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## **In an Interview, President of Kaist Insists His Reforms Will Continue**

*By David McNeill*

Seoul, South Korea

The year 2011 is one the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, better known as Kaist, will want to forget. It began when an undergraduate at the elite 40-year-old public university jumped to his death in January, the first of four student suicides during the winter and spring. In April, a middle-aged professor facing accusations of misappropriating research funds hanged himself.

The deaths sparked a bitter, long-simmering confrontation between Kaist's president, Suh Nam-pyo, and his faculty critics, many of whom blamed his policies for contributing to the student suicides. In a poll subsequently carried out by the university's Professors' Association, over a third of the faculty members—234 professors—said Mr. Suh should quit.

"I thought the sky was falling down," says Mr. Suh now, recalling the fourth student suicide and the outburst of criticism that followed. "But this type of difficult period had to come sometime. In some ways I'm glad it came up now, while I'm still here."

The 75-year-old Korean-American and MIT veteran has been a lightning rod for controversy since he arrived in 2006, importing U.S.-inspired reforms into a higher-education system widely seen as stagnant and closeted. The reforms made him an iconic figure in the clash between what was portrayed in the news media as a fight between old and new Korea, earning him direct support from the country's biggest newspapers and even South Korea's presidential office.

One of Mr. Suh's first decrees ordered the language of undergraduate instruction switched to English, a move that initially provoked gasps of disapproval but which has since been copied at other Korean universities. Mr. Suh also introduced a punitive tuition system, forcing the worst performing of the university's 10,000 students to pay part of their roughly \$6,000 in yearly fees. Usually the government pays the entirety of the costs.

Kyung Chong-min, head of Kaist's Professor's Association, said those policies piled competitive pressure on undergraduates, making it inevitable that some would crack. "It's a terrible idea

teaching all classes in English," he says. "It is just blocking the eyes and ears of the students. President Suh's problem is that he does not listen to others."

Such criticism didn't stop Mr. Suh from being elected last year—at age 74—to a second term, after four years that saw Kaist double its budget, more than double research income, and increase its faculty by a third. But the suicides forced the policy debate into the open, and led to the appointment of a 13-member council of students and professors that debated Kaist's direction over the summer.

Mr. Suh was compelled to blunt some of his reforms, including scrapping the tuition penalty system. "Since the suicides," says a spokeswoman for Kaist, "we have created a course called 'Happy College Life' to assist freshmen in their better adapting into a new environment of college life." And although the vast bulk of Kaist's science and technical classes are still taught in English, literature and some other courses have reverted to Korean.

The president insists, however, that he is still backed by the more reform-minded faculty. "Two-thirds are not in the camp" of the opposition, he says, a calculation he makes by adding those "in the middle" with his staunch allies. He says his own tough tenure-review system and aggressive recruitment drive—roughly 170 new professors since 2006—have created an "unstable" situation.

"Forty-nine percent do not have tenure. Some people got caught between the new and the old tenure policy," which automatically awarded tenure after seven years. He says it will take five to seven years for the university to stabilize, by which time most of his critics will have retired. "Many people who are in the forefront of this opposition are in their upper 50s," Mr. Suh says.

Perhaps the most damaging allegation thrown at Mr. Suh this year, however, is that he is personally profiting from his position. Mr. Kyung is one of several professors who say that the president registered in his own name dozens of patents associated with two prestigious research projects started under his tenure: a mobile hydraulic system that allows cargo to be offloaded from ships at sea and a pilot project for an electric public-transportation network, dubbed OLEV.

"In four out of 50 patents he is registered as the sole inventor," says Mr. Kyung, who led the search committee that recruited Mr. Suh from Boston in 2006. "He is paid a lot of money to be president, not a researcher."

Mr. Suh calls those claims "nonsense." "I didn't come here to make money. If that was my goal, I would have stayed in the U.S." He rejects accusations that he put his name on somebody else's invention. "It's all done under law and Kaist rules. I'm the first one to come up with the idea for OLEV and the mobile harbor," he says, adding that "every penny" he has earned outside of his presidency he has "given to Kaist."

The suicides rattled him, he admits, as did criticism from the parents of one student that the university should have been paying closer attention. But he adds that South Korea has one of the world's highest suicide rates, and students at elite American institutions are under far greater pressure: "At MIT, students pay \$50,000 a year and have to get a loan or scholarship. Only 1.5 percent of our students pay fees at all."

It remains to be seen if those arguments will stamp out the fires of 2011, and allow him to see out his four-year term, a prospect Mr. Kyung called "very undesirable." Even he admits, however, that Mr. Suh has brought improvements, especially the competitive evaluation system for professors. "Nobody else would have been able to do that," Mr. Kyung says. "But we simply don't believe him anymore."

Mr. Suh refuses to rule out stepping down early and heading back to Boston, and says his goal remains the same: "I've been trying to make this one of best universities in the world. By any measure, we're doing well. But there are a lot of intense stresses, like an earthquake or volcano building up pressure. We have to clean up the mess created by the volcano."



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