

# Exchange Year - South Korea

WiSe 2023/24 - SoSe 2024



Hey there! I'm currently studying International Finance and spent my last two semesters as an exchange student in Seoul, South Korea. Originally I only planned to stay for one semester, however I liked it there so much that I decided to stay longer. Funnily enough, most people I talked to mirrored a sentiment similar to mine, but couldn't stay longer due to various factors so I'm sure you will like it as well! That being said, let me start at the beginning and tell you about my time in South Korea.

## Pre-Departure

The process of getting to Korea was quite lengthy but luckily not all that complicated. After getting a spot at a partner university through the international office, I applied for the visa as soon as possible. I found all necessary information online at the Korea Visa Application Centers (KVAC). From what I heard processing times can vary greatly, since I was so early however, I had no problem with it.

Additionally I got some international insurance. Although in hindsight I maybe shouldn't have. As soon as you get your ARC (Alien Registration Card) there, you will be signed up to the NHIS (National Health Insurance System). If you have your own you will need to get an exemption

from this, otherwise you will have to pay both. For me it would've been much easier to just use the Korean one. The exemption process was really annoying and the differences between the two are negligible.

As a last point on the organizational checklist, my accommodation. I decided to stay in the university dorm for my time in Korea. Mostly because I am lazy and did not want to look for another apartment nearby, which could have been annoying. Additionally, it's directly on campus, so no travel time! Before I heard a lot of worries about the curfew in the dorm, but to be honest there is no need. Especially if only staying for a semester. The curfew itself is till 1AM with 8 weekday exemptions as well 2 for each weekend, doable through the dorm app in a couple seconds. This is more than enough. Even if it wasn't, the only punishment are penalty points, which only matter if you plan to stay longer than a semester. For me in my first semester I kinda paid attention to it, however, come the second semester I didn't really care anymore and just stayed out a lot more than those allowed days. Many Koreans told me that it is common for them to stay in the dorm for one semester and then move out (usually because they found something cheaper/better elsewhere). In the dorm you will have a double room, which means you will have a roommate. During the year I had two different ones. With both I came along well and even became somewhat of best friends with my second one. So no worries, most people there are really chill and respectful, even if you might not become the closest friends. The quality of the dorm is mediocre, but for the price and its location I didn't mind it that much, especially since the only time I really spent there was while sleeping.

## University Life

First things first. The difficulty level is comparable to our at the FRA UAS. However, since it is relative grading, usually you will end up with good grades in most cases, even with little learning. What's "relative grading" you may ask? Basically, the best person in a class will get an A+, the rest will get grades based on that (it's a bit more complicated than that but I don't wanna get into that here). It is the most common way classes are graded in Korea. For example in my accounting class I got an A with only around 50% score, since the class was apparently very hard. Signing up to the courses wanted was its own adventure entirely. Korean university courses have an upper limit of students allowed in, the spots are given out on a first come, first serve basis in multiple rounds. If you don't get into a course... tough luck, although sometimes

professors allow students to join, above the limit, so don't worry too much. In the end, most students I knew got all the courses they wanted.

Another thing you might notice is that classes are much quieter than they are at home. Koreans usually don't make new friends in the classroom. Only already established groups will interact with each other and usually after a class everyone will part ways without much socializing. At the same time however, university has a much more central position in the life of students than it has in Germany. Much of the socializing happens in school clubs. These are student run organizations authorized by the university that usually focus on one specific activity. For example, I joined the Tennis club, pretty

self-explanatory, as well as the "International Friends" of IF club, the latter tried to enable friendships between Koreans and Foreigners with weekly meetings and activities (which usually involved quite a bit of drinking to lighten the mood, also leading itself to the loving nickname "International Alcoholics" by some). Of course drinking isn't required though. If you want to make Korean friends I highly recommend joining a club, as it is one of the best ways to!

One last thing, if there is a bigger school festival you can attend, definitely do. They're great, usually with a musical performance of some popular artists, a lot of food and activity booths to hang out with your friends.



## Life in Korea

Personally I found the quality of life to be quite a bit higher than in Germany, although I might be slightly biased. It's very common in Korea to meet friends outside in bars, cafes or many of the other possible activities outside of your own home, such as Karaoke Bars (which I apparently absolutely suck at, a Korean friend once told me after going she'd never go with me again... which in the end she did do again, but well) or PC Bangs (Internet cafes). As mentioned earlier, the quality of the dorm didn't matter much to me because I spent most of my time outside anyways. Honestly, among our partner universities, in terms of location, Konkuk is basically unmatched, the only other coming close might be Ewha. Kondae (the district near Konkuk) apparently used to be quite trendy a couple years back. It offers a wide selection of food, bars, cafes and some nightclubs. Basically you can find almost anything there (although for clubbing, Itaewon or Hongdae might be better, since the average English level there is much better). Additionally Konkuk is directly next to metro line 2, which in my opinion is the best line as far as connectivity goes.

Speaking of English, the language level there was lower than expected. This has one big main reason. In the west we usually hear "They learn English in school", see their hard tests etc. and automatically assume they must be good at English. Well the problem is that those tests and the training in school usually only concern reading and writing, not listening and speaking.

Therefore communication even college students can be quite hard sometimes, especially since the school attitude of "being perfect" when speaking still persists, leading many Koreans to be quite shy about their English and to avoid speaking it. The better your Korean is, the easier it will be to make Korean friends or interact with locals (you should also at least learn the alphabet, it can already help immensely).

Finally, let's get to the good stuff. Food! Korean food is so good and more importantly, a lot cheaper than it is in Germany. I went out to eat basically every day, and while eating instant ramen might have been cheaper, it still didn't break my bank entirely. Since there was no kitchen in the dorm, those were kind of my only two options. My personal favorites were Korean BBQ, of course, but also Dakgalbi, Jimdak and Tteokbokki. All of these have really good and cheap restaurants in Kondae. Additionally a lot of other good Asian food can be found there, such as Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese. Western food aside from fast food like Burger King can also be found, however it's usually a bit more expensive and I found it to be lacking compared to the food at home.

## Conclusion

In the end I'm glad I did my exchange year in Korea. I'm even happier I got the opportunity to stay there for a year instead of just one semester. It feels like the perfect country to do an exchange in. Aside from the partial language barrier, the people are open and friendly, the country is incredibly safe (trust me, you can leave your laptop in a cafe for an hour or two, unguarded, and it will still be there when you return) and there is so much to explore, both in terms of places and culture.

