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**“Educational Cooperation and Knowledge Sharing with the DPRK: a new Soft-Power Approach? An introduction to four case studies”**

**Abstract**

This paper addresses cooperation in higher education as a form of engagement with North Korea. The majority of experts acknowledge that there will not be any real economic reform in North Korea without an adequate number of well-trained public officials, administrators, and managers to guide the country out of its dire straits. Change in political direction will be just as important and, in this regard, recent studies have shown how the DPRK has manifested its intention to overcome the economic impasse by fostering higher education in IT, economy and science. In the past, North Korea had relied almost exclusively on China to train its most promising students. During the last decade, however, foreign (Western) NGOs and institutions have been allowed to develop educational projects in the DPRK as well as in the US, EU and a few Asian countries. These new initiatives, if properly supported, may deliver significant results in the long run. In this paper, educational exchanges and knowledge sharing with the DPRK are viewed as an exercise of soft power, carried out by independent actors (that is, educational institutions not linked to political organizations in either the US, EU or South Korea); they are understood as a form of engagement which is more likely to succeed, when compared with other vehicles of negotiation. This paper is a first attempt at understanding how much, in terms of knowledge, North Korea has been able to absorb so far and how it could implement newly acquired knowledge within a system that has insofar had the only goal of self-preservation. Before presenting some preliminary conclusion, the first part of the paper will introduce the concepts of capacity building and educational cooperation within the context of engagement with the DPRK. Further, we will briefly cover the current state of higher education in North Korea and then examine four projects of international cooperation with the DPRK at the level of tertiary education: the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), the East-West Coalition & Pyongyang Project (EWC-PP), the academic network of Choson Exchange (CE), and the Cooperation between Syracuse University and the Kim Chaek University of Technology (SU – KCUT).

**Keywords:**

*North Korea, soft power, education, cooperation. Inter-Korean relations, US-DPRK relations.*

**Acknowledgements and foreword**

*Some information reported and analyzed in this article was gathered from conversations with foreign actors who operate with DPRK counterparts on a daily basis, in various different countries. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, at the request of his interviewees the author has agreed to keep confidential most of the details regarding their names, locations, dates or any other information that might compromise their work or an individual's security. Access to well-documented facts about North Korea's network of unofficial diplomacy is difficult to obtain as almost all the institutions involved prefer to maintain a low profile. Although academic practice calls for transparency of sources, doing so in this case would present a risk. The author would nonetheless like to thank his interviewees for providing links and information, as well as sharing useful insights on the importance of educational exchanges and constructive engagement with the DPRK. This paper represents a first step towards a broader research and it is therefore intended as an introduction to the topic, with only a few preliminary conclusions. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the people involved in educational exchanges with the DPRK.*

**Introduction: capacity building and educational exchanges within the context of DPRK's foreign**

### relations. The importance of cultural diplomacy.

The breakout of the first North Korean famine in the early 1990s brought to the world's attention the disastrous situation of what was then an extremely isolated country, where an unfortunate series of climatic events seemed to have caused the death of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people. Nearly two decades later, a wealth of studies<sup>1</sup> has shown that the famine was largely due to a combination of climatic conditions and decades of mismanagement, where the latter had equal, if not predominant weight, as by the end of the 1980's, the DPRK had already lost most of its productive capacity, or in other words, was unable to provide any kind of response to the chronic shortages of energy, food and primary goods, being largely depended on China and the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the 1990's, when China established diplomatic ties with South Korea and the Soviet Union collapsed, the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 left North Korea directionless, even more isolated than before and suddenly dependent on external aid. The international community first responded to what looked like an emergency, and in many ways was an emergency, with contingency plans, to avoid further deaths. As the years went by however, it became clear that humanitarian aid alone would not solve the problems of North Korea, and that the country lied in desperate need of capacity building, to restore some degree of self-sufficiency and attempt economic reforms.

The notion of capacity building in education, with particular regard for developing countries, has been promoted since the 1992's UNCED, which outlined its main characteristics and objectives: “[capacity building] encompasses the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities. A fundamental goal of capacity building is to enhance the ability to evaluate and address the crucial questions related to policy choices and modes of implementation among development options, based on an understanding of environment potentials and limits and of needs perceived by the people of the country concerned”<sup>2</sup>.

Almost twenty years have passed since the famine's outbreak in 1994, but the need for capacity building in the DPRK is yet to be properly addressed. According to Bernhard Seliger, capacity building has been attempted in North Korea ever since the mid-1990s, as some level of capacity building proved to be necessary for almost any kind of foreign aid due to the country's technological backwardness. Projects organized by several NGOs gradually made their way into the country, however none of these earlier projects was designed to tackle the structural issues that keep the DPRK in a status of permanent alert and aid-dependence.

These efforts, in other words, remained on the technical level and addressed mostly agricultural problems, land erosion and other such issues because this kind of projects are more easily accepted by the North Korean leadership, but they do little to solve the institutional and structural problems that must be addressed for the country to stop living hand to mouth. Aside from the reluctance of the North Korean government to accept anything that would jeopardize their rule, capacity building was, especially during the 1990s, also limited by Western fears that projects providing North Koreans with too much knowledge might perpetuate the regime<sup>3</sup>.

Instead of capacity building, more attention both in politics and the academia was placed on security issues, and the international community tried to deal with North Korea through negotiations on its nuclear program, economic sanctions and humanitarian aid. These three were not separate from one another, and humanitarian aid efforts often depended on the developments of the nuclear negotiations. Not many countries wished to engage with North Korea, but a change in this pattern started to occur around 2001, when a number of Western

<sup>1</sup> For further reference, see, among others: Liem, Ramsay, 'Silent famine in North Korea', *Peace Review*, (1999) 11: 2, pp. 325-331; Ahn, Christine, 'Famine and the Future of Food Security in North Korea', *Food First - Policy Brief* n. 11, May 2005; Noland, Marcus, 'Famine and Reform in North Korea', *IIE Working Papers*, Vol. 5- July 2003, Haggard, Stephan and Noland, Marcus, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reforms*, Columbia University Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> UNCED, Agenda 21's definition, Chapter 37, 'Definition of Capacity Building', UNESCO, Paris, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Seliger, Bernhard, 'Engagement on the Margins: Capacity Building in North Korea', *KEI-Korea's Economy 2009*, Vol 25, pp. 68-74.

countries established diplomatic ties with North Korea, and some new initiatives by NGOs saw the light of day. The establishment of diplomatic relations was crucial for these new initiatives to emerge, because political support is required for capacity-building projects to move beyond technical issues and to address the more fundamental problems, and it is an extremely important factor in determining whether capacity building projects succeed or not<sup>4</sup>.

