

# Reflecting Seven Years of Social Sciences Korea Program: Its Performance, Current State and Future Prospects

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**Abstract** This article assesses the performance of the Social Sciences Korea (SSK) program over the last seven years and proposes potential future developments. In particular, this research carefully analyzes the program's effects on Korean social scientists, the landscape of social science research, the vitalization of Korean social sciences, and the impact of research results on society. In order to do so, the general characteristics of the SSK program are surveyed. Then, the sequential development of the SSK is examined. Next, a comparison is made between the SSK program and other major Korean research support programs in the humanities and social sciences to reveal the SSK's salient features. The SSK program places emphasis on the growth of research teams through inter-competition and cooperation, which leads to the formation of research groups and eventually large research centers. The SSK program actively encourages networking activities and interdisciplinary research as ways to break through the walls of sectionalism and egoism within major subject of study as well as regional barriers so as to create a more innovative research culture. By taking a top-down as well as a bottom-up approach with regard to selection of research agendas, the SSK program effectively creates opportunities for researchers to proactively respond to social needs. Finally, some suggestions are made as to how the SSK program can develop more in the future.

**Keywords** SSK (Social Sciences Korea) · competition · collaboration · social science · policy · research culture, innovation

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## Introduction

After the 1997 financial crisis the future of Korean society was very uncertain due to sudden and diverse social changes such as an economic slowdown, widening disparity between rich and poor, an aging population, the coming of a multicultural era, and the security threat posed by North Korea. Diagnosing, analyzing, and resolving these types of unprecedented problems became an important social issue. As a result, the formation of professional research groups in the social sciences that could solve these types of problems became increasingly necessary.<sup>1</sup> Since 2010, the Ministry of Education has been supporting the Social Sciences Korea (hereafter SSK) program, a 10-year-long social science research support project, to develop world-class social science research centers—i.e., think tanks—that attempt to predict the future and conduct the medium- to long-term research necessary to solve social problems. Through long-term and systematic support, the program also aims to nurture competent future generations in the field of social sciences and establish networks of researchers (see *Annual Report* and *Quarterly Reports* of the SSK-Networking Support Group, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

The most important feature of the SSK program is to adopt an evolutionary support system to intensify research by concentrating support for research teams that are considered to have the ability to carry out specific research topics insofar as they survive in the competition process. In particular, the program has set up the growth stages necessary for selected research teams to grow into world-class research centers and proposes specific goals for each phase to support their developmental path. Accordingly, one of the key features is that this program is designed to strengthen the competence of research teams through rigorous evaluation. For the assessment stage of each growth phase, in general, only about half of the previous stage's research teams and groups are selected. In addition, at the second annual evaluation of each stage, the bottom 20% of research groups are let go, while the surviving groups are supplemented with an incentive scheme. Moreover, the SSK program has not only been providing opportunities for voluntary cooperation and collaboration among research groups within the program, but also maintaining a networking support group (hereafter the SSK-Networking Support Group) to facilitate exchanges among SSK researchers such as academically oriented or policy-oriented meetings. Various types of academic meetings are being held regularly to promote mutual cooperation among researchers who belong to different research groups.

The central concern of this article is to assess the results of the SSK program over the last

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<sup>1</sup> Since the 1990s, studies have been conducted to comprehensively assess and critically reflect the status and role of the academic fields considering the rapidly changing social world. For instance, there has been research that delves into the changing status and role of top-notch universities in the U.S. higher education system (Cole, 2009; Ehrenberg et al., 2010; Jacobs, 2013; Karabel, 2005; Readings, 1996; Rhode, 2006). There have also been chronological and topic-based research results diagnosing the field of sociology (e.g., Calhoun, 2007; Cole, 2001; Turner & Turner, 1990). Research has also questioned and tried to reorient the public mission of research-oriented universities through various examples from different countries (Rhoten & Calhoun, 2011). Furthermore, the relationship between think tanks and other facets of society has become an issue as well (Medvetz, 2012). Many Korean research papers evaluate the academic productivity of the SSK program and attempt to analyze it from different angles (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2016; Park et al., 2014). The fact that reflective research is increasing in many academic fields shows not only the important role of higher education in society but also the demand for a restructuring of the status and role of the higher education system in our ever-changing society.

seven years. In particular, this paper will focus on the extent to which the SSK program has produced research results as well as the extent of contributions to the promotion of diverse academic activities by researchers in the Korean social sciences. To do so, the general characteristics of the SSK program will be surveyed. Then, the sequential development of the SSK will be examined. Next, to clarify salient features of the SSK, a comparison will be made between the SSK program and other major Korean research support programs in the humanities and social sciences launched by the Korean government at a very similar time and maintained until now. Finally, some suggestions will be made as to how the SSK program can develop more in the future.

