Exchange Semester Report

Ajou University, South Korea
March - June 2017

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1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation

„The ideal place for me is the one, in which it is more natural to live as a foreigner.” said Italo Calvino. For me, to sit and watch is quite boring. I believe in exploring new horizons every day. So to me, it was an adventurous desire to go to South Korea as exchange student. Above all else, I am hopeful for a bright future. I set high goals for myself which I am eager to achieve and to reach new heights in my personal and professional life. This is why I was so interested in participating in the exchange program with Ajou University.

Primarily, my desire to study in South Korea stems from my particular interest in the richness of its culture and its reputation for welcoming international visitors. Importantly, I chose Ajou University in Suwon because it is one of the highest ranked universities in the country, and thus the idea of furthering my engineering education there is very exciting. The professors at Ajou University are highly acclaimed and regularly awarded for their Achievements and I am very impressed by the standard of teaching and the quality of the university as a whole. Another reason that I was drawn to the Ajou University is because it is an international oriented university and has a significant population of international students.

Therefore, I believe that attending Ajou University will help me learn to work in new ways, specifically by adapting to how Korean schools approach Mechanical engineering. Outside my academic pursuits, another reason I was so eager to apply for the exchange program is that I am very interested in other cultures and their unique qualities. I yearn to meet people from all over the world, get to know their way of life, and learn to appreciate the differences between my native culture and others. Moreover, I considered this program as an excellent opportunity to develop my English skills, which have room for improvement in both my grasp of writing and speaking.
1.2 Report Scope

In the following report, I would like to give all interested students who have already applied and are currently in the preparatory phase small insights into the exchange program at the Ajou University in South Korea. I will briefly explain the application procedure, provide some guidance to the preparations, and give an overview and assessment of the overall living situation and the courses I took at Ajou. The rights to the pictures in this report belong exclusively to me and may only be used for information purposes.

Figure 1. Ajou Exchange and Visiting Students Spring 2017
2. Application and Preparation

After finalizing my decision to go to Suwon, I started to go for the required documents. There was a standard application form that was needed to be filled out online. On top of that, the English CV, a motivation letter and a recommendation letter were required. The statement I wrote was about two pages long and was comprised of my academic plans for the semester abroad. The motivation letter was the most critical part for the success of the application. The whole application procedure was very simple and was well described on the website of the concerned international office. I just had to put all the documents together to complete the process. After realizing that a university exchange program wasn’t something that I could allow myself to miss out; I applied to study the spring semester at the Ajou University without any further delay. I was informed about the acceptance in the beginning of November. After the pledge, I was then waiting for the “Welcome Package” from Ajou University, which had all the important documents for the visa as well as further information about the academic schedule and the rules at the University. After getting all, I applied for the visa at South Korean Consulate in Hamburg. The Visa was awarded without any delay or hindrance within a week. I got a D-2 (Single visa) visa, which costs 54 €. International students can only apply for a single entry visa. Double entry is not possible. This means you can enter South Korea only once with that visa. So, if you want to travel outside Korea you need to make sure you get your Alien Registration Card in Korea as soon as possible. In a few months’ time I came to learn that a wrong decision would have led to miss out the biggest opportunity of my life. Now I can write down a report about how studying at Ajou improved my career prospects and sharpened my skills regarding my vocation. I booked my flight for February and started preparing my baggage. During that period I was thinking all day long about this long trip and the new atmosphere that I would find on the Campus.
3. Arrival and Accommodation

On 24/02/2017, the trip began. On the flight from Frankfurt to Seoul I had already met a student from the High School of Hannover who had the exact same destination as I did. Because of that, the excitement could be somewhat satisfied and the waiting time at the airport could be shortened.

After an 18 hours flight we had finally arrived in Seoul and were welcomed by the members of the Ajou Global Ambassadors. They had been waiting for arriving exchange students there for the entire day and showed us the way to the bus. After a trip of not quite one hour at the destination bus stop, we were welcomed by other students who had kindly requested a taxi to the University for us, as the way would have been too far along with our luggage.

