

Exchange semester
Korea University
Spring Semester (March – June 2025)



I am pursuing my Master of Science in Biology with a focus on Plant Sciences at the University of Freiburg. Thanks to the University of Freiburg Global Exchange, I was able to study at Korea University in Seoul, South Korea, for one semester. I applied for the exchange in the winter semester 2023/24 and was accepted for the spring semester 2025. Thus, I had quite some time to prepare for my exchange. I was the only student from Freiburg who went during the Spring semester. Both Fall and Spring are amazing experiences, but I can wholeheartedly recommend the spring semester for an exchange since there are many university events during that time.

Preparation and Visa application

Once I was accepted for the exchange, I started studying Korean by myself and started watching K-dramas and listening to K-pop (I was not really familiar with it beforehand). I wanted to get acquainted with Korea as much as possible. I attended the Korean 1 course by the SLI (SprachLehrInstitut) in the summer semester 2024 and Korean 2 during the winter semester 2024/25. I tried to meet more Koreans in Freiburg, for example, through the events and activities organized by the International Club. During the winter semester 2024/25, I met three Korean exchange students from Korea University at Café multilingua who were doing their exchange in Freiburg. It was quite helpful to have local students I could ask questions before moving to Korea for one semester.

For the visa application, I went to the consulate in Frankfurt, which is responsible for residents of Baden-Württemberg, in person. My appointment was right before Christmas and they told me I could pick up my visa after January 7th. They gave me the visa grant notice, which is important to apply for the ARC (Alien Registration Card) after arrival in Korea. I reserved an appointment with the immigration office to apply for the ARC online before coming to Korea and prepared most of the documents. I got the picture for the ARC in Seoul, it was quite cheap and they were very fast.

As for financial support, I looked for different scholarships and applied for the Global KU Scholarship (<https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/exchange/scholarships.do>) at the end of January. I heard back from the GSC (Global Service Center) of Korea University in mid-April, however, I was told they only contact the students who got accepted for the scholarship. The scholarship was a one-time payment in May; the amount varies and is chosen by the GSC for each applicant.

Courses

The course registration took place early February (11th to 14th) and we received an email with the detailed information end of January. The registration for undergraduate courses took place before the registration for graduate courses. As a graduate student, I was able to enroll in both undergraduate and graduate courses. There was a pre-registration period for preferred undergraduate courses one week before the actual registration. After this pre-registration, you are automatically enrolled if there is enough space in the class. If you were unable to enroll in a specific class, you have to try during the regular registration period, which is on a first-come-first-served basis and can be annoying due to the time difference.

I was able to get all the classes I wanted to register for. During the registration period for undergraduate courses, I enrolled in Korean Beginners 2 and Dynamics of Korean Society, both of which I took out of pure interest and the Korean class of course for language advancement. Moreover, I initially enrolled in three graduate courses from the Graduate School Department of Plant Biotechnology, since I was mostly interested in getting more insights into biotechnology in Korea. During the Add/Drop period, I dropped one of the courses. I needed two courses for which I can hopefully receive ECTS at the University of Freiburg and the third class did not seem as interesting to me as the other two. I slightly regret that I did not register for one of the many sports classes offered by Korea University, but many of them were also hard to register for since they filled up very quickly.

Korean Beginners 2 turned out to be the right level for me after finishing the Korean 2 course by the SLI in February 2025. I heard that the Korean Intermediate courses at Korea University are quite advanced. Also, even for Beginner 2, our textbook was made for full-time international students, not exchange students; therefore, some parts of the textbook were quite challenging. My Korean teacher was amazing and helped us navigate the content really well. The class on Dynamics of Korean Society is a course from the major of Global Korean Studies and was quite outside my academic background, considering I am majoring in Biology. The class was fully in English and covered modern Korean history (including the Korean War) and how various aspects influenced different parts of Korean society. The class was really interesting and considering a sociological perspective was quite challenging and refreshing as a Natural Science major.

In the two graduate courses, I was the only exchange student and quickly realized that graduate programs in Korea are really different from Europe, especially in Natural Science or Engineering. Korean graduate students basically work full-time in a laboratory during the two years of their Master's program and take only very few courses per semester. In one of my courses, we were 11 students; in the other one, only four students. According to the course plan, all graduate courses were supposed to be in English. However, most students and many professors feel more comfortable doing the class in Korean. In my class with only four students, the professor asked at the beginning if he could do the class in Korean; he was kind enough to stick to English, considering my insufficient Korean. Thus, both my graduate classes were in English except for some student presentations. In both classes, the professors requested us to hold quite long presentations to encourage our presenting and teaching skills.

