

Pharmacy education and its accreditation framework in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Pharmacy education in South Korea has undergone significant reform, culminating in the nationwide implementation of an integrated six-year professional pharmacy program in 2022. Alongside this transition, the accreditation framework for pharmacy education has evolved to ensure quality assurance, standardization, and continuous improvement. This paper outlines the structure of pharmacy education in South Korea and describes the accreditation system administered by the Korean Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (KACPE). Established in 2011 and officially recognized as a higher education program accrediting agency in 2022, KACPE conducts accreditation to assess whether colleges of pharmacy meet the essential requirements for the education and training of competent pharmacy professionals. Following pilot evaluations, the first cycle main accreditation reviews have been implemented since 2018. KACPE introduced POST Cycle 1 accreditation standards with the adoption of the integrated six-year curriculum and subsequently revised the standards for the second cycle through extensive stakeholder consultation. The revised standards are scheduled for implementation beginning in 2027, offering insights into accreditation development in pharmacy education in Asia.

Key words: South Korea, pharmacy education, accreditation, standards

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, pharmacy education worldwide has undergone substantial transformation in response to rapid changes in healthcare systems, pharmaceutical sciences, and societal expectations of pharmacists. The traditional product-centered role of pharmacists has progressively evolved into a patient-centered and population-oriented professional identity, requiring graduates to demonstrate not only scientific knowledge but also clinical competence, professional judgment, interprofessional collaboration skills, and ethical responsibility (FIP, 2012). In this context, pharmacy education systems have increasingly adopted outcome-based education (OBE), competency frameworks, and robust quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for contemporary and future practice (Frenk et al., 2010).

South Korea represents a particularly instructive case of systematic reform in pharmacy education. The pharmacy education system in South Korea has undergone major structural changes, most notably the transition from a 2+4-year model to an integrated six-year program, alongside the

establishment and maturation of a national accreditation system. These reforms were driven by growing demands for practice-ready graduates, alignment with international educational standards, and the need to strengthen accountability and continuous quality improvement in higher education.

This manuscript aims to provide a comprehensive overview of pharmacy education in South Korea, with a particular focus on the accreditation framework and its evolution. By examining the structure of pharmacy education, the role of accreditation, and recent developments in quality assurance, this paper highlights how South Korea has sought to modernize pharmacy education and align it with global trends while responding to national healthcare needs.

2. Pharmacy Education in South Korea

2.1. Historical Development of Pharmacy Education

Prior to 2011, pharmacy education in South Korea was delivered primarily through a four-year undergraduate program that emphasized pharmaceutical sciences, with relatively limited focus on clinical practice. While this model successfully produced graduates with strong foundational

scientific knowledge, it was increasingly criticized for insufficient preparation for direct patient care and for its misalignment with global trends in pharmacy practice (Yoo et al., 2014). In response to these concerns, efforts to improve and standardize the pharmacy education system continued, led by the Korean Association of Pharmacy Education (KAPE), and South Korea introduced the 2+4-year pharmacy education system in 2011, in which students completed two years of pre-pharmacy education followed by four years of professional pharmacy training (Choi, 2005). This reform marked a significant milestone, as it formally incorporated experiential education and expanded clinical content into the curriculum. Nevertheless, the structural separation between the pre-pharmacy phase and pharmacy school education, as well as variability in curricular implementation across institutions, presented challenges to curricular coherence, continuity, and alignment with educational outcomes (Lee, 2022). To address these limitations, South Korea adopted an integrated six-year pharmacy education program in 2022. This unified structure enables longitudinal integration of basic sciences, pharmaceutical sciences, and clinical

education, thereby facilitating progressive competency development and earlier exposure to professional identity formation. Moreover, the integrated model provides a more robust foundation for the implementation of OBE and performance-based assessment strategies (Figure 1, Table 1).

2.2. Current Structure of the Integrated Six-Year Program

The KAPE has defined two goals for the integrated six-year pharmacy education program (KAPE webpage). The first is to cultivate creative and competent pharmacy professionals who are capable of developing and utilizing pharmaceuticals to contribute to the improvement of national healthcare. The other one is to foster pharmaceutical research experts who are capable of conducting advanced pharmaceutical research and cooperate with the pharmaceutical industry, academia, and research fields to support the development of the healthcare industry. In alignment with these goals, the integrated six-year program encompasses not only in-depth education in pharmaceutical sciences and clinical pharmacy, but also foundational training in the humanities and basic sciences (KAPE, 2021).