Among the new initiatives, educational exchanges could be a particularly important instrument of capacity-building. Educational exchange is an umbrella term which includes academic cooperation, cultural visits, scientific information exchange and study tours. In other words, although most of the examples mentioned in this paper are academic exchange programs, the term also encompasses initiatives, that do not lead to specific degrees, but nevertheless contribute to a wider mutual understanding between the DPRK and Western countries. However, it is important to note that exchanges with the DPRK cannot and should not be evaluated with the same criteria as exchange programs with other countries, because of the peculiarity of North Korea's political and economic situation, nor should complete reciprocity and mutual recognition of degrees be a concern at this point in time.

In the context of DPRK's foreign relations, the benefits of educational exchanges can be less tangible and need to be evaluated with a far longer timespan, as they are a way for a growing number of younger North Koreans to gain a more positive idea of the outside world and help rear a new ruling class with new ideas and capacities that could in the future help change the direction of the country. This kind of capacity building, that takes the form of personal contacts and cultural exchange is essentially a form of soft power: as Joseph Nye explains, a foreign student studying in another country will have a more realistic picture of the country that they visit, and will familiarize themselves with new ideas that they can take back to their home country<sup>5</sup>.

Even though soft power is more easily wielded by non-governmental actors than other forms of power, and private sources of soft power are becoming increasingly important in this day and age, governments can easily damage this form of soft power if their foreign policies do not support the building of it<sup>6</sup>. This is all the more true in the case of North Korea. To facilitate educational exchanges, diplomatic ties must be established to allow North Korean students to apply for visas and scholarships.

Friendly ties with the country with which the exchanges take place will also make it easier for North Korean students to go abroad and study, and in the long run, a more relaxed international atmosphere could also help the regime feel more secure in letting them implement some of the knowledge they have gained during their stay abroad. Both inbound and outbound programs are important, because, as Bernhard Seliger states, "every activity that takes North Koreans outside of the country or brings outside expert inside the country, helps open up North Korea"<sup>7</sup>.

The mix of hard power, economic isolation and traditional humanitarian aid strategies has done little to solve the situation, and the basic conviction behind this article is that a more substantial investment in cultural diplomacy is called for. This article introduces four exchange projects as examples of this new form of engagement, and how political support, or the lack thereof, can influence these projects, while also attempting to illustrate that even though North Korea is not about to stop receiving foreign aid any time soon or to radically open up the country overnight, there is considerable interest on the North Korean side to seek new solutions that go beyond short-term fixes and would help the country catch up in terms of science and other forms of knowledge, and that young North Koreans are increasingly open to the idea of studying abroad, despite the bureaucratic and other difficulties that they continue to face. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to provide some basic information on the North Korean education system, human resources, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 73-74.

<sup>5</sup> Nye, Joseph, 'Soft Power and Higher Education' in: *Educause - The Internet and the University Forum 2004*, p 42; the document is available at: <http://net.educause.edu/apps/forum/iuf04.asp?bhcp=1> [accessed Aug 1, 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 44-46.

<sup>7</sup> Seliger, 2009, p. 74.

current economic possibilities available in the country.

Therefore, the first section will outline the characteristics of the higher education system in the country, while the second section will present the four exchange projects, to illustrate what types of relations currently occur between foreign educational providers, NGOs, Western institutions and a number of foreign-facing actors in the DPRK. Finally, the last section will offer some preliminary conclusions.

### Higher Education in the DPRK

The organization of higher education in North Korea reflects the socio-economic class system, within which a person's place of residence as well as where he or she can study or hope to be employed is determined by the evaluation of their political and family background. The quality of education differs drastically from one region to another, from the low-ranking remote northeastern provinces to the capital Pyongyang, which is not only the country's business and political center, but also home to the country's best educational institutions.

This is not a feature unique to North Korea: a similar pattern can be observed in Japan, South Korea and some other Asian countries, so that academic institutions in the capital almost automatically enjoy a better ranking than those in the provinces, simply because of their location. In the case of North Korea, however, this is even more true due to the 'chulshin songbun' (출신성분, the 'system of ascribed status' or the social classification system of North Korea), as Pyongyang is recognized as the showcase capital, the city where the elite lives, the place that foreigners visit and that is supposed to provide a glorified image of the country. The greater majority of young North Koreans who can afford (and are politically eligible to) study abroad resides in Pyongyang and is enrolled in one of its major universities.

There are four institutions that outrank all others in terms of prestige in the fields of humanities, economy, science and technology: Kim Il Sung University (which includes the Institute of National Science, also known through South Korean media as 'KAIST in North Korea'), the Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology, the Pyongyang University of Foreign Languages and the Kim Hyung Jik University of Pedagogy. The Koryo Songgyunwan University, located in Kaesong could be considered an exception to this rule: although not as important as its counterparts in Pyongyang, it enjoys a good reputation due to Kaesong being the productive center of North Korea's light industry and the establishment of one of North Korea's special economic zones in its proximity.

It should be noted here that the term 'university' in the North Korean context does not have an immediate equivalent in Western terminology; in fact, the only 'real' university in the DPRK, according to Western standards seems to be Kim Il Sung University, while all the others might be more easily compared to specialized colleges. The difference is not merely nominal, as it reflects the employment opportunities of the graduates of each institution. The graduates of Kim Il Sung University often acquire jobs in the Korean Worker's Party and the government, while the graduates of the other top institutions are treated more like technocrats that can gain key positions within regional administration and ministries<sup>8</sup>.