## Overview

The SSK program was started in 2010 with the objective of systemically supporting academic research in the social sciences for years to come (*Annual Report of the SSK-Networking Support Group*, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). There were three main goals for the program. The first was to construct a research infrastructure for the social sciences through in-depth research of Korean people and Korean society. The second goal was to nurture world-class think tanks that come up with appropriate diagnoses and solutions for various social problems arising from the rapidly changing nature of society. The third and final goal was to create a sustainable research environment to cultivate talented researchers who will lead the future of Korean social science. All of these goals were ultimately directed toward contributing to the advancement of Korean society.

### The goal, structure, and composition of the SSK program

The SSK program contributes to the building of an information network and research groups by providing the necessary financial grants and intellectual resources to program participants. At the same time, the program was not originally intended to be satisfied with only sharing academic research results within the academic community. In other words, the program has continuously pursued efforts to ensure that scholarly research achievements not only provide good reference points for social issues related to research topics, but also go further by enabling policymakers to use the insight provided by this research to formulate policies. By doing so, it was expected that the SSK program would create a virtuous circle among the academic community, civil society, and the state, thus contributing to the development of society.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, it seeks to publicize research. Overall, the SSK program supports researchers at the collective level so that social scientists can achieve the highest level of productivity in their research activities.

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<sup>2</sup> For further reference, please refer to *Annual Reports* published by the SSK-Networking Support Group since 2012.



**Fig. 1** The goal of the SSK program

Basically, the program is designed to ensure that researchers can form teams to join the program to receive financial and institutional support for up to ten years for their own research once they have passed the interim evaluations. The SSK program has three hierarchical stages following a time sequence, although the starting period may differ for different research teams. (See also Table 1.) In the SSK program, the earliest level as well as the lowest stage of a set of researchers is referred to as a research team. The research team differs from the other two stages in terms of size. There are two criteria when it comes to determining size. The first is the number of researchers, and the other is the amount of financial support the team receives. In a small research team, there must be at least three researchers including the research director, and the team annually receives around 100 million won in subsidies for research purposes over three years. In a mid-sized research group, the number of researchers increases to at least seven, and the group annually receives around 230 million won over three years, twice the grant of research teams. Finally, in the case of a large research center, there must be a minimum of 17 researchers, and the center annually receives 450 million won for four years. As of March 2018, under the umbrella of the SSK program, 31 large research centers conduct social scientific research. Furthermore, 26 mid-sized research groups and 13 new research teams are also part of the SSK program.

**Table 1** The structure and composition of the SSK program

	<b>Research Team (3 Years)</b>	<b>Research Group (3 Years)</b>	<b>Research Center (4 Years)</b>
<b>Status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teams selected in the new cohort (2017): 13</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Groups selected in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cohort (2015): 16</li> <li>Groups selected in the 4<sup>th</sup> cohort (2016): 10</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Centers selected in the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort (2016): 17</li> <li>Centers selected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort (2017): 14</li> </ul>
<b>Research Grant</b>	Around 100 million won yearly	230 million won yearly	450 million won yearly
<b>Composition of Researchers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least 3 participating researchers</li> <li>1 research director</li> <li>At least 2 joint researchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least 7 participating researchers</li> <li>1 research director</li> <li>At least 4 joint researchers</li> <li>At least 2 full-time SSK researchers</li> <li>At least 5 research assistants</li> <li>1 administrative personnel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least 17 participating researchers</li> <li>1 research director</li> <li>At least 8 joint researchers</li> <li>At least 4 full-time SSK researchers</li> <li>At least 12 research assistants</li> <li>1 administrative personnel</li> </ul>

After the start of the SSK program in 2010, research teams were selected for four consecutive years: 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013. In the first year of the SSK program in 2010, 92 research teams were selected. Afterwards, 71 teams were selected in 2011, 43 in 2012, and 23 in 2013. No new research teams were selected for the next few years after 2013, and in 2017, 13 research teams were newly selected.<sup>3</sup>

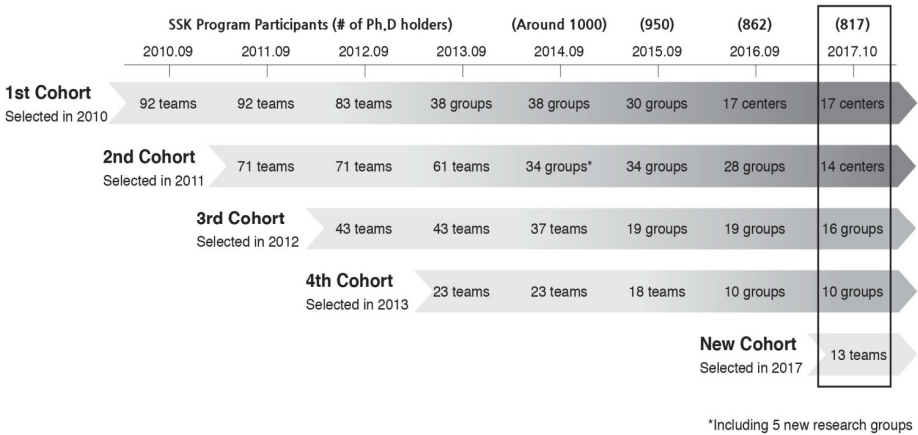
All newly selected research teams were subject to a midterm evaluation two years after their selection. Research teams that did not meet standards for research results were excluded from financial aid. After another year, small research teams underwent a stage evaluation to become mid-sized research groups. For research groups, a midterm evaluation once again takes place after two years, and after another year, the stage evaluation to become a research center occurs. The research center receives a final midterm evaluation two years after its promotion. As of March 2018, there are around 800 researchers who have received or will receive these evaluations, and they make up 70 research teams, groups, and centers that are working under collective research agendas.