The Ajou University has 14,000 students, with 171 exchange students studying there with me for one or two semesters. The university has a campus on which there are some other facilities besides the buildings of the different faculties and the 5 dormitories. Thus the university library, a book store where course books can be ordered, a mail office, a bank, the university hospital, 5 lunchrooms, partly with cafés, a gym, soccer, basketball and tennis fields, convenience stores, tables and benches for sitting outside as well as a few green meadows to relax on are situated there.

Ajou University offers various types of accommodations providing comfort and modern technology to residents. The University Dormitory "Woncheon Dormitory Complex" houses over 2,300 domestic and international residents consisting of 4 buildings. A double room amounted about 600 Euros for the whole semester. For a quadruple room the price was slightly lower. From 2015 there is however, also a new dormitory especially for exchange students - here the price is around 1000 Euros. The place where I had to live for the next 4 months, opened in 2015 spring so we were the 6th generation of students there. All the furniture in the room was new, bathroom and kitchen were clean, and gym on the ground floor was fully equipped with latest devices. I felt myself very comfortable there. In this dormitory there were eight floors, each floor had about 20 rooms. Each room could accommodate two students: a Korean and an exchange one. My Korean roommate was a little bit able to communicate in English so I didn’t face much problem in communication. The strict gender separation was something that we felt odd about from the beginning. Even the
Elevators were separated: one for men, one for women and one for professors, because on the top floors there were apartments for the teaching staff members. The dormitory was very secure. It was only possible to enter with the right student card and visitors had to be registered and approved. Within the entire dormitory surveillance, cameras were installed and at least once a month there was a random check of the room. The atmosphere in the dormitory was very pleasant nonetheless, it was always possible to find people in the kitchen, the bathroom or on the corridor to talk with and we could relax altogether in the “TV room” during the evenings.

I recommend arriving before school starts and join all of the orientation sessions that you may have. You would meet your potential classmates and ask others which course you should take as an exchange student. In addition, there might be some city tours held by the host university. Moreover, you should join some school clubs and enjoy the events and activities that are held. It would help you to explore Korea and fit into their culture.

Figure 2. Ajou AGA during the orientation days
4. Campus life

The campus of Ajou University is huge. It literally has everything you need. The oldest and the largest school at Ajou University is the College of Engineering with its four divisions: Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, Electronics Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology, and Environmental and Urban Systems Engineering. The selection of courses in English at the university has a wide variety. Most of the professors using English as a medium of instruction had spent some time in countries where English is spoken. It helped us to communicate with them easily.

For each course at the Ajou University, you attend 2 lectures per week for 75 minutes, respectively. The first possible lecture starts at 9 am, the last possible one ends at 5.50 pm. Attendance is mandatory and is controlled by a card reader and integrated camera at the entrance of the classroom. Whoever is absent for more than 8 times has failed the course. The final grade consists of; attendance, homework, presentations, an intermediate exam and the final exam. My courses started on 2nd of March and the last exam was on 21st of June. In total I had enrolled in 4 courses during the semester. I had chosen Business and Management related subjects to avail the opportunity to explore new sciences. The courses are selected online with a first come, first serve basis. The competition for the popular courses is extremely high, so I recommend you to be awake at the time the registration opens and do it quickly and effectively when it opens. You can browse the courses beforehand in the course registration system, where you can find the times and syllabi of the courses:

**Innovation Management:** The course was designed to introduce the innovation process, the management of the innovation within the organization, and the role of innovation in the global context. The objective is to explore theories and practical applications about innovation management.

**Principles of Economics:** The course taught the basic principles of microeconomics and how to apply them to current economic problems and issues in the Korean economy as well as the mechanisms of markets in the capitalistic economy and their implications to economic performances such as efficiency and equity.
Entrepreneurship I: This class deals with entrepreneurial processes such as embodying new idea, recognizing opportunity and potential market, business planning, financing, building powerful entrepreneurial team, the growth of entrepreneurial company, and other issues related to entrepreneurial process. In specific, the focus is on learning primary concepts and tools necessary to understand entrepreneurial process and then writing a Business Plan.