The system thus allocates graduates to different positions based on their family and political background, with no real consideration for merit<sup>9</sup>. The children of a restricted elite, those at the very top, will almost

<sup>8</sup> See, among others: Cho, Jeong-Ah, *North Korea's Human Resource Development System*, Korea Institute for National Unification, 2006; Lee, Chong Jae - 북한 교육 체제의 특성과 기능 연구 (A Study on the Characteristics and Functions of Education in DPRK) - KEDI working papers, 2003 ; Cho Myung-Chul, Hong Ihk-Pyo, and Kim, Ji-Yeon, 체제전환국의 시장경제교육 경험이 북한에 주는 시사점 (Market-Oriented Economy Education in Transition Countries and Applicability of the Education Experience to North Korea), KIEP Policy Paper, Seoul, 2007 and Cho, Myung-Chul, 北韓 (북한)의 시장경제교육 실태와 南北 (남북) 협력방안 (The current State of Market Economy in North Korea and the Possible Measures of South and North Korean Cooperation), KIEP Policy Paper, Seoul, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, Hyung-Chan, *Human Remolding in North Korea: A Social History of Education*, University Press of America, NY, 2005, p.

automatically be enrolled in Kim Il Sung University and, once graduated, go to form the new ranks of the future leadership; right below in order of importance, a number of young North Koreans from well-to-do families will fill the higher intermediate ranks, and so forth. It is a system that reproduces itself.

In addition to this, the imbalance between objective content and propaganda in academic programs, the lack of adequate materials, up-to-date information and feedback from the international community have made the North Korean higher education system a factory of cadres with outdated knowledge and limited skills. A mechanism that feeds itself, with little to eat from.

There are, however, exceptions to this system and it seems that in recent years the DPRK has become aware of the fact that it needs to acquire knowledge and technologies if it wants to overcome the current stagnation. Despite its present hardship, the country does possess the potential to revive at least some sectors of its economy and to be an appropriate partner, for example, for international IT firms and companies operating within the energy sector. Recent news have revealed how North Korea is indeed advanced in small IT niches and it is starting to attract some interest as a regional outsourcing hub<sup>10</sup>. What is even more important is that the country has dedicated part of its very limited resources to support educational cooperation with numerous Western countries, on nearly every aspect of adult education, retaining a strong focus on IT, economy, foreign languages and science.

These initiatives are rooted in the late 1990's, when the Sunshine policy generated a number of studies geared towards re-defining the DPRK's educational system in view of a gradual reunification. In the last five years however, while South Korea changed its policies towards the DPRK, numerous countries have established or re-defined diplomatic relations with North Korea, paving the way for educational exchange. The cases presented in the next section are, by necessity, explored only on a surface level but they still constitute a sample that could indicate a larger, renewed trend of informal diplomacy towards the DPRK.

### **From Europe to Singapore: four case studies of educational engagement with the DPRK**

The international approach to knowledge sharing with the DPRK has been examined here by analyzing the characteristics and *modus operandi* of four different projects: the East-West Coalition & Pyongyang Project (EWC-PP), the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Choson Exchange (CE), and the research collaboration between Syracuse University and the Kim Chaek University of Technology (SU- KCUT). These four initiatives differ in scope, focus, location, size and period of activity. Nevertheless, they also present important similarities; all of them have obtained significant results in establishing positive relations with different counterparts in the DPRK.

Despite the names of some of these initiatives, not all them feature a real exchange (i.e. a two-way flux of personnel, and data). Of the four cases, the PUST represents the first and certainly most unique example of an international education project, almost entirely funded by private donors, yet developed directly in the DPRK under governmental auspices. Another two, Choson Exchange and the EWC (together with the Pyongyang Project), illustrate the different ways in which NGOs can operate, through a variety of channels, both official and unofficial, to facilitate academic exchange or promote the introduction of new concepts within the DPRK.

Of the two, CE represents a form of ad hoc educational provider for young professionals, while EWC-PP

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nknews.org/2012/07/business-and-outsourcing-in-north-korea/> [Accessed Aug 3, 2012] and Tjia, Paul, 'Emerging Markets Inside the Hermit Kingdom: IT and Outsourcing in North Korea. A Unique Perspective on an evolving Technology Sector', *Viewpoints*, Aug 2012, vol. 55, no. 8; the document is available at: [http://www.gpic.nl/outourcing\\_in\\_North\\_Korea\\_%28CACM%29.pdf](http://www.gpic.nl/outourcing_in_North_Korea_%28CACM%29.pdf) [Accessed Aug 3, 2012].

functions as a bridge between western institutions and North Korean individuals. Finally, the collaboration between Syracuse University and the KCUT is perhaps a more traditional form of exchange, which has delivered positive results and has stood the test of time, despite difficulties caused by tensions in the US-DPRK relationship. The following table summarizes the main characteristics of each project:

<b>Projects</b>	<b>East-West Coalition &amp; Pyongyang Project</b>	<b>Pyongyang University of Science &amp; Technology</b>	<b>Choson Exchange</b>	<b>Exchange between Syracuse University &amp; Kim Chaek University of Technology</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>				
<b>Year established</b>	2009	2001	2009	2001
<b>Categorized/Registered as</b>	NGO, Non for profit	Higher Education Institution (under the auspices of the DPRK's MoE)	NGO, Non for profit	International Project for Research Collaboration
<b>Headquarters/Origin</b>	Canada	USA and South Korea	Singapore	USA
<b>Location of Activities</b>	China, EU and occasionally DPRK	DPRK	Singapore and occasionally DPRK	USA and DPRK
<b>Fully operational since</b>	2009	2010	2010	2003
<b>Funding/Resources</b>	Tuition exchange, private scholarships	NAFEC, Other private donors, ROK MoU	Private Donors	Henry Luce Foundation, R. Lounsbery Foundation, Other private donors
<b>Contacts with DPRK Counterparts</b>	MFA, Rason Tourism Board, CCRFC (occasionally), Others	DPRK MoE	CCRFC, MFA, Others	KS, DPRK Mission to UN in New York, MOE, KCUT
<b>Inbound Programs (taking participants to the DPRK)</b>	Cultural tours/North Korean language courses (mainly run in Northeast China, with occasional visits to the DPRK)	University Programs (BA, MBA, MA)	Seminars (occasional)	Exchange of researchers
<b>Outbound Programs (bringing participants from the DPRK)</b>	Facilitating the enrollment of some North Korean students in academic courses & programs abroad (mainly in China, UK and Switzerland)	None	Seminars, Intensive courses and training sessions (Economy, Fiscal policy, Urban Planning and other topics)	Exchange of researchers (short-term projects only)

Fig. 1: Comparison chart. Four case studies of educational exchanges with the DPRK. Source: by Author.

