

ERASMUS report, Korean National University of Arts – summer semester 2019

In this text I would like to briefly discuss the experiences I had during my exchange studies in South Korea and discuss the challenges that one has to overcome in a foreign country with a different language and way of writing. Korean culture is comprehensive and multifaceted and is still full of surprises even after a semester.

Before you start studying abroad, you have to take care of a few organisational things. On the one hand, it is important to put together all the necessary documents for the host university and, on the other hand, it is important to make arrangements for life in the respective host country.

A precise list of documents from the International Office helped me a lot. I estimate that about 3 months should be enough to prepare well for the trip.

An English language test is essential and should also be taken as early as possible. If you want to learn Korean, you should give yourself at least a year in advance so that you can have a little conversation with people. From experience, everyone there is very happy when a guest student speaks Korean.

It is very important that you get a visa from the South Korean consulate in Germany. As a German tourist you have the legal opportunity to stay in South Korea for three months without a residence permit, but as a student abroad it is mandatory to have a residence permit. You have about one month to get this within the country without having to pay a fine, although it is less complicated to do it in Germany. You should also take out international health insurance in case you become ill or injured.

I arrived in Seoul about a month before the start of my studies to acclimatise and organise everything. Finding an apartment was the most urgent thing I had to worry about. At the beginning I took a room in a hostel and was able to organise everything else from there.

There is the option to live on campus in shared rooms, which is fairly affordable but does not offer a lot of privacy. So I decided to look for a room near the University. There are several real estate agencies around the campus at Dolgoji station and with luck and help I managed to get a small space for around 350 euros per month. However, in South Korea the deposit is very high. You should expect around 5000 euros if you have the opportunity to get a room.

I was able to withdraw money from some Kookmin Bank (KB) ATMs using my normal Sparkasse EC card. Before you can get an alien registration card, you must be able to provide proof of a bank account with enough money in it. It is therefore worth registering an account as early as possible in one of the respective banks.

There is also a supermarket near campus at Dolgoji station that is relatively cheap and stocks many products. However, the food in South Korea is definitely more expensive than in Germany and you have to be really careful about what you buy. If you are looking for a larger selection, there is an Emart located a short distance away on the south side of campus.

In general, it should be mentioned that you should install “Naver Maps” (or another map application) on your cell phone in order to be able to orient yourself around the city. I have found myself in several situations with a dead battery and can definitely say that mobile internet and a working cell phone make life in Seoul much easier. Especially since the city’s infrastructure is very digitalised.

The campus of the Korean National University of Arts is somewhat remote on the outskirts of the city. But it can be easily reached by bus or subway. Nearby there are idyllic city parks, restaurants, bars and cafés where students meet and often work on projects together. The Film, Product Design and Theatre buildings share an area on campus. The Art building, a former government building, and the workshops are a little removed from the main part of the university on the other side of a park with barrows where you can go hiking (for a small entrance fee).

The main buildings are very modern and have various workshops and infrastructure. For example, in the basement area of the film building there are studios and stages where rehearsals and filming can take place. Above this are the classrooms and multimedia workshops for animation and film editing.

The Faculty of Product Design part is located in the basement of the building opposite and, in addition to 3D render stations, also offers 3D printers and in-house workplaces. The course rooms are separated from the main room by glass walls, where students work independently or discuss group projects. A small courtyard allows enough light into the interior spaces. The library and cafeteria are located on the upper floor of the same building. With the student card you get access to the library area and are able to borrow several books over the course of a month. Although the majority of the books are in Korean, there is also a large selection of English-language books. The library has quiet areas, computers and work tables where you can read and study undisturbed. The film rooms are popular and are used by students to rent and watch films together.

The cafeteria is located diagonally across from the library and provides students with food twice a day. You have the option of paying with cash or card at an ATM to get a food voucher. In exchange you usually get soup and can help yourself at the buffet. The food is affordable and usually tastes very good, although even the side dishes are often not vegan or vegetarian. However, there are definitely alternative options through a kiosk directly in the cafeteria that sells lots of ready meals, snacks and office supplies.

There is also a Theatre building on campus with several halls. Performances and performances are regularly rehearsed and presented there. Many of these events are well attended and there are not only students among the spectators.

The first information event helped me a lot to organise everything else at the University. Unfortunately, the University's online portal is not in English, which makes choosing a course very difficult for non-Korean speakers. Luckily, they have student assistants who agreed to help us with the problems of everyday student life. The “buddies” can also help you open a bank account or get a phone card in the city. (However, it makes more sense to get a phone card directly at the airport. The employees there all speak English and can give you good offers. The stricter security requirements make it very difficult for foreigners to get a prepaid card. These offers are not available or known in phone shops in the city centre.)

After the information event, we met separately with our buddies and selected our courses. It should be said that as a foreign student you can theoretically choose courses in all artistic areas, even if you have chosen a different area, but not all professors want to speak in English and therefore reject foreign students. My buddy really helped me a lot. She knew many of the professors and was able to choose the right courses for me that suited my interests and also gave me a lot of support.

The buddies were also the ones who organised the get-to-know-you week. They showed us around the city and took us to bars, restaurants, museums and hiking in Central Park. All in all it was very entertaining. But as quickly as the first week came, it was over and the courses began.

I chose courses that were available to me and that I thought were appropriate for my interests. In the painting course, the professor showed us various oil painting techniques and supervised our projects. During the course we visited various museums in the city and had the opportunity to see projects by contemporary artists.

The professor of the animation course was really very accommodating and occasionally translated the important points of the lecture into English so that we as foreign students could also learn something. The course was very informative, but not being able to speak Korean, especially in a lecture, was a big problem. However, the students tried to help in every way possible if it was needed.

In order to learn a little Korean, I chose a language course, like many of the other guest students. Korean grammar is less complex than German or English, but the Korean language has a fairly large vocabulary, which is why you have to learn a lot before you start can converse in Korean. It is worthwhile taking a course in Germany because everyone in South Korea is happy to be able to talk to visiting students in Korean.

The tasks in the "conversions project" were kept very open. This meant that each participating student was able to pursue their own projects by meeting several times a week and presenting our progress. I was the only guest student in this course. Although the language was sometimes a problem, most of the students spoke English and translated a lot of things for me. Here, too, the professor was really accommodating and gave me a lot of support in my illustration projects. My project concerned the Euljiro district, which is in danger of losing its identity due to ongoing renewal projects and gentrification. I was so impressed by the people there that I wanted to explore their history through drawings. I learned a lot from professors and fellow students, but research within the district also helped me work on this project.

I mostly spent my free time getting to know the culture and the city. As an illustrator, it was particularly valuable to me because I could use an entire city as study material and museums and life continually provided new inspiration for drawing. During the day, the city's connections are excellent. If you take the subway you can get to almost every point in the city. To do this you have to get a rechargeable card, which can be bought at every underground stop. You can then use these to get through the electronic barriers. Once empty, the cards can be recharged in any convenience store (which are open 24 hours) and at machines at the stations. I can only recommend Naver's map application ("Navermaps") again. Google has little support in South Korea, unlike Europe. Seoul particularly has many activities to offer for anyone who wants to take the time to explore, and many of the other visiting students shared this wanderlust with me.

All in all, I can say that this trip has shaped me personally and helped me further. You are often faced with new challenges, but there is always support from many sides and you never feel left alone.

I can only recommend everyone to take this journey, because these challenges have helped me to fundamentally broaden my horizons.