across various companies nationwide to identify factors that heighten a sense of calling. These factors were divided into personal and external elements. The first personal factor is work values, which refer to the ultimate goals an individual seeks to achieve through their work. Work values are divided into extrinsic values, such as concern for financial income, and intrinsic values, such as pride in one’s work. Extrinsic values were found to have no significant effect on a sense of calling, whereas intrinsic values, such as pride in one’s work and the inherent value of the work itself, did have an effect. In fact, according to “An Empirical Study of Influencing Factors Affecting the Morale of Fire Officers” (2019), research on firefighter organizations showed that self-realization factors such as pride and dignity had a positive effect of 0.313 on morale. This indicates that firefighters draw a strong sense of calling from the intrinsic value of saving lives.

The second factor is work orientation, which reflects the degree to which an individual considers work important in their life. Those with a high work orientation strongly identify with their job, prioritize it above other aspects of life, and willingly take on overtime or holiday work. Similarly, individuals with a strong sense of calling view their work as the most important part of their identity. Studies on firefighters confirm that those with a high sense of calling show lower levels of burnout, which can lead to vulnerabilities in mental health such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, or substance abuse, compared to those with a low sense of calling. Even when stress increases, their burnout rises only modestly, enhancing both job persistence and resilience. The final personal factor is intrinsic motivation, which refers to the drive to create social well-being by considering others before oneself. Individuals with a strong sense of calling likewise believe that through their work they can make the world a better place.

An external factor is transformational leadership. Transformational leadership refers to raising subordinates’ current level of needs to a higher level by appealing to values such as freedom, equality, justice, peace, or humanitarianism. It is a process that motivates individuals to achieve results beyond

their personal interests and expectations, directly fostering their confidence, encouraging greater effort in their work, and inspiring them to deliver outcomes that exceed expectations. Research has shown that transformational leadership also has a significant impact on a sense of calling. Transformational leaders instill confidence in their subordinates, motivating them to devote more energy to their work and achieve results beyond what is expected. Through emotional identification with their team members, such leaders go beyond the role of a superior to also act as mentors, empowering their subordinates. These characteristics directly influence employees who possess a sense of calling.

However, the very sense of responsibility strengthened by these conditions also makes firefighters more vulnerable to PTSD. Professor Ahn Hyun-nie of Ewha Womans University, Department of Psychology explained, “Firefighters often ask themselves, ‘This is my duty, this is what I was trained for, so why am I trembling, why do I keep having nightmares, and why do I keep evaluating myself so negatively?’ These feelings turn into guilt. Because the work environment for firefighters emphasizes that everyone must be strong, such emotions are dismissed as personal weakness. In reality, these are common PTSD symptoms, but within this kind of work culture, it becomes extremely difficult for firefighters to speak up or seek help.” Professor Ahn’s remarks highlight just how vulnerable firefighters are to PTSD within their occupational environment.



### PTSD Deeply Ingrained in Daily Life

In the film, *Cheol-woong*, a member of the 119 Rescue Team at the Seoul West Fire Station, responds to a fire call with his fellow firefighters and begins searching for victims. In the kitchen, they find a woman, but soon receive orders to prepare for evacuation because a room containing liquefied petroleum gas poses an explosion risk. Yet Captain Jin-seop notices family photos on the refrigerator and becomes convinced that a child must still be inside. He decided to stay behind with firefighter Yong-tae to search for the child. They eventually located the child in the bathroom, but as the fire spread too rapidly for them to escape downstairs, they attempted to flee to the rooftop using a ladder truck. During the process, the staircase collapsed, and Yong-tae managed to save only the

child before falling into the flames. Witnessing this, Captain Jin-seop was left traumatized by the fact that he could not save his colleague. For Cheol-wong, who became a firefighter at the encouragement of Yong-tae, his senior from military service, returning to the neighborhood where Yong-tae lost his life triggered flashbacks of that day, leaving him vomiting, crying, and suffering from severe trauma.



▲ Firefighter Yong-tae falls amid flames and debris in a scene from *The Firefighters*.