As we can see in Figure 2, there were 92 small research teams selected in 2010, which became 38 research groups in 2013, and 17 research centers in 2016. In 2011, 71 small research teams were picked, with only 34 research teams making it three years later in 2014, and 14 research centers being formed in 2017. Forty-three research teams were selected in 2012, and three years later in 2015, only 19 research groups were left, finally leading to 16 groups growing into research centers. The cohort selected in 2013 was composed of 23 research teams, and there are currently 10 research groups as of 2016.

The number of full-time researchers, joint researchers, and research directors participating in the SSK program was about 1,000 in 2014, 950 in 2015, 862 in 2016, and 817 in 2017. If research assistants who are attending graduate school are included here, it can be said that more than 1,000 researchers in the social sciences each year are carrying out research with the financial support of the state through the SSK program. Since the SSK program is a large-scale,

<sup>3</sup> As an exception, five medium-sized research teams were newly selected in 2014.

long-term support program that is unprecedented in the social sciences at the national level, the financial and academic impact of this program on the Korean social sciences will be enormous.



**Fig. 2** Trends of the SSK program's research groups and participants, 2010-2017

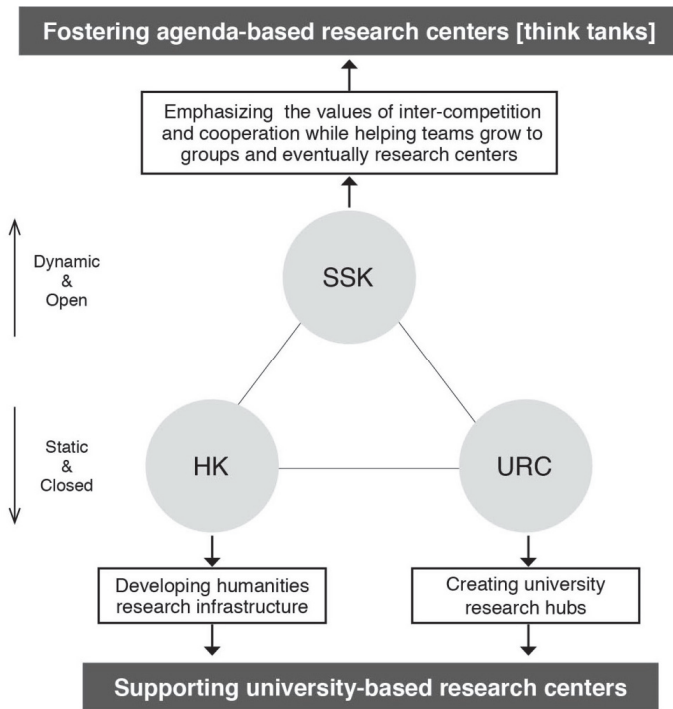
### Its salient features compared to other programs: Inter-competition and collaboration

Now we will look at the salient features of the SSK program through a brief comparison with other comparable academic support programs. There are two other academic research support programs that share similar characteristics with the SSK. One is the Humanities Korea (hereafter HK) program and the other is the University Research Centers Support (hereafter URC) program. The basic commonality of these three programs is that they are long-term research support programs under a government initiative. Furthermore, all three programs support groups, rather than the individuals themselves. Finally, they also emphasize the nurturing of future generations of researchers. Graduate students who participate in these programs have a chance to develop their academic careers as well. In the 2000s, the "crisis of the humanities" was stressed, and the limitations of small-scale and short-term academic support projects in the humanities and social sciences were increasingly pointed out. To overcome this, new mid- and long-term group research projects such as the HK in 2008 and the SSK in 2010 were started. As a result, the range and scale of support for humanities and social sciences institutions has greatly expanded. The URC program started in 1980 with an intention to financially support university-affiliated research institutes, with the subsequent expectation of these institutes evolving into research hubs. The URC program is the oldest social science and humanities research support program that has received funding from the National Research Foundation of Korea (hereafter NRF).<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the other two programs, the SSK program emphasizes both inter-competition on the one hand and collaboration or cooperation among researchers with respect to research agendas

<sup>4</sup> The NRF is an academic research support institution which corresponds to the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the United States.

on the other. As mentioned above, the SSK program has a mid- to long-range outlook on the Korean social sciences by helping small-scale research teams and mid-sized research groups develop into large-scale research centers. Researchers who are interested in participating in the SSK program can apply by organizing a research team with others who have similar research interests. Although the NRF organizes a screening committee composed of university professors and professional researchers, the NRF grants full autonomy to the committee for evaluating and selecting candidate research teams that are qualified to join the SSK program.