Accommodation

As for the accommodation, there are basically four options: student dormitory, goshiwon, shared house or one-room apartments. I did apply for the dormitories in early December and was informed I could have a double room (one room shared by two students). After considering the rules of the dormitories I decided to look for other options, since I wanted to be able to receive visitors from Germany and this is not possible in the dormitories. I heard mixed things about the goshiwons, many seem to have a great social life since mostly exchange students live there, however, the rooms are really small and often do not have a window. Many of the students I met who were living in goshiwons also complained about issues with the air conditioning, either it did not work or it was too cold.

I decided to look for a one-room apartment through different platforms that were recommended by Korea University (<https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/service/accommodation.do>). I also asked some Koreans and they recommended me pages such as Zigbang (직방), NAVERpay Real Estate (네이버페이 부동산), which are more usually have listings with a minimum duration of 1 year. I also searched in different Facebook groups. I found some Real estate agents who speak English and gave me information on different apartments. I wanted to see the place in person beforehand and decided to fly to Seoul as early as possible, so I arrived around 3 weeks before classes started. However, when I arrived, I was told that contracts shorter than a year are quite rare, so I started to worry a bit. Also, it should be mentioned that it is normal in Korea that there is a high deposit when renting a place.

I ended up signing a six-month contract for a one-room apartment I found through the real estate agency Zip Toss (<http://ziptoss.com/en>). The apartment is in Yeonnam-dong, which is actually closer to Yonsei University, but I fell in love with the area because of its cozy cafes and many restaurants. It took me around 45 minutes by subway to get to my classes at Korea University. My rent was 870 thousand KRW, which is around 550 Euro. It was a little over my ideal budget, but since it was only for one semester and I was able to receive visitors and let friends crash at my place if they needed to, it was worth it. For sure it has disadvantages to live far from the Korea University area (Anam-dong), but overall, I am still happy with my choice.

Later, I met other exchange students who found one-room apartments closer to the university, even on short notice. Some people also changed between different goshiwons or changed from a goshiwon to a studio apartment.

Phone plan, bank account, transportation, etc.

Before moving into a one-room apartment, I stayed in a hostel in Hapjeong. The host recommended me a phone plan and I ended up getting LG U+ MVNO, which is one of the cheaper phone plans offered by all three major mobile network operators SK Telecom (SKT), KT and LG U+. The first two months cost me around 70 thousand KRW and after that, each month was 38 thousand KRW for 10GB 5G (after the 10GB it is unlimited but slower). It is a prepaid option, so every month I get a message that I need to pay again, otherwise the plan just expires. The only issue I encountered with that phone plan is that the MVNO plans do not work for ID verification. Once you have your ARC, you can link it to your phone number and then you would usually be able to use your phone number for identification in online bookings, etc. However, with the MVNO option, this was not possible, or at least I did not find a way to do it, which was a bit annoying.

I opened a Korean bank account with the Hana Bank branch on the main campus. However, I am not sure if I would recommend Hana Bank. I did have some issues with online payments, which was actually one of the main reasons I wanted to get a Korean bank account. Transfers to other Korean bank accounts were really easy and fast. The process of opening an account is also really fast, it just requires a lot of signing and there are no English translations. At the end of the semester, a friend told me that they got the WOWPass, which basically works as a T-money and credit card that you can charge with money. I am not sure if that might be a better solution. Generally, you can pay with a credit card almost everywhere (make sure your home bank does not charge extra for payments abroad) except for recharging transportation cards, markets, smaller stores or street Pochas (포차), there cash will be needed.

Since I used the subway every day, I got a climate card. The climate card can be purchased at any convenience store just like the T-money card. In contrast to the T-money card it only works in Seoul. Once you select a duration and pay the amount at one of the machines in the subway (usually easier in cash), the climate card allows you to do unlimited trips within the selected time period. Therefore, I just paid for 30 days, which costs 62 thousand KRW and recharged the card once the 30 days were over.

Campus life

The first event we had was an orientation, one week before the classes started. After the orientation, we met our KUBA (Korea University Buddy Association) group for the first time. Every exchange student is automatically part of KUBA and they will contact you ahead of the orientation and provide the contact of your Korean buddy. In the spring semester, there were 8 KUBA groups, each with around 100 exchange students. In each KUBA group, there are various Korean buddies who each have around 8 exchange students. Starting from orientation, each group will organize and inform you about a lot of events.