### **Case 1: The East-West Coalition & Pyongyang Project (EWC-PP)**

The work of the EWC (including the Pyongyang Project) represents an interesting example of interaction between an NGO, international universities (in EU and China) and institutional actors in the DPRK. The EWC aims at providing access to opportunities abroad for those North Koreans who are qualified and able (or, in some cases, assigned by their government) to interact with foreign institutions. At the same time, through its subsidiary Pyongyang Project, the same team is working to introduce more Westerners (professors, students or simply anyone interested in a better understanding of the DPRK) to North Korean culture.

Founded in 2009, the EWC is a Non Governmental Organization registered in Canada under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act. It is also registered in the United States as a tax-exempt 501(c)3 non-profit organization. EWC is headquartered in Yanbian Province, Northeast China: the proximity with North Korea, allows its personnel to travel frequently to the country in order to develop contacts. Both the EWC and Pyongyang Project are run by the same team of professionals and represent, so to speak the two sides of the same coin. The EWC specifies that its action focus is not limited to the sole Korean peninsula, but extends to

the whole NEA region. The organization's activities have been covered by several media, most notably the BBC in 2011<sup>11</sup>.

The organization works on two fronts, with a variety of approaches. On the EWC website, its objectives are identified as follows: “1) *To provide new opportunities in education for students and professors alike. This includes funding fellowships in partnership with local and world renowned institutions, developing creative and comprehensive forums and courses [...]* 2) *To encourage the study of Northeast Asia as an interconnected whole as opposed to focusing on individual countries defined by modern international borders [...]* 3) *To influence both academic as well as political discourse on East-West relations through educational engagement initiatives and informal diplomatic "Track-II" exchanges between state and influential non-state actors*”<sup>12</sup>. Although these may sound like too broad definitions, the EWC-PP activities can be summarized as a combination of inbound and outbound programs (towards and from the DPRK and Northeast Asia).

The first group includes the Tumen Regional Studies and North Korean Language Summer Program, a ten-week intensive North Korean language course focused on the Tumen region (Northeast China and North Korea) for international university students; although the course makes use of North Korean materials and native speakers, it is taught in Yanji, rather than North Korea, due to logistic reasons. The same program is advertised on the Pyongyang Project website as ‘ThiNK - North Korean language program’, with the primary goal of teaching international students North Korean language (조선말) using the Pyongyang standard dialect of the DPRK<sup>13</sup>.

The outbound activities (i.e. abroad education for North Koreans) are classified as ‘fellowships’, and divided in three educational categories for university students, faculty and recent graduates: “1) *Field research grants are assigned to university students to pursue an independent research project in partnership with a local institution in Northeast Asia.* 2) *Teaching fellowships, which are provided to recent university graduates in partnership with local teachers to work at Korean schools in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Northeast China;* and 3) *Academic tuition scholarships for North Korean university students and faculty, designed to afford talented scholars the opportunity to study at renowned universities abroad*”<sup>14</sup>. The latter is perhaps the category that has more recently brought interesting results, and should be analyzed in detail for at least two reasons:

1) The phenomenon of an increasing number of North Koreans studying abroad constitutes an example of how the social structure, the distribution of power and the class system in North Korea could be evolving from a monolithic unity to a more fluid network. The EWC website reports that “Pyongyang is full of curious university students who have the language skills and determination to make study abroad worthwhile, and not just for themselves, but also for the development of the DPRK as a member of the global community”<sup>15</sup>. Sources within the organization have confirmed that younger North Koreans are aware that changes are needed within the educational system, they show zest and curiosity for world events<sup>16</sup> and do reach out for opportunities, if given the chance. It would be too far fetched to claim that the DPRK is experiencing the same kind of “educational fever” that has characterized the South for decades: the selection process is certainly complicated and it limits the number of individuals allowed to study abroad, however, it is undeniable that North Koreans have benefited from more than a decade of renewed diplomatic ties with a number of countries, especially in Europe, by accessing educational opportunities that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12096490> [accessed Aug 3, 2012].

<sup>12</sup> <http://ewco.ca/organization/objectives.html> [accessed Aug 2, 2012].

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pyongyangproject.org/programs.html> [accessed Aug 2, 2012].

<sup>14</sup> Source: East-West Coalition. For further details, please refer to: <http://www.eastwestcoalition.org> [accessed Aug 2, 2012].

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.eastwestcoalition.org/fellowships/academic.html> [accessed Aug 10, 2012].

<sup>16</sup> It is too early to say whether this implies a criticism of the socio-political system: most sources agree that it doesn't, as all north Koreans abroad show a sincere form of patriotism in their conversations with foreigners and most of them interpret their experience abroad as way to learn new skills and contribute to a better future for the DPRK.

2) The same phenomenon shows that, despite the absence of official partnerships between North Korean universities and their Western counterparts, the existence of diplomatic relations with the DPRK and the work of in-between organizations can facilitate exchanges and integration. Examples of North Koreans studying abroad are available among others, in US, Canada, Germany, Italy, France, Sweden, East European countries, Switzerland and the UK. Here, the author would like to illustrate the case of the Chevening scholarships assigned to a few North Koreans by the British FCO through its diplomatic mission in Pyongyang and the occasional synergy of this opportunities with the EWC activities.

The Chevening Scholarships (like other UK educational programmes aimed at the DPRK) is an integral part of the cooperation agenda established when London and Pyongyang normalized their relationship<sup>17</sup>. These scholarships are a prime example of soft power implemented through educational opportunities. They are given to students “with demonstrable potential to become future leaders, decision-makers and opinion formers”<sup>18</sup>, and they mostly cover one-year Masters’ degrees at UK universities. Mrs Karen Wolstenholme, British Ambassador to Pyongyang confirms on the Embassy’s website that the first two Chevening scholars arrived in Cambridge in 2011. The UK, with the help and cooperation of the British Council also operates an English-language teaching programme in various institutions in Pyongyang and has arranged one month language training visits to the UK for North Korean officials<sup>19</sup>.

