

# Report – Student Exchange at Sungkyunkwan University (SKKU) in Seoul, Korea

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## 1. Introduction

I study Chemistry and Management (MSc) at Ulm University and I'm an international student from Austria. To encourage more international students of the Chemistry Department to do an exchange at SKKU this report is in English. I spent two semesters there during the COVID-19 pandemic (Korea had low case numbers and few restrictions) and it was a fantastic year!

SKKU is a great uni with very good reputation in Korea. Everybody knows it and people treat you like you are super smart when you tell them you study there as it is very hard to get into SKKU as a Korean. The Seoul campus has good facilities and is superbly located in the heart of the city (within the boundaries of the ancient city wall). It's green, there are palaces and the area is famous for its theater and art scene.

I read all the other reports on the homepage of the international office and they do a good job at explaining the visa application and administrative part, course sign-up and about how to find housing in the "classic way" (pre booked dorm, goshiwon,...). So I will largely skip this part. However, I do want to say that you shouldn't worry too much, with the help of the amazing international offices at both unis the administrative part is easy and straightforward. SKKU trusts Ulm with their internal selection of candidates so you don't have to worry about your GPA and other formalities - as long as Ulm chose you, you should be fine!

What I want to offer in this report is an alternative to the "classic way" exchange students tend to spend their exchange at SKKU. A more individualistic approach that helped me to avoid the pitfalls of over-planning like unhappiness with the living conditions in the dorms or expensive airbnbs. Because I spent a full year in Korea I also want to give you some insider tips on what to do and where to go beyond the things you usually find on Google and Youtube.

## 2. Preparation and first weeks

Apart from applying for Visas and for the program at both unis and the Baden Wuerttemberg Stipendium I did a language course at the Volkshochschule Ulm. Korean language is *very difficult* and you will hardly be able to have conversations beyond "how are you" and "where are you from", even if you put some effort during and before your stay. However, it is *very easy* to learn the Korean alphabet (Hangeul) and I strongly encourage anyone to do so! You can read station names and restaurant menus and street signs and impress the locals within a few weeks. An old Korean saying goes that a scholar can learn Hangeul during one afternoon and even a fool can learn it in two weeks – it took me a month but it totally paid off!

I didn't book any accommodation before arriving in Seoul. In fact, I just went to Itaewon by bus and looked for hostels on Google. I quickly found a room for 20K won per night in a quite decent hostel. Now I had the benefit of not being in a contract and I was able to explore the city and live wherever I wanted. In addition, I was travelling lightly and so I moved around the city (Gangnam, Hongdae,..) for the first two weeks and experienced a variety of hostels at prices of about 25-30K won per night. Honestly, don't go to the dorms except if it's hard for you to make friends (because there you have to share a room and you

will meet people easily) or your budget is super tight. There are so many restrictions and almost everybody complained about curfews and sharing the room. Some friends told me they are travelling for the first time and they thought the dorm is just the safest option but then regretted the choice as Korea is incredible safe. Honestly it's a common sight that during summer drunk people (including girls) just collapse in the streets and sleep there all night, just to wake up with their phone, watch and wallet untouched – it's a level of safeness we are totally unused to in Europe and I never once heard of a story where anyone was ever in a threatening or scary situation in Korea, incredible!

So after moving around the first two weeks I went to a place called Stay Felix in Chungmuro, a kind of international student private dorm which I found on Google. It was good to meet people but the rather bad quality of the room prompted me and some friends I got to know there to move to an Airbnb apartment in Itaewon. It was really cheap because of Corona and in the heart of Itaewon which is an area famed for its nightlife and diversity. The best thing about my new apartment was the huge living room and my Korean roommate who would become my best friend there and with whom I travelled big parts of the country (Thanks Hyunwoo!).

I didn't buy a Korean sim because there is WIFI almost everywhere. But actually it is very cheap to get one, best option is a store close to SKKU (you will find out about it once you get there and people talk about it in the KAKAO Talk group).

Because of Corona it was decided that the semester will be online and so I only visited uni once during the first few weeks to take some pictures and enjoy the fantastic atmosphere of the old campus. I would not recommend the courses that are specifically for exchange students because it's more fun and enriching to attend class with Koreans.

I didn't open a Korean bank account because I prefer cash anyways (but it's easy to do). I just picked money from ATMs accessing my Austrian savings account, which is cheap. I don't own a credit card but had to ask friends and family to book flights or hostels online sometimes.

Download Kakao Maps for public transport planning and for finding places! Google maps is worthless in Korea! Also, download Tinder – not just for dates but also if you just want to meet Koreans to hang out. It can be hard to approach Koreans and those who want to meet foreigners will get a Tinder account. Let them suggest what to do and enjoy the Soju, Koreans are a lot of fun to hang out with!

If you study at the science campus in Suwon and you are the social type who wants lots of experiences apart from science related stuff, I advise you to live in Seoul regardless because Suwon is much smaller and there are way fewer things to do there. There is a free bus connecting the Seoul and Suwon campuses and each way takes about one hour or less. So if you live close to the Seoul campus it's really easy to get there and you don't have to transfer.

I encourage you not to plan too much! Korea is safe and you don't want to be stuck in the dorm, a part of the city (or in Suwon) or with people you don't like for the whole semester! Maintain your flexibility!

