



Report

on

Exchange

in

Fall Semester 2023

to

Sogang University

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Disclaimer

Prior to reading this report, one should be aware of a few facts about my background. Firstly, I am a second-generation Korean-descent German who is fluent in Korean and has been to South Korea multiple times prior to this exchange. This also means that many of the immigration policies do not apply to me as an ethnic Korean. Thus, I cannot give any advice on the specific procedure involving the student visa application and subsequent steps for registration as a foreigner. I shall try to give as much generic feedback about my stay in Korea, as well as some different perspectives on Korean society.

I highly encourage doing an exchange to Korea and especially to Sogang University. Even if you have previously not had any contact with Korean culture, the exchange will be an enriching experience and open your horizon beyond Germany and Europe.

Before Exchange

First Steps

With my background, I was adamant about going to Korea, since I believed it to be best to build on my existing skill set to get the most out of the exchange. Therefore, for my list of universities I selected the three Korean universities for which I could apply at that point in time: Sogang University, Sungkyunkwan University and University of Seoul. Being aware of the distribution of the campus of each university and their respective districts, the order of preference was also quickly set. I wanted to get the best experience both academically and in terms of campus life. Sogang, being situated in the Sinchon area with three other highly ranked universities has both the academic excellence and the proximity to an active student life, being very close to Hongdae and Itaewon, both very vibrant areas of Seoul.

Application at Heidelberg University

The application was very straightforward, since one simply had to complete the application form provided by the university. Additional, documents such as language certificates and recommendation letters should be prepared in advance to avoid any inconveniences during the application process. I will now explain a detailed schedule of the application procedure to give you an orientation for how long the process will take approximately.

Shortly after submitting my application, I received a confirmation mail on the November 30th, 2022, by the exchange coordinator Mrs. Tracy Chan. On the 8th of December, I received an invitation for an interview (Auswahlgespräch) scheduled for the 13th of January 2023.

For the interview, you should prepare yourself for question that seek to pick out applicants with genuine interest in the exchange. That includes valid and convincing reason for why and how you are going to represent the University of Heidelberg abroad and in what way you are going to add value to our university and yourself. Also make sure that your letter of motivation reflects these values and intentions as well and that you ideally are ready to follow-up on its content.

After the interview, on the 19th of January 2023, Mrs. Chan sent out a mail confirming my nomination for the exchange program with information regarding the receiving institution. At this

point, the crucial part of the application is completed. The following steps are mostly proforma and technicalities, though I can't guarantee that the receiving institution will not deny the nomination. Keeping this in mind, you should already start planning for your travel to Korea and take care of flight, insurance and other administrative measures in Germany (Abmeldung, Mobilfunkvertragsstilllegung etc.)

Around April, Mrs. Chan sent out invitations to the nominees of all Korean exchange programs to meet at a "German-Korean Get-together" which was scheduled for the 27th of April. I highly recommend taking part in this as this will be your chance to connect with other nominees, especially the one's going to the same receiving institution, but also with previous exchange students from our university and exchange students from Korea that are currently in Heidelberg.

Application at Sogang University

As stated above, the application procedure is still not fully complete, since the receiving institution, i.e. Sogang University, still must officially accept your application. The application at Sogang University was done on their own online platform and was due on the 30th of May 2023. For the application, you require a copy of your transcript of records (TOR), your passport, a bank statement, and potentially additional documents specified in the application form.

During the process, you can also apply for the student dormitory Gonzaga which located on campus and which I highly recommend. After final submission, on the 15th of June 2023, the Office of International Affairs (OIA) sent my acceptance package via e-mail, including the letter of confirmation. On July 13th, 2023, the OIA also sent the acceptance message for Gonzaga Hall with specifics about moving in and out, which were very strict.

During Exchange

Arrival at Sogang

When you arrive at Sogang, the first people that you will greet you are the OIA, the international student buddy club "Hands up for Gathering" (HUG) and – if you are staying at the on-campus dormitory – Gonzaga Hall management. You will receive a notice about where to gather and which

orientation events to take part in advance. At the respective events, you will be guided in a well-structured schedule and get all the information you need thereafter.

