

From Sweden to Korea: Turning Admiration into Welfare Policy

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In 2014, I arrived at Stockholm University as a DUO-Sweden scholarship recipient, unsure of where my major in social welfare would eventually lead me. I did not know then that one semester in Sweden would become a turning point in my life. By witnessing how a welfare state operated in people's everyday lives, I began to imagine a future in which I could contribute directly to welfare policy in Korea. Twelve years later, that imagination has become my work: I am now a Deputy Director at the Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Republic of Korea.

A few days ago, I happened to check an old university email account that I had not used for a long time. After struggling to remember the password, I finally logged in and found an email about the ASEM-DUO Essay Contest. The moment I saw the name DUO-Sweden in that forgotten inbox, I was taken back to Stockholm in 2014. It reminded me not only of the time I spent there, but also of the direction that experience gave to my life. This essay is both a record of my exchange student memories and a belated letter of gratitude to ASEM-DUO, which became a turning point in my career.

When I applied for DUO-Sweden, I was a third-year university student deeply concerned about my future. Most of my friends seemed to have already chosen their paths. Those preparing for employment were busy obtaining certificates and building extracurricular experience, while those planning to attend graduate school were focusing on academic activities and grades. Meanwhile, I felt as if I were floating without a clear direction.

Since childhood, I had been interested in helping others, so I naturally chose to major in social welfare. When I entered university, I assumed that my career path would become clear by the time I approached graduation. In reality, it did not. The closer I came to graduation, the deeper my uncertainty became. I was interested in both social welfare policy and practice, so I considered pursuing graduate studies. At the same time, I was also concerned that going to graduate school would delay my entry into the workforce. I could not easily choose between contributing to policy through research and entering the field as soon as possible.

In the midst of this uncertainty, I decided to apply for an exchange program. I thought that if I were to pursue graduate studies or study abroad someday, I should first experience what it was like to study and live in another country. When choosing a destination, I decided on Sweden. At that time, around 2013 and 2014, the "Nordic welfare state" was an important topic in Korean social discourse. Stories about fathers actively participating in childcare, child allowances, flexible parental leave, and childcare and education being treated as public responsibilities sounded almost like an ideal society to me. Although Korea has since developed many of these policies, Sweden was, at that time, the welfare state I most wanted to see with my own eyes.

The DUO-Sweden scholarship meant far more to me than financial support. By easing the financial burden, it allowed me to continue my exchange student life with greater stability and to focus fully on my classes and experiences in Sweden. For a student who was unsure of her future, DUO-Sweden was an opportunity to explore new possibilities without excessive pressure. Looking back, that opportunity became the starting point that changed the direction of my life.

The welfare system I saw in Sweden was not a grand slogan or an abstract ideal. It was naturally embedded in daily life. In public facilities, even men's restrooms had baby-changing facilities. At subway staircases, separate rails were installed so that strollers and wheelchairs could move more easily. Students came to class holding their babies, and on one occasion, a professor once brought a young child to class after briefly explaining the situation to the students. These scenes showed me how much more freely people can learn, work, and live when society does not place the responsibility of care solely on individuals.

Policies such as child allowances, free education, and childcare services were impressive, but what struck me even more was the fact that these systems were functioning naturally in people's everyday lives. Welfare was not merely something written in laws or allocated in budgets. It was present in the moments when people raised children, studied, worked, and moved through public spaces. My experience in Sweden taught me that welfare policy is a concrete mechanism that expands people's possibilities in life.

One class I took at Stockholm University, "Special Education," remains especially memorable. Through this course, I had the opportunity to visit a school where special education was being practiced. I was deeply moved by the way every child's right to education was respected, regardless of disability. At that moment, I learned that welfare policy is not simply a system for supporting vulnerable groups. It is also a way for a society to express whom it recognizes as its members and how it chooses to live together. The idea that society should design environments in which everyone can learn and grow equally had a lasting influence on my later policy work.

My experience in Sweden left me with an important question: "Could Korea also move further in this direction?" Of course, Korea has its own strengths and institutional context. But at that time, I felt a strong sense of concern about the difficulties many people faced in balancing work and family responsibilities, the lack of social room to accommodate pregnant women and persons with disabilities, and the reality in which care was often left too heavily to individuals and families. The scenes I witnessed in Sweden gave concrete direction to those concerns. I began to think that I wanted to contribute directly to the development of Korea's welfare system.

After completing my exchange semester and returning to Korea, I chose to become a public official rather than immediately pursue graduate studies. Contributing to policy through research is certainly meaningful, but at that time, I wanted to participate in Korea's welfare policy field as soon as possible. In Korea, there is a national examination system for selecting senior civil servants, commonly known as the Higher Civil Service Examination. I passed this examination in 2017 and later began working at the Ministry of Health and Welfare. In other words, a student who had studied social welfare and witnessed the everyday reality of a welfare state in

Sweden became a public official responsible for Korea's health and welfare policies.

At the Ministry of Health and Welfare, I have participated in the design and implementation of various policies. In particular, I had opportunities to work on policies closely connected to what I had experienced as an exchange student in Sweden. Representative examples include childcare fee support for children aged zero to five and the establishment of public children's rehabilitation hospitals for children in need of rehabilitation treatment.

Korea has implemented free childcare policies since the early 2010s, and from 2022 to 2024, I was responsible for the childcare fee support program. Through this work, I once again realized the importance of policies that reduce the financial burden on families raising young children and help children grow in more stable childcare environments. The public responsibility for childcare and care that I had seen in Sweden was no longer a distant story from another country. I had become a policy officer thinking about how to realize that value within Korea's own reality and institutions.

