

One decision that changed everything

I did not know much about South Korea when I applied for the ASEM-DUO Fellowship in 2011. What I did know intrigued me. Korea was a country that had rebuilt itself from the ruins of war into one of the most technologically advanced nations on earth within a single generation. As a student of International Communication & Media at Hogeschool Utrecht in the Netherlands, I was drawn to cultures and stories of transformation. South Korea felt like a compelling story I had to experience firsthand.

When I was accepted and placed at my first choice, Hanyang University in Seoul, I could not have imagined that a single application would change the entire course of my life.

An earlier start

After receiving my placement, I discovered that Hanyang International Summer School (HISS) ran a short-term academic program in June, before the regular exchange period began in September. I signed up immediately. It meant arriving in Seoul three months earlier than planned.

Those months gave me a head start, not just academically, but in learning how to navigate a city and a culture that operated by a completely different set of rules than the ones I had grown up with. Simple tasks like reading a menu, taking the subway, buying groceries, became puzzles to solve. And each small victory felt satisfying, a feeling I would come to understand much better years later.

By the time my formal exchange semester began in September, I was already in love with Seoul. The pace of the city, the warmth of the people once you broke through the initial formality, the food, the language, everything held my attention in a way that nothing had before.

The internship that was hiding in plain sight

As my exchange period drew to an end, I faced what should have been a straightforward decision: return to the Netherlands, complete my final semester, and begin looking for work. That was the plan. But I did not want to leave.

My degree program required a graduation internship, and I began searching intensively for a position in Korea. After an extensive search, the opportunity I found was closer than expected: the Office of International Affairs (OIA) at Hanyang University itself. The role focused on supporting newly arriving international students and helping them navigate the university, the city, and life in Korea more smoothly. It was exactly the role I had been living from the other side just months earlier.

I threw myself into the work. Apparently it showed. When my internship period ended, the OIA offered me a full-time position. I accepted without hesitation.

There were two conditions to meet. First, I had to graduate as quickly as possible. I had one semester remaining. Second, I had to learn Korean.

I did not return to the Netherlands to write and defend my thesis. I stayed in Korea to do so. I wrote my thesis about the marketing strategy of HISS, the very program that had brought me to Seoul. Once I had my diploma in hand, I began fulfilling the second condition.

Learning Korean, and learning Korea

For the next year and a half, I attended intensive Korean language classes while working full-time as a Program Coordinator for HISS. The combination was demanding. Korean is not a language that is easy to pick up casually. The grammar, the honorifics, the written system, all require sustained effort and full immersion. But I was surrounded by it every day, and I was motivated in a way I had never been in a classroom back home.

I eventually achieved TOPIK Level 4. It was one of the hardest things I had done, and one of the things I am most proud of.

The Korean language opened doors that had been closed to me as an English-only speaker. Conversations deepened, and relationships changed. Korea started to make more sense to me, not just linguistically, but culturally. I began to understand not just what people were saying, but why.

An MBA taught mostly in Korean

Once my language studies concluded, Hanyang University offered me something unexpected: a scholarship to pursue an MBA. The program was designed for working professionals, with classes held in the evenings and on weekends. It was taught mostly in Korean.

The two years that followed were among the most challenging of my life. I was working full-time, studying for an advanced degree in a language I had only recently learned, and doing both in a culture that expected a lot from you. There were moments of real doubt.

But I finished. And when I crossed the stage to receive my MBA, I understood something that I could not have put into words when I had first landed in Seoul as a curious student from Utrecht: I was no longer the same person. Not just professionally, but fundamentally.

Returning full circle

After nearly six and a half years in Korea, spanning from HISS to the exchange, to the internship, to a full-time career at the OIA, and eventually to a postgraduate degree, I returned to the Netherlands.

I brought with me a fluency in Korean, a graduate qualification, years of international professional experience, and a perspective on the world that I could not have gained any other way. I also brought something less easy to put into words but equally important: the knowledge that I could build a life from scratch in an unfamiliar place, and not just survive it, but thrive.

Back in the Netherlands, I started my own web development company, a passion that had grown during my time at Hanyang, where I had built the international marketing website for HISS as part of my coordination work. My company has been successfully running for almost eight years now. Among my clients today are Korean companies, including HISS.

What Korea actually taught me

People often ask what the most valuable thing I learned in Korea was. They expect me to say something about the language, or the business culture, or the MBA. And those things matter. But the most valuable thing was something simpler and harder to put into words.

Korea taught me to be comfortable outside my comfort zone.

Being immersed in an unfamiliar culture, navigating daily life in a language I did not yet speak, finding my place in a society with different habits and expectations, all of this forced me to let go of the idea that the way I had grown up doing things was the normal way. Things that I had taken for granted as a westerner, like the way institutions work, the way relationships are formed, the way success is defined, turned out to be cultural assumptions, not universal truths.

That shift in perspective has made me a better professional. It has made me a more thoughtful person. When I work with clients from different backgrounds, I approach their context with curiosity rather than assumption. When I face an unfamiliar problem, I no longer expect it to look like the problems I already know how to solve.

At the end of each chapter of my time in Korea, the summer school, the exchange, the internship, the job, the MBA, I had the same feeling: I was not done yet. I had not yet experienced Korea to the fullest. That feeling kept motivating me to find the next challenge, to go a little deeper, to stay a little longer.

Looking back, I think that feeling was not really about Korea at all. It was about growth. And I learned that growth does not have an endpoint.

If I had not applied for the ASEM-DUO Fellowship, I would not have gone to Hanyang University. I would not have discovered HISS. I would not have found my internship, or been offered a job, or learned Korean, or earned an MBA. I would not have built a career with roots stretching from the Netherlands to Seoul.

I would have had a different life. I am certain it would have been a good one. But it would not have been this one.

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