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Study Master (gongsin.com)

Study Master is a program based in South Korea. Its user base is primarily secondary school students and is open to students with various circumstances such as low income, rural residing, multicultural, disabilities and North Korean refugee status. Study Master is a combination of services and products. With its online mentoring service, students can look for, contact mentors and access the content provided by the mentors. Its website contains databases of articles and videos which address a variety of topics including study strategies, actual subject instruction and school life. The website also features forums where students can talk among themselves and post questions to be answered by mentors. Study Master recently developed a mobile application in collaboration with students from a professional high school for digital media. This application provides an additional way to access the forum and contact mentors. With offline mentoring, students and mentors meet once a week at a mentoring site for casual interaction and/or subject instruction. Currently, all the sites are located in Seoul, largest and capital city. During summer and winter, however, a dedicated group of mentors volunteer to move to community centers in rural areas to provide services to local students. Half-priced workbooks written by mentors are available to students as of 2011. These workbooks are a boon to students and parents who are faced with the trouble of buying expensive workbooks. Mentors also work with schools and community centers who supply classrooms and disadvantaged students.

Physical accessibility is enhanced when students with access to computer and the internet can use the website to get information and make friends and when mentors themselves visit students at local community centers or schools. No information about accessibility of the tools was found, however. In order to ensure full physical accessibility, Study Master needs to design their products to be universally usable and communicate prominently when they have achieved universal usability. Intellectual accessibility is enhanced when students can better understand the seemingly complex education system of Korea with the help of mentors who have experience the process themselves. The application developed by the high school students reflects their needs and is therefore easy to use. The workbook developed and designed by mentors who were test takers at one point also reflects student needs closely.

The cost of the program varies for students. Online mentoring is free to all while course videos are not. One course costs between $20 and $50. Monthly passes are also available. Both services and products are free to students who can prove that they have disabilities or are from low income families, multicultural families and North Korean refugee families.

Study Master was founded by two engineering students at the nation’s top university in 2006. They made and uploaded videos of how they studied and what worked for them. The videos went viral. Friends joined to produce more content and form a student organization. As the organization became more popular, offers from parents and corporations followed. But the organization wanted to stay volunteer-based. The campus group grew into a national organization. In 2008, Study Master decided to become a social venture and formed a new vision: one mentor for every student. Study Master won the best social venture award in 2009. To make its service more robust and permanent, Study Master implements a fee schedule in 2010. As of 2011, 297 mentors and eight full-time employees are at work. 1481 students have been served free of charge. 210,000 registered users of the website exist. Study Master plans to expand to 100 sites in the next ten years. The younger brother who served his military duties in Indonesia worked with students there to help start Indonesia’s version of mentoring called Maha Mentor, which now boasts 300 mentors.

Although mentoring is not a unique concept, this program offers benefits to many students and parents in Korea by providing practical solutions to social problems. Exam performance is very important among secondary school students in Korea, but educational resources are often concentrated in urban areas, especially Seoul. A typical middle school student is asked to decide what kind of high school he or she can enter. Magnet high schools require stellar academic performance. Students living in non-standardized areas need to work hard to get into the top schools in their area. High school freshmen, in turn, need to ask what area or category they will study toward. Depending on what area the students choose, class subjects and college entrance exam subjects may change. During the senior year, prior to taking the entrance exam, students also need to decide whether they are going to apply or not based on the credentials they have established. After they have taken the entrance exam and gotten their scores back, they need to strategically start applying for admission. Each college and department has varying standards for exam scores and GPA levels. While this overview is a simplification of the more complex system, it suggests how difficult the education process can be for young students.

The nation’s best universities are concentrated in Seoul, and they are reluctant to spread. Where there is a university, there are college students and graduates. They often times work as part-time tutors. Where there are tutors, there are tutoring businesses. This creates competition and choices. Students who get extra help through tutoring go back to school. School teachers, in turn, are constantly pressured to provide more advanced teaching. Tutoring costs money. Typical cost of offline lesson is $100-300 per month, per subject. One can rent a room for $300 a month. Online lesson is between $60-150 per course. To stem the excessive dependence on private education, the government has implemented a public version of online instruction, but it is not as robust as the ones offered by private institutions. Some positive news is that the infrastructure for online interaction is available. Korea is known as the most wired nation on earth, with the world’s fastest internet speed. While Study Master is still in its infancy and has a long way to go before it can achieve its vision of providing one mentor for every student, it has offered some practical solutions to trumping the nation’s social ill.