

My Korean life: Going on Exchange to Sungkyunkwan University

"Life is a journey, not a destination"

On the spring of 2013, I spend one semester at Sungkyunwan University (SKKU) in Seoul, Korea. In my previous papers, I've already written shortly about what life over there was like. You're probably reading this because you're also interested on going on exchange as well, so I will try to give you more insight on the all aspect of life in Korea.

LIVING

Housing: SKKU has good housing facilities. There are 3 dorms (I-House, Migaonville and Koartville). Both I-House and Migaonville are walking distance from school, and Koartville is two subway stations away. I lived in Koartville, but had friends living on all the dorms. I believe that my dorm was the best, mostly because of the location. Koartville is located in near a very busy commercial street, with a lot of restaurants and shops nearby, while the other two dorms are in residential areas, and places to eat are a little more distant. The only disadvantage is that you are not so close to school, but from my room to the classroom, it always took me 30 minutes. I also had friends, who opted for renting by themselves, but this is not easy because landlords usually ask for one-year contracts, so unless you're going for two semesters, it might not be convenient.

Living expenses: SKKU gives you a handbook with a lot of information regarding school, but one section which is a little outdated is the living expenses. I think in general, life in Korea is more expensive than Taiwan. Of course it all depends on your lifestyle, but if you're used to the prices around NCCU, you will definitely think Seoul is very expensive. Around my dorm, for example, a Korean dinner of *bibimbap* and *bulgogi* (rice with vegetables and beef) was a little over 5,000 ₩ (or about 150 NT), a Subway meal with coke and a cookie was a 7,000 ₩ (200 NT), and eating pasta was almost 10,000 ₩ (300 NT). If you decide to cook (all the dorms have good cooking facilities), the bill won't be any lower. Shop at E-Mart, Homeplus or Daiso (they even have groceries), and avoid Lotte Mart. Transportation was not expensive, because the subway has a minimum fare of 1,200 ₩ (35 NT), but it covers up to 10 Km. On the other hand, if you're going to take the metro to school every day, it might feel a little expensive to spend 70 NT for a round trip. Walking to school takes 45 minutes to 1 hour. There are useful webs pages, like expatistan.com, which provide up-to-date information on prices of many items.

Weather: It might sound like something silly, but weather in Seoul varies a lot from winter to summer, so you must foresee this and take different types of clothing. In my case, I arrived on late February and used my heavy winter jacket until early April, but by the time I came back to Taiwan, I was already wearing flip-flops and short pants. I think it will be the opposite if you go for the fall term. Clothing in Korea is not so expensive (if you buy local brands), so don't fear to go shopping if you need anything (and yes, I will comment about shopping). If you have any seasonal allergies, make sure to bring all your medication.

Language: Just one advice: learn Korean! Even though it's a developed country and Koreans spend many years at at cram school (buxiban), they're very reluctant to speak English. Unlike Taiwan, where people are willing to try to speak English as soon as they see a foreigner, Koreans feel embarrassed to do so, because they believe they will make a mistake and "lose face". SKKU offers Korean Language courses for free to exchange students; but I couldn't enroll because I missed the deadline. However, my friends who did say that, even though it was a difficult class, they felt knowing some Korean made their life much easier. So, if you decide to go, start practicing your "*annyeonghaseyo*" (hello).

Shopping: This will probably be the most interesting section for girls. I had heard Korea was a perfect destination for those who love shopping, and it was true. I usually joked that a typical street in Seoul was "makeup store, shoe store, cafeteria, makeup store", but it kind of was. Myeongdong, Itaewon and Insadong are all very famous shopping areas, and local people will love to give you the insights of the best places to buy, depending on what you're looking for. Like I said before, if you need to buy seasonal clothing (like summer shorts) try the local brands. I got some t-shirts at SPAO and they are very good.

Mobile Phone: It will be practically impossible to get a Korean SIM card if you don't have an ARC (Alien Registration Card), which you will get two weeks after registering with Immigration office. So you have two choices, either you ask a Korean friend to buy it for you or you go to Immigration as soon as possible and spend two weeks without a phone. There is Wi-Fi almost everywhere in the city (even on the subway tunnels) because Koreans love their smartphones and want to be online all the time. It's very likely that your Korean friends don't use neither Whatsapp or Line, but rather KakaoTalk, an instant-messaging app that is extremely popular and Korea (and only there!).

Things to do: just go out and discover the city! Seoul might not have a long and rich history like Beijing or Tokyo, but still can be an attractive city with many cool things to do. Rent a bike and travel down the Han River, spend the day on one of the many cafeterias and tea houses on Insadong, enjoy the nightlife at Hongdae, or do some exercise and hike many of the mountains surrounding the city (Ingywan is a very good option) and enjoy Seoul's skyline from the top. Invest on a guidebook (I bought the Lonely Planet Korea) because it will give you a lot of ideas of what to do.