Note on Alien Registration Card (ARC)

As previously mentioned, I am a second-generation Korean which means that even with a German passport I am eligible for a different visa than the anticipated exchange student. I have gone through a similar, but separate process for getting my registration card. All I can say is that once you get your student visa (D2) in Germany and get to Sogang University, they seemed to take care of all the steps (and apparently accelerate the process by batch registration, since I got mine later than most exchange students).

Bank accounts and phone contracts

In Korea, you never – and I mean never, even if it's a cent – use cash. I tested this in the most unlikely situations, and it never failed to impress me. As long as you are not in the most rural area of Korea and want to pay for street food, they will offer you payment by credit card or instant bank wire. In this spirit, I highly recommend opening a bank account in Korea. For any fees and for paying in general, this made life a lot easier. This makes social exchanges also a lot easier since the Korean transaction system is extremely well integrated into all their public and private services – the Koreans will be thankful for it.

For similar reasons, I would recommend getting a Korean phone number *with your ARC number*. The temporary, rechargeable sim cards are fine for the first one to two months until you receive your ARC, but you should get a *authenticated phone number* as soon as possible to use all the services in Korea. Korea is highly digitized and also highly secure. This means that you almost can't use any application – even just online delivery services – if you can't authenticate yourself with Korean phone number. For this you need to get a Korean sim card with your ARC.

Gonzaga Hall

In general, the dormitory should not be compared to German student dormitories. The most obvious differences can be found in the strict rulebook. Besides residents, no one can enter the dormitory building. This is enforced by entrance gates through which you pass only with your resident card and dormitory guards that surveille the entrance area all-day round. From the common entrance area, the building is separated into two sections, one for



Figure 1: Gonzaga Hall - On-campus housing

each gender. One can only enter the section of your own gender and thus visiting other dormitory rooms is also only possible within your section. If you want to have external visits, this must be applied for in advance and is only intended to e.g. get help during move-in. In the entirety of the building smoking is prohibited. They very strictly enforce these rules and will persecute you with a point system which is also elaborated during the orientation event. The final measure – and I have seen this multiple times – is immediate expulsion from the dormitory. As you can tell, the dormitories are not intended to be primary location for any social activity which is also reflected in the fact that there is no kitchen or living common living room. The only common space is the laundry room in the basement and, right next to that, the gym room which is free to use for residents. Food is either eaten at one of the on-campus restaurants or by buying instant food from the convenience store across the dormitory. Altogether, the dorm is a very affordable, well-situated accommodation option with the condition of having to spend most of your time outside for any social activities, which – I promise – won't be difficult in Seoul.

Courses

The course registration happens during the first weeks of arrival and is announced in advance. As an exchange student from Heidelberg, you are not limited in terms of which classes you can take. You can register for classes at every study level and any major if they are offered in English and not part of a specialized graduate school. In the lecture catalogue, one can look up the available lecture of the past and current semester.

Activities at Sogang

Like most other Korean universities, Sogang offers a lot of student clubs for a great variety of topics. The clubs offer everything from sports, music, culture, literature, creativity, scientific and even Korean sign language. Most clubs accept exchange students as well and offer socializing events as part of the club team building. You will have a chance to join a club during the first weeks of class when the clubs actively recruit new members.



Figure 2: Campus Festival

There is also the annual campus festival which features many fun activities, food trucks and most importantly a very sophisticated evening concert with famous Korean stars and university bands.

Practical Tips for Living

Seoul is very big. You will most likely not be able to explore all parts of the city during your stay. But there are enough things to do in your neighborhood. Nevertheless, getting around in Seoul is generally quite comfortable. Public transport in Seoul is very fast and reliable – and therefore also very much in demand. During rush hours, you might witness a passenger density beyond anything that you have witnessed in Germany. The fare prices are calculated automatically by scanning your T-money card – the transportation card – during transit and are affordable.