The presence of two North Koreans at Cambridge indirectly facilitated the arrival of a third one, through the joint efforts of the EWC and the Cambridge University: the EWC has recently sponsored one semester at Cambridge for a young North Korean, who has now returned to the DPRK, after having successfully completed his studies. His status was as that of a “visiting student”, as he was not enrolled on any degree program; he did, however complete all of his courses successfully. In regards to his social life, he enjoyed what any other Cambridge student would, attending dinners, university events and even nights in the pub, without a second thought. He was, in other words, just another student, for most people. Sources report that there was absolutely no difference in treatment, despite the significance of him coming from North Korea; some people even assumed he was simply one of the many South Korean students in the UK. This success story would not have been possible without four determining factors:

- 1) The young North Korean had the opportunity, through a few relatives in the UK, to reach out for information, and managed to get in touch with the EWC.
- 2) Although no official partnership exists between Cambridge University and the EWC, the latter was able through a series of key contacts to facilitate the enrollment process: given the absence of mutual academic standards, Cambridge accepted to interview the student, in order to evaluate his language skills and background and finally admitted him as visiting student.

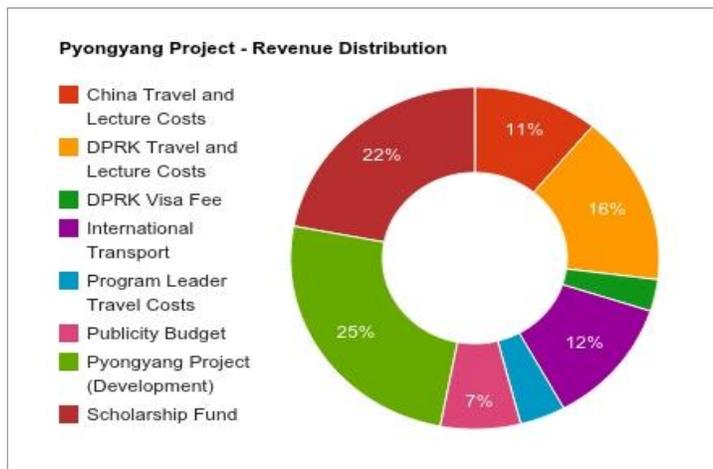
<sup>17</sup> For more information please visit <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/scholarships/chevening/> [accessed Aug 1, 2012].

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/scholarships/chevening/> [accessed Aug 1, 2012].

<sup>19</sup> <http://ukindprk.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/our-embassy/our-ambassador/> [accessed on Aug 1, 2012]. For more information on educational exchanges and other initiatives between the UK and the DPRK, please see: Everard, John, ‘Educational Exchanges with the DPRK: the British (and other) Experiences’, in: Shin, Gi-Wook, and Lee, Karin J., *US-DPRK Educational Exchanges, Assessment and Future Strategy*, The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 127-133. Everard reports numerous examples of fruitful exchanges, from programs dedicated to ELT training in Pyongyang and established in 1997, to important cases of North Korean officials studying in the UK: “two DPRK officials (one of whom now works in the European Department of the DPRK MFA) attended a human rights course at the University of Essex, and three people spent a month at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI): one wrote a paper that appeared in the RUSI Journal – Ri Tong-il, ‘Reunification of Korea and security in Northeast Asia’, *Rusi Journal 147*, Vol. 1, 2002”. It is significant that these events occurred within less than a year from the opening of diplomatic relationships between the UK and the DPRK and that the educational cooperation between the two countries continues with positive results.

3) The DPRK government had already a number of students (of different ages and backgrounds) in the UK, thanks to the Chevening programme. This made it easier for Pyongyang to allow the young North Korean to apply for a visa and make the journey to the UK (the chances of him applying alone and succeed would have been quite slim, as the DPRK is reluctant to send individuals alone and in general prefers more mature candidates).

4) Although the young North Korean student was not a receiver of any UK government scholarship, he was lucky enough to have the EWC providing a full grant for his studies. This form of private sponsorship was made possible by the organization's financial model: the EWC opportunities are partially funded through the revenues deriving from the Pyongyang Project, through a model of 'tuition exchange', exemplified by the figure below:



The scholarship fund is created to sustain tuition and living expenses for North Koreans studying abroad. The programs are usually created and promoted by foreign institutions and the EWC can facilitate the access of selected North Korean candidates through its relationships with institutional actors the DPRK. The Pyongyang Project retains about 25% of the program fee for its own development and maintenance.

Graphics: data from [www.pyongyangproject.org](http://www.pyongyangproject.org)

In other words, the revenues from inbound activities (aimed at Western and other non-Korean participants) throughout Northeast Asia, such as language courses, cultural tours and seminars, are redistributed in order to finance opportunities for North Koreans who are either: a) in the condition to apply for studies abroad (i.e. North Koreans living in China or the EU, or North Korean officials and their families, who are relocated abroad for working reasons), or b) DPRK citizens selected by their government on the base of their curriculum and assigned to training programs abroad<sup>20</sup>. Given the scarcity of resources dedicated to educational exchanges with North Korea and the general unwillingness of international firms to invest in the country, the tuition exchange system appears as a reasonable solution to the problem of tuition fees and living expenses that would otherwise be unsustainable for the grater majority of North Koreans.

Regarding its recent activities: as for inbound programs, the Pyongyang Project has concluded a new term of North Korean language tuition on June 28th 2012, with a cultural tour of North Korea, which included visits of universities in Pyongyang, and a visit to Chongjin. On the outbound front, at the time of writing this article, the EWC is running the *Forum on Economic Development and Regional Integration in Northeast Asia*, a comprehensive symposium on the interconnected nature of Northeast Asian economies focusing on China and the Korean Peninsula. This program incorporates lectures, discussions, workshops and exchange activities in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), the DPRK (North Korea) and the People's Republic of China. The forum is scheduled to run from August 12 to August 23, 2012, in multiple venues: Seoul, Pyongyang, Wonsan, Hamhung, and Beijing.