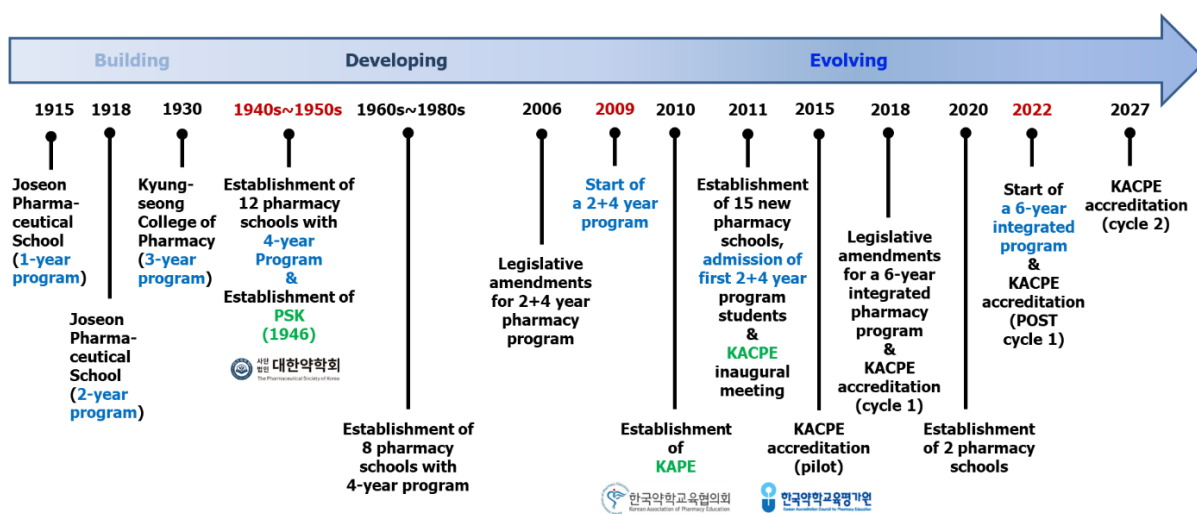


Figure 1. Evolution of Korean pharmacy education & accreditation.

Table 1. Changes of pharmacy education system in South Korea.

	4-year program (1940s–2008)	2+4-year program (2009–2023)	Integrated six-year program (2022–)
No. of schools	20	35 (2011) → 37 (2020)	37
No. of students	About 1,200	About 1,700	About 1,750
No. of professors	About 280 (year 2008)	About 590 (year 2016)	About 710 (year 2025)
Entrance	After high school	After at least two years of undergraduate program	After high school
Curriculum	Mainly pharmaceutical science courses	Combined in-depth pharmaceutical science and clinical professional courses	Humanities and liberal arts (mathematics, chemistry, biology, and physics), in-depth pharmaceutical science and clinical professional courses
Degree	B.S. in Pharmacy	PharmD	PharmD

Although the specific curriculum may vary slightly among institutions, the overall structure is broadly consistent nationwide. During the first one- or two years, students focus on building foundational knowledge in basic sciences, including biology, physiology, and chemistry, while also receiving education in the humanities and introductory professional pharmacy concepts. Beginning in the second or third year, students undertake combined in-depth pharmaceutical sciences and professional pharmacy subjects, with an increasing emphasis on clinically oriented disciplines such as pharmacotherapy. The curriculum includes five core academic domains such as life science in pharmacy, industrial pharmacy, pharmaceutical sciences, clinical pharmacy, and health and social pharmacy. In the final year of the program, students are required to complete one year of pharmacy practice experience (PPE) courses that provide intensive experiential learning and professional experiences which are related to their specific area of expertise. The PPE is composed of common and advanced courses. The first common 800-hour course helps students to develop fundamental knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes required of pharmacists. After that, students go on to a 600-hour advanced PPE courses. They can select a specified track among clinical pharmacy track, industrial pharmacy track, social pharmacy track, or pharmacy research track according to their interests. This advanced course encourages students to enhance their motivation to pursue careers as pharmacy professionals in specific fields. The one-year PPE course is a mandatory requirement for both graduation and eligibility for the National Pharmacist Examination. The KAPE has established guidelines for the effective implementation of both common and advanced PPE, and all pharmacy schools operate their PPE courses in accordance with these guidelines (KAPE, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

Upon completion of the six-year pharmacy curriculum, graduates are awarded the Doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) degree, and take the national pharmacist licensure examination which is typically administered in January. Approximately 90–95% of candidates successfully pass the national examination and obtain licensure. Most pharmacy graduates pursue careers in community pharmacies or hospitals, while others enter academia, the pharmaceutical industry, government agencies, or related sectors.

