Ministry of SMEs and Startups

Press Release

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Wider Doors, Deeper Support: Ministry Unveils Phase 2 of "Startup for All" Project

The Ministry of SMEs and Startups (Acting Minister and First Vice Minister Roh Yong-Seok) announced the "Phase 2 Startup for All Project Implementation Plan" on August 13, jointly with relevant government agencies, at a session combining the Emergency Economic Response Headquarters Meeting, the Economic Ministers' Meeting, the Interagency Task Force on Special Management of Livelihood Prices, and the National Startup Strategy Meeting, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Koo Yun-Cheol.

The plan builds on the momentum generated by the first phase of the Startup for All project, aiming to channel that early enthusiasm into a nationwide entrepreneurship movement. It incorporates feedback gathered directly from participants and mentoring institutions to further widen the pathway into entrepreneurship.

Phase 1 in Review

The first round of the Startup for All project drew approximately 63,000 applicants this March – the largest field ever recorded for a government-run startup or idea competition. Young applicants aged 39 and under made up 68% of all entries, while 53.4% came from outside the Seoul Capital Area, reflecting strong interest in entrepreneurship nationwide.

Follow-up surveys of university students, employees, and members of the startup ecosystem also pointed to a broader shift in public attitudes: intent to pursue entrepreneurship rose by 13.5 percentage points, while negative perceptions of startup failure fell by 28.8 percentage points.

The 5,000 participants selected in Phase 1 received a special program from their host institutions along with one-on-one early-stage mentoring. The Ministry also held Startup for All community roundtables across all 17 provincial-level regions to collect feedback, addressing issues immediately where possible and working with startup support institutions to shape further improvements – many of which are now reflected in the Phase 2 plan.

Phase 2: Five Core Initiatives

Phase 2 is designed to establish Startup for All not as a one-time event, but as the starting point where aspiring entrepreneurs across the country enter the startup ecosystem. It centers on five core initiatives:

1. Expanding Support and Growing the Network of Incubating Institutions and Mentors

   Phase 2 will select 10,000 participants – double the size of Phase 1 – split between 8,000 in the general and technology tracks and 2,000 in the local track. Eligibility requirements will also be relaxed: founders who restarted a business will now qualify if they did so within the past seven years, up from three years previously. To keep the project's founding spirit intact, at least 80% of selected participants will be pre-startup founders, and at least 70% will come from outside the Seoul Capital Area to support regional entrepreneurship.

   Applicants who were not selected in Phase 1 will receive bonus points for completing mentoring for repeat applicants and refining their ideas, recognizing their persistence. Standout innovators identified through the Intellectual Property Office's idea competition and the Startup for All University League will also be fast-tracked into the program.

To give participants more options, the number of incubating institutions will expand to roughly 170, with new participants including large corporations and mid-sized firms such as Hana Bank and Shinhan Square Bridge, as well as public institutions such as K-water. To raise mentoring quality across the board, the Ministry will establish formal qualification standards for mentors and limit each mentor to working with no more than two institutions at a time. Mentor pools will also be organized by startup stage and area of specialization to better match mentors with participants' needs.

2. Specialized Leagues Across a Broader Range of Fields

Phase 2 broadens both the fields and formats through which participants can compete.

The Startup for All University League will run as a hackathon-style competition open to student startup clubs nationwide, hosted through university startup hubs. A new Startup for All Youth League will identify promising youth startup teams through regional BizCool centers, offering hands-on entrepreneurial experience.

A new Social Innovation & Social Venture League will identify and support entrepreneurs developing solutions to social challenges – such as gaps in community care and barriers to employment and civic participation – selecting 10 companies to receive up to KRW 150 million each in commercialization support.

A new Global League will support entrepreneurs pursuing international expansion, connecting them with specialized accelerators in Silicon Valley, New York, Singapore, and India to provide commercialization funding, support for establishing a local presence, and mentoring from global experts.

3. Strengthening Review Fairness and Upgrading Support Systems

Drawing on feedback from mentors and participants, the Ministry is improving fairness and convenience throughout the selection and support process.

On the review side, all applications will now require joint assessment by three mentors along with a formal review committee at each institution. A new AI verification model will check for AI-generated content and cross-reference submissions against external databases to detect plagiarism. A minimum feedback requirement will also be introduced so every applicant receives substantive review comments, and supporting documents can now be submitted online for greater convenience.

The application form will grow from the current three categories – WHY, WHAT, and HOW – to as many as six, adding a "READY" category to assess applicant capability along with separate evaluation criteria for existing founders and repeat applicants, enabling a more systematic assessment of each participant's strengths.

On the support side, startup activity funds can now be used for online payment gateway (PG) services to better support early-stage operations. To improve the quality of AI-based solutions, the Ministry will select roughly 50 companies through a review led by AI and science and technology experts, providing up to three solutions per company. Participants who advance through regional competitions will also gain access to cross-agency support, including GPU resources from the Ministry of Science and ICT and export training and trade statistics support from the Korea Customs Service.

Participation in Startup for All will now count as a formal credential: participants will receive an official Startup Challenge Certificate documenting their involvement, which can be used to gain preferential consideration in startup support programs, loans, and R&D funding.

4. Building a Nationwide Startup Culture

   To keep participants, alumni founders, and investors connected well beyond the competition itself, the Ministry will establish regional startup communities.

   Four regional hubs will host Startup Clubs, where experienced founders share insights and firsthand lessons with newer participants, alongside "Built Together" Clubs that support participant-led startup meetups.

   The Ministry will also hold regular regional Community Days bringing together participants, alumni founders, investors, and support institutions, and will launch a nationwide Challenge IR event connecting participants with Tech Incubator Program for Startup (TIPS) operators – creating a pathway from securing investment through to TIPS participation.

   Together, these efforts aim to establish Startup for All not simply as a selection program, but as a lasting startup culture where participants grow alongside fellow founders and investors.

5. Strengthening Platform Security and Operational Governance

   To give participants confidence in the platform, the Ministry will strengthen both its security and its operational stability.

   Drawing on assessments from outside security specialists, the Ministry will enhance platform security and improve its personal data management systems, while ensuring full compliance with administrative requirements for public information systems in coordination with relevant agencies.

   To reinforce operational stability, the Ministry will designate regional hub institutions to oversee incubating organizations in each area, establish ongoing communication channels between the Korea Institute of Startup and Entrepreneurship Development and these regional hubs, and set up a continuous security review process with outside specialists.

Phase 2 of the Startup for All Project formally begins on August 20. The Ministry will select 10,000 participants in September, then support them through staged incubation and competition programs linked to cross-agency and private-sector resources, aiming to build a solid growth pathway that carries participants from initial challenge to actual startup launch.

First Vice Minister Roh Yong-Seok said the roughly 60,000 applicants who took part in the first phase of Startup for All demonstrated new possibilities for entrepreneurship across Korean society.

"In Phase 2, we will open the door to more citizens, actively support repeat applicants and founders across diverse fields, and build a foundation that allows participants to keep growing within the startup ecosystem well beyond the competition itself," he said.