### Case 2: The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST)

The PUST case has been abundantly covered by the press as it represents a true novelty: a foreign-managed, foreign-owned and directed institution with a campus in Pyongyang, under direct supervision of the DPRK Ministry of Education, yet with freedom to choose its teaching staff and the curricula, as long as it does not

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pyongyangproject.org/financials.html> (accessed Aug. 10, 2012).

directly challenge North Korean ideology. PUST is even more exceptional due to the history of its founder and director, James Kim, and the nature of its main fundraiser NAFEC, a Christian organization, with headquarters in the US and South Korea.

PUST is the first international university in North Korea. The North Korean Ministry of Education gave permission for the establishment of the university in May 2001, and the building of the campus began in 2002. Before PUST, James Kim, had already established China's first foreign university, the Yanbian University of Science and Technology (YUST), located right next to the North Korean border in Yanji<sup>21</sup>. Much of the funding for the project in North Korea, collected through NAFEC, came from South Korean donors, and even South Korea's Ministry of Unification is claimed to have given \$1 million to the project, though with little fanfare. However, despite this grant the project faced several delays, and it took until 2009 before the opening ceremony could be held, and until 2010 for the university to receive its first students<sup>22</sup>.

The goals for PUST were set high from the beginning, and the university's website states that they aim to aid the development of North Korea by creating an institution with "first-rate faculty" teaching the brightest of North Korea's students, who will later on become the new generation of "innovative global leaders"<sup>23</sup>. Kim was given permission to act as the president of the university and to hire foreign staff of his choosing, as well as a 50 year lease on the campus<sup>24</sup>. Kim's co-president, Ho Kwang Il, was appointed by the DPRK Ministry of Education, as was the vice president Pak Sang Ik. Though Kim is a devout Christian, as are many others of the university's foreign teaching staff, he promised to keep religion out of PUST. Instead, the students take lessons on North Korean Juche ideology just the same as their counterparts in any other university. However, PUST is unlike any other university in North Korea not just because of its foreign faculty and the use of English as its instruction language, but because it is the only one in the country with full internet access. Foreign teachers can use internet as they please, and even second-year graduate students can use the internet to help them with their studies, although a log is kept of the sites that they visit<sup>25</sup>.

In 2009 it was said that in the beginning PUST would operate three schools: one dedicated to information technology, another one to industry and management and a third one that would teach agriculture, food, and life sciences. It was also stated that later on the university would expand into architecture and engineering, as well as public health. However, PUST is currently facing severe funding problems, and there is no information as to whether the plans to open the planned new schools have materialized or not. Likewise, enrollment targets were initially set at 600 graduate and 2000 under-graduate students by 2012; but a 2011 article gives the number of graduate students as 67 and undergraduates as 200<sup>26</sup>. The University's homepage does not provide any up-to-date information on the current state of its programs or the number of students enrolled.

PUST is an example of how the more institutionalized forms of exchange in particular are vulnerable to political tensions. The lack of funding is largely due to worsening of North-South relations, which began in 2008 after Lee Myung-Bak took office in South Korea and took a less lenient approach with Pyongyang, and a South Korean tourist was killed on Mt. Kungang. The Cheonan incident of 2010 complicated matters even further. With faltering support from the South, PUST has not been able to live up to initial expectations, and the university has been unable even to acquire all the necessary equipment for its campus. Some of the professors fear that this will eventually lead to the brightest students being sent to other universities in the country. Many hoped PUST would help groom a new North Korean elite with a wider worldview, and the institution still aims to do so, with plans of taking some students to visit universities in China, and even allowing some to participate

<sup>21</sup> Stone, Richard, 'A Mission to Educate The Elite', *Science*, Vol 316, 2007. p. 183

<sup>22</sup> Stone, 2007, and Stone, Richard, 'The Force Behind North Korea's New Science University', *Science* Vol 3-25, 25 September 2009, pp. 1610-1611 and Stone, Richard, 'Crunch Time for PUST', *Science*, 23 Dec 2011, n 334, pp. 1624-1625.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.pust.kr> [accessed July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012].

<sup>24</sup> Stone, 2007, p. 183

<sup>25</sup> Stone, 2011, pp. 1624-1625.

<sup>26</sup> Stone, 2009, p. 1610.

in the European Erasmus exchange program<sup>27</sup>. But unless the university is able to solve its funding problems, these plans will likely never become reality, and PUST could fall victim to political circumstances.

### Case 3: Choson Exchange

Similarly to the EWC, the case of Choson Exchange represent an example of independent initiatives of cultural cooperation both within and outside of the DPRK. However, its pool of contacts within the DPRK is not the same as that of the EWC, and its educational projects and the way they are carried out are also different. CE specializes in short term seminars, geared towards groups of talented young professionals and DPRK academics, selected by a number of DPRK institutions or government bodies, to undergo a period of specialized training and bring new sources of knowledge into the country. CE also differentiates itself for its attitude towards the media. Whilst maintaining the usual, necessary discretion about specific details of its cooperation with DPRK institutions, the organization is committed to make public as much of its activity as possible.

CE is a nonprofit organization registered in Singapore. Its founder, Geoffrey See, explained in a few interviews how the project was first conceived and then turned into a working reality: “*On my first trip to Pyongyang, in 2007, a student from Kim Il Sung University [...] told me that she wanted to join a trading company to prove that women can be great business leaders. She asked if I could bring economics or business textbooks for her the next time I visited the country*”<sup>28</sup>. See (a Research Affiliate at MIT’s Center for International Studies), realized that there was a thirst for knowledge in the North Korea and that, given the right educational opportunities, some of these people could become globally integrated leaders.

After 2007, he was joined by a number of partners that now constitute the core of CE: Peter Morley (a Beijing based lawyer), the Executive Director of Operations, Andray Abrahamian (PhD researcher at Ulsan University) the Executive Director for Korea Analysis, and External Relations and Desmond Lim (an expert in global finance and investment), the Head of Singapore Programs. After the First trip in 2007, See and his associates launched their first exploratory project in 2009 and finally registered the organization as a Singaporean Non-profit in 2010.