For this, it is really important to always check the notice chats they create in KakaoTalk and to have a KakaoTalk account. Often they will also post polls within the KUBA group chats, like for registering for an event or joined dinner etc. There will be so many group chats that it will be difficult to follow all of them. The events are really fun and you can meet a lot of people. KUBA also organized an event to teach us the Korea University cheering. I definitely did not expect Korea University to have such a lively cheering culture. Despite it being quite exhausting because it goes on for a long time, it is incredibly fun. The KUBA cheering instruction was also before the semester actually started. During the first weeks of the semester, there was a start-of-the-semester cheering event for freshmen (first-year students) we, as exchange students, also attended together with KUBA. Of course, these events are not mandatory, but I would highly recommend going to as many as possible.



(On the first day of classes March 4th, it snowed, so I got lucky enough to see the campus covered in snow even in the Spring semester, but the snow did not last very long)

In the second week of classes, the clubs of Korea University had booths on the campus for a few days. Each booth usually had giveaways, games and sometimes snacks. While some of the clubs do not take exchange students, many of them are open to exchange students and there is a club for pretty much everything. I joined the language club LECA, a travel club called “youth hostel” and the ski/snowboard and skateboard/longboard club Flip. Also, for the clubs, it is important to check KakaoTalk for polls on participation in upcoming events. The clubs are a great way to meet more Korean and international full-time students. On the last day of the club booths, there was a performance by some of the dance and music clubs, which was really incredible. It was right on the main campus and open to everyone.



(Science campus in Spring, pictures were taken only a few weeks apart)

May is truly filled with a lot of events, like the university festivals and MTs (Membership Training). Now, while MTs are also happening during the Fall semester, the university festivals are unique to the spring semester. In Korea, the Spring semester is considered the first semester, so there are way more events for freshmen during the Spring semester.

The university festival at Korea University is called Daedongje(대동제) and was held during the third week of May (picture on the left). From Tuesday to Thursday, right on the main campus. There was a big stage where some of the student clubs performed during the afternoon, followed by invited artists in the evening. The festival is free and all students can watch it from two standing areas (there will probably be a line, though). Non-KU students can watch from further back. While many other Universities announce their festival line-up, Korea University is keeping it secret. However, there will be leaks on the day of the festival that might or might not be true. The genres are quite diverse, from rock, indie, rap, hip-hop to kpop. In 2025, the lineup of Daedongje did not disappoint. I honestly did not know many of the artists but learned to love them through seeing them perform live.

Because three days of festival are not enough, Korea University (and Yonsei) have a special day-long festival which is usually held on the same day (there is a rivalry which University gets the best artists) in addition to the three days. At Korea University, this event is called IPSELENTI it was on the Saturday after Daedongje. IPSELENTI is held by Korea University's cheering team, so there is a lot of cheering, so be prepared. For IPSELENTI, we could purchase a ticket with KUBA. Usually, usually freshmen go with their department or sign up with one of their clubs. Everyone needs a ticket, 2025 it cost 18 thousand KRW.



(TXT at Daedongje on the left and IPSELENTI on the right)

The MTs, which are basically just an overnight trip outside of Seoul, are either before midterm period or afterwards. MTs are organized by clubs or departments (mostly freshmen go with their department) and each KUBA group. While it is considered an overnight trip, many people leave with the first bus at 5 am or the first train at 6 am. It's part of Korean University culture, usually they rent a place with a lot of space and everyone plays games and has BBQ.

Things I wish I had known before

There is a free Korean language course offered for one month after the end of the semester, and the GSC informs students about it during the second half of the term. I had already planned a summer internship at Korea University and therefore couldn't participate in the course. Nonetheless, I was very happy about finding an internship, which I arranged by emailing several professors before coming to Korea. Although the internship is unpaid, I received a scholarship from the DAAD in cooperation with the NRF that supports summer internships for German graduates in Korea (<https://www2.daad.de/ausland/studieren/stipendium/de/70-stipendien-finden-und-bewerben/?detail=50015437>). Another thing I wish I had known before is that being a vegetarian in Korea turned out to be more challenging than I expected. While I have traveled to many countries with meat-heavy cuisines, what makes Korea particularly difficult is that meat-based broths are commonly used in many dishes. Additionally, fruits and vegetables can be quite expensive, although they tend to be more affordable at markets.

Summary

I truly loved my time at Korea University and am deeply grateful for all the people I met and the experiences I had. Visiting a country as a tourist is one thing, but living there and experiencing university life firsthand is something entirely different and incredibly rewarding. Korea University has a vibrant, community-oriented, and exciting campus culture. I would absolutely choose to go on this exchange again. Every challenge along the way, especially when going abroad to a culture so different from my own, was completely worth it.