

Career-changing experience from ASEM-DUO; DUO KOREA 2008

It fills me with joy when I look back to see what all has happened since I applied as an exchange student at Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul, South Korea and applying for the ASEM DUO fellowship back in 2008.

In the last 15 years so many things have happened, so many things have changed in my life and my career. This is all because of the unforgettable experience and the opportunity to study abroad and being an ASEM DUO fellow. Before going into more details below, I started to write this essay from Seoul, South Korea. So, approximately 14-15 years after being your fellow, I am now again in Korea. This is just a teaser; how things have developed.

When I applied at the Sookmyung Women's University in Korea my goal was to experience and live in a culture which is completely new for me. I wanted to learn and understand a different culture, meeting people from a different cultural background to grow my own mindset. At that time, I have never been to Asia before. My home university, the University of Bamberg had several partner universities in Asia. When I read about the different countries in Asia, South Korea piqued my interest. The economic development of South Korea is remarkable. At the same time the history of South Korea has similarities to Germany's history. When I got admitted for a one-year exchange program, the office of external affairs of my home university informed us students about the ASEM DUO fellowship and the application requirements. I did not hesitate but applied right away for it.

I mainly financed my studies through part time jobs. I knew that it would be difficult to live in a new country, focusing on my studies while having a part time job with limited local language skills. At the same time, I wanted to make the most out of the exchange year and travel as much as possible through South Korea, in order to learn more about the Korean culture, and meet people from a different background and from different cities. To be well prepared, I started to meet Korean exchange students who were guests at my home university and to learn from them about the Korean culture.

I still remember the day when I received the positive news from our office of external affairs that I got awarded with the one-year ASEM DUO fellowship. The ASEM DUO fellowship opened so many opportunities to me during that one year and enabled me to discover not only Seoul but many different places in South Korea. From all exchange students at our host university, I was the one who visited the most culture sites in Korea, many of the UNESCO world heritage sites, and many different regions and cities. During the exchange year 2008/2009 and thanks to the opportunities through the fellowship, I literally fell in love with South Korea. South Korea has so many different facets. I enjoyed the colorful and vibrant city life of Seoul. At the same time the nature outside of Seoul is fascinating. I especially enjoyed traveling to the green tea fields in Boseung and Hadong. Coming from Germany and seeing green tea plantations was something completely new for me. The people in Korea are open and interested in different cultures, although it was not always easy being a foreigner in such a different culture. Lastly the food was a dream, and I could write pages about this. Already during the exchange year, and due to the great experiences, I decided that I will come back to Korea.

Back at my home university in Bamberg, I worked on several scenarios how I could go back to Korea. At the end I decided to take a semester break and apply for one more exchange semester. I came a second time to Korea from 2010-2011. First, I attended a six-month language exchange class at Yonsei Language School in order to become better in the Korean

language. After that I took my last semester at Korea University, which was another partner university from us. During my second year in Korea, it became very clear to me, that I want to work and live in South Korea. In order to fulfil my dream, I tried to extend my network in the German expat community. Pretty fast I recognized that it is not easy to find a good job in Korea, with only internship experience. Maybe due to my background as business administration student, I had certain expectations towards an attractive salary in order to pay back student loans. I clearly wanted to work and life in Korea, but not at any price. Basically, all expatriates I met during that time recommended me the same: Go back to your home country, get some profound work experience, and then consider coming back to Korea for an MBA or at least the chances to find a job at a German company will be much higher. I still tried to find a job, but at the end I failed. I decided heavy-heartedly to move back to Germany. My dream to come back to Korea did never die, though.

In Germany I worked from 2011 to 2016 at a US based private equity fund, which was a great experience. One of the reasons why I got hired for the job was, that my background is not 'typical' German, because in general not many Germans' study in Asia, and definitely not in Korea. At least around 15 years ago. Looking back, it was a very good decision to get proper work experience in my home country. Although, I experienced a reverse cultural shock when I came back to Germany. I got so accustomed to the Korean culture, that I often felt as a stranger in my home country. I missed so many things about Korea and its' culture, the food, my Korean friends, the great city Seoul and many other things. I was looking every other month for job openings in Korea, but I was aware that I need around three to five years of work experience outside of Korea. During the five years I learned many things at work and kept friendship with lots of Koreans living in the city I worked. In 2015, I started to apply for several MBA programs globally. I got admission not just in Korea, but also in Japan, USA and Singapore. At the end, you guess, I decided to go back to Korea for a third time.

Back in Korea I attended the global MBA at Yonsei University, where I had classmates from over 16 countries which was another great learning. Different compared to the last two stays in Korea, I was more successful on job hunting. I was able to make a summer internship at a large global cosmetic company. At the same time the networking in Korea was easier, since I had several years of work experience. Before graduating I signed a contract with one of the biggest German companies as finance manager. I started to work there in January 2018 and working for the same company since then.

One important reason, why I got the job at this company was, that I had several years of cultural experience in Korea. Many foreign companies send expatriates to Korea, but the expats do not have any cultural understanding of Asia or specifically about Korea. For them it can be difficult to get adjusted to the Korean working culture. Living in Korea 2008-2009, thanks to the ASEM DUO fellowship, and again in 2010-2011 was therefore a huge impact of my future career.

For my job, I am traveling frequently to other Asian countries. I was for assignments and workshops several times in Singapore, Malaysia, China, India, Thailand, Philippines, and I am finishing this essay currently from a hotel room in Tokyo. My experience in Korea, studying and meeting so many friends and talented people from all over Asia made it possible that I change not only my personality, my attitude, but also my career and at the end my life. I would like to use the opportunity to thank ASEM DUO for choosing me in 2008 to be a fellow of your organization. I can clearly say my career and life has been changed and I am very blessed and thankful for having this opportunity!

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