So far, CE has mainly focused on short term initiatives, mainly conducted outside the DPRK with a few exceptions. There are plans for a full-on academic program (Master’s level) to be conducted in Singapore, but things have not been finalized yet on the DPRK end (it seems that one factor of delay may be related to the requirements from the Singaporean partner institution being hard to match for some North Korean participants, especially in terms of English fluency). The seminars (or workshops) are organized in small-to-medium groups (under 20 participants) and according to CE personnel, they are usually easier to set up than other programs, as similar seminars have already been organized in Pyongyang. In this instances, DPRK institutions present their candidates selected from a pool that has been pre-screened either by the sending institution (banks, or various companies or agencies) or alternatively by CE’s main partner, the CCRFC. Occasionally, CE may receive bureaucratic support by other counterparts or directly from companies within the DPRK. When it comes to establishing relations with DPRK agencies or institutions, CE specifies that this process requires time and perseverance, in order to find a proper way to access the network of foreign-facing DPRK actors, and more important, to gain their trust and will to cooperate. In terms of content, CE programs are strongly focused on marketing and finance, although other subjects may be introduced from time to time (the first workshop ever organized was in fact about urban planning).

As the aforementioned topics are not usually familiar to those coming from the DPRK, it is necessary to ask how do the North Korean participants digest the new information and all the concepts that, to our knowledge, are foreign to their system (e.g. monetary and fiscal policies, banking systems, marketing strategies). CE makes

<sup>27</sup> Stone, 2011, p. 1624-1625.

<sup>28</sup> <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-North-Koreans-Deserve/128426/> [accessed July 30, 2012]

a distinction between some basic concepts (e.g. taxation of private capitals and individuals, fiscal responsibility, most of which constitute the foundation of western administrative systems) that are completely new to DPRK participants, and others, such as state-provided goods and services, that they are more familiar with. As for the impact that these seminars have had on the participants, the feedback received by CE indicates a gradual waking up to the existence of plausible alternatives, rather than a ‘shocking revelation’, in other words, North Korean participants seem to be able to incorporate new knowledge into a pre-existing frame of socialist education. The fact that some of these workshops are organized in Singapore (a highly efficient and well administered country, which however does not possess the full pluralism of politics that other western countries have) could constitute a plausible model, so to speak, of gradual integration between a more open economic approach and an authoritarian political system.

The work of organizations like CE seems to be well received by the North Korean participants, at least judging from the feedback (a feedback that is by necessity anonymous), published on their 2011 activity report: “I was impressed by the training programs in order to have a skilled labor force. Training and retraining is very important in order to remain competitive [...] Another issue important for us was the allocation of resources. Singapore is a market economy and it was a surprise for me to learn that 90% of the population owns their apartment [...] While attending this [Choson Exchange] program, I came to conclusion that in future, we must include many capable and intelligent people of a think-tank for DPRK’s economic development and growth...and find out together a right approach to many economic problems – *North Korean participant in Singapore Economic Policy Dialogue*”<sup>29</sup>. It seems plausible that some things could change in what could be the first generation of DPRK managers and new leaders, or at least among those who are selected to attend these seminars.

CE has recently released a study on female participation in North Korea’s business sector, an interesting document on an even less explored side of the DPRK economic reality. As for all other initiatives of educational cooperation, the main problem remains the access to funding, provided which, CE plans to continue its educational plans for 2012 with a focus on domestic training for North Koreans<sup>30</sup>.

#### **Case 4: The Collaboration between Syracuse University and Kim Chaek University of Technology (SU-KCUT)**

The Syracuse-KCUT is probably the one initiative which carries most characteristics of a true exchange program and one that is sometimes referred to as a model on how to engage with the DPRK on the education exchange front<sup>31</sup>. Initial steps to start the program were taken in 2001, when representatives from SU, interested in research collaboration with a North Korean university, contacted the Korea Society who helped them arrange a meeting with the DPRK Mission to the United Nations. A delegation from the DPRK visited Syracuse University, and during this visit the board of the university clearly stated their interest in co-operation with the DPRK. Later on, KCUT was chosen as SU’s partner institution. The representatives of SU identify the role played by the Korea Society and the DPRK Mission as go-betweens, as well as the aforementioned signal of commitment on part of their university as key factors in successful initiation of the project.

They also acknowledged the importance of personal relations and building trust between the two institutions, so after KCUT had emerged as a suitable partner, several meetings were held between the delegations of the two universities. These meetings also aimed at finding research areas suitable for co-operation in the area of integrated information technology, and soon the building of KCUT’s digital library, according to the participants the first of its kind in North Korea, was identified as a suitable collaborative effort, with the focus of adapting open source software for the needs of the project. After several successful research exchanges, some of which took place in New York and some in Pyongyang, the two universities expressed their desire to

<sup>29</sup> Choson Exchange, 2011 Annual Report, pp. 6-7, available at: <http://chosonexchange.org/?cat=11> [accessed Aug 11, 2012].

<sup>30</sup> Choson Exchange, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, Cathy, ‘A Consortium Model for Science Engagement: Lessons from the U.S.- DPRK Experience’, *Science & Diplomacy*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 2012).

further develop the project by creating twin integrated information technology labs in order to facilitate joint research. They also agreed to organize courses on technical English, and to engage in exchange of students and junior faculty members<sup>32</sup>. Funding is often a problem for DPRK related initiatives, but the SU-KCUT program has been fortunate in that it has received funding from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Richard Lounsbery Foundation and the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, as well as private donors<sup>33</sup>.

The representatives of SU have stated that they always aimed to develop the project into something more than a mere bilateral exchange<sup>34</sup>, and in 2005 the project moved to a new phase with the launch of the Regional Scholars and Leaders Seminar program, that included participants also from China and South Korea. The program included training programs on technical English and provided an important platform for interpersonal communication<sup>35</sup>. North Korean teams have also participated in the ACM International Computer Programming Contest, and in 2007 the KCUT team performed so well it was even invited to the world finals, but for unknown reasons did not travel to Banff, Canada, for the occasion. Finally, the project has led to the establishment of the the U.S.-DPRK Scientific Engagement Consortium, which consists of SU, the Korea Society, and the U.S. Civilian Research & Development Foundation (CRDF) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)<sup>36</sup>. The KCUT digital library was opened in January 2006, and as a result of the research collaboration with SU, it is compatible with the relevant international standards and could therefore potentially exchange data with any digital library in the world.

