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Under the Department of Biochemistry at Chinese University, the Dedicated Research Exchange and Mentorship (DREAM) Programme gave me the opportunity to perform research overseas and expand my social network with foreign academia. During July 2010, I was in Seoul, South Korea, at Hanyang University. My host was Professor Lee Jae-Seong from the Department of Molecular and Environmental Bioscience, College of Natural Sciences. Under his supervision, and his graduate students in the lab, I performed toxicological exposures on a fish called the marine medaka, and a microscopic animal called the rotifer. Professor Lee's lab specializes in the toxicogenomic analysis of environment contaminants, and in my case, I studied the effects of brominated flame retardants under acute toxic exposure. Flame retardants are chemicals used in textiles such as clothing to prevent them from catching on fire, while they are also a health concern for having endocrinological and neurological effects. On Monday to Friday, I would work in the lab starting from 9am and finishing at 9pm, while on Saturday I would be in the lab until mid-afternoon. The local students worked just as long, and in fact, even longer as one or two people would occasionally stay until well past midnight! Since everyone shared this routine, I found that they had strong work ethic and were quite cooperative as a lab team.

Aside from my research project and mentorship in the lab, I also learned a lot regarding the various aspects of Korean culture. One of the most noticeable features is the etiquette used throughout daily life. Each morning, people would greet everyone present in the lab no matter where they were, and would also bid everyone farewell during the evening. Etiquette was also very prominent while eating in a group. Age and ranking is very much revered in South Korea and also a responsibility at the same time. A superior will usually pay for their subordinates while the subordinate may treat their superior to a round of alcohol or coffee. For alcohol in particular, the drinking culture in South Korea is very inherent. This is unsurprising, as South Korea apparently has the highest per capita consumption of alcohol in the world. Alcohol lowers social inhibitions, and many locals believe that the true character of a person is revealed after spending a night of heavy drinking together. In South Korea, hurting the liver appears to be the fast track for making friends!

Overall, I was extremely satisfied with my research internship in South Korea and feel that it was a truly enriching experience while undertaking my tertiary studies. For those who have not yet travelled overseas for exchange or internship, I can definitely recommend South Korea as a suitable choice. As with all places, it is advantageous to learn the local language, so that one can experience everything that the destination offers. That having been said, every student should strongly consider using the overseas opportunities offered by the university to forge new friendships, build academic linkages and live under a different culture.