

Developing and Validating a Social-Emotional Learning Program for University Students in South Korea

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Abstract

This study aims to develop and validate a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program specifically for university students in South Korea and evaluate its impact on social-emotional competence, academic adjustment, and motivational outcomes through a randomized controlled trial (RCT). While SEL is a globally recognized framework for holistic education, empirical research remains disproportionately focused on K–12 settings (Y. S. Kim and H. S. Kwon, 2015; H. S. Park and H. S. Koh, 2018; J. Gwak and W. Choi, 2025). This study addresses the critical gap in East Asian higher education, where students in South Korea navigate complex developmental transitions, including identity formation and evolving interpersonal dynamics, amid rising mental health concerns. To bridge this gap, the research pursues three interconnected objectives: (1) identifying SEL needs through large-scale surveys and focus group interviews (FGI); (2) developing an evidence-based SEL curriculum tailored to the tertiary level, validated by expert panel reviews; and (3) rigorously evaluating program effectiveness via an RCT. Methodologically, the study employs a three-phase sequential mixed-methods design. Phase I (Needs Analysis) assesses baseline competencies and perceived programmatic requirements; Phase II (Program Development) utilizes a systematic instructional design process to construct a developmentally appropriate SEL curriculum; and Phase III (Experimental Evaluation) randomly assigns participants to either an experimental group or a waitlist control group. Pre-test, post-test, and two-month follow-up assessments are administered to examine both immediate and sustained effects. Statistical analyses, including independent-samples t-tests for baseline equivalence and Repeated Measures ANOVA for interaction effects (Time $\times$ Group), are conducted to ensure robust internal validity. As this study is currently in progress, anticipated findings suggest that the experimental group will demonstrate significant improvements across primary outcomes, such as social-emotional competence, university adjustment, and self-determination motivation, with these gains sustained at the two-month follow-up. Positive shifts in career decision-making maturity and academic achievement are also expected. This study contributes to the international field in three dimensions. Academically, it extends the SEL evidence base into higher education, a domain where RCT-based interventions remain scarce. Methodologically, the longitudinal follow-up assessment addresses the limited attention currently paid to the maintenance of SEL gains. Practically, the study offers a replicable model for adapting Western-developed SEL frameworks to collectivist educational cultures in East Asia. Ultimately, this research informs global policy on competency-based education reform and institutional mental health strategies, fostering dialogue on student well-being across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, higher education, randomized controlled trial, university students, student well-being