As is obvious from the previous paragraph, the SU-KCUT research collaboration and exchange program has also had some very positive spill-over effects. Still, the project has not been without its difficulties, mostly due to the strained political relationship between the United States and the DPRK. After SU and KCUT had agreed on the creation of the twin labs, SU applied for an export license to provide the KCUT laboratory with some of the necessary technology, but their request was denied as the Six-Party Talks were at a particularly low point at the time. SU was merely able to provide KCUT with some desks, filing cabinets and other such unrestricted items for the digital library. Although the university planned to renew its application for technology exports, the Cheonan incident has ensured that the political environment has not become any more favorable to such efforts. The project has also fallen short of its aim of bringing North Korean junior faculty members to SU for extended periods of research, despite receiving sufficient funding from the United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia to host five to six scholars per year. This problem was discussed in January 2010, when KCUT Chancellor Hong So Hon visited SU, but so far it would appear that the political difficulties between the two countries have formed too great of an obstacle for DPRK scholars to take advantage of the program. However, the DPRK has already sent scholars on similar programs to several other countries (namely UK, Germany and Canada), and SU and KCUT continue to work on the issue. They have also identified green data centers as a possible new focus of co-operation<sup>37</sup>. While the political situation has often complicated the project, and the export control regime of the United States poses great challenges for science programs in particular, so far this has not managed to stifle the program.

## CONCLUSIONS

What do all these initiative tell about the DPRK and its willingness to acquire scientific and technological

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<sup>32</sup> Thorson, Stuart J. et. al, 'Notes on the SU-KCUT Research Collaboration and Exchange Program', in: Shin, Gi-Wook, and Lee, Karin J., *US-DPRK Educational Exchanges, Assessment and Future Strategy*, The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 82-84.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 86

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Seo, Hyunjin & Thorson, Stuart, 'Academic Science Engagement with North Korea', in: *KEI - On Korea, Academic papers series*, Vol. 3, 2010, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-116.

<sup>37</sup> Thorson et. al, pp. 84-85.

knowledge? The case studies presented here are only to a certain extent representative of a new North Korean reality and they should not be used to assume that an all-positive trend will emerge in the future. As alluded to in the foreword, this article is an experiment towards a broader work and is therefore not meant to draw more solid conclusions beyond the findings of the case studies that have been presented here. A few observations can be made at this time: based on the feedback received from the cases of CE and EWC, we can say that North Korean participants in study programs abroad seem ready to absorb new information, but they are unsure of: *a)* how to overcome a knowledge gap that has widened for decades; *b)* how to incorporate lessons from a world that their government perceives and portrays as hostile and *c)* how to reconcile ideas related to market economy with their socialist system. Sources in Cambridge have also confirmed that North Korean students in the UK, regardless of age and social background in North Korea, were perfectly integrated on both academic and personal levels, actively participating in discussions and that one of them even gave a lecture about the difference between the European and the North Korean systems. This is not to say that all the candidates selected by the North Korean government are at a level where they can automatically participate in exchange programs: among other issues, language ability (or the lack thereof) seems to be one of the main causes for candidates' rejection, which makes language programs like the one conducted by the British embassy in Pyongyang all the more important.

In regards to how younger North Koreans could employ at home everything they have learned from participating in educational exchanges or by studying in an international institution like PUST, one important remark must be made: the greater majority of all North Koreans who either study abroad or receive tuition from International organizations come from a 'transversal core class' within the North Korean class system: most of the participants in these programs are from Pyongyang; their family background is not always in the military, and more often they belong to families that for various reasons have been deputed to interact with foreign institutions (or to live and work abroad). In any case, they have been allowed to benefit from international training because they (and their families) enjoy a high degree of political trust, a trust that cannot be shaken by openly declaring sympathy for Western ideas. It is important to realize that the main purpose of educational exchange with the DPRK should not necessarily aim at promoting immediate political change, but rather at providing the country with a functional economy, to operate a set of reforms that only in the long run could deliver a political change. North Koreans who undertake international training may receive an eye-opening experience, however, while it is in their interest that the country would slowly enact reforms, they need to be constantly aware of preserving a good degree of loyalty to the regime.

However, there appears to considerable interest on the DPRK side to engage in exchange projects that go beyond mere technical assistance and would enable the country to acquire more substantial knowledge and find new solutions to its problems. The DPRK network of foreign relations consists of a multitude of actors that all represent small centers of power, and the political reality in the country appears to be less monolithic than it was under Kim Il Sung. The DPRK has allowed foreign NGOs to operate on its territory, with a keen interest for accessing knowledge resources. Intra-elite competition for investments, with multiple channels is backed by different individuals at the highest levels of the North Korean government, has significantly increased in the last two years<sup>38</sup>. The cases introduced in this article also indicate the importance that political support has for educational exchange. The support the UK government and its embassy in Pyongyang of exchange activities has made it considerably easier for North Koreans to study in the UK, and this support has also benefited the activities of the EWC, as explained earlier in the article. On the other hand, the difficult political relationship between the DPRK and the US has at times seriously complicated the cooperation between Syracuse University and the Kim Chaek University of Technology. Regardless, this project has been able to survive through serious low points in the bilateral relationship between the two countries, and Jin Park and Seung-Ho Jung argue that this kind of exchanges could serve as a valuable channel of communication precisely when nuclear, or other

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<sup>38</sup> See, Geoffrey and Abrahamian, Andray : Economic Performance and Legitimacy in North Korea, The Harvard International Review, Aug 23, 2011. Available at: <http://hir.harvard.edu/economic-performance-and-legitimacy-in-north-korea> [accessed Aug 3, 2012].

security-related issues complicate relations between the two countries on the governmental level<sup>39</sup>. Further exchange projects could help reinforce this channel and cultivate more personal relationships between North Korea and the US, as well as other countries.

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<sup>39</sup> Park Jin and Jung, Seung-Ho, 'Ten Years of Knowledge Partnership With North Korea', *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2007, p. 80, in: Shin, Gi-Wook, and Lee, Karin J., *US-DPRK Educational Exchanges, Assessment and Future Strategy*, The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 14.