3. The Accreditation Framework for Pharmacy Education in South Korea

3.1. Establishment of the Accreditation System

The Korean Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (KACPE) was established to ensure the quality and accountability of pharmacy education nationwide in 2011, and authorized by the Ministry of Health and Welfare of Korea in 2019 (KACPE webpage, a). In 2022, KACPE was further designated by the Ministry of Education as a recognized accrediting agency for higher education programs.

Accordingly, KACPE works in close collaboration with KAPE to advance pharmacy education in Korea, with KAPE focusing on the development and continuous improvement of the education system and curriculum. Meanwhile, to ensure fairness and integrity in the accreditation process, KACPE operates an independent decision-making structure, free from the influence of related organizations or funding bodies, and independently formulates and administers its accreditation budget.

Since its establishment, KACPE has functioned as an independent accreditation body responsible for developing accreditation standards, conducting evaluations, and promoting continuous quality improvement in pharmacy education across South Korea. Grounded in the goal of improving public health, KACPE contributes to the quality assurance and advancement of pharmacy education by evaluating whether individual colleges of pharmacy meet the essential requirements necessary for the education and training of competent pharmaceutical professionals. Initially, to prepare for the formal implementation of accreditation, KACPE conducted pilot evaluations beginning in 2015 to develop and refine the accreditation framework and evaluation procedures. Since 2020, the formal accreditation reviews (Cycle 1) have been conducted. Between 2015 and 2024, KACPE completed at least one cycle of evaluation and accreditation for all 37 colleges of pharmacy in South Korea. Of these, 36 were accredited in the initial evaluation, while one did not receive accreditation. These evaluations encompass the overall operation of pharmacy education, including curriculum design and implementation, educational facilities and learning environments, and the adequacy and qualifications of faculty. KACPE annually discloses accreditation results to the public, with the aim of ensuring standardization and consistency in high-quality pharmacist education while respecting the diversity of educational models adopted by individual colleges of pharmacy.

3.2. Accreditation Standards and Evaluation Process

The accreditation process administered by KACPE consists of two sequential stages: a document review based on the pharmacy school's self-assessment report and an on-site evaluation conducted by external evaluators. Evaluators are drawn from academia, industry, and healthcare institutions and are selected based on their expertise in pharmacy education, professional practice, and accreditation. To ensure the competence, consistency, and reliability of evaluators, KACPE requires all evaluators to complete a mandatory training program. To qualify as an evaluator, individuals must complete an eight-hour training program provided by KACPE. This program covers the purpose and role of pharmacy education accreditation, principles of outcomes-based education, and detailed explanations of pharmacy education accreditation standards and evaluation methods. In addition, KACPE has established formal

guidelines for maintaining evaluator qualifications, thereby safeguarding the overall quality of the evaluation process.

The first stage of the evaluation process involves a comprehensive review of the self-assessment report and supporting evidence submitted by the pharmacy school. This is followed by an on-site evaluation, during which an evaluation team visits the pharmacy school and its affiliated practice institutions over a three-day period. In practice, approximately eight evaluators are assigned to each pharmacy school, and the same evaluators participate in both the document review and the on-site visit to ensure consistency and continuity across evaluation stages. Final accreditation decisions are made through a structured, multi-level review process based on the evaluators' reports. First, the Coordination Committee reviews and harmonizes the final evaluation reports across evaluation teams and individual evaluators and submits a consolidated recommendation to the Accreditation Decision Committee. The Accreditation Decision Committee then examines the validity and appropriateness of the coordination report, verifies the evaluation findings, deliberates on the outcomes, and renders the final accreditation decision (KACPE webpage, b).

Since the transition to the integrated six-year pharmacy education program in 2022, KACPE has developed and implemented the POST Cycle 1 accreditation standards to ensure the standardization and consistency of foundational pharmacy education under the integrated six-year system (KACPE, 2022). The POST Cycle 1 accreditation standards are grounded in the principles of OBE, reflecting the decision made by the KAPE in 2017 to adopt OBE as a core strategy for enhancing the quality and advancement of pharmacy education in South Korea. In alignment with this resolution, KACPE incorporated the fundamental principles of OBE into the POST Cycle 1 accreditation framework, thereby supporting colleges of pharmacy in preparing for and implementing OBE-oriented educational models. The POST Cycle 1 accreditation framework was structured hierarchically into evaluation domains, subdomains, and individual elements. It comprised eight evaluation domains essential to the operation of pharmacy education programs: mission and educational outcomes, governance and administration, curriculum, students, faculty, educational environment and facilities, post-graduate education, and continuous quality improvement. The accreditation standards included 63 elements across 21 subdomains, with each element assessed using a rubric-based, predefined scale. Each element was rated at one of three levels—meets standards, requires improvement, or does not meet standards. The overall evaluation was determined by synthesizing the results of the 50 mandatory elements out of the 63 elements, and based on this result, the accreditation validity period varied to 5 years (full accreditation), 3 years (conditional accreditation), or non-accreditation. In addition, beginning