### 3. The rest of my stay, things to do and places to be off the beaten path!

If you want to earn money there, you can do some German or English language tutoring. I didn't do it but you can ask for up to 30K won per hour and there are apps that will refer you to customers. I think it is technically illegal though but I am not sure. Many people I know earned a lot with language tutoring!

Because of COVID-19 I decided not to go home during summer break so I travelled Korea extensively with my Korean friend and separately with my girlfriend, my favorite spots outside of Seoul include:

- Sokcho: Best during summer. Go there by bus from Seoul, great beaches in the area and a nice night market and Korean drinking places. Very scenic and famous for the Seoraksan mountain close by. Climb the tallest peak (look for it online, go there by bus from Sokcho) for an incredible view, although technically forbidden jump in the rivers and streams that you'll find on the way. Check out the temples in the national park area. Don't book a fishing trip as sea life is more abundant along the southern coast and you will hardly catch anything. Do go for night swims in the ocean on the illuminated beach close to the bus station you arrive at from Seoul! Check out Surfy Beach further to the south and immerse yourself in the up-and coming surfing scene of Korea.



Figure 1: Seoraksan

- Jirisan Mountain: Climb the highest peak approaching from Baengmudong Valley (there is an Express Intercity Bus terminal there so you can go there from Seoul). You can sleep in one of the bed and breakfast type accommodations nearby and swim in the great river in the bottom of the valley.
- Somaemuldo Island: Small and beautiful island in the south accessible via Tongyeong. You can stay there overnight and the island is basically yours as there are very few people living there permanently. There are lots of such islands in Korea!
- Namhae Island: Big island with a German village and stunning temples and beaches. Best if you rent a car.

- Gyeongju: Ancient capital with great sights (nice for 1-2 days). Eat Sammbap!
- Busan: Incredible city with good beaches and skyscrapers and a nightlife that is much crazier and rougher than in Seoul. Haeundae is the best place to stay.

In fall I settled very close to the Seoul campus as I had an offline class. The place is an affordable share house and there were lots of exchange students living with me. You can get in touch with me for details about the house. The fall is the best season to have hikes and do sightseeing as the summer is very hot and humid and the fall foliage is very beautiful.

Still I would generally advise you to choose the spring semester over the fall semester because you will make better use of the seasons and get more warm days. Some of my favorite “secret” places and things to do in Seoul are:

- Hiking to Mangwolsa Temple and the mountain peak above (Y Valley) from Mangwolsa subway station is probably the best hike in Seoul.
- Insa-dong has great antique shops for special gifts and souvenirs. Nearby Iksan-dong boasts the hippest cafes and bars in lavishly modernized traditional houses (hanoks) and there are great places for Korean BBQ on the street. It's my favorite area of the city.
- Itaewon is the best place to go to bars and clubs along with Hongdae (and maybe Gangnam). The Seoul Community Radio in Itaewon is a place for techno lovers and you can find friends there easily if you are into the techno thing.
- Bukcheon Hanok Village is famous but the surrounding areas are nice too. Basically you should explore the whole area to the left (Seochon) and right of the Gyeongbokgung palace a lot. “Hwangsangga Kalguksu” is my favorite restaurant in the area (try to get a table in one of the “pang” (rooms) upstairs where you sit on the floor for an added touch of authenticity and drink makgeolli alongside the cooked pork)!

- Get off the subway at Bukhansan Ui station and go towards Doljip restaurant and the mountain. Great area to explore with a river to swim.
- Go to Gucheon Pokpo Falls in Bukcheon National Park and eat at one of the outdoor tent restaurants that you'll encounter on the way (just below the wedding hall which is marked on Kakao maps). There are natural pools to swim in the area too!
- In winter you can go by subway (!) to the closest skiing area called Elysian, which is very small but quite fun for one day. You can borrow everything there (also clothes) but gloves.



Figure 2: Ssambap



Figure 3: Mangwolsa



- The best places for a nice evening are “Korean drinking places”, the best of which you can only find with Korean friends. The places often look run down or are located in tents but the food tastes best there and the atmosphere is just fantastic!

Studies went well and I earned a total of 15 SKKU credits in two semesters. That’s roughly 30 ECTS so not a lot but 9 SKKU credits per semester are max for MSc students (you can inquire to do more though). Some courses require a lot of work and some less, it’s comparable to Ulm. After I finished my studies I was lucky enough to find an internship through a friend of mine. It’s a three months’ internship at Dotrade, Inc., a small online wholesaler for Korean products like face masks and cosmetics which I can use towards my degree. It’s not the most prestigious or high-paying internship but the boss is very nice and it is interesting for me to learn more about how international B2B trading and sales works and I get to choose my own tasks and don’t have to do repetitive stuff. Let me know if you’re interested in doing an internship there too.

I really enjoyed my stay and have learned a lot. I can definitely recommend studying at SKKU!

Finally, I want to thank the Baden-Wuerttemberg Stiftung who awarded me with a scholarship for their support, the extra resources helped me to explore a lot of places while still (mostly) being able to afford three meals a day! Further, Daniel Kanzleiter and Brigitte Sleiers of the international office in Ulm helped me a lot and I greatly appreciate their professionalism, thank you. Many thanks also to my family, in which I would like to include my dear girlfriend Yebin, for their tremendous support and good-will towards me.



*Figure 4: Bukhansan Ui area with tent restaurants and swimmable mountain streams.*