Firefighters are repeatedly exposed to situations that most people may never experience in their lifetime, such as witnessing multiple deaths, and as a result they suffer from trauma. Trauma refers to a single event, multiple events, or a series of circumstances that are physically and emotionally harmful or threatening to an individual, with lasting negative effects on their physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Trauma can lead to various adverse health outcomes, one of the most significant being PTSD. According to the Firefighters' Mental Health Survey conducted by the NFA in 2024, out of 61,087 respondents, 4,375 reported experiencing PTSD. The criteria set by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1994 specify that for an event to qualify as trauma for a PTSD diagnosis, two conditions must be met: the event must involve actual or threatened death, serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others; and the person exposed must have responded with intense fear, helplessness, or horror. At this point, whether an event qualifies as traumatic enough to cause PTSD is determined entirely by subjective standards. Professor Ahn explained, "In the past, events were sometimes categorized as natural disasters, human-caused accidents, or incidents involving actual death or the threat of death. However, research has shown that these distinctions don't hold much meaning. What matters is not the event itself, but how the individual perceives it." So, what kinds of incidents are most likely to trigger trauma for firefighters? In "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Firefighters" (2008) by Chung Young-ki,

professor of the Department of Psychiatry at Ajou University College of Medicine, common traumatic incidents reported by firefighters included the death of a child, the death of a colleague during duty, the death of a patient under their care, experiencing violence directed at themselves, feeling severe threats to their own safety, witnessing violence against others, and accidents involving mass casualties.

How are the traumatic events experienced by firefighters processed over time, and how do they lead to PTSD? Traumatic memories begin to form immediately after an incident, and this process takes place during the stage of post-traumatic cognitive appraisal. Unlike ordinary memories, traumatic memories are stored in fragmented pieces with poor coherence and context, as they are linked to the formation of mental loss and fear networks. During this process, if a person makes positive cognitive evaluations or uses adaptive coping strategies, the traumatic memory can gradually be integrated into autobiographical memory. However, when the event is interpreted negatively, the memory remains as a persistent threat stimulus, leading to PTSD symptoms.

Professor Ahn explained, "The cognitive process following a trauma can be understood along a temporal flow: before the trauma, immediately before, during, immediately after, and long after the event." To understand how individuals perceive a traumatic event, one must first consider what kind of thinking patterns they had before it occurred. "Before a trauma, the pre-trauma stage, it is important to look at what kind of cognitive pattern a person habitually holds. People who react to minor stress by thinking, 'It's my fault,' or 'I'm not good enough,' differ greatly from those with balanced thinking patterns. These differences can determine whether PTSD develops or not," professor Ahn said. At this pre-trauma stage, the individual's deep-seated beliefs, or core cognitions, may not appear in everyday life but are triggered under stress, distorting one's perception of events. Whether the belief is overly positive or negative, its rigidity becomes a major vulnerability factor. Those who hold unrealistically positive beliefs about themselves or the world may find such beliefs shattered by trauma, while those with pessimistic beliefs are likely to have their negativity further reinforced.

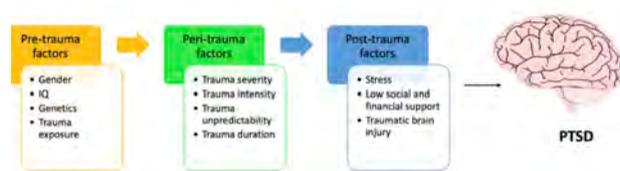
The next phase, peri-trauma, refers to the moments immediately before and after the event. For example, in a bus accident, the instant when the bus starts to tilt represents the peri-trauma stage. Cognitive appraisal, the process by which

## Morpheus

people interpret and evaluate their experiences, plays a crucial role here. Professor Ahn explained, “We constantly interpret and evaluate our experiences. People instinctively turn what they go through into a story, a narrative, because that gives them a sense of control. What matters is not whether the narrative is factual, but whether it makes sense to us. We regain stability when we can link causes and consequences in a way that feels meaningful.” During this peri-trauma stage, individuals might think about whether they should act. For instance, whether to warn the driver. These fleeting thoughts become the foundation for later narratives. “People often believe they remember what they were thinking at that moment, but in reality, many of those details are reconstructed later as part of a narrative, not as factual memory,” professor Ahn added.

The next phase is the trauma moment itself. “During the traumatic moment, memory is almost entirely lost due to dissociation, a survival mechanism shared by mammals. In moments of extreme pain, the mind detaches from the body, as if the soul were separating from it,” professor Ahn explained, describing why survivors often cannot recall what happened at the peak of the event. Immediately after the accident, when consciousness briefly returns, the second peri-trauma phase begins. At this point, cognitive appraisal again occurs, determining how the individual interprets their emotions and responses. This stage has the highest predictive power for PTSD prognosis. “Those who evaluate their reaction as shame tend to develop depressive symptoms, while those who interpret it as fear exhibit greater anxiety and PTSD,” professor Ahn noted. Some individuals, overwhelmed by confusion, develop self-blaming or helpless cognitive patterns, which intensify the symptoms.