with POST Cycle 1, a midterm evaluation system was introduced to assess whether accredited institutions continue to make sustained efforts to improve their educational environments and programs, thereby determining the ongoing maintenance of accreditation status.

4. Evolution and Advancement of the Accreditation System in South Korea

In December 2025, KACPE announced revised accreditation standards in preparation for the second accreditation cycle (Cycle 2). The revision was undertaken for several reasons, most notably the need to update accreditation standards to better reflect evolving educational paradigms and professional expectations in pharmacy practice. In addition, with the revision of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Act of 2025 in South Korea, only graduates of accredited pharmacy schools will be eligible to take the national pharmacist licensure examination from 2027. This regulatory change has further strengthened the importance of pharmacy education accreditation. Accordingly, KACPE initiated foundational research to revise the accreditation standards in 2022 and developed a draft of the Cycle 2 standards in 2024. Beginning in July 2024, the draft standards were refined through consultation with internal and external educational experts. From November 2024 onward, KACPE conducted a series of public hearings with colleges of pharmacy to systematically gather institutional feedback and further revise the standards. In parallel, KACPE collected input from a broad range of stakeholders, including professional organizations and external experts such as accrediting bodies from other healthcare disciplines, and held multiple town hall meetings to ensure an inclusive and transparent revision process. The revised standards for the Cycle 2 accreditation are scheduled to be implemented beginning in 2027.

Under the Cycle 2 standards, KACPE has placed greater emphasis on OBE to ensure that graduates are well-prepared for real-world pharmacy practice (KACPE, 2025). The evaluation structure has also been reorganized. Whereas the POST Cycle 1 framework consisted of eight evaluation domains, the revised Cycle 2 standards have been streamlined into six domains, comprising 103 elements across 34 evaluation questions (Table 2). This restructuring aims to enhance clarity and usability for both colleges of pharmacy and evaluators. Furthermore, KACPE has introduced a more detailed and clearly defined rubric compared to POST Cycle 1, thereby enabling more objective, consistent, and fair assessments.

5. Conclusion

Pharmacy education in South Korea has undergone profound transformation through staged structural reforms and the maturation of a national accreditation framework. The transition from a four-year undergraduate program to a

Table 2. KACPE accreditation standards for the second cycle.

Domain	Explanation
Mission and governance	Evaluates whether the college of pharmacy has a clearly articulated mission and desired graduate attributes, and whether governance and administrative structures support the effective delivery and continuous improvement of pharmacy education.
Curriculum	Evaluates the design, implementation, and integration of the curriculum to ensure alignment with the principles of outcome-based education, including the articulation of educational outcomes, the appropriateness of instructional and learning methods, and the attainment of defined competencies.
Students	Evaluates policies and systems related to student admission, progression, support services, and student welfare to ensure equitable access, academic success, and well-being throughout the pharmacy education program.
Faculty members	Evaluates policies and systems for ensuring an adequate number of qualified faculty and supporting their ongoing professional development in teaching, research, and social service.
Educational environment and facilities	Evaluates the availability of educational and research support facilities, as well as facilities for student welfare, and provides for their continuous maintenance and management.
Continuous quality improvement	Assesses institutional mechanisms for continuous quality improvement, including the systematic collection and analysis of outcome data and the implementation of evidence-based actions to enhance educational quality and accountability.

2+4 system and ultimately to an integrated six-year professional program reflects deliberate efforts to enhance educational coherence, practice readiness, and societal relevance. The accreditation framework administered by KACPE has played a pivotal role in guiding, supporting, and sustaining these reforms. By emphasizing OBE, continuous quality improvement, and alignment with international educational standards, accreditation has become a central mechanism for advancing the quality and accountability of pharmacy education in South Korea. Collectively, South Korea's ongoing efforts to refine accreditation standards and systems offer a valuable reference for other countries seeking to advance pharmacy education through systematic accreditation and robust quality assurance mechanisms.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study does not involve life science and medical research activities of human or animal subjects.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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