

From Shy Student to Surgeon: How Six Months in South Korea Changed My Life

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I often wonder what my life would look like if I hadn't gone to South Korea. Would I still be working as an engineer? Would I ever have found the confidence to retrain as a doctor? Would I now be training as an orthopaedic surgeon?

I'll never know the answers to those questions. But looking back, it's hard to escape the feeling that so much of the life I have today can be traced back to six months I spent studying in Daegu through the ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme.

At 21, I thought confidence was something you either had or you didn't. I certainly didn't think I had it. Growing up, I was incredibly shy. Although I'd always been fascinated by medicine, I never seriously considered it as a career because I simply didn't believe I was the sort of person who could become a doctor. Doctors spend their days talking to patients, building trust and helping people through some of the most difficult moments of their lives. I saw myself as someone much more comfortable with machines than with people – my thesis was on the navigation of a cleaning robot after all. So, engineering felt like the natural choice.

Thanks to the ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme, I had the opportunity to spend six months studying at Kyungpook National University in Daegu while completing my undergraduate degree in mechanical and electrical engineering. At the time, I thought I was simply travelling abroad to complete my thesis. Looking back now, I realise I came home with something far more valuable than an engineering qualification. I came home believing I was capable of far more than I had ever imagined.

Living in another country is very different from travelling through one. For the first time in my life, I was completely outside my comfort zone. I was thousands of miles from home, surrounded by a language I barely spoke and a culture that was completely unfamiliar. Suddenly, everyday life became a challenge. Ordering food, shopping, navigating public transport, opening a bank account and making friends all required confidence I wasn't sure I possessed.

One memory still makes me smile. When I first arrived, whenever I climbed into a taxi and tried to explain I wanted to go back to the university, drivers would often assume I meant the nearby American military base. One day I successfully explained in Korean that I wanted to return to the university, and the driver understood immediately. It sounds like such a small thing now, but I remember feeling genuinely proud of myself. It sounds like such a small thing now, but I remember sitting in the back of that taxi feeling ridiculously proud of myself. It wasn't really about speaking Korean. It was about realising I was no longer intimidated by situations that would once have made me anxious.

That confidence didn't appear overnight. It grew through hundreds of little moments. It grew through evenings at karaoke with my research group, enthusiastically singing songs despite not understanding most of the lyrics. It grew during a team-building weekend where I was introduced to the biggest crabs I had ever seen and experienced the warmth and generosity of Korean hospitality.

One of my favourite memories was setting off before six in the morning to hike a mountain near Daegu. I remember thinking I was incredibly dedicated for starting so early, only to spend the climb passing countless people already making their way back down! It made me laugh and taught me something about Korean culture. There is a reason Korea is known as the "Land of Morning Calm". People embraced the outdoors, community and routine in a way that was completely different from anything I had experienced growing up.

Those experiences might seem small on their own, but together they changed me. Without really noticing, I became more independent, more resilient and, most importantly, more confident. Perhaps the biggest lesson South Korea taught me was that communication isn't about speaking perfectly. It's about curiosity, kindness and a willingness to connect with people. Even when my Korean vocabulary was limited, I found that patience, a smile and genuine interest could bridge remarkable gaps. Those are lessons that have stayed with me ever since.

After graduating, I spent eight years working as a mechanical and electrical engineer. I enjoyed many aspects of the profession and valued the analytical thinking and problem-solving skills it developed. Yet over time, I found myself increasingly drawn to the human side of my work. The interactions with colleagues, mentoring others, and helping people solve problems often felt more rewarding than the technical challenges themselves. And every so often, I found myself wondering about medicine again.

The difference was that this time I no longer dismissed the idea. Instead, I found myself asking a different question, "Why not?". Looking back now, I think that change in mindset began years earlier in South Korea.

Retraining as a doctor was one of the biggest decisions I've ever made. It meant walking away from an established career and returning to university while many of my friends were progressing in theirs. It was exciting, terrifying and one of the best decisions I've ever made.

I discovered that the communication skills and confidence I had developed abroad were not just useful; they were essential. Throughout medical school and now as an ST3 orthopaedic registrar, communication and empathy have consistently been highlighted as strengths by supervisors and colleagues. Reflecting on this now, I can trace much of that growth back to my experience in South Korea.

Being immersed in another culture taught me to listen more carefully, appreciate different perspectives and understand that everyone communicates differently. More importantly, it taught me what it feels like to be the outsider, the person trying to navigate an unfamiliar system and I believe that experience has made me a more empathetic doctor.

Interestingly, my engineering background never really left me. In fact, it became one of the reasons I was drawn towards orthopaedics in the first place. Orthopaedics combines technical

problem-solving, mechanics, and practical skills with direct patient care. I often joke that it is simply engineering on the human body. Somehow, the two careers I once thought were completely separate, turned out to fit together perfectly.

Beyond shaping my professional life, my time in South Korea also broadened my horizons in countless personal ways. I developed a deep appreciation for cultural exchange and international collaboration. I formed friendships and memories that have stayed with me for years. I also developed a lasting fondness for Korean dramas, which remain a fun reminder of my time in Daegu and often find their way onto my television screen!

Looking back now, what amazes me most is how a decision that initially seemed academic ended up shaping the next twenty years of my life. The ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme didn't simply help me study abroad. It gave me the opportunity to discover a version of myself that I didn't know existed.

When I first arrived in Daegu, I was a shy engineering student who genuinely believed I wasn't confident enough to become a doctor. Today, I spend my days talking with patients and their families, helping people through some of the most difficult moments of their lives and training to become an orthopaedic surgeon.

That journey didn't begin in a hospital. It didn't begin at medical school. It began in Daegu. At 21, I thought confidence was something you either had or you didn't. Now I know better. Confidence isn't something you find, it's something you build—one unfamiliar conversation, one challenge, one leap of faith at a time.

Mine began in South Korea.