South Korea's plan for AI-powered tablets in schools faces parental backlash

Financial Times Europe
20 ago 2024
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South Korea's plan to introduce artificial intelligence-powered textbooks in schools has provoked a backlash from parents and academics concerned about children's exposure to digital devices and potential misinformation.

Education minister Lee Ju-ho said this week that tablets loaded with AI features were "pivotal" to a planned overhaul of the Korean school system.

The technology is set to be introduced next year into classrooms for schoolchildren as young as eight.

But the proposal, which the government says is the first of its kind, has met opposition from many parents already anxious about the amount of time their children spend using smartphones and tablets.

South Korea consistently ranks among the highest-performing countries in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment tests. However, the government is worried that an emphasis on rote-learning is stifling innovation at a time when the country is seeking to reduce dependence on traditional manufacturing industries.

"We can all agree that we need to move from a one-way, memorisation-based classroom to a space where students can engage and take ownership of their learning," said Lee, adding "2025 is a pivotal year for that change, and we need to leverage AI textbooks to help teachers transform their lessons."

According to the education ministry, the tablets will be customisable so that "fast learners" and "slow learners" can be assessed by the software and given different AI-generated tasks with varying levels of complexity.

But few details have been provided on how the digital textbooks — and other AI-powered education tools being developed by Korean tech businesses including LG and Samsung — will work or how the system will be prevented from AI's tendency to "hallucinate" or produce errors.

The AI apps will be introduced for all subjects except music, art, physical education and ethics by 2028, with teachers monitoring activity through a digital dashboard. Pupils will

be given classes in digital literacy to help them deploy AI tools responsibly.
"AI textbooks will enable teachers to evaluate each student's study level and pace based on their data, and provide a tailored education for each one of them," an official said.

Many pupils "tend to fall asleep in class, as some of them already learnt the content in private cram schools and others just fail to follow the lessons".

Soon "they will be able to think outside the box, as AI textbooks provide various content for any situation and induce their interest in study and help them think creatively".

Other AI tools to be introduced to classrooms include programmes that transcribe a teacher's remarks on to an electronic whiteboard while they roam the classroom.

The country has piloted mobile robots offering AI-generated responses to pupils' inquiries.

Many are wary of the proposals. Shin Kwang-young, professor of sociology at Chung-Ang university in Seoul, said the government was trying to introduce the AI textbooks "too hastily, without properly assessing the side-effects, just because AI is a megatrend".

More than 50,000 parents have signed a petition demanding that the government give greater consideration to pupils' overall wellbeing.

"We, as parents, are already encountering many issues at unprecedented levels arising from [children's] exposure to digital devices," the petition read.

Lee Sun-young, a 41-year-old Seoulbased mother of two school-age sons, said she would prefer to see more afterschool teachers hired to help pupils than AI textbooks.

"I am worried that too much usage of digital devices could negatively affect their brain development, concentration span, and ability to solve problems. They already use smartphones and tablets too much."

The introduction of AI textbooks has been welcomed by many in the profession, with 54 per cent of state schoolteachers surveyed by the Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations expressing support.

The move goes against the trend in other developed countries where governments have sought to restrict or roll back children's access to smartphones and tablets in schools.

AI in the classroom risked "getting out of control", said Shin, given the potential spread of false information, plagiarism and leaks of pupils' personal data.

Addressing legitimate concerns about rote-learning required "properly" overhauling the system, including examination methods, Shin said.