

Five Korean Cities in the Global Top 100 by 2030

Korea's startup ecosystem has long been concentrated in the greater Seoul metropolitan area. The Startup City Development Project is designed to change that – and today, it took a concrete step forward.

At a strategy presentation held at DGIST Convention Hall in Daegu, the Ministry of SMEs and Startups (MSS) convened four metropolitan governments, four science and technology institutes, and regional startup support organizations to present localized strategies and formalize their commitments through MOUs. The event followed the National Startup Era Strategy Meeting in April, where the project was first announced at the national level. Today translated that blueprint into region-specific action.

Around 80 participants attended, including Minister Han Seong-Sook, vice-mayor level representatives from Daegu, Gwangju, Daejeon, and Ulsan, and the presidents and vice-presidents of KAIST, DGIST, GIST, and UNIST.

The project carries a clear and measurable objective: placing at least five Korean cities in the world's top 100 startup ecosystem rankings by 2030.

To get there, each participating city receives a government support package covering talent development, commercialization, investment linkage, and infrastructure – layered on top of its own differentiated local strategy. At the center of each city's model is its regional science and technology institute, around which universities, research centers, companies, and investment institutions are expected to build an integrated governance structure.

The underlying principle is a self-reinforcing cycle: technical talent is cultivated locally, startups are formed and scaled within the region, and successful companies choose to remain and reinvest – reducing the gravitational pull of the capital and creating ecosystems that sustain themselves over time.

Each city presented a strategy that reflects its distinct industrial identity and research strengths.

Daegu is positioning itself as a leading city for AI-driven transformation in advanced manufacturing. With DGIST at its core, the city's strategy centers on establishing a deep tech testbed across robotics and mobility, medical and bio, and AI and software – translating existing research capacity into startup activity at scale.

Daejeon is drawing on KAIST and a dense concentration of government-funded research institutes to build a deep tech startup ecosystem anchored in three priority sectors: space and defense, AI and robotics, and bio. The city also presented a longer-term vision for a science and technology innovation hub capable of producing the next generation of unicorn companies.

Gwangju is centering its model on GIST-led research and deep tech development, with future mobility, energy, and AI and semiconductors as its focus areas. Notably, the city's strategy extends beyond its own boundaries – connecting with the energy infrastructure of neighboring Naju, including Korea Electric Power Corporation and the Korea Institute of Energy Technology, to form a broader regional startup corridor.

Ulsan is leveraging UNIST alongside the industrial base of the city's established manufacturing companies to build a globally-oriented, open demonstration startup city focused on manufacturing AI and future mobility. What sets Ulsan's model apart is its directness: startups will be able to validate their technologies on active factory floors across the city's automotive, shipbuilding, and petrochemical industries – turning real-world demonstration into

commercialization without leaving the region.

Following the strategy presentations, MSS and the four metropolitan governments signed MOUs formalizing their cooperation under the project. All parties committed to identifying and developing technical talent through their respective science and technology institutes, attracting high-quality startups to each region, supporting technology development, commercialization, and investment, building sustainable local startup environments, and improving conditions for long-term settlement and growth within each city.

“It is important to move beyond a startup structure centered on the capital region – to create an environment where technology-driven entrepreneurship thrives across the country, and where companies that grow locally choose to remain and put down roots,” said Minister Han Seong-Sook.

“Through the Startup City Project, we will help regions build self-sustaining ecosystems that generate their own growth momentum – and work toward Korea where starting a company is a genuine option no matter where you live.”

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