

Career-changing experience from ASEM-DUO

In 2007, I embarked on a life-changing journey as part of an exchange program, leaving behind the familiar grounds of Karlstad University in Sweden to study at Ajou University in Suwon, Korea. This essay aims to highlight the transformative experiences I had during my exchange studies, the cultural exchange, the friendships forged, and the subsequent impact on my career, including the decision to stay in Korea for another two years to kickstart my professional career at a company called Zenitum. This period not only broadened my horizons but also allowed me to contribute to groundbreaking projects, paving the way for my future endeavors in the field of design and technology. I also grew tremendously as a person during this experience and I am currently an expatriate in Hong Kong since 2011.

My arrival in Suwon was met with a vibrant cultural tapestry that immediately captivated my senses. The bustling streets, delicious aromas, and awe-inspiring historical sites provided a glimpse into the rich Korean heritage. The people and their polite manners stood out more than anything. Immersing myself in the local traditions and customs became a focal point of my exchange experience. From learning the intricacies of the language, starting with Hangul as part of the education at Ajou University, to the cultural mannerism which plays such an important role for everyone and everything in Korea. Even though it took me a long time and a lot of hard work, I eventually felt a profound sense of integration with my friends and the local community.

Moreover, my interactions with Korean students allowed me to gain deeper insights into their values, beliefs, and ways of life. The exchange of ideas and perspectives fostered a broader understanding of global differences and similarities and served as a catalyst for personal growth. Sharing meals, attending cultural events, and exploring the diverse landscapes of Korea together solidified great friendships, transcending borders and bridging cultural differences. In one of the on-campus events, students from all over the world cooked their traditional foods, shared their music, language, and other things such as traditional clothing, and it was just one of those opportunities to normalize the differences in a way that would contribute to making me more open to living abroad later.

During my time at Ajou University, I had the opportunity to forge meaningful relationships with both local and international students. The exchange program was great for forging friendships that transcended cultural barriers. Through collaborative projects, group discussions, and social gatherings, I developed a network of friends from all over the world including, the USA, Canada, Germany, China, Netherlands, and Japan. This made me more susceptible to intercultural collaboration, something that I am still leveraging in my daily work today.

These friendships enriched my personal life and broadened my professional horizons. The multicultural environment nurtured a spirit of collaboration and encouraged innovative thinking. The exchange of ideas and knowledge across diverse backgrounds provided a fertile ground for creativity and learning. The bonds formed during this period have continued to be a source of support and inspiration throughout my journey, and being able to follow the achievements of my fellow alumni on LinkedIn and Facebook serves as an inspiration to keep going.

My time in Suwon had such a profound impact on me that I decided to extend my stay in Korea beyond the initial exchange program. Recognizing the potential for personal and

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professional growth, I sought opportunities to immerse myself further in the local culture and contribute to the technological advancements taking place in the country.

Although the job opportunities for foreigners were very limited at the time, I managed to convince the management of a Seoul-based startup called Zenitum that I was the right person to fill their position as an online marketing person and SEO expert. I very quickly brushed up on my SEO skills by doing online research, and even though I had done a fair bit of SEO for myself it is an area that is always changing and hence requires active learning in order for one to stay relevant.

Zenitum focused on developing cutting-edge technologies such as large-size multi-touch screens and sensing node networks, but my first mission was to make sure their online video conferencing platform PalBee was getting the attention it deserved from organic search. Many of the other projects were interesting and intriguing though, and I started staying at the office later and later, and I soon found myself involved in almost all of them, with a new title as an Interactive Art Director, and a team of my own to manage. The opportunity to work on such groundbreaking projects allowed me to hone my skills and contribute to the technological advancements in the field from a design perspective. Working alongside talented professionals, especially designers, I experienced firsthand the dynamism and innovation that characterized the Korean tech industry.

The collaborative and fast-paced environment at Zenitum nurtured my growth as a professional. I was exposed to a diverse range of projects, each presenting unique challenges and opportunities for creative problem-solving. Through this experience, I developed a deep appreciation for the intersection of technology, design, and culture, as well as the power of cross-cultural collaborations. I also learned to work really long hours and eventually, I didn't mind coming in to work on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. When I later worked in Sweden where they have very short working hours, I carried this experience with me and it allowed me to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the two extremes against each other. My conclusion is that the middle ground is ideal.

My exchange studies in Suwon, Korea at Ajou University served as a transformative experience, opening doors to cultural exchange, lifelong friendships, and professional growth. The exposure to Korean culture broadened my understanding of the world, fostering a deep appreciation for diversity and intercultural collaboration. Living and working abroad became normal to me and when I later moved to Hong Kong to live as an expatriate, I always carried my experience in Korea with me as a benchmark.

The friendships I forged during this time continue to be cherished connections that transcend borders.

The lessons learned from this experience have shaped my perspective and influenced my subsequent endeavors. The exchange studies in Korea provided the foundation for a successful career in design and technology, allowing me to embrace new challenges and explore the endless possibilities that lie at the intersection of culture and innovation. The memories and experiences gained during my time in Korea will forever remain etched in my heart, reminding me of the transformative power of cultural exchange and the limitless potential for personal and professional growth. I still travel back to Korea as often as I can and it will always be a special place to me.