Finally, the post-trauma stage encompasses all memories formed after the immediate aftermath of the event. “Cognition is the process of building a narrative at each point in the timeline. How a person constructs these narratives ultimately shapes the post-trauma stage, in which all experiences interlock to form the cognitive patterns that sustain PTSD,” Professor Ahn said, explaining how post-traumatic thoughts maintain the disorder. “As therapy progresses, patients must eventually face the memories they have long avoided, and it is the therapist’s role to help them see those memories objectively,” Professor Ahn added, explaining how understanding the cognitive process of PTSD can help.



▲ Factors influencing PTSD are divided into pre-trauma, peri-trauma, and post-trauma stages, showing how experiences across time interact to shape the disorder.

©Genomics of Brain Disorders 2.0



### Approaches to Addressing PTSD

What do firefighters go through if they have PTSD? According to the APA, PTSD symptoms fall into four major categories, and these symptoms must persist for more than one month after the traumatic event. The first category is intrusion symptoms, which involve the repeated, involuntary, and distressing re-experiencing of the traumatic event. These take four forms: intrusive and distressing memories of the event; recurrent dreams related to the event’s content or emotions; dissociative reactions in which the person feels or acts as if the event is happening again, sometimes losing awareness of his or her current surroundings; and intense psychological distress or physiological reactions when exposed to internal or external cues symbolizing or resembling the trauma. The second category is avoidance symptoms, characterized by persistent efforts to avoid trauma-related stimuli. This includes attempts to avoid distressing thoughts, feelings, or conversations about the event, as well as efforts to avoid people, places, activities, objects, or situations that trigger reminders of the trauma. The third category is negative alterations in cognition and mood, which begin or worsen after the traumatic event. These symptoms include memory impairment, persistent negative beliefs, distorted cognitions leading to self-blame or blaming others, a persistent negative emotional state, diminished interest in activities, feelings of detachment or estrangement, and difficulty experiencing positive emotions. The final category is marked alterations in arousal and reactivity. These include irritable or aggressive behavior, angry outbursts, hypervigilance, an exaggerated startle response, and difficulties with concentration.

What impact does PTSD have on firefighters? Unlike

isolated incidents, firefighters' traumatic experiences are repetitive and cumulative in nature. PTSD has consistently been reported to negatively affect overall job performance. Those with PTSD tend to show lower job satisfaction, higher rates of absenteeism due to symptoms, and an increased likelihood of early retirement. A Japanese study on firefighter organizations found that the more severe the PTSD symptoms, the higher the levels of burnout and job stress, and the lower the perceived social support from colleagues, family, and others. In particular, the core dimensions of burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, were found to be significantly linked to PTSD symptoms and job stress. A decline in quality of life is also evident. A survey of firefighters in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, confirmed that PTSD reduced overall quality of life. Furthermore, PTSD has been associated with increased risks of depression and substance use, as well as reduced coping capacity for chronic stress. These consequences extend beyond individual suffering to organizational impact, creating workforce shortages, loss of expertise, and heightened secondary stress among colleagues, all of which contribute to indirect costs in fire service operations.

The impact of PTSD extends beyond the individual firefighter to the family system. Those suffering from PTSD often express anger, irritability, cynicism, negative emotions, and at times even violence within the home. Although the sample size was small and it was unclear whether all participants' spouses had PTSD, interviews with 21 wives of firefighters who responded to the September 11 attacks found that 24 percent reported problems in their marriages. Stress experienced

by firefighters on duty can be transmitted to their families, leading to secondary PTSD within the household. Family members of firefighters repeatedly exposed to horrific incidents may visualize the events their loved ones experienced and, in turn, relive those images themselves. In other words, even without directly witnessing or experiencing the trauma, family members can suffer indirectly from traumatic events. For example, a study of 27 wives of firefighters who responded to the 1995 Oklahoma City federal building bombing found that about half displayed PTSD symptoms related to the bombing.