From 2020 to 2021, I was also in charge of a project to establish public children's rehabilitation hospitals. This project aimed to expand public infrastructure so that children in need of rehabilitation treatment could receive appropriate care and support within their communities. In particular, I promoted a school program within hospital wards to guarantee the right to education for hospitalized children. I believed that children's learning should not be interrupted simply because they needed medical treatment. In this process, the philosophy of inclusive education that I had encountered through my Special Education class and field visit in Sweden was naturally reflected.

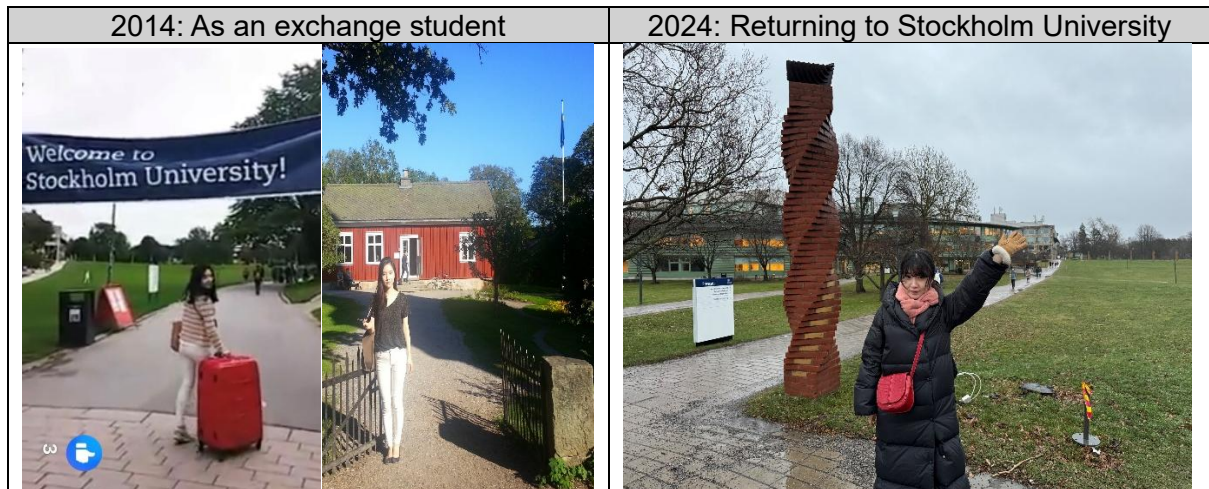
One of the greatest rewards of working as a public official has been seeing the policies I worked on being announced to the public through press releases and then implemented in the field. Policy can seem abstract when it exists only on paper, but once it begins to operate in the real world, it touches someone's life. If childcare fee support can slightly ease the burden on families raising young children, and if public children's rehabilitation hospitals can provide better environments for children who need treatment and education, then I feel that the path I chose has meaning.

After six years at the Ministry of Health and Welfare, I found myself with another dream. While I felt rewarded by contributing to society through policy work, I also became aware of the limits of my own knowledge and experience. I realized that in order to design more effective and sustainable policies, I needed to deepen my understanding of public policy.

So I challenged myself once again to study abroad. Through Korea's overseas training program for public officials, I began a master's degree in Global Public Policy at the University of Birmingham as a British Council Korea-UK LINK scholar. I have now completed my dissertation and expect to graduate in July 2026. I hope to bring this learning back to Korea and use it to design better policies.

While writing this essay, I reread the exchange student report I submitted in 2015. In it, I had written at length about how sad I was to leave Sweden. I must have thought that I might never have the chance to return. But life is unpredictable in the most interesting ways. In the winter of 2024, ten years after my exchange semester, I

visited Stockholm University again. During a break from my graduate studies in the United Kingdom, I traveled to Stockholm and walked once more through the campus and streets where I had studied years before.



When I compare the photos from 2014 and 2024, I do not seem to have changed very much on the outside. Inside, however, I know I have grown. Ten years ago, I stood on the campus of Stockholm University as a student full of questions about my future. When I returned a decade later, I found myself standing in the same place with a clearer sense of who I had become and what kind of work I wanted to continue doing.

Looking back, DUO-Sweden was far more than an exchange scholarship. It was the opportunity that helped me see a wider world, discover how I wanted to contribute to society, and take the first step toward the career I have today.

Through my career, I have learned how meaningful it is to know that one's work may have even a small impact on someone else's life. That is why I wanted to share how deeply ASEM-DUO's support influenced one student from Korea. Because of DUO-Sweden, I was able to learn, reflect, and dream in Sweden, and that experience became an important foundation for who I am today.

I also want to speak to students who may be reading this essay and dreaming of becoming exchange students. The worries we have when we are young are never trivial. The time spent being uncertain about one's future, and the time spent searching for new possibilities in an unfamiliar place, can all become part of one's growth. A semester abroad may not immediately provide every answer. But one day, it may become the experience that helps you understand what kind of person you want to become and how you want to contribute to society.

If, in 2026, I am able to contribute, however modestly, to Korean society, one of the starting points was surely ASEM-DUO's DUO-Sweden. Twelve years ago in Stockholm, I was a student who admired a strong welfare state. Today, I am working to turn that admiration into policies suited to Korea's own reality. I am deeply grateful to DUO-Sweden for showing me a wider world and giving me the courage to choose a new path.