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My experience as an exchange student in South Korea

1. Introduction.

Studying abroad is one of the best opportunities that a student could have and, although for many it is a challenge and a difficult decision to make, this opportunity should not be missed. The benefits obtained at an academic and personal level are quite numerous, and it is a way to get out of the comfort zone and experience new things in life that in the future will be of great help. In addition, it helps to be able to see life from different perspectives and to be able to develop good intercultural and communication skills.

In this paper, I am going to talk about my experience as an exchange student in Seoul, South Korea, how this exchange experience helped me in terms of personal life, as well as mentioning some recommendations. But before I start with these points, I would like to express the reason why I chose South Korea for my study abroad.

2. Reason why I chose South Korea for my study abroad.

In short, since I was a child I was interested in Korean music and series, and thanks to K-pop (Korean pop) and its incredible choreographies I was able to go deeper into what is now my passion, dancing. In addition, this led me to want to learn more about this country, such as its culture and language. And it was from that moment that I began to feel curious about getting to know new countries, and South Korea became one of them.

As the years passed and I grew, my attraction to South Korea also continued to grow, so there came a time in life, during my high school period, when I told myself that one day I would like to go to study in that country, to be able to know more about the culture and language, in addition to being able to visit the large entertainment agencies and dance academies in Seoul.

3. How I felt during the selection process for the exchange program and my travel to South Korea

When I was already in the second year of my career, I heard many students in my class talking about the exchange program and their desire to go to study in other countries within Europe, but none of those countries were of interest to me when it came to studying, they only made me curious and I thought of only visit them on holidays. At first, I thought that we only had the opportunity to do our exchange period at universities within the European Union (at that time I did not have much knowledge of how the program worked), but then, one of my classmates, who also wanted to go to study in South Korea, told me that it was possible to choose other destinations outside Europe, with Korea being one of them, so I quickly started looking for more information and without thinking about it I signed up.

After the entire process of selecting places and then the application process for the destination university, I began to feel nervous and I was full of uncertainty because it was going to be the first time going to another country alone for so long. "Will it really be a good idea?, Won't I regret it later?, What will happen if in the end it was not what I was expecting?", there were some of the questions that came to my mind as the date of the trip approached. However, despite all that, I wanted to go into the adventure because, at the end of the day, it was what I wanted the most, so I tried to convince myself that

everything was going to be fine and that everything was going to be worth it. In addition, throughout this process, I was able to meet another girl who was going to study at the same university as me, so we began to share our interests and ideas, and we were supporting each other in order to be able to combat the nerves and uncertainty we felt. And in this way, we became closer and were able to share the experience.

Now, speaking of the trip, it all started on the morning of August 20, 2022, just the day after my birthday, which made this trip more meaningful for me. First, I boarded a plane from Las Palmas to Barcelona, where I waited 7 hours, and from there I took a direct flight to Seoul. In total, it was about 16 hours of flight, which were very hard, but in the end it was worth the suffering.

I arrived in Seoul the next day, that is, on August 21. Together with my friend, we stayed in a hotel in the *Myeongdong* area, a central and relatively cheap area, where you can find hotels at a very good price. We were there until the 23rd, the day we went to the university residence, which is located in the campus area.

4. Experience at MyongJi University

MyongJi University, despite being one of the smallest universities in Seoul and having fewer foreign students compared to other universities, is a good university for an exchange period. Those in charge of the international relations offices are always aware of foreign students so that they feel comfortable at the university and do not feel lost. In addition, like the vast majority of universities, they have the so-called Buddy Program, which is a group composed of local students who are willing to help foreigners during their period of study in Korea. This program is also responsible for organizing activities, such as celebrations or small excursions to learn more about the country in a more fun way with Korean and foreign students.

However, there are some minimal aspects of the university that can be improved, for instance, it would be great if they add an option to translate the website where the selection of subjects is made, since the whole website was in Korean when I had to select the subjects and I had to translate everything with the help of a translator. In addition, in the university residence, where I was staying throughout the semester, there are some megaphones where sometimes notices are usually given and these are mostly in Korean as well, which makes it difficult for foreign students, who do not master the language, to understand and have to ask others what has been announced. Despite this, my experience at MyongJi was quite good and I was able to meet nice people during the semester.