**Fig. 3** Distinguishing features of the SSK program: Comparison with HK & URC

The research teams that are selected receive a stage evaluation of their research results after the first three years. The teams that pass the stage evaluation receive more subsidies and the team grows larger. In other words, the small-scale research team grows into a mid-sized research group. After the team becomes a group, a second-stage evaluation of their results takes place after three more years. The mid-sized research groups that make it through the second evaluation evolve into large-scale research centers and receive four more years of government financial aid.

The overall workings of the SSK program are conducted in the following ways. Many researchers participate in the beginning, but in order to get pass the first-stage evaluation, competition takes place between research teams. Once the teams pass the evaluations, then they have a chance to become large research centers via research groups. As a consequence, the surviving research centers receive more concentrated research aid. In a sense, the SSK program

shows an evolutionary pattern, where the most adept research groups receive better conditions and funding. Compared to other research support programs such as the HK and URC, the emphasis on mutual competition and selection in the SSK program sets it apart as much more dynamic.

The SSK program is not only dynamic but also open in that it encourages collaboration between researchers. To produce more creative and innovative research results, the SSK program has greatly emphasized joint research among researchers from the beginning. Long before the stage evaluation takes place, research teams with similar interests can voluntarily and freely form alliances. There are two main reasons why coalitions are induced. The first is that through alliances, a synergy effect is expected in research results.<sup>5</sup> Second, allied research groups can receive subsidies in a more effective and concentrated manner, leading to economic efficiency. With regard to this issue, it has been reported that collaboration between research teams (or groups) has brought about higher productivity in terms of relations between researchers and research results (Im, 2014). Collaboration gives the program an opportunity to use the budget more effectively, which in turn gives more researchers a higher chance of receiving research grants. Furthermore, collaboration between teams makes a reduction in sunk costs likely in terms of the entire program. Therefore, even if research teams can pass all the stages and become research centers by themselves, flexible collaboration between teams is highly recommended by the SSK program, and this open or even unfettered system is what sets it apart from other research programs.

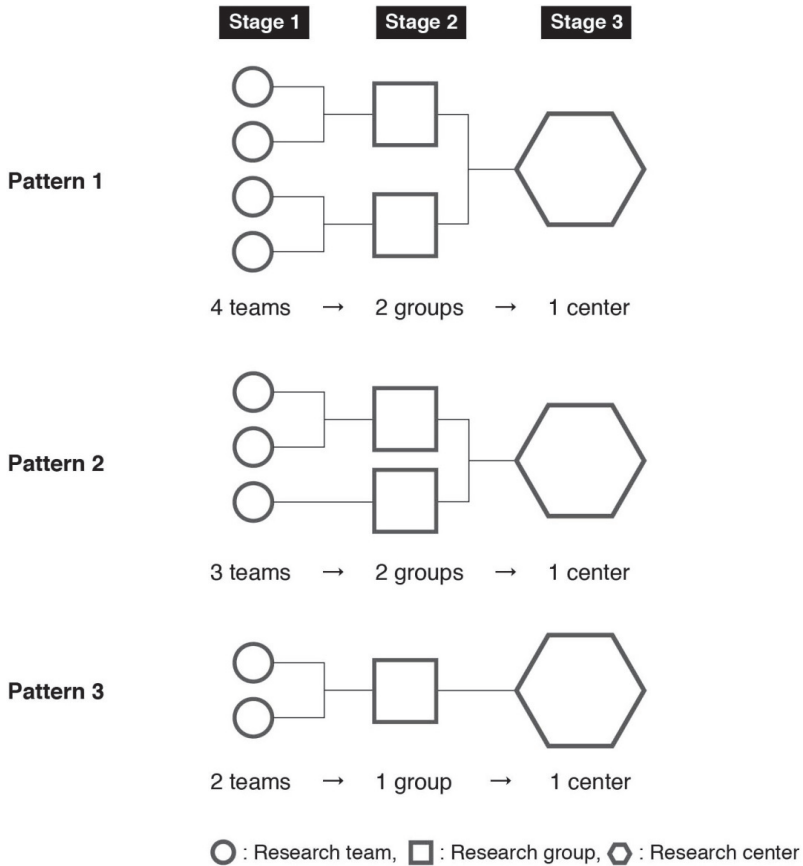
When we look at the how the researchers developed their research groups over time, the dynamic and open characteristics of the SSK program reveal themselves even further. This will be explained by looking at research teams that were selected in 2010—the year the SSK program started—and grew into research centers that are in their second year in 2018. These research centers were in their third year of the research group stage in 2015-16. At the time, 30 research groups existed. However, out of the 30 research groups, 16 groups—more than half—showed collaborative experience. Put differently, when these research centers were still at the team or group stage, they teamed up with other research teams or groups. Furthermore, out of the 17 research groups that passed the final stage to become research centers, 10 of them (58.8%) teamed up with another research team or group at least once.