STUDYING

Above all, you're there to study. You will have to attend classes and lectures, prepare presentations and write exams. You will have classmates and professors, and just like at NCCU, you will like some of them, and others not so much. In this aspect, the dynamics remain the same when you are a student at exchange. These are some important things you should know:

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Enrollment: Read the handbook SKKU will send you. It has very helpful information and is presented in a very simple way. The last page of it was the calendar with important dates on the semester. Do not miss the deadlines for enrollment because otherwise you will have to make manual enrollment and it's not an easy job. I had troubles enrolling so I had to do the manual registration, which meant going to the first class and asking the professor for his approval for you to join the class. Sometimes, if the class is already too large, the professor might not accept you, so that's why enrolling online is your best choice. I only enroll two courses: one International Exchange Course (or IEC) and one MBA class. I'll talk more about them ahead. One final word of advice: there is an add-and-drop period to make final changes to your schedule, but it doesn't apply to graduate students! I complained about this to SKKU, but it's their policy so if you're a Master student, make sure your schedule is final, because you won't be able to change it afterwards.

Facilities: SKKU campus is very nice and modern. It actually has two campuses (one in Seoul and one in Suwon), but you can read more about them on the exchange student handbook. The Seoul campus, where I studied, it's located on a steep hill so walking from Hyehwa subway station (the closest one to school) to the Law School Building, for example, can be quite a tiring walk, especially if you're carrying your notebook. Luckily there is a shuttle bus which only cost 300 ₩. Trust me, it's worth it! I also recommend you to always carry a map of campus. It's not such a big school, but finding your classroom can take you a little time, and because of the topography, you don't want to have to run all the way up because you mixed up the buildings and are running late for class. School also has a small but well equipped gym, but you have to be quick on registering because there is limited capacity. The largest cafeteria is on the Business School Building and food is ok. Avoid the hamburger place, the food is ok, but they take a lot of time on serving a mere burger with fries. The Main Library is a great place to study, although I only went there for a couple of times. The study area on the 4th floor gives you the best view on campus. There are many resources, but English material is limited.

Courses: Like I mentioned, I only registered two courses. The first one was called "Political and Economical Development of Korea" and it was an IEC course, this means it was only meant for exchange students. The professor was Korean, but had studied many years in France and his English was fluent, although with a strong accent. The content was interesting because it allowed me to better understand the current Korean society and where does it come from. However, because all the participants were exchange students, sometimes it was a little lax and not so strict. I learn a lot, but to be honest, I don't recommend IEC courses. Try to avoid them if you can.

My second class was an MBA course called "Asian Regional Studies for Manager" and it was just excellent. I am very happy I took it, because the professor (also Korean) had a lot of experience working on different Asian countries –he was an economist for the Asian Development Bank. We even had a lecture from the Asia Pacific Director of Stryker, an American medical equipment firm with presence in over 20 Asian countries. This class addresses the issues that manager must face when working on multicultural environment and how to analyze the opportunities and risks on the

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market, based on economic analyses. I also liked this because it was half foreigner and half Koreans, so it gave the chance to interact with Korean MBA students. My recommendation would be to try to avoid the IEC courses and enroll at regular classes. However, the risks are that you might end up being the only foreigner in the class or the teacher not having good English (both things happened to different friends). Evaluation varies from class to class, but the most common will be a midterm exam around week 6 and final exam at the end of the semester. You might also have to make presentations or write final papers, although professors tend to prefer presentations (usually in a group).

International Office: They are good and have goodwill, so don't doubt on asking their help. The Office is located on the International Building and they always have many interns you can talk to. These interns are very nice and will always try to provide you with advice; however, they have little to no power, so if you really need something you might want to talk to someone at a higher position. Check the email the Office sends you because they're always reminding you of important deadlines or things you must submit.

FINAL ADVICE

It's not an easy decision. Spending one semester abroad doing an exchange might seem like a big challenge, and when taking the decision, it's very normal to have a lot of doubts. I went through the same process, so if you're reading this because you're considering going on exchange –to Korea or anywhere else- I hope that my experience can be of any help.

Make sure that you have the financial means to go on exchange. Otherwise, you will not enjoy the experience because you will always be limited by money. Talk to your parents or make your own analysis to decide whether it can be done or not. Take your time to make this decision; sometimes you might need to save money for some period before being able to go on exchange, so starting the process with anticipation is the best thing you can do. Do not fear of making as many questions as you need. Read about other people's experience and get in touch with other students who have gone to the same place.

Once you're on exchange, remember the cultural shock is a normal process and that many people are going through the same. Whenever you feel sad, go out and do not lock yourself. Get to know the locals, or at least, the other exchange students. Do some sport or any physical activities; just don't stay in your room.

It's important to understand that having doubts and being a little afraid is perfectly normal; but the most important thing to do is not letting the fear stop you. Going on exchange can be an extraordinary experience that can make you grow and learn more about yourself. Many wise people have talked about "going out of your comfort zone" and I totally agree with this. Only when facing the challenge of a new environment is when you know how much you can achieve.