

Unemployed Despite a PhD? Highly Educated Jobless at 10-year High



A PhD holding a resume

Photo: Segye Ilbo (segye.com)

Hong, Jeong-min

Reporter
jmhs0615@khu.ac.kr

Last year, the unemployment rate among individuals with doctoral degrees reached its highest level in a decade. Once considered a temporary difficulty in the job market, the situation is now revealing itself as a structural crisis. This trend has sparked concerns that it could not only impact current university students but also pose a threat to the future of higher education and the broader economy.

PhD Joblessness: Differences by Age, Gender, and Discipline

Young people who have completed their PhDs are struggling with unemployment, and the job crisis for highly educated individuals is becoming increasingly evident. According to a survey conducted by Statistics Korea in March of this year, 70.4% of the 10,442 respondents were either employed or had secured a job. The remaining 29.6% were classified as unemployed or part of the inactive la-

bor force. The proportion of unemployed new PhD graduates remained in the mid-20% range from 2014 to 2018. However, it jumped to 29.3% in 2019 and reached a record high last year. With the jobless rate at 23.4% in 2014, the data indicates a clear deterioration in the employment landscape for highly educated individuals over the past decade.

The unemployment problem among PhD holders has become particularly acute among certain age groups, genders, and academic fields. While 29.6% of all PhD recipients were unemployed, the jobless rate among those under the age of 30 stood at 47.7%, the highest figure recorded since the survey began. Among male PhD recipients, 27.4% were unemployed, compared to 33.1% of female recipients. Unemployment rates were highest in the fields of Arts, Humanities, Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Statistics, Social Sciences, and Journalism.

Even after securing employment, many still receive low salaries. According to the 2024 *Employment Status of PhD Graduates Report*, among the 7,346 employed PhD holders, 27.6% earn between 20 million and 40 million won, while 19.8% earn between 40 million and 60

million won. Only 14.4% of PhD holders earn annual salaries exceeding 100 million won. Despite securing employment, it highlights the reality that highly educated individuals continue to face relatively low salary levels.

Why Are Highly Educated Individuals Facing a Deepening Job Crisis?

The growing unemployment crisis among highly educated individuals is driven by various factors, making it difficult to attribute to a temporary phenomenon. First, there is a clear disparity in employment opportunities in the fields of study. In fields such as the Humanities and the Social Sciences, job opportunities that require both the specialized knowledge of a PhD and market demand are limited. Professor Kim Joong-baeck from the Department of Sociology at Kyung Hee University explained, "Fields that require both specialized knowledge and market demand are primarily found in the natural sciences and engineering. In contrast, the labor market for such expertise in the humanities and social sciences remains relatively underdeveloped."

Unemployment among highly educated individuals has emerged as an urgent challenge that our society cannot overlook. Only through innovation across industry, education, and society can we fully unlock the potential of future talent. This is the moment for both the government and society to take proactive steps.

The overall rise in educational attainment across society is also exacerbating the problem. A report by the National Assembly Research Service indicates that the number of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher has been steadily increasing, yet the growth of professional and semi-professional jobs capable of absorbing them remains limited. As a result, credential inflation and a distorted labor supply-demand balance are emerging, with many highly educated individuals remaining unemployed.

Prof. Kim also pointed out the gap between highly educated young people's job expectations and the realities of the labor market as a key factor of unemployment. He emphasized that innovation within companies is essential for the development of a labor market that demands high levels of education. He further noted that political instability, a decline in international competitiveness, and the irrationality of corporate governance are hindering sufficient job opportunities. These factors negatively affect the ability to meet the expectations of highly educated young people.

Clouds on the Horizon: The Outlook for Highly Educated Job Seekers

The hiring outlook for the first half of this year is also expected to be bleak. The Korea Economic Association's survey of the 500 largest companies by revenue found that 61.1% of respondents either had not made hiring plans for the first half of the year or had no intention of hiring at all. Additionally, 41.3% of companies had not established hiring plans, and 19.8% had no inten-

tion of hiring at all. Among the 38.9% of companies that had established hiring plans for the first half of the year, 28.6% reported that they would reduce the scale of their recruitment.

In addition, the Bank of Korea and academic fields have predicted that the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology may replace more jobs held by high-income and highly educated individuals. They analyzed that this trend could intensify further in the future.

As the issue of unemployment among highly educated individuals shows signs of becoming structurally prolonged, fundamental solutions seem urgent. Prof. Kim stated, "To resolve the issue of high-education unemployment, two approaches are necessary: securing a sufficient labor market that demands highly educated individuals and reducing the production of highly educated individuals who are not needed." He emphasized, "It is crucial to enhance corporate competitiveness and increase investment in higher education to provide more opportunities for highly educated individuals."

To address this issue, the roles of academia and society are crucial. Prof. Kim stated, "A system that allows highly educated individuals to fully utilize their abilities is necessary, along with a cultural shift where only those who truly need advanced degrees pursue them." It seems that efforts must go beyond simply increasing the number of jobs. Strengthening the connection between industry and education, developing tailored career paths, and shifting societal perceptions will all require multifaceted efforts.