Research teams that were selected by the SSK program in its second year, 2011, and became research centers in 2017 showed similar results. As of 2016-17, 28 research teams that were selected in 2011 became research groups. Ten research groups (35.7%) showed at least one experience of collaboration. Also, in 2017, 14 of the 28 research groups that passed the stage evaluations became research centers. Of these 14 research centers, six centers had experienced collaboration with other groups (42.9%).

In general, three coalition patterns are most typically observed (see Fig 4.) The first pattern is that four small research teams become two mid-sized research groups, which then become a single research center. At the team stage, there are four separate research teams, but through the sharing of research agendas and interests, the teams group together and become two teams before they pass the evaluation. Then, the two research groups combine into a single group,

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<sup>5</sup> The trends and outcomes of collaboration are shown in the subsequent representative research results (e.g., Moody, 2004; Wuchty et al., 2007).



**Fig. 4** Typical patterns of collaboration between SSK researchers

which if it passes the evaluation stage, becomes a research center. The second pattern is when three research teams become two research groups, which eventually become a research center. In this case, two research teams with shared interests combine before the stage evaluation. Once these research teams have passed the evaluation to become one research group, this research group tries to collaborate with another research group in the hope of passing the final evaluation stage to become a research center. The last pattern is when two research teams collaborate to form one group before the first stage of evaluation and pass additional evaluation to become a research center.

The collaboration patterns that can be seen in the phases of research teams and groups are unique to the SSK program and cannot be recognized in the HK or URC program. There is one interesting phenomenon to point out about the phase during which collaboration takes place. All of the initial occurrences of collaboration between researchers took place in the research team stage of the SSK program. Thus, the collaborations that took place were not mechanical in nature to simply get past the evaluation stage. Through the various opportunities for academically oriented interactions among researchers provided by the SSK program, researchers were able to exchange ideas and share their insights on common research agendas. This

became the basis for collaborative efforts that lasted into the research group and center phases.

On the other hand, the HK and URC programs support research institutes that already existed within universities in an attempt to make them research strongholds. Compared to the SSK program, the way these two programs work is relatively static and closed. Therefore, the institutes receiving academic support through these two programs might neither receive nor feel the demands of the alliance from the inside and outside. In other words, it can be said that there is no chance of different research institutes collaborating under the HK and URC systems. Moreover, competition between research groups, concentrated financial aid, and human resource development are all aspects of the SSK program that cannot be seen in the HK or the URC program. Finally, unlike the HK or URC program, the SSK program aggressively supports, mediates, and guides collaboration among research centers, groups, and teams through the assistance and guidance provided by the SSK-Networking Support Group.

We will now take a look at how these characteristics of the SSK program could be understood in terms of an organizational perspective. From the perspective of individual researchers, the inputs and outputs of research personnel are very flexible. In addition, the emphasis on collaborative studies in the SSK program shows the characteristics of future organizations that emphasize “sustainable learning communities” in the sense that they increase the probability of fostering research skills through mutual learning (Hesselbein et al., 2000). With regard to group formation and reformation, the boundaries between the participating research teams are shown to be not rigid but flexible. Teams can also freely combine based on each other’s research interests and needs. These features may be said to be in a highly flexible form rather than a rigid form, as well as a horizontal structure rather than a hierarchical one. It seems that these organizational characteristics are closely associated with what Hesselbein (2000) called “the circular organization,” or what Powell (1990) called “network forms of organizations,” and, more generally, with the “open system” perspective in organizational theory (Scott & Davis, 2007). The SSK program is a good example that reflects the aspects of a future organization in that it underscores the flexible recruitment of organizational members who share similar research goals, as well as the ability to reorganize organizational structure so as to actively respond to environmental changes.

To sum up, the SSK program, which emphasizes mutual competition and cooperation among researchers, shows a relatively dynamic and open stance when compared to other academic research support programs. The characteristics of this SSK program are understood to be linked to the productive academic performances that will be discussed in the next section.

### **The distinguishing research performances of the SSK program participants**

The SSK program has more research papers published in esteemed international academic journals than any other research support program in South Korea. These results show not only that SSK researchers are producing large numbers of research papers, but also that the quality of these papers is on par with the international standard. SSK program participants published 4,638 academic papers in various domestic and international academic journals from 2010 to June of 2016. In international academic journals, 992 papers stemming from the SSK program were published, representing 21.3% of the total papers. What is more, 813 of the 992 papers

were published in SCI- or SSCI-level academic journals, and 179 papers were in SCIE- or SCOPUS-level journals. The remaining 3,646 papers (78.61%) were published in domestic professional academic journals. Of 3,646 papers, 3,457 were published in Korean Citation Index (KCI)-registered journals and 189 were in KCI-reserved journals.