The selection of subjects is different from the one we are used to in Spain. Before the start of the semester, a deadline is opened to be able to select the subjects in advance, and later another deadline is opened to make the final selection of the subjects. During this period, you compete against other students to be able to get a place in the classes, so you have to be quick when choosing the subjects you want to take. Another aspect that is different from Spanish universities, is the structure of the academic year. The first semester or Spring semester runs from March 2 to June 14, and the second semester or Fall semester begins on September 1 and ends on December 14.

During the period I was studying at MyongJi, *Chuseok* (추석) was held, which is equivalent to Thanksgiving in the United States. This is celebrated in mid-September, and on this holiday Koreans thank their ancestors for the harvest and take the opportunity to eat the delicious rice cakes that are very typical of this event. MyongJi University organized a special event for foreign students to have the opportunity to celebrate and be able to experience part of Korean culture, during the event we were playing traditional games and tasting rice cakes, as well as wearing *Hanbok* (Traditional Korean clothing).

5. Some aspects that I liked about South Korea and interesting facts.

South Korea has a lot to offer, I would say that it is a country where you do not get bored easily and you can always find different activities to do, places to visit and where to hang out. In addition, this country has one of the most effective public transport systems I have ever seen and connects many parts of the city of Seoul with other areas, which makes it easier to travel either by bus, metro or train.

When I had free time or when I felt stressed about my studies, I took the opportunity to do tourism and visit different places in the city of Seoul, or I just walked along the bank of a river near the university to clear up. One of the places that I frequented the most was *Hongdae* Street, one of the most well-known shopping streets and visited by both Koreans and foreigners, where you can find different clothing stores, restaurants and cafés, as well as talented people who are dedicated to busking, and you can mostly find dance groups and singers. Also, in Korea you can find different themed cafes where you can go to hang out and take incredible photos, and it is common to find some called “Dog cafés”, where you can have a drink while playing with dogs, people who have dogs also take the opportunity to take their pets to these cafés. There are some others cafés that also have different animals, such as cats and even sheep. On other occasions, I would go out to sing to the karaoke rooms, visit arcades, walk along the Han River (a famous river that divides the city of Seoul) or even visit traditional villages. In addition, as I had mentioned before, my passion is dancing so, during my period of study, I had the opportunity to take dance classes at two of the most important dance academies in South Korea: YGX Academy and 1Million Dance Studio.

One of the things that surprised me the most is the great contrast between the modern and the traditional. In some parts of the city, such as *Gangnam*, which is one of

the most expensive areas of Seoul, I could appreciate a great view of modern buildings and skyscrapers, and at the same time a view of traditional houses and temples that are nearby. Another aspect that surprised me and that I enjoyed a lot during my university life in Korea, was the music festivals. During the different seasons of the year, almost all universities organize festivals after the period of the midterm exams. In these festivals, artists are invited to do performances that are free to everyone who wants to attend the festival, however only students from the university where the festival is taking place can be in the area closest to the stage. Thanks to these festivals, I was able to enjoy performances by artists that I like a lot and that I never thought I would see one day.

The last fact that I would like to mention is that South Korea is a homogeneous country, so being a foreigner it is normal that sometimes people stare at you when you go down the street, when you go on the subway or in any means of transport because the difference in the physical features is quite noticeable and it attracts the attention of many Koreans. At first, it seemed strange and uncomfortable to me that people looked at me so much, but over time I got used to it and I did not worry anymore.

6. The impact that this experience had on my personal life.

Although the experience I had was mostly positive, there were also difficult moments in which I did not feel in the best mood. However, those moments of difficulties were the ones that helped me to get to know myself better and put certain limits on my life. It also helped me a lot to improve some aspects of my personality, since I am a very shy person and I usually have a hard time doing things for myself, and it is something I have been trying to work on. And during my stay in such a distant and different country, I was able to experience what it is to be independent and be able to handle certain problems and situations on my own, and I have noticed a big difference in how I was

before I traveled to South Korea and how I am now. Also, this trip helped me to be able to appreciate and respect different cultures much more, as well as to be more open-minded.