How, then, can firefighters with PTSD be supported? According to "The Relationship Between PTSD Symptoms and Posttraumatic Growth in Firefighters: The Dual Mediating Effects of Emotional Recognition Clarity and Emotional Self exposure" (2025) by Hwang Chang-Ui, Doctoral Program Graduate of Kyungpook National University Department of Education, PTSD does not necessarily lead only to pathological outcomes; depending on an individual's ability to regulate and express emotions, it can also become an opportunity for growth. The study surveyed 415 field firefighters working in Metropolitan city and found that the negative impact of PTSD on post-traumatic growth could be partially explained by emotional clarity and emotional self-disclosure. Among these, the mediating effect of emotional clarity was found to be relatively stronger than that of emotional self-disclosure. These results suggest that interventions aimed at improving emotional clarity may be more effective in alleviating the pathological effects of PTSD symptoms and in promoting post-traumatic growth.

On firefighters' shoulders rests not only the life of an individual but the safety of an entire community. Yet society must ask itself again whether it is truly protecting firefighters. Driven by a strong sense of calling to safeguard lives and public safety, firefighters hurl themselves into the flames day after day, but in the process they bear deep psychological wounds. Repeated exposure to trauma does not remain a matter of ordinary job stress; it develops into PTSD, undermining their job performance and quality of life, and even spreading to their families, causing secondary suffering. Therefore, it is essential to continue studying the psychological mechanisms of firefighters, develop counseling approaches tailored to their needs, and expand the number of trained professionals. Only then can society build systems that truly protect those who risk everything to protect the public. 

*yisuws@hufs.ac.kr*





## A Word to My Younger Self



Kim Si-yon

If I could talk to my past self, I would say, “Do not overthink everything; just try, and do your best.” Looking back, I see that I was always trapped by fear. I often gave up on challenges because I worried about failing or not making it. These were challenges I really needed and that would have been good for me, yet I held back. Also, fear led to anxiety, and anxiety made me feel stuck, sometimes causing me to lose my passion. Now I realize that the fear was bigger in my head than in reality. I would like to tell myself not to get carried away by fleeting worry, but to focus on the moment and give it my all.



Song Eun-seo

Even as a Chinese major, I often told myself, “I’ll study later,” and kept postponing studying. If I had consistently worked on basic conversations and vocabulary, I would now speak far more naturally, but what remains is regret. To my past self, I would say, “Language never improves overnight. Memorize even a single sentence today.” Every moment of delay pushes opportunities further away. Only steady, small steps build the real strength we need.



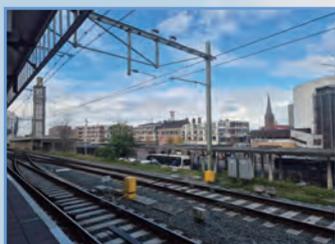
Lee Seeun

When I was young, I was athletic enough to compete in national basketball tournaments, and P.E. was my favorite subject at school. I enjoyed sports so much that I practiced a lot, which made me physically strong. I always thought that my strength would last, but since high school I have hardly exercised. Accordingly, my stamina has quickly declined, and now my lack of fitness is interfering with my daily life. I have come to realize, in the harshest way, that exercise is something one must always value.



### Jo Hae-deun

My father would take me on short morning rides around our neighborhood every day, each of us on our own bicycle. As a pre-high school student, I gradually put off these outings instead prioritizing other tasks, and what had been a daily morning riding ritual became less frequent. After his knee surgery in my third year of middle school, we could no longer enjoy those rides together. Looking back, I painfully realize that those rides were my only chance to make memories with him. I wish I could tell my younger self not to complain and to explore as many streets as possible with my father.



### Kim Yi-eun

I regret giving up too easily without trying. There are many things I gave up on before even giving them a real shot, lacking courage and afraid of failure. I regret not studying harder, not joining more clubs, not having new experiences, and all the things I missed out on by not challenging myself back then. If I could advise my past self, I would say: do not be intimidated by what you have not tried yet and take on as many challenges as possible and experience as much as you can. This is how to create good memories in the future and have opportunities to grow. Do not worry and just go for it.



### Park Se-eun

I used to hold back from trying new things. I would question whether I should speak up or take action and usually ended up doing nothing. I was afraid of failing and nervous about making mistakes, but I have learned that avoiding challenges only keeps me from growing and moving forward. Now I see failure as a part of the journey, a step toward learning and becoming better. I want to tell my past self not to fear taking risks and to embrace every opportunity to try new things.

## Special Thanks to

Prof. Ahn Hyun-nie, Prof. Lee Ji-yeon, Lecturer. Baik Jong-wan, and Managing Partner Attorney Kim Yong-hyun



The Argus  
[www.theargus.org](http://www.theargus.org)