How should we understand these research results? When comparing the results of publication by the SSK program researchers to those of other programs, the SSK researchers were more effective per person relative to the amount of financial aid they received. It has been reported that a comparative analysis of research results against result funds injected into the social sciences between 2010 and 2014 showed that while the URC program produced 13.8 papers per 100 million won, the SSK program produced 15.8 papers per 100 million won (Kwon, 2015). In other words, the researchers participating in the SSK program show relatively high research productivity compared to the investment.<sup>6</sup> Of course, we cannot conclude that the SSK program is superior to other research support programs because of the high productivity of the SSK program from a quantitative standpoint. The humanities field is expected to perform better in terms of publishing books than the social sciences. Therefore, when understanding and evaluating research results, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of each academic field. Nevertheless, the fact that more than 20% of the research results supported by the SSK program were published in overseas journals seems to indirectly reveal that the research results obtained through the SSK program are of good quality as well.

### **The SSK program's pragmatic dimensions: Policy contributions and networking activities**

The research centers, groups, and teams that participated in the SSK program for the past seven years have worked tirelessly to share their results with the rest of society. While utilizing the media to publicize their findings, researchers also attempted to use their findings to create new policies or solve social problems. Over the seven years, there were 1,300 cases of the results being shared and spread. Moreover, the SSK research results were promoted 2,000 times in the media, and 1,700 cases were related to policy-making. This implies that the results from the SSK program may not only be shared among scholars, but may also be expanded in a way that provides positive alternatives to society.

**Table 2** The SSK's performance related to policy contribution activities, 2010-2016

SSK Cohorts	Diffusion of Performance	Media Promotion	Policy Contribution	Total
1st Cohort (2010-16*)	460	663	747	1870
2nd Cohort (2011-16)	616	599	603	1818
3rd Cohort (2012-16)	166	647	285	1098
4th Cohort (2013-16)	112	100	89	301
Total	1354	2009	1724	5087

\* The performances of the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort research teams during 2010-2013 were not counted.

<sup>6</sup> Considering the characteristics of the social sciences, the rate of publishing of research results in books was very high during the research period (2010-June 2016), with 465 books being published. Among these books, 430 were published independently and 35 were translations of previously published books.

From its beginnings, the SSK program has promoted many exchanges among SSK and non-SSK researchers as well as domestic and international researchers through various kinds of academic gatherings such as symposiums, seminars, forums, and conferences. The emphasis on networking is based on two main reasons. One is the necessity to create more effective and successful results within the SSK program by sharing similar research agendas through networking. The other is that in order to become an internationally acclaimed research center, it is vital to exchange information and insights between domestic and foreign researchers. The results, as can be seen in Table 3, show that there were 3,082 occurrences of foreign networking activities as well as 8,482 domestic networking activities during 2010-2016.

Here it is worthwhile to briefly present an empirical analysis of whether the frequency of participation in SSK-Networking activities is actually associated with an improvement in the research performance, such as publication of papers in academic journals (*Quarterly Reports of SSK-Networking Support Group* 2015). As a result of research conducted on selected SSK research teams in 2010, it has been reported that there is a direct positive correlation between the frequency of participation in SSK-Networking events and the number of published journal articles, including academic journals and monographs. Finally, it shows that the orientation of the SSK program, which emphasizes networking, is meaningful in that active networking activities could lead to positive research consequences such as publishing journal articles.

**Table 3** The SSK networking activities,\* 2010-2016

SSK Cohorts	Domestic Networking Activities	International Networking Activities	Total by Cohort
1st Cohort (2010-16**)	2748	817	3565
2nd Cohort (2011-16)	2850	1264	4114
3rd Cohort (2012-16)	1928	661	2589
4th Cohort (2013-16)	956	340	1296
Total	8482	3082	11564

\* Includes various kinds of academic activities such as conferences, symposiums, seminars, academic forums, and so on.

\*\* The performances of the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort research teams during 2010-2013 were not counted.

The networking results of the 17 research teams that became centers in 2016 will now be briefly discussed. It has been reported that 35 cooperative researchers who were affiliated with foreign institutions participated in the SSK program. These foreign researchers made up 12.5% of the 279 total researchers.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, 11 research centers had one or more foreign researchers. Focusing mainly on the first cohort, the results are as follows. There were 30 institutions that were affiliated with foreign researchers: 15 academic institutions were from the United States, three from each of China and Australia, and two from each of Canada and Japan. These results show that most of the collaborative research is occurring with research institutions based in the United States.

<sup>7</sup> There were 279 participants in the 1<sup>st</sup> SSK cohort.

