

Experience Report: Exchange Semester at PNU, Busan

In the fall semester of 2025, I had the opportunity to spend my Master's exchange semester at Pusan National University (PNU) in Busan, South Korea. Having previously been to Seoul during my Bachelor's, I wanted to experience a less popular destination, enjoy the seaside, and explore a new environment. Initially, I was a bit skeptical about moving to a city I had never visited instead of the capital, but it turned out to be an excellent choice.

Academic Experience

I was enrolled in the Graduate School of International Studies, which made it easy to take courses entirely in English. The process of registering for classes in Korea was very different from Germany and required extreme speed as course spots fill within minutes and you have to decide on your schedule beforehand. Since I was still in Germany at the time of registration, I had to stay awake until 3 a.m. to secure my courses, which was an unusual but memorable experience.

The courses themselves were engaging, with a good balance of lectures, student presentations, and discussions. Professors were very approachable and adapted well to the mix of local and exchange students and were always ready to help us. As the academic calendar in Korea is shorter than in Germany - four months from September to December with both midterms and finals, it sometimes felt a little difficult to catch up with the material. Midterms were written exams, while final assessments involved research papers, similar to a Hausarbeit at FU. Since I also wanted to explore Busan and engage in cultural experiences, I tried to balance coursework and student life. Sometimes we stayed in the library with my friends until midnight, and sometimes we focused on extracurricular and leisure activities.

Campus Life and Cultural Experience

PNU provides a welcoming environment for exchange students. Over 200 students participated in the exchange program, and we had many group chats to solve problems and connect with one another. The university organized an introductory event and a farewell dinner, welcoming us and showing us a strong sense of community. Additionally, many cultural events were available for international students. For example, during Chuseok, a traditional Korean holiday, we had the opportunity to play traditional games and try local foods, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in Korean culture better. We also received a lot of memorable souvenirs.

During long national holidays in October I joined friends on road trips to explore Busan and its surroundings. Busan itself is a beautiful city, less chaotic than Seoul, with stunning coastal views. One highlight of my semester was attending the famous Busan Fireworks Festival in November, where people from across Korea and abroad gathered to enjoy the show. We arrived early to secure the best spots, and watching fireworks by the sea was an unforgettable experience. Additionally, we could watch Busan Drone Shows every Saturday on the beach.

I also joined a Korean language club, which was both fun and useful for practicing the language. PNU offers many other clubs in sports and arts, most of which are accessible even without advanced Korean proficiency. The staff and student support services, including assigned buddies, were always helpful in navigating life in a new city.

Accommodation and Daily Life

As an exchange student it was easy to get into university dormitories, which were very affordable - approximately 1200 euros for four months. Each student had a roommate, and the rooms were well-equipped with all necessary amenities. The dorm also had its own cafeteria, where we were required to eat at least twice. Food was generally delicious and inexpensive, though sometimes spicy for those less accustomed to Korean cuisine.

The only challenging thing was that the dormitory had a curfew from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m., which made it difficult sometimes to return on time from going out. I know that some people decided to live off-campus for that reason. However, the close proximity of the dorm to the campus was extremely convenient and going to class took just a few minutes. The campus is located uphill, which makes us exercise a little bit daily but provides a wonderful view, though it could be challenging during hot weather. Public transportation (subway) was efficient and clean and one could use it to get to the city centre. But there were multiple cafes, restaurants, photobooths, cinemas and other places to spend time around the campus. If you needed medical attention, there was a big hospital nearby and PNU students had additional insurance coverage so I got treated a couple times for a very affordable price - I could just come to the hospital and wait for a little bit to be admitted. I instantly received necessary tests and consultation, including translation services on-site.

Unlike Germany, convenience stores provide 24/7 access to snacks and meals, and while cooking is not possible in the dorms, eating out was easy and affordable. I especially recommend trying a variety of Korean dishes, there are many non-spicy and vegan options available.

During my stay, I made many friends from around the world which broadened my perspectives. The buddy program helped me learn more about Busan and Korean culture, while my participation in clubs and cultural events strengthened my social and language skills.

Reflection and Advice

Overall, my exchange at PNU was an enriching experience academically, culturally, and personally. I discovered that Busan is a city full of charm, with friendly people, beautiful scenery, and a well-organized university environment. My advice to future exchange students is to maintain an open mind and embrace the differences as doing so will make the experience extremely rewarding.