Alternatively, there is a municipal bike-sharing system called Ddareungi (따릉이) – the lending system is the same as the nextbike system in Heidelberg. It is fairly well distributed within the city, and you can roam for one at least an hour. Currently, the one-day-ticket costs 1000₩ (ca. 0.67€) and the one-year-ticket costs 30,000₩ (ca. 20€!!). I have personally used only when the metros and busses were not running anymore, but even if then it was definitely worth the money.

Don't use non-Korean map application such as Google Maps or Apple Maps. They have limited functionality and are mostly not up to date. Korea has its own map and transportation applications like Naver Maps or Kakao Maps. Both are very well integrated into the public transportation system and the national data centers. The map has extensive features and recommendations for

you. The ecosystem with reviews and reservations is by far more advanced than other map applications.

Activities in Seoul

Korea is a very unique country in terms of population density. Approximately 25 million people – roughly half of the population – live in the Seoul Capital Area which amounts to only 13% of the South Korean land area. 10 million of those live in Seoul City proper which results in a population density of 16,000/km². For comparison, the densest cities in Germany – Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt – have population density of around 3,000 to 4,000 per km² and Heidelberg has around 1,463 inhabitants per km² (so just imagine 10 people for every person in Heidelberg).

Seoul is naturally the center of most financial, political, cultural and industrial activities. The entire city is very vibrant and constantly active. There will almost certainly be no lack of things to do in Seoul – as long as you have enough money. Here are some of my favorite places in Seoul:

- Sinchon Blues (<https://naver.me/xevjf15T>)
very cute café with view over Shinchon
- Mapo Shikdang (<https://naver.me/llqz2HO9>)
very affordable restaurant with unlimited rice and soup
- Orient Express Wine (<https://naver.me/5Bv1vptv>)
Jazzbar with nice atmosphere
- Gogimani Bapmani (<https://naver.me/FQa6VwxB>)
All-you-can-eat K-BBQ restaurant!!!
- Mifendang (<https://naver.me/FArQjxTB>)
Rice-noodles restaurant with unlimited noodles refill
- TYPE Hangang (<https://naver.me/xl8c3ffY>)
Café inside high-rise building with view on Hangang and Yeouido Island

Trips within Korea

Apart from Seoul, there is the country-side which is comparatively underpopulated and has far less activities, but offers beautiful mountains and coasts. Here are some trips that I have done and recommend for the holidays and the time after the semester ends:

- Busan, the second-biggest city in Korea, located at the south-eastern coast with nice beaches and lots of fresh seafood.
- Gangneung, an eastern coast city with extremely beautiful beaches and very famous beach-side café street.
- Jeju-do, the Hawaii of Korea, a Volcano-island with a lot of beautiful nature, ranging from unique coast area with (again) lots of nice cafés and the highest mountain in South Korea which you can climb within a day, if you are a well-trained Königstuhl-climber.

After Exchange

All good things come to an end of course. After the finals are over and the different clubs and groups have done their fare-well parties and events, you will eventually have to wrap up the exchange, moving out of the dorm and closing any accounts you opened if applicable.

Course Recognition

After returning to Heidelberg, you will at some point receive an academic transcript from the OIA. If you have done everything correctly, you can go to your respective dean of studies and get the course (which are ideally the ones you agreed on in a Learning Agreement prior to your exchange) recognized at our university.

Reconnecting

If you made some friends during your stay at Sogang or Seoul in general, I recommend inviting them to Heidelberg or even encouraging them to do an exchange themselves. Also staying in touch with Sogang students as well as your fellow exchange students is nice to have as a contact person in Korea. Maybe you'll want to revisit Korea at some point.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are a lot of things that can be or must be done in Korea for your exchange. I once again highly recommend doing this exchange and taking this step to see the world. There will probably be no other occasion where you can stay in Korea this easily and with this much support, both from our International Office and Sogang's OIA. Thank you for reading this report and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact the international office and ask for my contact information.