**Table 4** Major cases of international networking by the 1<sup>st</sup> cohortClassification of Foreign-Based Researchers within 1<sup>st</sup> cohort Research Centers by Country

Nation	Number of Overseas Affiliates
United States	15
China	3
Australia	3
Japan	2
Canada	2
Mexico	1
Netherlands	1
Great Britain	1
Italy	1
Germany	1
Total	30

## Classification of Academic Exchange with Foreign Research Institutes by Continent

Continent	Number of Research Institutes
Asia	33
Europe	22
North America	16
Oceania	4
Total	75

In addition, the 17 research centers cooperated with 75 foreign research institutions to create an international research network. In particular, each research center was in contact with at least two foreign research institutions.<sup>8</sup> When categorizing by continent, 33 research centers (44%) were based in Asia, 22 (29%) in Europe, and 16 (21%) in North and Central America. These results showed the following implications. Most of the cooperative researchers participating in the SSK program were concentrated in the United States. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that most academic research takes place in English, and most domestic researchers receive their doctorate from universities in the United States. On the other hand, the number of affiliated research institutions ranked Asia, Europe, and North and Central America from highest to lowest, showing some diversification.

**The SSK program's activities for nurturing future social scientists**

As the SSK program progressed over the years, the strengthening of the self-sustaining power of social scientific research and the fostering of future generations of social scientists became a major enterprise. As a part of these efforts, there are various efforts being undertaken to create the perception of a "generation of future scholars" as well as to strengthen the research capabilities of the research assistants who make up 59% of the SSK program. Many of the

<sup>8</sup> One research center was found to have collaborated with 16 foreign institutions, while two other research centers each collaborated with 13 foreign institutions.

undergraduate students who participated in research centers, groups, or teams pursued graduate studies in distinguished universities (159 doctorates, 544 masters).

**Table 5** Degree-granting trends of research assistants supported by the SSK program

	1 <sup>st</sup> Cohort*	2 <sup>nd</sup> Cohort	3 <sup>rd</sup> Cohort	4 <sup>th</sup> Cohort	Total
Number of MA Degrees	130	263	108	43	544
Number of PhD Degrees	37	81	33	8	159
Total	167	344	141	51	703

\* Degrees granted during 2010-2013 for the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort were not counted.

The graduate research assistants who participated in the SSK program also showed active participation in academic activities such as publishing papers or giving presentations at conferences. These students published 1,368 papers in academic journals either individually or jointly. Of those papers, 162 (11.8%) were published in foreign academic journals. To put it differently, one out of ten papers published by graduate students were published in foreign journals. Academic presentation activities also took place frequently, and 2,217 cases were reported during this period. In fact, 664 presentations were made in foreign academic conferences, representing almost 30% of all presentations.

Particularly among the graduate students, the SSK program gave all-but-dissertation (ABD) students a chance to study overseas in renowned research-centered universities or research institutes. Research centers that participate in the SSK program collaborate with foreign universities and institutions in a variety of ways—visits between researchers, joint symposiums, and active information exchange, to name a few. As an extension of these actions, the program gave ABD graduate students the opportunity of visiting foreign universities and research institutions to learn about the latest research developments in their respective fields and reinforce their research capabilities. As a result, 78 ABD-status students have been to research-centered universities to complete their graduate studies. Thirty-one students were selected for overseas studies in the first cohort, 37 in the second cohort, nine in the third cohort, and one in the fourth cohort. When we take a look at the periods during which they went, nine students went in 2012, 28 in 2013, 22 in 2014, six in 2015, three in 2016, and ten in 2017.<sup>9</sup>

The SSK program opened the “SSK Future Social Scientists Symposium” in 2014 and provided an opportunity for future generations to present their research findings and network with each other. Over the course of four symposiums, 307 academic papers have been presented. Furthermore, starting from 2015, papers submitted to the “SSK Future Social Scientists Symposium” were judged, with the authors of outstanding papers receiving awards.

### **The hub of the SSK projects: The SSK-networking support group**

One distinguishing feature that sets the SSK program apart from other academic support programs is the existence of the SSK-Networking Support Group. This group constantly works as a substantive connector or hub between NRF and SSK researchers, between researchers, and

<sup>9</sup> The number of selected students greatly decreased starting from 2015. This is because funding for the SSK program was cut in that year.

between researchers and external fields as well as legislative and administrative bodies in addition to the general public. The SSK Support Group was started in 2011, one year after the inception of the SSK program itself, as a means of facilitating networking. In 2013-2014 the SSK-Networking Support Group merged with the SSK Policy Linkage project, and in 2016 the SSK Performance Promotion project was included to form today's support group.

The Support Group's goal is to connect and promote research results with policy-making, to create and develop the SSK research ecosystem, and to spread the trend of collaborative research in Korean social sciences. One specific goal is to have successful collaboration between SSK research centers, groups, and teams, and to create a world-class social science research center through the support of networking between researchers. The main enterprises are networking support, promotion of SSK research results, the strengthening of relations to policy-making, and research activities.