7. Recommendations.

In my experience, these are some of the recommendations I would give to students who want to embark on the adventure of studying in South Korea:

7.1. Learn basic Korean words.

In order to study in Korea it is not mandatory to know Korean or handle it perfectly, but it is advisable to know at least basic words or expressions of the language because, otherwise, it will be more difficult to communicate with the locals since many of them do not speak English. However, despite the language barrier, I was able to meet many people who, although they did not know how to speak English, tried to communicate with me and other foreigners. For this reason, Koreans are also very grateful when foreigners show a certain interest in the Korean language and when they can express themselves even using very basic words. I could even say that with at least knowing how to read *Hangul* (Korean writing system) would be of great help, and this can be learned in 2 hours or even less, but it all depends on the person and the effort one puts into it.

In order to also deal with this language barrier, I would recommend downloading the Papago translation app, which has very accurate translations and many Koreans use it in order to be able to communicate with foreigners as well.

7.2. Documentation to take into account (ARC).

In this section, I would like to mention a specific documentation, ARC or RC (Alien Registration Card or simply Registration Card). I wanted to dedicate this section to this

because, while I was in Korea, I realized that there were some foreigners who did not know the importance of this. The ARC is an identification card for foreigners, which is necessary and mandatory for all those people who are going to stay in South Korea for more than 3 months, and it indicates that you are a resident in the country. In addition, with this card it is possible to make multiple entries into the country, since the student visa only allows a single entry. But before leaving the country definitively, that is, once the period of stay is over, the card must be delivered to the immigration area of the airport.

7.3. Get to know the culture and some of the customs.

This topic is similar to the one I mentioned in point 1. It is advisable to know a little about the culture and customs in advance, and this not only applies to South Korea, but to any country that someone wants to visit and has totally different customs. One of these customs in South Korea is to bow instead of waving. People are usually greeted by bowing, and those who greet each other with their hands are usually friends or close people. It is also important to keep in mind that before entering a house, it is mandatory to take off your shoes, there are even some restaurants where you cannot enter with shoes. In public transport there is usually no noise, when people go on the transport they almost do not talk and when they do, they usually whisper or speak in a lower tone of voice. Another important fact is that when receiving or giving something, it must be done with both hands or with one hand while the other rests under the arm, this is a way to show respect for the other person.

There are many more customs and cultural aspects that are quite important and I would highly recommend to know them before visiting a country. For me, knowing those things in advance helped me a lot in my stay in South Korea and that is why I barely had culture shocks during the time I was there, and just knowing some basic things about a

country will make a difference and will be of great help so that the consequences of culture shock are not so hard to overcome.

7.4. Applications that I recommend downloading.

-KakaoTalk. In a few words, it is the Korean WhatsApp. This is the chat application that Koreans use, since they do not use WhatsApp. So they usually ask for KakaoTalk when they want to contact someone, for this reason, before going to South Korea it would be advisable to have this app.

-Naver Map or Kakao Map. These applications, as their name may indicate, do the same function as Google Maps, but the latter is not recommended in Korea since it is not as assertive as Naver or Kakao Map. Having these applications, moving in Korea will be much easier and they are very easy to use, you also have the option to change the language, this way foreigners who do not understand Korean can use them without any problem. They also specify the route in detail and the transport schedule, and what surprised me the most is that it also specifies whether the buses are full, moderate or empty.

In this section, it is also worth mentioning transportation cards. In Korea, there are different transportations cards, but the most used and the most convenient is the so-called T-Money. This prepaid card is not only used to pay in buses or subways, but also to pay for taxis or even in the print cafes. In addition, by using this card you get discounts on transport and free transfers from bus to metro or vice versa and even from bus to bus, but this only applies within 30 minutes after using one of these means of transport.

-Papago. As I mentioned before, this is a totally free translation app that works quite well to communicate and is much more assertive and efficient than Google Translate. During my time in Korea, this app became my best friend and helped me a lot.

8. Conclusion.

Having gone to South Korea as an exchange student was one of the best decisions I could have made in my life, I would make the same decision again and again if I could go back in time. Obviously, for each person the experience is different and in this paper I express everything from my point of view and what I experienced during the almost 5 months that I was there. At first, it was very difficult for me to get out of my comfort zone and risk experiencing new things, but I can truly say that it was a totally enriching experience that helped me to be able to see life from different perspectives, to see other people's way of life, to make new friends and to expand my knowledge.