Strategic Management: This course introduced the issues associated with how to formulate and implement firm strategy in the global environment. It draws on building a fundamental understanding of how and why some firms achieve and sustain superior performance. This course primarily aims at enabling students to understand and analyze the factors that affect organizations’ long-run economic performance and to provide them with the tools to make recommendations to organization on how they can improve their long-term performance.

Figure 3 Group B on the Ajou Campus
5. Free Time and cultural activities

The first impression in South Korean is that the people are very nice, friendly and helpful. Korean service is one of the best in the world that they truly serve from the bottom of their heart. So, just ask and they will try their best to support you. However, Korean people are not very good at English. Hence, a little knowledge of Korean is really helpful for you to buy stuff or travel around. The Korean food is completely different and quite healthier as compared to the western food. The most served dish with almost every meal was Kimchi, a spicy pickled cabbage. There are so many delicious Korean dishes like Boribap, Kimchi, Bulgogi, Samgyeopsal, Jajangmyeon, and etc. Most of the dishes are made of rice, flour, and beef. Korean food has moderate calories with low fat which makes it healthy and well-balanced. Generally it is sweet in taste. Koreans also like meat dishes and enjoy the food mostly in get-togethers. Noodles were the cheapest thing to be afforded by the students. There are so many 24 hours restaurants, coffee shops and convenient stores everywhere that you don’t have to worry about food and beverage. The night-life in Seoul is very dynamic and active. Some of my friends usually go to Itaewon to enjoy western style party; many local people go to bars/ clubs in Gangnam and Hongdae. There are several types of entertainment in Korea you can enjoy. Around Sinchon and Hongdae, there are many young people show street performances such as singing, dancing, magic show, etc. The K-music concert is what Korea is most famous for. The flea markets are operated almost every weekend, in which you can buy clothes or handmade souvenirs and stuffs. Also, there are such places with video games along streets. Nore-bang or Karaoke is one of the must try activities in Korea. This is a place for group of people to sing together. You can choose the song you like in the list and sing it with lyric and music shown on the screen. It is very easy to travel in South Korea thank to the convenient transportation system and useful tourism information service. Try to learn some basic sentences and the alphabet to read Korea, and then you can travel to anywhere you want. There are subway in every big city; local buses go to every corner of the country, taxi and cross-region buses are available everywhere. With the T-money card, you can pay for all of above transportations. For travelling to other cities, you can use airplane or train also. Just Google it, you can find bunch of clear instruction about
this. From South Korea, it is very convenient to travel to other Asia countries. I did not miss out this opportunity and I made an Asia tour and traveled to Japan, Macau and Hong Kong during my exchange period.

South Korea is rich with flowery spring landscapes, sandy beaches, Rocky Mountains and quietly stunning historical sites. It has a large number of places which are worth-watching. Another venue was enchanting fortress of Hwaseong. It is more than 300 years older. UNESCO has declared it as the ‘world heritage’ site in 1997. The most common mode of transportation in Suwon, South Korea, is bus; used by the majority of civilians there although rickshaw is also used frequently there. The activities that the International Office at Ajou organized are diverse. There is a weekly pub, where the buddies and exchange students gather. Then there are activities like group trips to different parts of Korea, picnics, theme park visits, temple stays and group dinners. The amount of activities is astounding. Taekwondo, football and golf are the favorite leisure-time activities in Suwon. People love to gather at nooks and corners to have gossips. Cultural and food festivals are loved by the Koreans. The prevailing spirit of Buddhism can be seen throughout.

Figure 4 Asia tour in several countries
6. Veni, Vedi, Vici

Korea offers so much that you don’t get bored during the four months. The weather is ideal because it is warm until October. Studying at a Korean university is also a very interesting experience where the relationship between the professor and the students is completely different. Korea is also a country where the English skills of the average person are not great. Communication is sometimes difficult, but in most parts of the country you will get by. The people are usually friendly to you and in public places, such as transportation, or the university, everything is written in English. Korea is an exotic and different country from my perspective. The culture is very different and unique. Overall, it was a memorable time of my life. I made friendships which will last for the rest of my life.
All in all, I am more than satisfied with my choice.

Figure 5 Farwell ceremony at Ajou University