The SSK-Networking Support Group is necessary for a variety of reasons. To achieve the aforementioned goals, it is crucial to develop networks between research teams to diffuse and circulate information about specific research agendas. For this to be realized, similar research topics need to be set in advance. Moreover, it is important for the program participants to share research results along with research experiences and accompanying data sets, because the sharing of research interests, different academic perspectives, and theoretical models can function as the basis for more diverse and innovative research results. In addition, through the academic exchanges among researchers participating in the SSK program, the overarching goal of collaborative research is expected to be naturally achieved. As the research environment grows more diverse and complex, the SSK program attempts to effectively create synergies

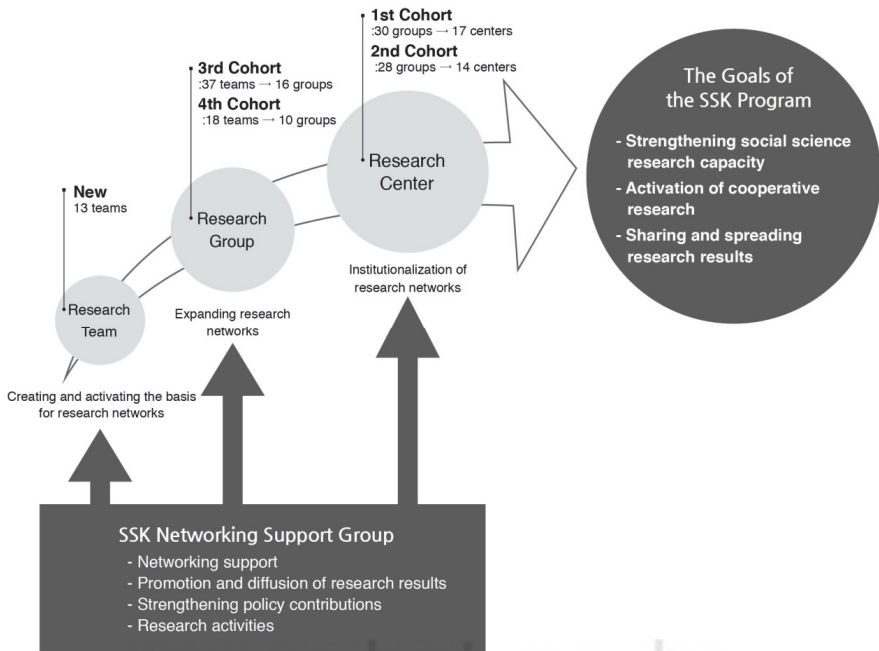


Fig. 5 The SSK-Networking Support Group's roles and contributions to the SSK program

between research teams through networking activities. To do so, the SSK-Networking Support Group was organized to create, develop, and maintain networking activities such as regular meetings, and ultimately achieve the objectives of the SSK program.

## Concluding remarks

When compared to the HK and URC research support programs, the SSK program has a few distinguishing characteristics that set it apart. The program places emphasis on the growth of research teams through inter-competition and cooperation, which leads to the formation of research groups and eventually large research centers. The SSK program actively encourages networking and even has a support group whose sole purpose is to organize and manage networking activities such as symposiums or information exchange. The SSK program is also working to overcome the walls of sectionalism and egoism within major subject of study as well as regional boundaries through interdisciplinary research, and to create a more innovative research culture. Unlike other research support programs, the SSK program is a mid- to long-term program. As a result, the program not only allows researchers to diagnose chronic or impending social problems and propose solutions, but also creates chances to propose progressive blueprints for the future. The SSK program takes a top-down approach to research by presenting a variety of agendas from which researchers can choose. Therefore, researchers can proactively respond to social needs through this type of intensive research.

It has been seven years since the SSK program was started. We will now briefly discuss the future of the SSK program and the issues it may face. First, it has become necessary at this point to consider the formation of a blueprint for a so-called post-SSK. The research centers that have received or will receive financial support through the SSK program over the 10 years of its existence must now find new ways to become independent. Making research centers into financially independent academic organizations, think tanks, and engines for the fostering of future generations of researchers even a decade after the SSK program has become a critical issue.

Another issue is how research centers will be able to retain the ability to produce effective research results even after funding from the program ends. At the same time, the social application of the results obtained from the SSK program has become an important task. For instance, if an important social issue—e.g., public health issues such as the spread of MERS or national security issues such as North Korean nuclear weapon testing—arises, SSK researchers who have published on or are researching relevant topics must have some basic guidelines to follow in order to solve the problem. The issue of the societal role of research centers goes hand in hand with this issue. It is true that most research papers have been judged based on their quantity and quality. Considering the emphasis on social contribution, educational utility, and ever-changing internal and external environments, the reestablishment of the research center's status and purpose has become an important mid- to long-term project.

Finally, the scale of the SSK-Networking Support Group within the SSK program and how much interest and support it will receive to expand networking has also become a topic of discussion. The SSK Support Group has strived not only to create networks between SSK researchers but also act as a bridge between researchers and important societal entities. In

addition, various steps have been taken to create connections between research results (research centers) and policy (administrative agencies) that lead to more involvement in policy making. Also, for the future generations of social scientists, various academic symposiums and award ceremonies have taken place. Reaffirming the status and the accompanying role of the SSK Support Group in relation to these enterprises has become a subject of interest as well.

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